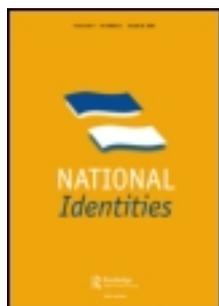


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## Ethnic and state sports in the context of the 2014 Sochi Olympics

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Sports have long been an important point of expression in communal identity in the North Caucasus and recently came to serve as a forum for political dissent. This article examines the emergence and transformation of ethnic sport projects in the North Caucasus in connection with the 2014 Sochi Olympics. It charts the history and progress of two projects known as the Circassada and the Caucasus Games and evaluates the debate of the sport-nation nexus in the North Caucasus. While the Circassada and the Caucasus Games reflect the typical elite-driven narratives of border security and terrorism, they also highlight discussions over historical and cultural practices of nationhood and the boundaries of national identity.

**Keywords:** Caucasus; Russia; nationalism; Circassians; ethnic sport; 2014 Olympics; Sochi

### Introduction

Pierre de Coubertin thought of the Olympics as embodying the traditional virtues of sportsmanship. These included concepts such as ‘fair play, the beauty of the fight and national representation’ (Coubertin, 2000, p. 542). Later, with the development of the Olympics, the intermingling of sports and politics has become quite commonplace, and few believe that one can easily be separated from the other. This is especially evident in among mega-events like the Olympics.

‘The Olympic Games unmistakably became occasions for competitive national self-assertion’ – when this statement was made by Eric J. Hobsbawm (1990, p. 143), a famous theorist of modern nationalism, he was clearly referring to the competition between nations as states. However, during the run-up to the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics, we can see the truth of this statement not only in the relations between states, but also between nationalities (or groups of nationalities) within states. While referring to the Russian Federation a historical multinational state, we understand it as a sovereign state that consists of many nationalities. At the same time, it is possible for many of the people of Russian state to consider having two different identities and belonging both to an ethnic group and to the nation simultaneously in the way defined by Ilan Peleg, when one can be a Chechen and Rossiyanin (Peleg, 2007, pp. 78–80). Such phenomenon as ethnic sports highlights grass-root debates over the boundaries of communal identity and alternatives to Russianness in either its *russkii* or *rossiiskii* varieties (Zhemukhov & King, 2013).

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The new researches indicate that the Olympic Games have come to reflect the reality of multiculturalism as a policy of maintaining a diversity of ethnic cultures (Henry, 2005). Within post-Soviet territories, and especially within the Russian Federation, it is increasingly unclear whether politicians capitalize on sports in order to promote their own agendas, or whether sports become an extension of existing agendas and sports-political debates take on lives of their own. Accordingly, it is unclear whether it is the dog wagging the tail, or whether it is the other way around. Within the post-Soviet Russian Federation, where the days of Soviet ethnic repression are largely gone but state realities of multinational life still exist, the political import of sports takes on proportions as large as many of these nations are small, and minorities look to sports as a means of advancing national self-assertion.

Leaders of the Soviet Union used the Olympics as a stage to demonstrate the superiority of the Soviet system and the effectiveness of the communist ideology. Current leaders of the Russian Federation also attempt to capitalize on sports in order to demonstrate that Russia is once again strong and a major political player. This phenomenon is sometimes referred to as ‘Russia’s rising from its knees’ or ‘the resurrection drama’ (Persson & Petersson, 2014).

While there are clear parallels between the Soviet Union and the Russian Federation as regards to the Olympics as a showcase for the external world, the Games have taken on a unique role in Russia’s domestic issues as well. In Russian society, sports enjoy a dual role, full of contradiction. On the one hand, Russian competition against other countries reflects nostalgia for the great lost power of the Soviet era. Society evaluates the effectiveness of the state’s leaders through the achievements of Russian athletes; this is especially true during the Olympics’ final gold medal count. State leaders understand this phenomenon and even encourage it; if Russian Olympians succeed in ‘bringing home the gold,’ state leaders can easily take credit. If Russian Olympic athletes demonstrate a poor showing, Russian leaders can quickly and easily distance themselves and lay blame on private, non-state actors. On the other hand, the development of different nationalistic trends within the Western and Southern Russian Federation, namely the two trends of Russian and Caucasian<sup>1</sup> nationalism, has led to situations where sports have become part of dueling domestic nationalistic ideologies and sporting events reflect clashes in society caused by the rise of anti-Caucasian sentiment among ethnic Russians.

Regional elites within the Russian Federation’s titular republics often use sport as an instrument for nationalistic mobilization. The myth that sport is above politics helps local elites actively employ sport events as instruments of nationalistic mobilization without direct confrontation toward the Kremlin. Until recently, sports remained one of few forms of peaceful nationalistic competitions within the multiethnic Russian society.

Sport has always played a significant role in the culture of the people of the North Caucasus. The Nart Sagas – the pan-Caucasus folk narratives of the exploits of a mythical pre-human population – contain passages that celebrate the power by which skill and wit win out over simple brute strength. Later historical legends celebrated sport as an alternative to violence and provide numerous examples of famous fights that decided victory without the cost of bloody military battles. These tales have left their mark on the region; horse races, weight lifting, wrestling, and a variety of other sports have been popular in the Caucasus since ancient times. The role of sports is so engrained in Caucasian culture that even among the relatively large diasporas of several North Caucasian ethnicities, sports continue to play the same role.

