# Putin declares Sochi Winter Olympics open at captivating ceremony

Audience in stadium and at home led on spectacular journey through Russian history

[Vladimir Putin](http://www.theguardian.com/world/vladimir-putin) has formally opened the [Winter Olympics](http://www.theguardian.com/sport/winter-olympics) in Sochi during an elegant, mesmerising and occasionally surreal ceremony that showcased [Russia](http://www.theguardian.com/world/russia)'s past while glossing over some of the more divisive moments of its history.

One of the five Olympic rings, fashioned in the form of giant snowflakes, failed to open properly, but apart from that the opening ceremony was typically grandiose and elegant, drawing attention to the more glorious moments of Russian culture – its composers, art and dance heritage.

After an hour-long parade of the 3,000 athletes who will compete in almost 100 events, actors, dancers and singers led the audience on a spectacular journey through Russian history, from the misdemeanours of Ivan the Terrible via the romantic period of the 19th century to a surprisingly brief Soviet vignette complete with pioneers, Stakhanovite industrialists and some colourful 1960s types who looked suspiciously like they'd been imported from swinging London.

Putin himself presided over the entire event, stepping forward only to sound the starting gun for the Games. "I declare the 22nd Winter Olympic Games open," he said

There were intriguing comparisons to be made with London 2012's opening ceremony.

Huge pillars came out of the floor during Sochi's War and Peace ballroom scene just as Boyle's chimney stacks rose into the Stratford air. Ceremony director Konstantin Ernst's floating balletic doves brought to mind Boyle's winged cyclists, who flew into the air as the Arctic Monkeys played.

Opening ceremonies for Winter Olympics tend to be less extravagant affairs than their summer cousins, but after spending £30bn on the most expensive Games ever, there was never any chance that Putin was going to scale back. Yet this was not a cold, grand spectacle like Beijing's jaw dropping exercise in military precision.

There were moments of grandeur – not least the dramatic cauldron lighting. But like Boyle, who rewrote the rulebook for opening ceremonies with his complex, intimate snapshot of "who we were, who we are and who we wish to be", this was a production designed as much for those watching on television as those in the Fisht Stadium.

The controversy over Russia's law against gay propaganda appeared to be momentarily forgotten, though the German team was suitably decked out in rainbow colours. A brief scare over a plane apparently hijacked in Turkey by a Ukrainian man eager to get to Sochi was quickly defused in Istanbul.