

Sochi 2014: The Quarry Outside My Window and Other Geographies of Protest (Chapter 5)

Sven Daniel Wolfe

Spatial Development and Urban Policy, ETH Zurich

swolfe@ethz.ch

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4517-6056>

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Chapter 5

Sochi 2014

The Quarry Outside My Window and Other Geographies of Protest

Sven Daniel Wolfe

“This was supposed to be my little hotel,” Petros¹ explained, indicating a guest house by the orchard on the edge of his property. “I planned it for four rooms and was going to have it open before the Olympics. And I wanted to keep running it after, for the skiers and vacationers who will come later . . . but none of that was possible” (May 2014, Akhshtyr). The guest house was simple but spacious, built by Petros and his sons two years before the 2014 Winter Olympic Games in Sochi, Russia. It had electricity from a dedicated gasoline generator, running water from their own well, and a view overlooking the valley and the river Mzymta. This was in Akhshtyr, one of a string of small villages between the two clusters of Olympic venues in the mountains and on the coast, part of greater Sochi. In theory, the location was ideal for catching the anticipated flows of tourists: only fifteen kilometers to Sochi-Adler, the beach, and the main stadiums and, in the other direction, thirty kilometers to the slopes, the lifts, and an entirely new city being built in the mountains. The trouble was that there was no simple way to get there from Akhshtyr. The highway between Adler and the mountains ran on the opposite side of the river, and residents had to drive many kilometers on an old, rutted road until they could cross over to the more functional transport links. As part of the Olympic urban development agenda, authorities constructed a new elevated highway and, separately, a high-speed commuter train line, both running between the mountains and the coast. The fact that these new linkages were on the Akhshtyr side of the river gave Petros the inspiration to build his small pension hotel. After all, with a planned and promised onramp to

the new highway (and perhaps someday even a station for the train), his fortunes would be sure to improve. But the fact that these new constructions ultimately bypassed and ignored his village meant that he was left with an unusable investment. This is the origin of Petros's local protest against the Olympics, its exclusionary urban development, and an unresponsive government at municipal, regional, and national scales.

This vignette illustrates some of the dynamics of local contestation against the 2014 Winter Olympic Games in Sochi. From abroad, this mega-event was often framed as a personal project of the Russian president,² a soft-power strategy on the geopolitical stage,³ but Petros's story presents a more nuanced interpretation of these global ambitions. Soft power is not a stable construct, nor is it directed only to an international audience at geopolitical scales.⁴ In Sochi, the Olympic soft power project took the shape of a concerted attempt to introduce a 'new Russia,' tied to a new sense of Russian-ness, to both international and domestic audiences.⁵ This attempt met with partial success domestically but failed at the international level due to the hard power context of the Russo-Ukrainian war and the increased tensions in international relations that followed. These maneuverings at global and national scales were tied to a regional urban development project in Sochi of breathtaking size and cost, reinserting the Russian national government into regional spatial planning practices, and fundamentally restructuring Sochi's economic base and built environment.⁶

What is missing in many analyses, however, is the micro-level effects of these ambitious projects. How did Sochi locals themselves react to hosting the Olympics, with the symbolic politics at play alongside the unprecedented construction activity involved in the redevelopment of their region? This chapter endeavors to shed light on this question through ethnographic attention to some of the villagers living between the two major sites of Olympic construction. In so doing it

uncovers nuanced dimensions of micropolitical protest on the ground in Sochi. Further, when focusing on protest activity at this level, the chapter is contextualized with, but differentiates itself from, protests that were more visible from abroad, such as the infamous whipping of the Pussy Riot activists outside of the Olympic venues,⁷ the international furor over the passage of the controversial so-called “homosexual propaganda law,”⁸ or the Circassian activist diaspora who tried to bring attention to the massacres and expulsions that occurred 150 years ago.⁹ Instead, this chapter follows the relatively invisible actions of residents who tried—and ultimately failed—to make their voices heard against the roar of Olympic development dictated from above and from afar. From this micropolitical perspective, the chapter details the uneven outcomes of the Sochi regional development project and concludes that, while some areas have indeed been transformed into popular year-round tourist destinations, this definition of successful development excludes many residents, and that the project has in fact taken place at huge environmental and social cost.