During the Soviet era, these ethnic sport traditions were considered subversive and were supplanted with numerous state-sponsored organizations for young athletes – many of whom later went on to win World and Olympic championships. In the post-Soviet aftermath, the state lost control over its Olympic athletic training programs, and many of the less successful athletes became involved in organized crime; this trend began in 1990s and evolved into terrorist activities in the 2000s. That point notwithstanding, sports remain very popular in the North Caucasus of Russia and the region is known as a breeding ground for Olympic athletes. The revival of ethnic sports in the North Caucasus may be an alternative to the criminalization of athletes.

In 2007, Russia won the bid to host the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi, a prominent resort in the Northern Caucasus. To that time, Russia pacified separatist movements in the Caucasus that had been lasting since the fall of the Soviet Union, including two wars in Chechnya and attempts to redraw the borders between North Caucasus regions of Ingushetia, North Ossetia, Kabardino-Balkaria, and Karachaevo-Cherkessia. The right to hold Olympics in Sochi was interpreted by the Kremlin as a sign of international appreciation of its achievement in stabilization of the recently volatile Northern Caucasus that allowed Russia's return to the world stage (Wills & Moore, 2008). On the broader scale, 2014 Sochi Olympics was seen as a symbol of success in the statehood building of new Russia that, in two decades after the fall of the Soviet Union, would match the 1980 Moscow Olympics as the symbol of highest development of the Soviet era.

Russian preparation for the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics played a direct role in the revival of ethnic sport traditions. The Games are positioned as a testament to Russia's status as a modern, stable, multinational state in the global economy, but at the same time, Russia's decision to host the Olympics in Sochi sparked a wave of Circassian national movements. These are among the dynamics from which the Circassians and the Caucasus Games emerged – almost simultaneously – in 2009. This brings us to a question – what happens when older ethnic sports are reappropriated and given new life? As in other areas of post-Soviet cultural practices, how does the uncertain landscape of 'tradition' intersect with the new uses to which national culture may be applied? In other words, what is at stake – culturally, historically, and even politically – when an ethnic sport event is 'revived' in the context of a globalized, post-Soviet world?

Ethnic sports within the North Caucasus represent a longer-term intellectual challenge to Russian state narratives: a form of indigenous cultural creation that bypasses political elites of the region and the more or less official cultural norms promoted by the Russian federal center. Where state narratives stress the North Caucasus' historical ties to the Russian center, the Circassians and the Caucasus Games are particularistic, modern, and expressive of the identities of the Caucasus' people that distance themselves and step beyond the shadow of Russian culture. In their origins, form, and recent history, the Circassians and the Caucasus Games also seem to replicate other valorizations of human movement in postcolonial contexts – yet another example of the way in which cultural activists on the Russian periphery are analyzing their own national identity. It also opens up intriguing questions about the extent to which these are either postcolonial or borderland debates (Howell & Leeworthy, 2010). State-sanctioned representations of North Caucasus cultures in forms of dances, folk music, and museum artifacts have been displayed in the festivities accompanying the 2014 Sochi Olympics. The Circassians and, in part, the Caucasus Games stand as remarkable examples of post-Soviet oppositional ideologies reflected in sports.

In the following chapters we will discuss three types of event: first, the 2014 Olympics as intensely integrated into the hegemonic project of the Russian state; second, Circassiada, as the activity of a submerged and diasporic nation with a local set of quasi-statelets; and third, the Caucasus Games as a multiethnic, transnational, multistate event (in its conception) that has come to be treated as a political diversion in its appropriation by the Russian state.

### **The Circassiada: the International Circassian Olympics**

The 2014 Winter Olympic city of Sochi has enormous symbolic significance for the Circassians in several ways. By an irony of history, the 2014 Winter Olympic Games will mark the 150th anniversary of the Circassian defeat in 1864, when, after over a century of fighting, Tsar Alexander II declared victory for Russia. Every year on May 21, Circassians around the world light 101 candles and observe a minute of silence in memory of the 101-year war. Sochi itself was the site of the war's last battles, and its port was the place from which the Circassians were deported to the Ottoman Empire. Krasnaya Polyana (*Kbaada* in Circassian), the area that will be the centre of the 2014 Winter Olympic Games, was where, on 21 May 1864, a parade of Russian troops celebrated the end of the Russian–Circassian War. Most of the global Circassian population now lives outside the borders of the Russian Federation, including Turkey, Middle East, the EU, and the USA. The Circassian diaspora is the second largest diaspora from Russia, after the 25-million ethnic Russian diaspora itself. Since the end of the Cold War, the Circassian world has developed an ideological unity based upon a shared memory of deportation and the fragmentation of its remaining territory. Repatriation and unification of the native land have become the primary goals of the Circassian nation.

