



Ευξεινος

Governance and Culture in the Black Sea Region

12 / 2013

SOCHI AND THE 2014 OLYMPICS: GAME OVER?

Guest Editor Martin Müller (Zürich)



The Olympic clock is ticking... neon installation when entering Sochi, August 2009.
(Photograph by Martin Müller)

Online Journal of the Center for Governance and Culture in Europe
University of St. Gallen
URL: www.gce.unisg.ch, www.euxeinos.ch
ISSN 2296-0708

Last Update December 2, 2013

LANDIS & GYR
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Center for Governance and
Culture in Europe



University of St.Gallen

Life On The Ground: A Comparative Analysis of Two Villages in Sochi During Olympic Transformation

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ABSTRACT *This paper examines the effects of major infrastructure development for an international mega-event on two villages in rural Russia. The focus is on the experiences of people witnessing these changes firsthand, as Russia prepares to host the 2014 Olympics in Sochi. The work is grounded in field research, 19 ethnographic interviews, and government documents. Extensive interviews were conducted with Sochi locals living in two villages on opposite sides of the Mzymta River, between the Coastal Cluster of Olympic venues on the Black Sea coast and the Mountain Cluster of venues in Krasnaya Polyana. These villages have undergone radically divergent changes since Olympic development began, and contrasting the personal experiences of their inhabitants shines a light on the human element of the massive construction involved in hosting the world's most prestigious mega-event. It is concluded that, while much of the infrastructure development is needed and welcomed, many locals nonetheless feel significantly marginalized, excluded from the discussion, and not benefiting from their region's development.*

KEYWORDS: Russia; Sochi; Olympics; Mega-Events; Kazachiy Brod; Akhshtyr'

INTRODUCTION

With a budget already exceeding 50 billion USD¹, the Sochi Olympics represent unprecedented levels of investment in a relatively under-populated, rural area. Major infrastructure improvements have been touted by official sources as a significant part of the legacy of the 2014 Olympic Games:

"By 2014 Sochi will have built and reconstructed more than 360km of roads and 200km of railways. New water treatment facilities are under construction in Krasnaya Polyana and Adler. New, ecologically clean power facilities are being built in the Mountain and Coastal Clusters.

The main Olympic artery will be the Dzhubga-Lazarevskoe-Sochi gas pipeline - a critical supply of gas for the city...The pipeline will provide

2.78 billion cubic meters of gas per year. This will bring gas to many settlements and will ensure a reliable energy supply for Sochi.

*The legacy of the 2014 Olympic Games in Sochi will include an improved network of roads and highways, a modern international airport, aerial tramways in the mountains, and a system of power stations."*²

The official translation on the English version of the OlympStroy website, although less detailed, adds the following text: *"We have made a long-lasting positive impact on the development of the area. A legacy for everyone... a brand new infrastructure of energy, water, telecommunications and transport, international hotels..."*³

Further, the discussion of mega-events often focuses on macroeconomic results and

1 Thomas Grove, 2013. Russia's \$50 billion Olympic gamble. Reuters [online], February 21. Available at: <<http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/02/21/us-russia-sochi-idUSBRE91K04M20130221>> [Accessed 21 September 2013].

2 OlympStroy evidence. O Korporatsii [About the Corporation]. [online]. Available at: <<http://www.sc-os.ru/ru/about/>> (author translation)

3 OlympStroy evidence. About the Corporation. [online]. Available at: <<http://www.sc-os.ru/en/about/>>

frames the impact of development in terms of tourism, GDP, and the benefits that an improved infrastructure will bring to economic development in the region as a whole. In a 2010 official interview, Dmitriy Chernyshenko, the president and CEO of the Sochi 2014 Organizing Committee, said *“the Winter Games will attract investment from around the world and open up unprecedented opportunities for the region’s tourist and leisure industry.”*⁴