This chapter is based on extensive fieldwork, official documentation and reports, and media analysis before, during, and after the 2014 Sochi Olympics, as part of a separate project that did not involve the dynamics of protest. Texts and transcripts were entered into qualitative data analysis software and coded iteratively over time, in dynamic conversation between the field and desk research,¹⁰ from which the themes of micropolitical protest rose inductively. This thematic coding process ultimately revealed a disconnect between the narratives surrounding the Olympic urban development preparations and the actual outcomes on the ground. Occasionally, this disconnection sprouted as small, localized expressions of protest, some of which serve as the empirical basis for this chapter. In the years after the event, periodic efforts were made to remain in contact with several of the participants in order to understand the aftermath once the Olympics left town.

The chapter approaches these small-scale moments using micropolitical thinking. Following Deleuze and Guattari,¹¹ who acknowledge that “everything is political, but every politics is simultaneously a *macropolitics* and a *micropolitics*,” the chapter endeavors to make sense of larger scales through an attention to the “micro,” rooted in the notion that neither macro- nor micropolitics can be understood without the other. This is an omnivorous approach that valorizes the relatively invisible actions of small-scale protest, predicated on the understanding that local scales and individual actions have an inherent political immediacy that exists apart from, but saturated with, dominant orders.¹² In this way, the chapter uses local Sochi protest as a means of understanding dynamics within Russia at larger scales and, conversely, using larger political developments to make sense of resident actions within Sochi.

Sochi as Material and Symbolic Project

Hosting mega-events has long been associated with wide-ranging urban development and placemaking agendas.¹³ Most famous of these was the creation and propagation of the so-called “Barcelona Model,” based on the 1992 Summer Olympics, wherein a city hosts a mega-event and transforms its built environment and tourist attractiveness, ultimately setting itself on a more prosperous trajectory with worldwide renown.¹⁴ This model has spread around the globe, regardless of the fact that the Barcelona games went over budget and displaced local populations.¹⁵ Indeed, the flipside of the potential economic, infrastructural, and (geo)political benefits of hosting mega-events is an array of negative outcomes for host cities and populations.¹⁶ These range from gentrification and other socioeconomic marginalization¹⁷ to ecological devastation.¹⁸ As the promised benefits of mega-events spread to attract potential host cities outside of the traditional heartlands of the global north, so too do the attendant risks and damages.¹⁹

Russia's recent history of hosting mega-events fits into this picture, and includes the 2013 Summer Universiade in Kazan, the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi, and the 2018 World Cup, among many other smaller-scale events. These are part of a multifaceted state strategy to reassert Russia's presence on the global stage,²⁰ and, at the same time, to reinsert the Russian federal state into spatial planning.²¹ The latter is based on the idea of developing chosen territories through specific government attention, in a strategy of so-called extraverted urbanism.²² Sochi was selected as one of these chosen territories and given unprecedented state attention and funding, to the tune of over \$50 billion USD,²³ making it the most expensive Olympics in history. However, Golubchikov notes that approximately 80 percent of this investment went not to sporting facilities but to infrastructure.²⁴ Thus, the Sochi Olympic preparations are better understood as a massive regional development program, rather than merely hosting a sporting event, however prestigious. The goal here, as stated in government policy and expressed by leaders from the Sochi mayor up to the Russian president, was the wholesale regeneration of Sochi, transforming it from a somewhat dilapidated summer resort into a world-class, year-round tourist destination.

Alongside this far-reaching regional development agenda, there was also a goal of introducing a new sense of Russia and Russian-ness to the domestic population and the world at large.²⁵ In the tumultuous years since these Olympics, it is clear that this attempt was a spectacular failure on the international level, but it is important to remember that at the time of the bid and the preparations, there was a concerted effort to present Russia to the world as a growing democracy and an eager partner in global affairs. This is the reason behind the message "Russia—Great, New, Open!" displayed in huge letters in English and Russian at the entrance to the Olympic Park in Sochi. In this light, Russian organizers aspired to use the 2014 Olympics to create and display a nation fully recovered from the fall of the USSR in much the same way that Japanese organizers

used the Tokyo 1964 games to introduce to the world a peaceful, postwar country.²⁶ Thus, the Sochi Olympics held great significance for the Russian state, in both material and symbolic dimensions, and in domestic and international contexts.