The organizers of the 2014 Winter Olympics cannot directly involve the Caucasian elements in the Games for several reasons, including the strong nationalistic and anti-Caucasian sentiments among the Russian ethnic majority. For example, it is impossible to imagine that Caucasian nationalities would play the same role in the opening ceremony of the 2014 Winter Games in Sochi as the 'first nations' played during the 2010 Games in Vancouver. That would require reevaluation of the traditional historical approach of the Russian officials to the past and change of the narrative of glory conquest of the Caucasus into the dark story of ethnic cleansing of the indigenous population. Based on experience of recent unrests, the Kremlin would fear that such an abrupt change of state ideology would cause mass disorder and anti-Caucasian demonstrations among the Russian ethnic nationalists similar to the demonstrations at the Manezhnaia organized in 2010 by the Russian football fans against ethnic Caucasians. However, the organizers cannot completely ignore the Caucasian element since the Olympics will take place in the Caucasus – a region that was conquered by Russia a century and a half ago. Sochi was the capital of the last independent state in the North Caucasus, and Imperial Russian forces sent a navy seal team to burn its Circassian Parliament as a symbol of Russian might and as an affront to Circassian statehood and independence (Smolensky, 1872). Krasnaya Poliana, the center of the Games, was the site of the last battle of the war.

The organizers of the Olympics apparently did not consider the local history of Sochi at the beginning of their evaluation process. The Candidature File did not include any event with Caucasian elements, including ethnic sports. From the beginning, the organizers planned different cultural events for cinema, theater, music, and art. For example, in the run-up to the Games, organizers proclaimed that 2010 would be the Year of Russian

Cinema in Sochi; 2011, The Year of Russian Theatre in Sochi; 2012, The Year of Music in Sochi; 2013, The Year of Visual Arts in Sochi; 2014, The Cultural Olympiad (Sochi, 2014, p. 181).

The geographical perspective of the 2014 Olympics involves and invokes multiple layers of Circassian and Russian mythologies and speculations. However, the initial concept of the Sochi Olympics is not linked to the North Caucasus region, but rather turned its back to the region, associating itself with the Black Sea area. The Candidature File referred to ancient Greek history as the only historical context for Sochi, and the organizers used popular myths about Prometheus delivery of fire claiming that ‘Sochi’s history links it closely to that of ancient Greece’ (Sochi, 2014, p. 181). On 27 August 2004, the Krasnodar Museum presented an exhibition ‘Olympic glory of Kuban’ that was devoted to the participation of the local athletes in the contemporary Games. One of the exhibits displayed archeological artifacts from ancient Greek Olympics discovered in Krasnodar krai (Strugova, 2008, p. 270). Such materials allowed Circassian scholars argue about connections between ancient Greek and Circassian sport cultures and even speculate about possible participation of the Circassian athletes in ancient Olympics, despite the lack of direct evidence proving the fact (Gergov, 2010). However, organizers of the exhibition failed to mention such hypotheses as well as the very fact of the presence of the Circassians in the area before the Russian conquest in the nineteenth century.

Later, President Vladimir Putin shared the same historical and geographical talking points during a speech following the announcement that Russia won the right to hold the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi. Such an attitude of ignoring the Caucasus immediately caused negative reaction in the North Caucasus. The Circassian activists, including those traditionally close to the local governments, reacted the day following Putin’s speech by protesting against the fact that ‘there was not a word said about the Circassians whose historically land it is in reality’ (Shazzo, 2007). Even the leaders of the Circassian titular republics argued that their republics should have a chance to participate in the Olympics through hosting part of the Games in Elbrus (Kabardino-Balkaria), Lago-Naki (Adygea), and Dombai (Karachaevo-Cherkessia; Vlasti, 2007). After many unsuccessful unpublicized negotiations with the federal authorities, three years later, on 24 March 2010, the Parliament of Adygea initiated unusual criticism of Russian federal policy, expressing that:

to great sorrow the state and civil structures absolutely ignore the history and culture of the Circassians, the indigenous people of Black Sea shore. The Circassian element has been fully ignored during the solemn transition of the Olympic Fire from Vancouver to Sochi. (Parliament, 2010)

In response, the Russian Olympic Committee issued a statement agreeing that Circassian elements should be included at Sochi; no concrete steps were ever taken to back up this statement with action.

In 2009, Alexei Bekshokov, a veteran leader of the 1993–1994 Abkhaz–Georgian War, and Sufian Zhemukhov, the author of this article, designed ‘Project Circassiada’ and later established a non-government organization (NGO) under that name. They proposed a project to organize a Circassian Olympic Games to be held in Nalchik in 2012 as a response to the Sochi Olympics, to remind the world about the area’s native inhabitants. The Circassiada’s concept was that of a World Game competition with the purpose of

bringing together Circassians scattered across 50 countries and was envisioned as a transnational sport event similar to Maccabean Games and Pan-Armenian Games. Similar folklore Games take place all over the world, including Scottish Highland Games, Jangariada in Kalmykia, Sabantui in Tatarstan, and Cossack Shermitsii in Rostov Oblast. Ethnic sports in the North Caucasus became very popular in the post-Soviet era, and every republic of the region organized its sport festivals. North Ossetia regularly organizes the Nart Games (Nartskie, 2010). The three Circassian titular republics of Adygea, Kabardino-Balkaria, and Karachaevo-Cherkessia organized competitions including ethnic wrestling and horse races. Professional athletes participated in those Games alongside amateurs. Aslanbek Khustov, 2008 Olympic Wrestling Champion, previously won third place in the Circassian national wrestling competition. He would promote the Circassian wrestling by claiming that it enriched his techniques, even going so far as to employ the locally developed 'reverse waist' wrestling move<sup>2</sup> in his final match during 2008 Beijing Games.