This theme is evident in literature, government documents, and news reports concerning mega-events not just in Russia, but in London⁵, China⁶, Rio⁷, and South Africa (Swart and Bob, 2004; Blackmore and Rottok, 2010). It is contended here that focusing solely on the macro level leaves out the critical human element, and that concentrating attention on the opinions and experiences of local residents adds depth and value, working toward a more

comprehensive discussion of the wholesale effects inherent in mega-development. Müller (2012) has documented the positive and negative perceptions of Sochi residents in light of the preparations for the Olympic Games, and this paper follows in Müller’s path by posing the following research question: How has Olympic mega-development affected the lives of local people in the very center of these changes? By focusing on the personal observations of affected individuals, we can improve our understanding of what it means to host major international events, particularly in rural areas where the necessary infrastructure development is more noticeable and the social, economic, and ecological changes are more drastic.

This paper focuses on the micro level of individuals and families in two neighboring villages in Sochi, both profoundly affected by Olympic-related development. These two villages, spatially and socially linked by a small footbridge over a river, have had a close, intertwined, parallel history. Since Olympic construction began, however, the two villages have undergone radical, divergent development, primarily due to differences in inherited infrastructure caused by their geographical location. Through detailed interviews with residents of these villages, a critical examination is developed of this fragmentation, framed in the lives and experiences of the people who are quite literally hosting this international event. Drawing attention to their own observations and opinions shows the divergent ways in which Olympic development has altered regular life, underscoring their perceptions of the uneven distribution of resources, and ultimately helping craft a more complete understanding of what it means to host a major international sporting event in a rural area.

4 Dmitriy Chernyshenko, 2010. Quoted in Sochi 2014 Environment Popular Ecology Newsletter [online], issue 02, Winter 2010. Available at: <<http://bit.ly/1aneZLH>> [Accessed 30 October 2013].

5 Olympic.org evidence. Benefits of hosting London 2012 will be ongoing. Official website of the Olympic Movement [online]. August 12, 2012. Available at: <<http://www.olympic.org/news/benefits-of-hosting-london-2012-will-be-ongoing/172370>> [Accessed 30 October 2013].

6 Xinhua News Agency evidence. Beijing offers Olympic template for developing countries. Xinhua News Agency [online], August 25, 2008. Available at: <http://www.china.org.cn/olympics/news/2008-08/25/content_16327893.htm> [Accessed 22 September 2013].

7 IOC President Jacques Rogge. Quoted in Associated Press/Yahoo News article [online]. July 10, 2013. Available at: <<http://yhoo.it/1dncUOu>> [Accessed 30 October 2013].

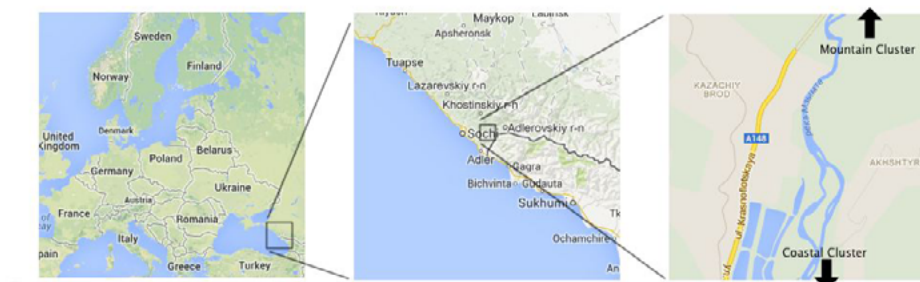


Figure 1. Kazachiy Brod and Akhshtyr', between the two clusters of Olympic sites in Sochi, Russia

MEGA-EVENTS AND MARGINALIZATION

The effects of mega-events on poor or marginalized populations is well-documented. Under the pressure of an internationally-visible deadline, host countries often conduct aggressive “beautification” projects in which impoverished local populations are displaced or hidden, and the international community has been guilty of failing to examine this tendency (Greene, 2003). Gaffney (2010) has detailed the radical transformation of land, the rapid construction of infrastructure networks, the behavior of organizing committees with access to resources, and the lack of legal recourse to people displaced or aggrieved by mega-events. Further, Kennelly and Watt (2011) have highlighted the contrast between the positive perceptions of the Olympics and the real-life consequences for homeless youth in the urban environments of Vancouver and London. In the context of this scholarship, this paper identifies two rural villages in the very heart of Russian Olympic construction and investigates the reactions and opinions of the people there.