Domestically, this identity project took the shape of a yearslong public relations campaign, aided by the state's increasing control of the media environment. Billboards in cities nationwide featured patriotic imagery linked to hosting, a national sportswear brand launched a fashionable clothing line tied into the patriotic nature of the Games, and numerous television channels broadcast in-depth interviews with famous Russian Olympic champions under the title "One Nation—One Team." This state-led drive for national unity through sport reached its climax during the opening ceremonies on February 7, 2014, a dramatic spectacle that attempted to consolidate Russia's pre-Soviet, Soviet, and post-Soviet history.²⁷ Imperial narratives of a great nation were delivered not just through reference to Russian cultural and civilizational triumphs, but also through a deliberately edgy, postmodern aesthetic, intended to appeal to broad swaths of the population.²⁸ The opening ceremony was broadly appreciated in the Russian population, but it nevertheless acted as a polarizing force between those who favored the state's increasingly conservative push and those who resisted, with both groups taking inspiration from the narratives on display.²⁹

Protest in Russia and abroad

Missing from most of these economic, infrastructural, and political discussions was the human scale, particularly regarding those individuals who resisted the imposition of the state's ideas of material and symbolic progress. The Sochi regional development and symbolic political programs were inherently top-down, created in Moscow and articulated on the ground by actors

with close connections to the federal state.³⁰ So, what were some of the reactions of the Russian population, both in the rest of the nation and in Sochi itself, in reaction to this top-down agenda? This is a particularly salient question because the Sochi Olympics occurred in the aftermath of the 2011 Bolotnaya protests, which saw unprecedented citizen and political mobilization against the authoritarian turn in Russia,³¹ but before the further consolidation of power and subsequent crackdown on dissent that followed the Russo-Ukrainian war.³²

Any mega-event host is subject to the potential for increased protest activity due to the concentrated attention of the global spotlight,³³ and Russia in the preparations for Sochi 2014 was no exception. Internationally, people knew or cared less about Russian domestic politics and instead focused on the passage of a law that effectively criminalized public homosexuality.³⁴ This was broadly framed as a human rights issue, and in light of the Olympic Charter's emphasis on non-discrimination, international activists seized on this contradiction to urge international boycotts of both Russian vodka and the Games.³⁵ Unfortunately for LGBT activists, the majority of the Russian population remained uncomfortable or outright opposed to gay rights, and as such, they supported the government's new conservative laws.³⁶ The Circassian genocide was another issue that attracted more attention internationally than domestically, as activists in the diaspora organized protests at Russian embassies and consulates, but generated little steam inside Russian borders.³⁷

Within Russia, but outside of Sochi, a handful of activists were arrested for an anti-Olympic/pro-LGBT demonstration in St. Petersburg on the eve of the Games.³⁸ They were arrested even though they adhered to the law that specifically allows solitary individuals to protest without permission. More dramatically, and away from the capital cities, the Museum of Contemporary Art in Perm hosted a radically political and anti-Olympic exhibition by the modern artist Vasily

Slonov. This exhibition targeted the Olympics as a vehicle of exploitation, expropriation, militarism, nationalism, and even the rehabilitation of Stalin.³⁹ In short order, and with no sense of irony in proving the artist's point, the exhibition was shut down, the artist questioned and put under surveillance, and the curator lost his job before later fleeing the country.⁴⁰

Because of the Russian state's draconian responses to physical expressions of protest or dissent, many citizens took to digital spaces to express their opposition through protest hashtags, critical blogs and vlogs, and anti-Olympic or anti-government articles, cartoons, videos, and songs. Alexey Navalny's Anti-Corruption Foundation—now labeled an extremist group and liquidated from Russia⁴¹—produced what they called the “Sochi 2014 Encyclopedia of Spending,” a detailed accounting of the costs and corruption for each of Sochi's Olympic development projects, linking dirty money to numerous highly placed businessmen and government officials by name.⁴² The report was released in Russian and English, in both PDF format and an interactive online site based on a map of Sochi, so users could see at a glance where the projects were sited, how much was spent, and who benefited. The release of this report made waves on the Russian internet, but there was no mention in the rest of the traditional media.