Members of the neighboring ethnic groups surrounding Circassian communities were welcomed to participate in the Games as well. The Circassiada's founding leaders conducted promotional presentations across Russia and abroad including Turkey, Jordan, Syria, the USA, and Great Britain. They established a global network of representatives in the Circassian communities of the diaspora, branches of Circassiada were established throughout the diaspora under representatives Jonty Yamisha (USA), Metin Sonmez (Turkey), and Osama Lybzu (Syria). The authors also published a book 'Circassian Olympics: Presentation in Russia' (Zhemukhov & Bekshokov, 2009, p. 65) and launched an online website [www.circassiada.com](http://www.circassiada.com). The same founders also went on to organize an expedition to climb Mount Elbrus – the tallest mountain in Europe and a fixture in the Circassian ethnic homelands of the Russian Federation – to raise awareness and support for the Games.

The Circassiada was met with support from the Circassian communities in Russia and the diaspora alike. Notably, the concept was endorsed by the local authorities of the Republic of Kabardino-Balkaria and International Circassian Association. Arsen Kanokov, the governor of Kabardino-Balkaria, supported the idea to organize in Nalchik, the republic's capital, the first Circassiada. He stated, 'In 2012, we plan to hold biggest Forum of Circassian communities, International Circassian Games, or Circassiada. Non-government organizations in Kabardino-Balkaria initiated them and this idea may be included into the expended program of Olympic Games in Sochi' (Kanokov, 2011). The message behind the Circassiada was understood as a controversial issue in the media. On the one hand, Circassian activists connected to the Sochi pre-Olympic movement by holding 'their own Olympics.' On the other hand, the Russian authorities could not be sure that the representatives of the Circassian diaspora would not protest and make direct statements against holding 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi; in the end, international Circassian activist organizations did not abandon their demand to cancel the Olympics in Sochi. It is no coincidence that the Circassian Olympics were planned in Nalchik and not in Sochi (Zhemukhov & Bekshokov, 2009, p. 112). *Radio Free Europe* stated:

Moscow for sure would not like such an apparent unification of people in the Caucasus under ethnic flags. It is seen from the absence of any response from the federal bureaucrats and politicians, in spite the fact that the future Circassian Olympics were announced long ago. It looks like Moscow is in a state of confusion. It tries to figure out what course the

organizers of the Circassian Olympics will take towards the 2014 Sochi Winter Games. (Zhemukhov & Bekshokov, 2009, p. 104).

The founders of the Circassiada issued a statement that the Circassian Games did not carry any anti-Sochi implication:

Our main goal is to gather our people. We are not against anybody, we are for the unification of our people. The Circassian project is not pointed against Russian interests. It is one of the ways to resolve the problem of our people. (Zhemukhov & Bekshokov, 2009, p. 129)

The Circassiada platform made it possible to the authors of the project to come up with a project of resolution of the Circassian problem between Russian authorities and Circassian world. In an article on the UK media venue Open Democracy, they proposed a solution that the Circassian side should renounce any claims to pecuniary compensation, in exchange for Russian recognition of the genocide, repatriation of the diaspora, and creation of a united Circassian Republic within the Russian Federation (Zhemukhov, 2010). The *New York Times* later went on to feature the project in its Idea of the Day section (Genocide, 2010).

In July 2009, the organizers of Circassiada approached D. Chernyshenko, the president of Organizing Committee of Olympic Games 'Sochi 2014,' with a proposal to work together. As one of the connection points between the 2014 Olympics and the Circassiada, they stressed the fact, that 'it is a well-known fact that Sochi was the last Capital of Circassia from 1861 to 1864, and the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics coincides with the 150th anniversary of the deportation of the Circassians to the Ottoman Empire' (Zhemukhov & Bekshokov, 2012; Zakharov, 2014). When the Circassiada was presented to the Russian authorities, the organizers of the 2014 Olympics made several demands, including direct involvement of the Circassiada with the Sochi Olympics and rejection of any political meaning such as 'remembrance of historical grievances and injustices' (Zhemukhov & Bekshokov, 2009, p. 65). The Circassiada organizers could not agree to these demands. As soon as it became clear that the Russian government would not support the project, the organizers faced insurmountable political barriers. Because of the organizational difficulties, Circassiada – originally planned for 2012, failed to take place.

