

Milano-Cortina 2026: The Olympics facing complexity

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The Milano-Cortina 2026 Olympic Games involve not only athletes and organizers, but also the ability of research to guide complex decision-making in an era marked by climate change and geopolitical instability. From sustainability to the governance of Alpine territories, the Games become a testing ground for the relationship between knowledge and politics.

A major event such as the Olympic Games almost inevitably begins amid a range of controversies. Milano-Cortina 2026 is no exception. Rising costs — which, judging by recent experience, appear to be an almost unavoidable feature of large-scale events — are one recurring issue, as are debates over infrastructure and environmental impact. This pattern runs through the recent history of both the Summer and Winter Games. Two examples suffice. Athens 2004 has come to symbolize abandoned venues and financial imbalance. Barcelona 1992, by contrast, is still widely cited as a successful case of urban transformation. Most contemporary Olympic experiences fall somewhere between these two poles: ambitious and often innovative, yet rarely free of ambiguity.

Today, however, the context is further complicated by two crucial factors. **The 2026 Games open in a climate shaped by geopolitical tensions and by the accelerating effects of global warming.** The Alps, the historic cradle of winter sports, are also among the European ecosystems most exposed to rising temperatures. Snow can no longer be taken for granted, and artificial snowmaking is increasingly relied upon, requiring significant water resources. The stability of mountain slopes is also under discussion. These are not technical details but structural issues. In such a scenario, sustainability stands at the top of the agenda.

What makes Milano-Cortina a particularly significant edition is also its organizational model of distributed venues. Building on existing facilities reduces — or is meant to reduce — the construction of new infrastructure, but it also entails considerable distances between competition sites. Transport thus becomes a crucial variable, both logistically and environmentally, since it represents one of the main sources of emissions in major sporting events. The Alpine model therefore constitutes an experiment: is it truly possible to reconcile organizational excellence with the long-term, responsible use of infrastructure and a meaningful reduction of overall environmental

impact? The distributed format is not entirely new. Events such as football World Cups and European Championships, or international basketball tournaments, have long been held across wide territories, involving multiple cities — and sometimes multiple countries. In winter sports, however, geographic dispersion intersects with more sensitive environmental conditions and with facilities located in vulnerable mountain contexts.

This is where research comes into play. Sustainability should not remain a narrative; it requires solid data, predictive models, and independent assessments. The Olympic Games are complex systems and demand adequate tools in order to be properly understood and governed. They remain, first and foremost, a sporting event focused on athletic performance and the emotional intensity of competition. That is the heart of the Games. Yet precisely because sport lies at their core, everything that surrounds it — organization, infrastructure, host region, public participation — profoundly shapes its meaning and long-term impact.

A crucial issue concerns legacy. Each edition promises lasting benefits, but what happens afterward is often difficult to measure. Which transformations truly endure in the areas involved? Which facilities become integrated into long-term strategies, and which struggle to find a purpose? Without scientific analysis and historical comparison, legacy risks remaining an assertion rather than a verifiable outcome.

Milano-Cortina 2026 is not merely a celebration of sport. It is also a test of institutional maturity and of the capacity of research to influence collective decisions. Medals will change the lives of individual athletes and will rightly be celebrated; the consequences of today's choices will shape host areas for decades. It is on this terrain that the real stakes ultimately lie.

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