



Criticism Is the Real Winner of Rio's Olympic Games

Scrutiny over corruption and public health may be the best thing to come out of the city hosting the Summer Olympics.

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Athletes and artists celebrate at the closing ceremony of the Rio 2016 Summer Games. (David Goldman/AP)

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For Brazil, Neymar's [game-winning penalty kick](#) during the finals match of the men's soccer tournament will surely be the enduring visual of the Rio 2016 Summer Games. It was good enough for gold and a triumph over Germany, whose team won the 2014 FIFA World Cup in Brazil two years ago. The image of Neymar, sporting a "[100% Jesus](#)" headband and kissing his medal on the

podium, was just the thing that Rio needed to get over the awful impression made by U.S. Olympic swimmer [Ryan Lochte](#).

For the world, the consequences of the Rio 2016 Summer Games have yet to truly register—Brazil included. As with other mega-events in recent years, [criticism of the Rio Olympics mounted before the games began](#). That criticism will last long after the closing ceremonies. The true measure of the games will be in what change the Olympics brings, for better or for worse. Better scrutiny and greater transparency may be the silver lining of any modern Olympics, even if it comes too little, too late.



As an example of corruption, the Sochi 2014 Winter Games may be peerless. The games, which may have cost Russia as much as [\\$50 billion](#) to mount, were marked by a host of giveaways to Russian Railways and its then-chief, Vladimir Yakunin, a Vladimir Putin loyalist who was later [ousted](#) from the president's inner circle. Many of the broken promises associated with the company's construction of the [notorious Adler-Krasnaya Polyana line](#) and the attendant Sochi-Adler spur were documented by the [Anti-Corruption Foundation](#), a nonprofit

investigative organization founded by Alexei Navalny, a fierce Putin critic.

The Sochi Olympics brought Navalny to greater prominence, and for his trouble, earned him a prison sentence (suspended, [for now](#)), and landed his brother in jail. Yet Navalny has helped to build a culture of criticism surrounding politics and infrastructure, something that is desperately needed in Russia, especially as the country heads into the 2018 FIFA World Cup or [other mega-events beyond](#). This work is not just needed: In Russia, it is [truly dangerous](#).

The better outcome, of course, would be to host the games in places that did not inspire epidemic levels of fraud or the assassinations of critics. But corruption appears to be a feature of the Olympics, not a bug. Even before the 2016 Olympics had begun, Tokyo Governor Yoichi Masuzoe was [forced to resign over a funding scandal](#) related to the Tokyo 2020 Summer Games, just

as his predecessor did. For the Olympics, the next decade or longer may be remembered as much for institutional failures as for athletic accomplishments.

In Rio, an [official probe into corruption surrounding the Olympics](#) covers both the infrastructure modernization projects as well as the Olympic venues built with federal funds. The probe coincides with the devastating fallout of a corruption crisis that has consumed the administration of suspended Brazilian president Dilma Rousseff. There is no end to this crisis in sight.

For Rio and Russia alike, the way forward is a commitment to transparency. It is a shame that the Olympics plays such an oversized role in corruption cases for each country, but if investigations shine a light on scandalous political behavior in both places, then—well, it is hard to say that it will have been worth it. For Rio, that question will only be answered if the state's [infrastructure upgrades](#) prove enduring and the [Zika epidemic doesn't spread to other countries](#). For Russia, the answer is no.

There is reason to be optimistic that Brazil's gains may last, though. As [The New York Times](#) reports:

Born seven years ago in the heady days of an economic boom, these Games were initially seen as a triumphal capstone for a newly ascendant global power. Instead, as the country suffered through its worst recession in decades, the Games became an emblem of government waste and political hubris — and a target for protesters who dogged the Olympic torch relay as it wended its way across the country.

But experts say the Games also served as a powerful catalyst for urban revitalization, spurring infrastructure projects, financed with taxpayer money and private investment, that will enhance the lives of Rio's residents.

Nearly 100 miles of rapid bus lanes have slashed commuting times for thousands of the working poor. Four new tunnels have been built, and a 17-mile light rail system opened in June. A new subway

line, the system's first major expansion in decades, began operating four days before the opening ceremony.

Still, these gains were hard won and came at a high cost. Corruption even hangs over Brazil's win in the Olympics soccer tournament. The late João Havelange, a former president of FIFA and member of the International Olympics Committee, stepped down from his post before an ethics inquiry over kickbacks could be completed. Marco Polo del Nero, the president of the national soccer federation in Brazil, [faces a warrant](#) from the U.S. Department of Justice for his part in the [global FIFA racketeering conspiracy](#). Among the principal subjects of that probe, Del Nero alone still holds his job. With a gold medal victory, his job is surely secure for now.

The next and more important victory for Brazil will be a gold medal that is untarnished by scandal. That's a ways off for both the country and the Olympics alike. The Olympics cannot endure the state of scandal that the International Olympic Committee seems bent on sustaining. If there's any long-term gain for the host countries, it is that what does not kill them makes them stronger.

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