



By: Tomorrow's Affairs Staff

# Will the Winter Olympics in Italy be safe?



When the Olympic flame is lit at the San Siro stadium in Milan on Friday evening, it will symbolically mark the start of the 25th Winter Olympics for the athletes.

But for thousands of security personnel, it will be just one of the more important episodes in a complex operation in which they have been involved for a long time.

Security concerns have not escaped the organisers of the Olympics in Milan and Cortina, in northern Italy, even though the event is much smaller in scale than the Summer Olympic Games.

The stage provided by the world's biggest sporting competition is always an irresistible lure for politically motivated disruptors seeking to leave their destructive mark on an event that guarantees global publicity.

For Italy, the upcoming Olympics will be one of the largest **security operations** in recent decades. Six thousand security personnel have been hired to protect the athletes, delegations, and audience over the next 20 or so days.

This is significantly fewer than the 45,000 people France hired to secure the 2024 Olympics in Paris. With that robust security apparatus, the organisers set a new standard for all future Olympics, especially since the event concluded without major security incidents, despite numerous threats.

The Italian hosts, who were the first to organise the Olympics after Paris, have adopted that high standard and given full priority to security aspects.

## No compromise on safety

The **security headquarters** for the Winter Olympics will include experts not only from Italy but from around the world, which is an essential standard for organising effective security measures given that threats originate from various parts of the globe.

Some security measures may not appeal to the

cosmopolitan spirit of the competition or the sentiments of the athletes and audience, such as a no-fly zone or a constant restricted-access cordon at the main arenas.

However, the organisers, especially after Paris 2024, do not wish to compromise between full security and a sense of community and sportsmanship.

Since the massacre of Israeli athletes in Munich in 1972, robust security measures have been the primary responsibility of every Olympics organiser.

**The games in northern Italy do not face risks arising from this Middle East crisis**

Compared to the Paris Olympic Games, Milan and Cortina d'Ampezzo benefit from a slightly more favourable geopolitical environment, which in turn reduces the number and intensity of certain security threats.

The **Paris Games** took place at the height of Israel's intervention in Gaza, which was followed by massive street protests across Europe, particularly in France.

The games in northern Italy, however, do not face risks arising from this Middle East crisis, as the ceasefire in Gaza is in force and pro-Iranian extremist proxies in the region and their European outposts have meanwhile been decimated.

Israel will be represented at the Winter Olympics by a team of **10 athletes** and will undoubtedly receive the special attention of the security services, regardless of the fact that tensions towards their country have eased.

Members of the Shin Bet security service participated in securing the Israeli Olympic team in Paris two years ago.

## Russia – the main source of risk

The main security challenge at the Olympics in Italy will undoubtedly come from Russia and actors over whom it has direct or indirect influence.

Russia has a long and intense record of security interference at the Olympics, so a repeat of this pattern in Italy would not be a surprise.

At the previous four Olympic Games, except for the Winter Games in Beijing 2022 (Rio 2016, PyeongChang 2018, Tokyo 2021 and Paris 2024), organisers faced strong attacks and interference in the cyber sphere by Russian actors.

These activities were initially linked to the suspension of Russian athletes due to proven, state-supported doping. In Rio 2016, for example, cyber groups associated with the Russian military intelligence service GRU leaked athletes' medical data to discredit the World Anti-Doping Agency, whose findings led to the suspension of Russian athletes.

### The physical infrastructure in northern Italy, such as roads, snow-making equipment and signalling, is also at risk

Subsequently, Russian state cyber warriors continued destructive operations against the organisers of the Olympic Games (except China), motivated by a desire for revenge over the exclusion of Russian athletes following Russia's aggression against Ukraine.

The Winter Olympic Games in Italy will not be spared these risks, which is why there is a significant focus on the cyber protection of digital infrastructure.

In addition, the physical infrastructure in northern Italy, such as roads, snow-making equipment and signalling, is also at risk, as these systems are highly digitised and therefore susceptible to remote cyberattacks.

### A surprise from America

Russian athletes will not be able to compete under their national symbols at these games either, which still leaves room for angry reactions from digital extremists there.

Nevertheless, the risk in this area is somewhat reduced due to frequent announcements that the International Olympic Committee may ease sanctions against Russian athletes.



*We understand politics and we know we don't operate in a vacuum. But our game is sport - Kirsty Coventry*

The president of the IOC, **Kirsty Coventry**, recently sent a strong signal that the multi-year blockade of Russian athletes could soon end and that they could participate in full capacity as early as Los Angeles in 2028.

*"We are a sports organisation. We understand politics and we know we don't operate in a vacuum. But our game is sport. That means keeping sport a neutral ground. A place where every athlete can compete freely, without being held back by the politics or divisions of their governments," said Kirsty Coventry.*

At the same time, FIFA chief **Gianni Infantino** hinted that Russian football teams could soon return to the international stage. "This ban has not achieved anything, it has just created more frustration and hatred."

All this together could "appease" the Russian authorities and encourage them to abandon the long-standing practice of security sabotage at the world's biggest sporting events. However, their unpredictable nature

does not allow the organisers of the Winter Olympics to relax.

Paradoxically, one of the security threats to the Olympians in Italy could come from a side that no one could have expected until just a year ago – from America.

The announcement that ICE officers would be among the members of the American Olympic team's security caused great indignation in Italy and even street protests. It appeared that the US was going to export its internal instability to the world and to a particularly security-sensitive event like the Olympics.

However, the Italian authorities quickly rejected the possibility of any direct participation of American agents in security operations on the ground, and the sudden security risk was averted in a short time.