### **The Caucasus Games**

While the Circassiada is a case of revival of an ethnic sport event of a specific nationality of the Circassians, the Caucasus Games represent a multiethnic concept. In 2009, Israil Arsamakov, former Olympic champion in weight lifting from Ingushetia, offered an alternative vision in the Caucasus Games – an ethnic sports competition between the people of the North Caucasus. The Russian authorities supported the project. The first and second Caucasus Games took place in the Republic of Karachaevo-Cherkessia in 2010 and 2011 under the patronage of the Russian Prime-minister Vladimir Putin, the representative of the Russian president in the North Caucasus Federal District and various governors of the North Caucasus republics. The third Caucasus Games took place in 2012 in Kabardino-Balkaria. Vitalii Mutko, the Minister of Sport, Tourism, and Youth Policy of Russian Federation, presented the Caucasus Games as a project to develop sports in the North Caucasus. The first Caucasus Games included many traditional regional and ethnic sports such as wrestling while each opponent holds the other by the waist, lifting, and

carrying heavy objects such as boulders, one legged racing, uphill running, rope climbing, tug of war, archery, relay racing, and stilt racing (Meshcheryakova, 2011). These sports were regular exercises among the indigenous people of the Caucasus at the time of fighting against the Russian advance into the region when almost entire population had to participate in the war.

However, the Caucasus Games have gradually abandoned ethnic specifics as the 2014 Olympics draw closer. The organizers avoid using of ethnic symbolic in the designs of the Caucasus Games. By 2012, the original ethnic sport components had been replaced with state-sponsored elements as the event has come more fully under the control of the government. This development has begun to cause conflict between the Russian authorities and ethnic sport activists, including Israil Arsamakov, the original founder of the Caucasus Games. Arsamakov accused the authorities violating his intellectual property rights and demanded the restoration of his original vision of the Caucasus Games as a means of developing ethnic sports, excluding recent additions such as chess, tennis, and volleyball, citing the fact that these sports having nothing to do with ethnic sports of the region. ‘Since when did volleyball became an ethnic Caucasian sport?’ indignantly asked Arsamakov in his interview (Tagrimova, 2012). He protested against directly connecting the Caucasus Games with the Olympic Games, warning that it casts a shadow of doubt about the goals and meaning of his project. However, the organizers of the 2012 Caucasus Games did not exclude the Olympics, and instead, the Olympic competitions of sprinting and shot-putting replaced traditional regional ethnic sports of running up hills and throwing for aim. The inclusion of Olympic sports into the program of the Caucasus Games was initiated by Alexander Khloponin, the president’s representative head of the North Caucasian federal district. Such a step intends to connect Caucasus grass-root sport activism to the 2014 Sochi Olympic project as a response to anti-Sochi movement in the Caucasus (Orlova, 2012). The founder of the project was also against the fact that the Caucasus Games were moving away from their egalitarian roots and were increasingly mostly attended by bureaucrats, special services, and VIP-quests.

Another problem stressed by the founder of this project was that all three Games took place in Circassian Republics. In 2012, Israil Arsamakov demanded that the 2012 Caucasus Games take place in the Republic of Ingushetia, where the Games supposedly originated. ‘Mekhk-Kkhel,’ a NGO in Ingushetia Republic, sent a letter to Vladimir Putin arguing that failure to stage the Caucasus Games in Ingushetia was unjust. The letter was signed by 150 citizens of the republic (Tagrimova, 2012). The petition was ignored; for political reasons, it is important for Russian authorities to host the 2012 Caucasus Games in the Republic of Kabardino-Balkaria, a neighboring republic of Karachaevo-Cherkessia, where previous Games were held. Both republics, alongside with Adygea, are home to large Circassian populations, and were historically part of independent state of Circassia. By coincidence, the Republic of Kabardino-Balkaria, which is hosting the 2012 Caucasus Games, is the very place where the same year the original Circassiada was supposed to take place prior to its rejection by federal authorities. In contrast to Circassiada, the Russian authorities see the Caucasian Games as part of a broader strategy to quell calls of Circassian nationalism and legitimize the Olympic Games in the eyes of the Circassians. It is one of the aspects of Russia’s diversion agenda (other aspects include academic conferences on the Circassian issue, performance of the Circassian dances on backstage of the Olympics).

It is obvious that the Russian authorities are attempting to use the Caucasus Games in connection with the 2014 Olympics in Sochi. Later, Russian authorities decided to make use of the Caucasus Games in political sense. There is another, economic angle of the Caucasus Games, as well. The Caucasus Games are held under patronage of the Russian presidents' representative in the North Caucasus Federal District. Host republics for the Games receive grants for their construction from the federal budget (Abdulaev, 2013). The financial aspect of the project has given rise to scandals. The NGO 'Mekhk-Kkhel' addressed a letter to President Putin claiming 'Those who are responsible for the project, including officials from President's Representatives in the North Caucasus Federal District, Ministries of Tourism and Culture, are mostly interested in consuming the finances for the project than its development' (Tagrimova, 2012).

The 2012 Caucasus Games gained international status spreading over the Greater Caucasus. Along with the Russian North Caucasus, South Caucasian states were invited to participate in the Caucasus Games, including Armenia, Azerbaijan, and semi-recognized republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. In March 2012, the office of Russian president's representative in the North Caucasus federal district announced, that 'we intend to invite teams from South Ossetia and Abkhazia to the next [2012] Caucasus Games; teams from Armenia and Azerbaijan expressed their willing to participate in sport festival, as well' (Orazaeva, 2012).