Protest in Sochi

In a sign of how seriously he valued the creation and maintenance of a unified and unquestioned national narrative, President Putin issued a decree that outlawed any protest in or around Sochi. Under pressure from the International Olympic Committee to support free expression, he later softened this restriction to allow the creation of a designated “free speech zone” far from the Olympic venues,⁴³ but this was little more than a tacit gesture to placate the international set and was not taken seriously by residents. Because of terrorist threats, the entire

region was placed under special military and security status, with a reported 100,000 Federal Security Service agents on duty.⁴⁴ This represented nearly a quarter of Sochi's pre-Games population and did not even take into account the soldiers deployed in newly-created temporary bases around the region. Aside from all this, the state instituted a wide-ranging package of digital surveillance technologies, allowing the Federal Security Service to monitor all telecommunications traffic in the region.⁴⁵ Because of these technologies, some activists received visits by the security services before even organizing any activities.

The most internationally visible protests in Sochi occurred during the Games, when Pussy Riot—the political punk art collective that grew famous for their protest song in the Moscow Cathedral of Christ the Savior⁴⁶—performed a spontaneous protest song at the Olympic venues. Before they could finish singing, they were accosted by the police and even whipped, on camera, by Cossacks.⁴⁷ True to form, they rapidly released a video of themselves being whipped and arrested in Sochi, accompanying a song called “Putin Will Teach You To Love The Motherland.”⁴⁸ Aside from this, not many protest actions were discernible outside of Russian territory. This does not mean that they did not exist, however. Rather, within Sochi, there were a few different flavors of activism and protest, but these actions were largely locally oriented, small scale, spatially dispersed, and quickly repressed by authorities. This local protest can be grouped roughly into two categories: environmental destruction and local disruption, both tied to the overwhelming scale of Olympic construction projects; and the negative reactions they inspired among the population.

Sochi's natural environment is rare and protected by a variety of laws at both the national and international levels. On the coast, the Olympic venues were built on the Black Sea shore, where cleanliness (in terms of both visual aesthetics and pollution) is necessary for the continued attractiveness of the region to tourists. Construction here was risky and threatened the local Black

Sea shores with pollution, both visual and chemical. In the mountains, however, the situation was further complicated by environmental law. There, the Olympic venues were sited within Sochi National Park, the only untouched mountain forest remaining in Europe, bordering the Caucasus Nature Reserve, and listed as a UNESCO natural world heritage site. In this protected environment, eleven new sports venues were built, and an entirely new city was founded in order to support these venues and the accompanying flow of tourists. These material interventions were linked with extensive transport connections of road and rail in order to provide seamless flow from the airport and train station transport hubs down on the coast. The construction activity caused colossal damage to the protected natural environment, complicating organizers' promises to "minimize, and when possible eliminate negative environmental impacts in Sochi during the construction and operation of Olympic venues and infrastructure."⁴⁹ This was a guiding principle of what Russian organizers claimed would be the "Games in Harmony with Nature," in alignment with the International Olympic Committee's stated environmental concerns.⁵⁰ To some extent, environmental considerations forced a change in plans, such as when the United Nations Environment Program complained that the luge and bobsled venues were sited within protected spaces, and local organizers relocated the developments, to international acclaim.⁵¹

In many other cases, however, organizers' promises to use the Games to protect and increase the size of Sochi's environmental preserves proved little more than greenwashing.⁵² In violation of national and international law, construction took place in protected areas and produced spectacular and irreversible environmental damage (see figure 5.1).⁵³ Unnecessary and extravagant projects were planned and executed, at great cost and in violation of the law, and affecting native populations of yew and boxwood forests, Atlantic salmon, red deer, and wild boar.⁵⁴ Speaking off the record, a former director at a local construction company explained how this was

accomplished: “They built where they needed to build, for the championship . . . and it was our job to go back, after they were done, and amend the codex so that no laws were violated” (June 2016, Sochi). This legal flexibility speaks to the political priority of the Sochi project, which also explains why environmental protests were so quickly repressed.