GEOGRAPHICAL FOCUS

Visitors to the 2014 Winter Olympic Games in Sochi will arrive either at the refurbished international airport or at the newly-constructed train station, both located in Adler, a district or sub-city of Sochi. The Coastal Cluster of Olympic sites has been built near these transportation hubs, but the Mountain Cluster lies approximately 40km away in the town of Krasnaya Polyana, at an altitude of 550m (1800 ft) above sea level. Until recently, there was only one road connecting Adler to Krasnaya Polyana, running into the mountains alongside the Mzymta river. As part of the development of Olympic infrastructure, a federal highway was built on the opposite side of the river, and a dedicated rail service between the clusters will be completed in time for the Olympic Games in February.

Although the entire city of Sochi and its districts are undergoing intensive construction and renovation, the focus of this investigation is on Kazachiy Brod and Akhshtyr', two small villages on opposite sides of the Mzymta river, situated 15km from the Coastal Cluster of Olympic sites in Adler and approximately 30km from the Mountain Cluster of sites in



Figure 2. Locals walking in Kazachiy Brod in 2013. New houses, new fences, new streetlights.

Krasnaya Polyana. Every spectator and athlete will pass these villages repeatedly during the Games; aside from helicopter, there is no other way to travel between the Olympic Clusters. Figure 1 shows the location of Kazachiy Brod and Akhshtyr' in relation to Adler, Sochi, and the rest of Europe. Figure 2 shows a snapshot of Kazachiy Brod in 2013. Every house visible in the picture was built after 2007. Figure 3 shows houses in Akhshtyr' surrounded by new power towers, along the construction road that leads through the village to the new quarry.

PARALLEL VILLAGES, DIVERGENT DEVELOPMENT

Kazachiy Brod and Akhshtyr' are connected over the Mzymta river by a small footbridge, but they are following dramatically divergent paths in terms of government attention and development. The original road linking Adler to Krasnaya Polyana runs west of the river, through Kazachiy Brod. This road has been vital to the village. It has been paved since Soviet times and has always had bus service. In contrast, the main link between Akhshtyr' and Adler is a poorly-maintained dirt road. Because their own infrastructure is lacking or nonexistent, residents of Akhshtyr' routinely cross the footbridge to Kazachiy Brod to shop or to commute to the urban centers.

"People from Akhshtyr' came over the bridge every day. They would come to take the bus. That's how kids got to school, that's how people got to work. They'd come over the bridge and do their shopping and then walk back across the river and be picked up in a car. It's a far walk uphill."

(Author interview: Kazachiy Brod resident "A", August 25, 2013.)



Figure 3. Houses on the construction road to Akhshtyr' in 2013. New power lines and towers.

Despite the presence of a few small shops in Kazachiy Brod, both villages shared a common, relatively low level of infrastructural development: both villages had dirt roads in poor condition, ramshackle houses with asbestos roofs, and cows could be seen wandering even on the main road. Further, both villages have endured similar difficulties with the lack of public infrastructure. To this day, neither village has a connection to a municipal gas line; all cooking is done on electric ranges or via propane tanks, and houses are typically heated by wood-burning stoves. Until very recently, the water in Kazachiy Brod was not potable and was often shut off; if residents had money, they would have drinking water delivered by truck. Akhshtyr' had no water connection at all, but some of the fortunate residents had their own wells. Neither village could rely on the electricity supply and blackouts were a fact of life. These rural villages were not keeping pace with the urban seaside in terms of access to basic goods and services. This was the general living situation before the Olympics were announced in 2007.

