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Russia lightens up with softer image at closing ceremony

BY MIKE COLLETT-WHITE

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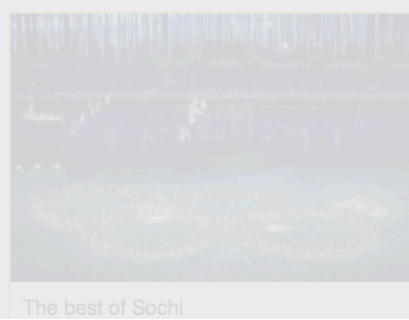


(Reuters) - An emotional closing ceremony at Russia's first Winter Olympics painted the hosts in soft colors, in contrast to the muscular, assertive spectacle that kicked off the Games, and there was even room for a joke at the home nation's expense.

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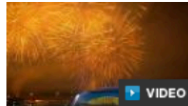
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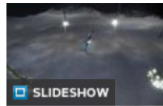


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The sense of national pride at a team of athletes that topped the medals table after a "super Sunday" fairytale ending to the Games was palpable, as huge roars erupted for the Russian team as they paraded past the crowds.

"Well done!" chanted tens of thousands of Russians as Alexander Legkov, Maxim Vylegzhanin and Ilya Chernousov received their gold, silver and bronze medals won in a clean sweep of the men's 50km cross country ski race earlier in the day.

Alexander Zubkov also led his team to glory in Sunday's four-man bobsleigh, leaving Russia top of the medals table with 13 golds and 33 medals in all.

After a rousing rendition of the national anthem by a choir of hundreds of children, the ceremony took viewers on a journey through Russia's rich heritage of visual arts, music, literature and dance.

The show at the Fisht Stadium on the Black Sea coast opened with a volley of fireworks and a boat suspended high in the air above waves formed by lines of hundreds of dancers in shimmering costumes.

They began to form the five rings of the Olympic symbol, but, in a reference to an embarrassing technical hitch during the opening ceremony when one failed to open, only four circles appeared.

After laughs and loud applause from the audience, the fifth ring eventually opened, and the mood was immediately more playful than an opening spectacle which had sought to portray Russia as a strong nation with nothing to fear.

"They are two very complementary shows," said Marco Balich, artistic executive producer of the ceremony, before it began.

"As grand as the opening was, with this one they went for another side of Russia - intimate, full of heart, and they (organizers) mentioned the word 'nostalgia'," he told Reuters.

It was as if Russia no longer had so much to prove.

"This is the new face of Russia, our Russia," Dmitry Chernyshenko, president of the Sochi organizing committee, said during his



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First there were floating houses and mysterious figures inspired by the paintings of Marc Chagall.

Then came pianist Denis Matsuev to play Rachmaninoff's "Piano Concert No. 2" as dozens of pianos were wheeled on to the floor around him in a carefully choreographed sequence that was captured best by the television cameras.

Next, beneath a huge chandelier, two theatre curtains drew back and dancers from the two rival ballet [companies](#) - the Bolshoi of Moscow and Mariinsky of St. Petersburg - emerged to perform some of the great dances of the genre.

In the fourth segment dedicated to literature, dissident author Alexander Solzhenitsyn was remembered alongside Alexander Pushkin, Fyodor Dostoyevsky and many other leading writers in another gargantuan display, this time recreating a library.

And, before the handover to South Korea's 2018 [Winter Games](#) host city Pyeongchang began, there was an ode to Russia's circus tradition, with a big top going up and clowns and acrobats dancing, jumping and twirling in trapezes.

BIGGEST CLOSING SHOW

It will come as no surprise that Sochi's was the biggest [Winter Olympics](#) closing ceremony ever staged, according to organizers, a fitting send-off for a Games estimated to have cost \$51 billion to stage - far more than any other Games Winter or Summer.

The feel-good factor the athletes have created has gone a long way to dispelling criticism during the buildup to the Games of Russia's human rights record, allegations of corruption and profligacy and the threat of Islamist militant attack.

Voices of dissent have been heard, but they have largely been drowned out by sporting endeavor on ice and snow in Sochi's futuristic [Olympic](#) Park and amid the peaks of the Caucasus.

International Olympic Committee President Thomas Bach gave Russia a resounding vote of confidence in his closing address.

"Tonight we can say: Russia delivered all what it had promised," he said. "What took decades in other parts of the world was achieved here in Sochi in just seven years."

Addressing the army of volunteers who helped guide athletes, reporters and visitors to their destinations, he said:



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Addressing the army of volunteers who helped guide athletes, reporters and visitors to their destinations, he said:

"Through you, everybody with an open mind could see the face of a new Russia: efficient and friendly, patriotic and open to the world. We arrived with great respect for the rich and varied history of Russia. We leave as friends of the Russian people."

After Bach formally declared the [Sochi Games](#) closed, three giant mascots of the Games - a bear, a snow leopard and a hare - appeared and the bear blew out the Olympic flame.

A thousand children from the Pan-Russian Choir performed in a rousing finale symbolizing the arrival spring, before choreographed fireworks exploded from the roof of the stadium.

(Editing by [Mitch Phillips](#))

<http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/02/23/us-olympics-ceremony-idUSBREA1M0QT20140223>