<Insert Figure 5.1>

Local environmentalists discovered that, under cover of the bustle of Olympic construction, a private villa was being built illegally in the national forest. One prominent activist went to protest the construction site and was promptly arrested by the security services. This did not make the news but was widely discussed in opposition circles. In response, another environmentalist group modulated their activities and decided not to protest actively against the construction. Instead, they dedicated themselves to cataloging the environmental destruction, starting with endangered species featured in the International Union for Conservation of Nature’s Red List.⁵⁵ The Olympic construction was so vast and swift that this group did not have time to publish their warnings before an endangered species of chamomile flower was destroyed and made extinct. They tried again with more endangered species but had the same result. This continued throughout the years of preparations, as the pace of construction and destruction only increased. What is more, one activist shared rather nonchalantly that she and her group had weekly meetings with the federal security services: “Our agent comes by, and we offer him tea. He asks what we’re doing, and we tell him what we’re working on . . . He always asks if we’re planning an action, and we always say no” (August 2013, Sochi). This cool response to state surveillance reveals, all at once, the commonplace nature of government interference in individual lives, the difficulties of protest and opposition, and the personal strength and flexibility of activists. At the same time, these environmentalists were stymied in their attempts to prevent or even mitigate ecological

destruction, and had to be content with publishing their list of species made extinct. When even this publication was repressed, Grisha, an environmentalist involved with the project, found himself under intolerable state pressure. Arrested and interrogated on a thin pretext of accepting bribes, he later fled the country.

Similar to the story of Petros that opened this chapter, Grisha had originally been enthusiastic about the Olympics coming to Sochi. Environmental activist is not a well-paid job, so Grisha supported himself by leading eco-tours to distant, untouched areas in Sochi's wild spaces. Shortly after the Olympic bid had been won, he explained his reasoning:

It's going to be good, I think . . . Currently I have maybe two or three big tours in a summer . . . Of course, most people coming to Sochi are not interested in going far into the mountains with me, but I'm certain that some will be. And if more and more tourists come, then there's more chance. I don't need much, but some more would be nice (December 2009, Sochi).

This optimism contrasts starkly with Grisha's attitudes many years later, from exile:

There was no chance for any business. None at all. The gangsters control everything anyway, and you can't make any money if you're a simple person . . . More important than that, they ruined Sochi. They killed it (April 2017, Hamburg).

Grisha's story parallels Petros's in several ways. At the outset, both hoped that the coming influx of tourists would help improve their personal fortunes. For one it was guiding people into the

wilderness and teaching them about nature; for the other it was giving people a place to sleep. Both were investing their futures into a promised increase in the tourist economy, and it would be easy to imagine a situation where the two—although they were not acquainted—could have forged a symbiotic business relationship: Petros would recommend Grisha’s services to guests who were looking for something to do, while Grisha would recommend Petros’s pension hotel to visitors coming to Sochi for an eco-tour. None of these plans came close to fruition, however, and the spoils of increased tourist activity went instead to well-connected firms and individuals. As a businesswoman put it, “Who wants to deal with local people when you have all these international chains?” (July 2015, Roza Khutor). Ultimately, both Petros and Grisha reflect stories of local hopes dashed by the political-economic realities of contemporary Russia. Neither of them expressed particularly anti-Olympic sentiments, particularly not at the start; rather, they both wanted to be part of the imagined rising tide that was promised to lift all boats, and they resented the fact that they were left out.

For his part, Petros took a more explicit oppositional and protest posture. In contrast to Grisha, who was concerned primarily with environmental destruction, Petros was affected by issues of local disruption. This affected him, and indeed his entire village, in three ways. The first of these was the exclusion from transit connectivity. Petros was overjoyed when he saw the original Olympic plans for the new highway, and incensed when local authorities cancelled the promised onramp to Akhshtyr. This did not lead him to protest immediately, but rather to engage with activism. A former Hero of the Soviet Union, Petros was unafraid of the authorities and lost no time in writing to the Sochi mayor. When he was ignored, he wrote to regional and then national politicians, all the while collecting local signatures for a petition and contacting legal representation for a court case.

While this played out, two other disruptions took place in Akhshtyr, centered around the need for raw material for the Olympic construction projects. Petros lived at the outside of the village, and his property opened onto a meadow ringed with sparse boxwood forest and a gradual slope to the river. This was not his property, but it may as well have been: his children grew up playing in the meadow and the forest, and the family would often walk through the forest to the river rather than take the road, which was a more circuitous route. This meadow and forest were chosen by local authorities as the site of a new quarry to provide rock for the masses of new construction in the mountains. They dug this quarry not four hundred meters from Petros's house, and work continued nonstop, around the clock, for years before the Games (see figure 5.2). That is a daily punishment of three eight-hour shifts of continuous rock drilling and loading, punctuated by the roar of oversized KAMAZ construction trucks arriving and departing every hour of every day without cease. "I dust the window sills in the morning," Petros's daughter Anja explained, "and by the afternoon I already have to dust again. There is so much powdered rock in the air. It is an outrage, but what can we do? They don't listen, and they won't listen" (August 2013, Akhshtyr). It did not matter to authorities that the quarry was sited illegally in protected forest, and they were also unconcerned about the nearby villagers. They steadfastly continued to ignore Petros's letters.

