

Zeitschrift: Swiss review : the magazine for the Swiss abroad
Herausgeber: Organisation of the Swiss Abroad
Band: 40 (2013)
Heft: 3

Artikel: The battle over the Olympics
Autor: Lettau, Marc
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-906646>

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The battle over the Olympics

Proponents had promised a highly sustainable Olympic Games. But the dream has ended prematurely – the electorate of the canton of Grisons has rejected the staging of the 2022 Winter Olympic Games in St. Moritz and Davos. Why has there been such scepticism in Switzerland towards the Games that are so coveted worldwide?

By Marc Lettau

Who remembers the 2010 Olympic Games in Berne and Montreux? You will not recall them because they never took place. The Berne-Montreux bid was prematurely derailed by the people of Berne. They did not like the idea of sacrificing the federal capital's very own mountain – the Gurten – for a bobsleigh run. So, in 2002, they overwhelmingly rejected the prospect of the Olympic Games right on their doorstep.

Now there is a sense of déjà-vu. The Olympic dream came to a premature end at the beginning of March 2013 in the canton of Grisons too. In a referendum 53% opposed the hosting of the 2022 Winter Olympic Games. Politicians and representatives of the sporting and business worlds had unsuccessfully attempted to highlight the benefits of the Games for the future of Grisons. And the promoters had promised in vain to ensure a sustainable Games. People instead listened to environmental organisations, which decried the promoters' pledges as little more than marketing measures and warned of "mountainous debt and environmental damage".

The no campaign personified

The 60-year-old grammar school teacher and Swiss Social Democratic Party (SP) politician Silva Semadeni is the personification of the no campaign. She vehemently opposed the Olympic promoters. Reflecting on her reasons, she remarks "the enormous scale of the Games today" is incompatible with the protection of the Alps. She adds: "The Winter Olympic Games are not sustainable. The waste of energy and resources and the impact on the natural environment and landscape are huge." This "highly commercialised mega-event"



Silva Semadeni, SP National Councillor and figurehead of the opposition to the Olympics

was unsuitable for the mountain valleys: "My focus is on ensuring a gentler and self-determined development of the canton."

Sochi acts as a deterrent

Through her criticism Semadeni indirectly suggests that the referendum was not just decided in Grisons but also in the Russian city of Sochi. The approaching 2014 Winter Games in this sub-tropical seaside resort are generally viewed as grandiose, and the budget has rocketed from 8 to 44 billion Swiss francs. Semadeni says: "The Sochi Games with their dreadful incursions into nature and exorbitant costs serve as a deterrent to any right-minded person." The experiences of previous venues are also sobering, says Semadeni. They have left in their wake environmental damage, oversized infrastructure and mountains of debt for the public sector. Even sports fans concede that Sochi has influenced the Swiss perception of the Games. "Sochi is the absolute opposite of the plans organisers had in mind for the Olympic Games in Grisons," says the experienced sports journalist Thomas Renggli after a visit to Russia. Semadeni says: "If the Games are ever to take place in the Alps, the International Olympic Committee will have to amend its rules and focus much more heavily on existing infrastructure." The Games today are too

much of a "money-making machine for the IOC".

Structural obstacles

In Switzerland, the canton where the proposed venue is located makes the decision on an Olympic bid. But the Games overstretch individual cantons. After the rejection by the people of Grisons, IOC Executive Member René Fasel therefore proposed that these enormous structural hurdles be lowered: federal government

should firstly set aside three billion Swiss francs for the Olympic Games and then ask who would like to organise them. Fasel believes that many cantons would apply if this approach were adopted. But Fasel's concept was met with a lack of understanding. The "Neue Zürcher Zeitung" accused him of failing to appreciate the principle of democracy: the proposed billion-franc loan could not just be conjured up but would also have required the approval of the Swiss people. This means that the two Winter Olympic Games that Switzerland hosted in 1928 and 1948 are unlikely to be added to any time soon.

MARC LETTAU is an editor with the "Swiss Review"

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The International Olympic Committee has its headquarters in Switzerland, in Lausanne. However, Switzerland does not receive preferential treatment when it comes to the awarding of Olympic Games, as there is a long list of failed bids. St. Moritz (for the 1936 and 1960 Games), Lausanne (1936, 1944, 1948, 1952, 1960) and Sion (1976, 2002, 2006) have made unsuccessful bids for Summer or Winter Games. Alongside these are the Olympic plans rejected by the people, such as in Zurich (referendum of 1969), Berne (1969, 2002), Valais (1963), Vaud (1986) and Grisons (1985, 2013).