#### **'Caucasus Olympics': ethnic divisions between Olympic sports in Russian society**

It is well known that 'Olympic sport was a creation of the state and could be molded regardless of the evolving tastes of the public' (Edelman, 1993, p. 126).

It appears that such a principle is not necessarily true when sports are approached from ethnic, and not national state positions. In Russia, Olympic sports came to serve as both a competition with other states as well as between different ethnicities within the country. Sporting events have become one of the means by which Russian society is able to compensate for nostalgia for its lost Soviet power. Russian politicians broadly refer to the 1980 Moscow Olympics as a reminder of the legacies of a great country, and references to the success of the Soviet hockey team in 1972 enhance the nostalgic propaganda of old time fame (Makarychev, 2013). Following every Olympic Game, Russians count medals to compare their number both to the other countries and to past teams of the Soviet state. Counting Olympic medals has become a kind of national hobby and can sometime takes extreme forms, such as when Russian citizens go so far as to sum up all the medals of the states that used to be former Soviet Union. This phenomena was especially popular during the 2012 London Summer Olympics, when the US team took the first place with 46 gold medals and Russia was fourth with about half the number – 24. Not to be outdone, Russian enthusiasts tallied all the medals won by former Soviet republics in order to vault the ghost state to the top of the rankings – equal to the USA in gold medals and ahead in silver and bronze. Propagandists of the ghost of the USSR would write in their blogs, 'From the bottom of my heart, let me congratulate all the athletes of the former Great Soviet Union!' (Sologubovsky, 2012) (see Table 1).

Many experts attributed the phenomena to chauvinistic philosophy. Some even went as far as to compare the medals that ghosts of other former empires would win if they lasted until the 2012 London Olympics. The first place would go to Mongol Empire with 102 gold medals having been won by the states used to be part of it. And the Soviet Union would be on the sixth place in such a table (see Table 2).

Table 1. Comparison between the ghosts of the USSR with first four winners in the 2012 London Olympics.

Place	States	Gold	Silver	Bronze
	Virtual USSR	46	45	73
1	USA	46	29	29
2	China	38	27	23
3	UK	29	17	19
4	Russia	24	26	32

However, the USSR would be ahead of Byzantium (55), Austro-Hungarian (1914), Ottoman (1683), and Arab Caliphate (750), not to mention those that would not get even in the first 10, including Assyrian, Persian, and Macedonian Empires. While the nostalgia for former Soviet power often takes rather predictable forms, the nationalism reflected in sports remains largely unexplored in several ways. Postcolonial sentiments in Russian society are reflected best in sports when Russians experience negative emotions both in case of failures of the Russian Olympic team and success of the ethnic non-Russian members of the team. Russian society divides the Olympic sports into two categories. Individual power sports are seen as Caucasian sports based on fact that athletes from the North Caucasus are more represented in such events. Other sports are seen as more suited to the Russian ethnic character, especially team kinds of sports. These mythical divisions became more common in Russian society during the 2012 London Summer Olympics, though the idea that Russian ‘ethnic character’ has tendency to collectivity was popular during the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics as well (Lobanova, 2014). Ironically, this concept was challenged during the 2014 Winter Olympics by the defeat of the Russian hockey team. Hockey is traditionally considered as highest achievement of the Soviet era alongside with achievements in cosmos and ballet. President Putin personally supports it by playing publicly hockey himself. In this context, the defeat of the Russian team by the US team caused significant depression in the Russian society that Putin himself had to make a comment about the game (Belogoltsev, 2014). Some commentators went so far as to question Russian collectivism (Novokshchenov, 2014).

Back in 2012, as a practical outcome, some regional authorities took political action, including the prohibition of the so-called Caucasian kinds of Olympic sports; the formation of special ethnic Russian (Cossack) units supposedly to defend the Russian

Table 2. Comparison between gold medals have been won by the states used to be part of different Empires during the 2012 London Olympics (Kim, 2013).

Place	Empires (year of the biggest borders)	Gold
1	Mongol Empire (1392)	102
2	Roman Empire (250)	90
3	Empire Khan' (China; 220 год)	55
4	Holy Roman Empire (1550)	54
5	British Empire (1946)	51
6	USSR (1990)	47

population from the advance of Caucasians from neighbouring regions, and the use of anti-Caucasian rhetoric in public speeches.

Power sports, namely judo, boxing, wrestling, and weight lifting, in Russia became regarded as 'Caucasian sports' because they are more widespread across the Caucasus.<sup>3</sup> Such a perception became popular in Russian ethnic society during the post-Soviet era. This myth became popular after several Caucasian athletes became Olympic champions in the 2008 Beijing Games. Nazir Mankiev, ethnic Ingush, won the first gold medal for the Russian team in Greco-Roman wrestling. Later, two other athletes Islam-Bek Albiev, a Chechen, and Aslanbek Khushtov, a Circassian, became champions in the same sport. Three Caucasians won gold medals in free-style wrestling – Mavlet Batirov, an Avar; Buvaisar Satiev, a Chechen; and Shirvani Muradov, a Lak. Rakhim Chakkhiev, an Ingush, was the best in boxing. Overall, all the Caucasian athletes won 8 out of 23 gold medals for the Russian team. The achievements of the Caucasian athletes during the 2008 Beijing Olympics did not cause wide negative reaction in the Russian society.