<Insert Figure 5.2>

Aside from this noise and air pollution, the endless string of KAMAZ trucks also presented a separate disruption to the residents of Akhshtyr. At all hours of day and night, they tore up and down the mountain, hauling rock or heading back for more. They raced along the unmaintained village road, endangering drivers and pedestrians alike, and the roar of their engines and their powerful bright lights woke residents throughout the night. One day, when Anja was driving home,

she found herself stopped by a man in uniform, who told her the road was closed and she could not pass. Apparently, the KAMAZ trucks had eroded the road so much that it was now dangerous. Construction workers dug a chasm to refill and repair, but had left it open for the time being. All residents were required to park their cars several kilometers away from their homes until repairs were complete. Anja took her groceries, crossed the chasm by means of a makeshift bridge, and dialed her father, who came down in a separate car to fetch her. This became their routine for the following weeks, and was repeated at regular intervals whenever the road needed to be shut.

On top of this, the KAMAZ trucks were so heavy that they destroyed local wells. Petros's family, long accustomed to being able to drink from their tap, suddenly found themselves without potable water, as did the other families in the village. After a series of increasingly vocal complaints, local authorities provided a water delivery truck once a week, but there was no hint that this would continue after Olympic construction ceased. Petros explained the situation: "We were living fine before. Yes, maybe we were poor but at least we had water and we had peace. Now we have neither one nor the other . . . I don't believe they will provide water later. What are we supposed to do?" (August 2013, Akhshtyr). Thus, far from providing increased economic opportunities for residents, the arrival of the Olympics substantially damaged local lives and livelihoods. Because his complaints about these injustices were ignored, Petros turned his attention to the possibilities of physical protest.

Since there was only one road that connected the village to the rest of Sochi, and this road was vital for the regional construction projects, Petros reasoned that this would be a good target for disruption. He elaborated: "I didn't want to destroy anything, of course. I simply wanted the authorities to listen to us" (December 2013, Sochi). Over the course of a week, Petros visited every family in Akhshtyr, trying to muster support for his plan to block the road. The initial plan was to

build barricades, but he soon realized that KAMAZ trucks could drive over anything the villagers could muster. Instead, the plan was to block the road with their bodies, preventing the trucks from passing until local needs were met. “A lot of people supported the idea, but didn’t want to go out,” he said, “and some people didn’t support the idea at all. And some people said they did, but I think they were lying” (December 2013, Sochi). It is unclear whether anyone in the village informed the security services, or whether they learned about Petros’s plans thanks to the institution of new surveillance technologies, but either way, the village earned a visit from a pair of FSB (Federal Security Service) agents. They went door to door and calmly stopped the protest before it could start. Petros explained:

They told me that someone in government would address my concerns, and they advised me not to block the road. Then they told me I was free to ignore their advice, but that they couldn’t tell what would happen if I did . . . I’m not a fool. I didn’t go out. How could I? What would it accomplish? (December 2013, Akhshtyr).

In this way, security authorities put an end to the potential protests in Akhshtyr. Local grumbling was permitted but direct action was not. The drilling work continued and when the quarry was too deep and wide, they dug a second quarry further up the mountain.

Conclusion

These micropolitical snapshots of the geographies of protest in Sochi highlight the need for a fuller, more inclusive understanding of mega-events and global affairs. A fair examination of the 2014 Winter Olympics is incomplete if it focuses only on regional urban development and