In 2012, two factors sparked the discussion over power sports and their popularity among Caucasians. First, a nationalistic 'Russian March' on 4 November 2012 with the slogan 'Enough feeding the Caucasus' under the leadership of Alexei Navalnyi, a leader of the opposition, made anti-Caucasian feelings popular in Russian society. Second, the discussion culminated during the 2012 London Summer Olympics when three first gold medals of the Russian Olympic team were won by ethnically non-Russian judo athlete Arsen Galstian, Mansur Isaev, and Tagir Khaibulaev, while other members of the team did not win at the beginning of the Olympics and Russia was not even among the first 10 teams for some time (Tol'ko, 2012).

The debate started as a wide discussion in Russian society comparing the numbers of ethnic Caucasian and ethnic Russian athletes in the Olympics (Naibol'shee, 2012). Russian nationalists and even representatives of authorities contended that the Caucasians are more effective in power sports for number of reasons. First, power sports are more appropriate for the Caucasian people because the later supposedly have inclination to violence and individualism. Second, the social and economic environment in the North Caucasus is more unstable, so (the argument goes) violent and young trained athletes are in higher demand among the local politicians and businessmen that supposedly became rich by means of corruption, dividing subsidies from the Russian federal budget. And third, the individualistic power sports are more primitive and do not require the development of social and economic structure. According to this line of thought, only ethnic Russian society is capable of building the cultural and social infrastructure necessary to encourage team sports that ethnic Russians win more often than Caucasians.

Indeed, in power sports, Caucasians represented the majority among the Russian Olympic team, while they were not represented at all in other sports – 70% in free-style wrestling and in Greco-Roman wrestling, 60% in boxing, and 50% in Judo and weight lifting. However, the widespread mythical explanation of that fact had nothing to do with reality. The irony of the myth is not only in the fact that judo is traditionally a Japanese sport but that Russia never used to win judo before the 2012 London Olympics. The achievement in judo became possible after the Russian National Judo team invited a new coach, Enzo Gamba, an Italian Olympic champion. After that, five out of six Russians won medals in London. Another important factor was that Russian President Vladimir Putin distinguished and personally supported Judo to promote his own image as a former Judo athlete. The president's press secretary stressed that Putin personally supported the Russian National Judo Federation (Putin, 2012). Inspired by the achievements of the Judo

athletes, Putin visited one of the fights in London together with the British Prime Minister David Cameron. Accordingly training in the primitive conditions of the Caucasian mountains was not enough to win triple gold Olympic medals but the talented athletes additionally needed a foreign coach and the personal support of the Russian Federation's leader. Such paradoxes can be seen as part of ambiguous and contradictory incorporation into the state.

Popularity of Caucasian athletes in the 2012 London Summer Olympics caused confusion among ethnic Russian sport fans. While many Russians were proud of their co-citizens, many others did not regard them as representatives of Russia. Sergei Serebriakov, an Internet blogger, conducted a survey that showed that only 40% of respondents felt 'unconditional pride for the achievement of my country.' Thirty-nine percent of respondents did not have any feelings because they 'do not regard these wrestlers [from the North Caucasus] as "my" representatives.'<sup>4</sup> Other 9% were displeased by those achievements because they were 'fans against such athletes' (Bolotnikova, 2012). This kind of anti-Caucasus sentiments in sport has also direct link to the broader feeling of ineffectiveness of the system of justice in Russia. Two famous trials contributed to ethnization of the sport in Russia. The first case was that of Aslan Cherkesov who, in a street fight, killed Egor Sviridov, an ethnic Russian football fan. The case of Caucasian killing a Russian caused mass anti-Caucasian nationalistic demonstrations on Manezhnaya square in Moscow and became so significant that Vladimir Putin visited the grave of the victim. Another case was that of Rasul Mirzaev, a world champion in Russian combat sport, sambo, who incidentally killed a Russian, Ivan Agafonov. The media and public were less hard on Rasul Mirzaev because he was a famous athlete who would be able to win gold medals for Russia. However, his case contributed significantly to the spread of the myth that Caucasians were champions in violent sports to disadvantage of ethnic Russians.

Pro-Caucasian public and media saw the domination of the athletes from the Caucasus in sport as a sort of return match for anti-Caucasian sentiments in Russia. First, Mansur Isaev and Arsen Galstyan, the first Russian gold medal winner in the 2012 London Summer Olympics, actively stressed their Caucasian origin. They danced Caucasian dances as soon as they arrived at the Sheremetyevo airport in Moscow after the Olympics (Rossiyanskies, 2012). Translated on the national TV, the incident with dances only contributed to anti-Caucasian sentiments in Russia. It revived the ongoing discussion in Russia about prohibition Caucasians dances on Russian streets and public places. Caucasian dances on the streets became officially prohibited in Rostov, and the leaders of North Caucasus republics officially addressed the Caucasians asking them to stop dancing on the streets of Russian cities (Evkurov, 2011).

The discussion took the form of a *statistic war* between those who wanted to show the achievements of post-Soviet sport and those who stressed the superiority of Caucasian athletes (Sportsmeny, 2012). This statistic was supposed to demonstrate that the number of athletes from the Caucasus was almost equal to the number of athletes from all other Russian regions combined (Medal'nyi, 2012).

The ethnicity of athletes became an issue for other reasons during the 2012 Summer Olympics. The National Olympic Committee of Georgia protested in London against inclusion of two partly recognized republics, Besik Kundukhav, a wrestler from the South Ossetia, and Denis Tsargush, another wrestler from Abkhazia. They were included into the Russian team and the Abkhaz athletes won bronze medal (Gruziya, 2012). Nationalists and the broader public actively participated in the discussion about power sports as

Caucasian sports. Some Russian nationalists demanded the prohibition of power sports on the ground that they spread aggression. Such demands would look just ridiculous if they were not supported by some politicians. Anatolii Artamonov, the governor of Kaluga oblast ordered the closure of Olympic reserve school 'Energy,' a free sport facility serving about 400 youths and children. The governor stated, that he 'did not like free-style wrestling for cultivating aggression and because it is dominated mostly by Caucasian people' (Gadzhieva, 2012). Another initiative came from Alexander Tkachev, the governor of Krasnodar Krai – the region in which Sochi is located and where the 2014 Winter Olympics will take place. After a Krasnodar citizen, Arsen Galstyan won the first gold medal for Russia in the 2012 Summer Olympics, the governor issued a statement against immigration from Caucasian regions into the Krasnodar region. Tkachev even announced that he initiated the creation of special Cossack units to drive Caucasians from Krasnodar illegally when they cannot make it in by law, and to scare neighboring Caucasian people from coming to Krasnodar Krai. The Cossack units were supposed to be armed and paid by the state (Rech, 2012). The irony was that Arsen Galstyan, an ethnic Caucasian, had recently moved to Krasnodar Krai from Adygea, before he became Olympic champion. Later, after many objections, Governor Tkachev again made a statement that he did not change his position on the subject (Tkachev, 2012).

### Conclusion

The Kremlin faces a problem whose complexity is equal only to that of the role of sports in the modern Russian Federation. On the one hand, the Kremlin cannot include Caucasian elements directly into the 2014 Winter Olympics. To do so would open the door to anti-Caucasian responses among ethnic Russian nationalists that would dwarf the unrest that took place in Manezhnaya square. If rising Russian nationalism must be addressed, certainly, geography cannot be ignored. It is already a common point for criticism that the 2014 Winter Olympics will take place in a subtropical climate, but no matter how much artificial snow is created, even if Sochi is no longer one of the regional native capitals, it always has been, and always will be a part of the North Caucasus. Accordingly, the Kremlin cannot ignore the Caucasian geography of the 2014 Winter Olympics, and this means engaging the Caucasian peoples themselves. Ethnic sports become important for the Kremlin because the 2014 Olympics will take place in the Caucasus. Such Games are supposed to demonstrate peace in the North Caucasus and create an illusion as if all the North Caucasus republics embrace the Olympics. That is why the Kremlin supports Caucasus Games and makes them directly connected with the 2014 Sochi Games. However, the organizers of the Olympics cannot ignore the Caucasus, as well, as they intended at the beginning, and that is when such as Caucasus Games become useful.

In order to address these competing and diametrically opposed forces, the Kremlin needed some instrument that was both sporting and yet neither ethnic at the same time. When the Circassiada was first introduced, it seemed to fit the bill – with a bit of changing that, though completely logical to the Kremlin, would have transformed the spirit of the event into an unrecognizable form. When the Circassiada failed to meet the Kremlin's needs, it co-opted the Caucasus Games, slowly transforming an ethnic sporting event into a pan-regional extension of the Olympics, creating a remarkable illusion – one in which the peoples of the Caucasus seemed to embrace an international sporting event,

and one sufficiently removed from the 'real Olympics' so as not to inflame ethnic Russian nationalists.

The analysis of the ethnic and state sport in today's Russia shows how important and highly relevant is the debate on sporting nationalisms. And in that context, the issue of cultural imperialism and sport is particularly important. Russian multinational society tries to understand its complex identity and history. These debates are not just theoretical exercises but they may have direct influence on the existence of the Russian state in two opposite ways. On one hand, if those kind of debates are suppressed as they were in the Soviet era, it may lead to disintegration of the Russian Federation following the pattern of the fall of the Soviet Union. On the other hand, these kind of debates on every aspect of the social life that is in crisis may help to build a new identity for the Russian citizens and turn post-Soviet Russia into true multinational state that would become a healthy member of the modern globalized international community.

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### Notes

1. Within this paper, the author commonly refers to Caucasians. As a term for the many nationalities that are indigenous to the Caucasus in general and the North Caucasus, specifically. The term notes ethnicities within this geographical context, and bears no resemblance to the racial moniker of the same name commonly used in the West.
2. *Reverse waist* is translated from Russian *обратный пояс*.
3. The paradox of inclusion of judo in this list will be explained later.
4. *Dzhigit* is a Russian word for a strong and crafty man of Caucasian origin.

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