geopolitical image management, without considering the lives of the host city residents. It is insufficient to discuss the narratives of a “new Russia,” for instance, without taking into account the intended audiences of those narratives. Likewise, it is an oversight to assume that the only audiences for this mega-event soft power project are located abroad. In this light, Sochi residents can be forgiven for taking officials at their word when they promised a new Russia. Far from the great nation narratives on display during the Olympic opening ceremonies—to say nothing of the full-throated nationalism after the annexation of Crimea in 2014—the new Russia that these residents believed in and desired was far more material. They were promised improvements to their daily lives, such as decent transit connections to the metropolitan centers, gas and water hookups for their rural homes, and expanded opportunities for earning a living. Put another way, they cared less about the Olympics than they did about what the presence of the Olympics might mean for their lives. When it became clear that the Olympic tide did not benefit everyone, they grew disenchanted. Some fled, some tried to protest, and many more remained silent. To some degree, all were caught up in the spectacle of the Games once they began, and a clear majority of Russians thought the Olympics were successful, worth the expense, and a source of patriotism and pride.⁵⁶ This is true despite the fact that they also continued to suffer unnecessary exclusions and deprivations.

In the end, the new Russia that developed after the Olympics was not a flourishing democracy, equitably integrated into international systems, and with meaningful material improvements for the lives of host city residents. Instead, what transpired was a nation locked into an increasingly authoritarian spiral, at war with its neighbor, aggressive toward and isolated from the west, and with drastically curtailed rights and freedoms for citizens. For Sochi residents, the context of increasing political closure has translated into even fewer opportunities for expression

or dissent. Inspired by Navalny's exposés, some activists began investigating municipal and regional officials for corruption. They published their findings in local blogs and other media outlets, but one by one these have been shuttered, their owners driven to flee or imprisoned. It is clear that a line has been drawn: criticizing the president or his allies is the same as criticizing the nation, and both are now forbidden. It is a sign of the severity of the authoritarian turn in Russia that the pre-Olympic period—with all its restrictions and repressions—can now be seen as a time of relative political liberty and free expression.

At the same time, Sochi does enjoy some important benefits of Olympic development. With newly built and upgraded infrastructure, the region has indeed become a year-round tourist magnet, and enjoys higher economic activity than most other Russian regions.⁵⁷ There are jobs in Sochi, and things to do, and beautiful places to see, and this attracts people from all around the nation—even during the coronavirus pandemic. To some extent, even some of the pre-Olympic promises have been fulfilled. Gas lines were finally extended to the residents of Akhshtyr, for example, though they were made to pay high fees for hookups to make the gas flow. In response to these mixed results, Petros's daughter Anja summed up her feelings:

Yes, there is some movement and life in Sochi . . . but we lost so much. I moved away from Akhshtyr into the city. I have an apartment and everything is more or less okay. My father still lives back home, but I rarely go and visit him. It's too sad to see how things are now (February 2021, Sochi).

<N1HD>Notes

¹ Names and identifying details in this chapter have been changed in the interests of anonymity. Parentheticals following quotations from those I interviewed include the places and years in which we spoke.

² Robert W. Orttung and Sufian N. Zhemukhov, *Putin's Olympics: The Sochi Games and the Evolution of Twenty-First Century Russia*, 1 edition (London: Routledge, 2017); Fred Weir, "Sochi Olympics: Putin's Moment at World Podium," *Christian Science Monitor*, February 6, 2014, <https://www.csmonitor.com/World/2014/0206/Sochi-Olympics-Putin-s-moment-at-world-podium>.

³ Jonathan Grix and Nina Kramareva, "The Sochi Winter Olympics and Russia's Unique Soft Power Strategy," *Sport in Society* 20, no. 4 (2017): 461–75, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17430437.2015.1100890>; Emil Persson and Bo Petersson, "Political Mythmaking and the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi: Olympism and the Russian Great Power Myth," *East European Politics* 30, no. 2 (2014): 192–209, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21599165.2013.877712>.

⁴ Sven Daniel Wolfe, "'For the Benefit of Our Nation': Unstable Soft Power in the 2018 Men's World Cup in Russia," *International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics* 12, no. 4 (2020): 545–61, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19406940.2020.1839532>.

⁵ Sven Daniel Wolfe, "A Silver Medal Project: The Partial Success of Russia's Soft Power in Sochi 2014," *Annals of Leisure Research* 19, no. 4 (2016): 481–96, <https://doi.org/10.1080/11745398.2015.1122534>.

⁶ Oleg Golubchikov, "From a Sports Mega-Event to a Regional Mega-Project: The Sochi Winter Olympics and the Return of Geography in State Development Priorities," *International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics* 9, no. 2 (2017): 237–55,

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