Situated along the only transport corridor between the two Olympic clusters, the people in these villages theoretically stood to gain tremendous material advantages from the boom in development and tourism. Indeed, when it was announced that Sochi would host the Olympics, many residents expressed optimism, and some even made plans for business ventures.⁸

8 Author interview: Pogos Antonyan, Akhshtyr', August 4, 2007; author interview: Kazachiy Brod resident "H", August 7, 2007; author interview: Kazachiy Brod worker "K", July 1, 2013.

KAZACHIY BROD: BOOMING AND UNRECOGNIZABLE

The existence of the road in Kazachiy Brod has fundamentally altered the village since Olympic construction began. On the way to Krasnaya Polyana, every piece of construction equipment and every worker has passed through Kazachiy Brod. The quiet country village has been transformed into a loud, turbulent mess, filled with construction, traffic, tourists, new stores, new houses, and a host of unfamiliar faces.

"The construction is unbelievable. Kamazi [heavy duty construction trucks] are racing by 24 hours a day. There's dust everywhere, dust from the construction, dust from the trucks. You wipe the windowsill in the morning and in the afternoon it's covered in dust again." (Author interview: Kazachiy Brod resident "M", August 2, 2013.)

"We've already forgotten what it's like to have a calm city. You can't even recognize anything anymore." (Author interview: Kazachiy Brod resident "H", August 2, 2013.)

"Before, we knew everybody in Kazachiy Brod. You'd walk to Arut [the store on the main road] and there were no strangers. Nowadays, there are strangers everywhere. Guest workers rent rooms in houses that didn't exist two years ago." (Author conversation: Kazachiy Brod residents "M" and "P", July 18, 2013.)

A power substation was built on the banks of the Mzymta between the two villages. When construction began, workers started shopping at Arut, the main store in Kazachiy Brod. In the village itself, new houses with rooms for rent appeared on lots that had once been fields. Soon, other villagers subdivided their property and sold the parcels. These houses are sometimes occupied by extended

members of local families (itself a sign of increasing wealth in the area), but residents still complain about the number of Olympic workers renting rooms.⁹

The village now has a pharmacy and a shop for mobile phones, and ground was broken for a small shopping center - all unimaginable developments a few years ago. Local reaction to this increased activity is mixed. Clearly money is flowing to the area and some store owners are enjoying a boom. The situation is more nuanced for other residents, however. Short of renting out housing, there is little that villagers can do to earn money on this influx of workers and tourists. Thus many people focus on the immediately noticeable negative changes to their environment.

*"They've cut off the electricity almost every day this summer. Sometimes we sit all day without power."*¹⁰

*"It's hard with all the construction and traffic jams. It's hard to get to work. I have to get up at 5:30 if I want to beat the traffic."*¹¹

*"It's never quiet anymore. You can hear them working all night in the quarry."*¹²

*"Let the Olympics be over! We are being tortured here."*¹³

9 Author interview: Kazachiy Brod resident "P", July 3, 2013.

10 Author interview: Kazachiy Brod resident "M", August 2, 2013.

11 Author interview: Kazachiy Brod resident "C", July 1, 2013.

12 Author interview: Kazachiy Brod resident "A", July 2, 2013.

13 Author interview: Kazachiy Brod resident "N", July 4, 2013.

It is worth noting that not everyone entertains such negative views, though the general mood in the village does seem pessimistic and harassed. Locals who are currently employed in Olympic projects - and therefore benefiting directly - have more positive opinions about the developments in the region.¹⁴

New improvements in the village include the installation of streetlights and the laying of new water pipes. For the first time, the village has been provided with public light and a source of potable water. It seems logical to credit Olympic infrastructure development for these improvements, but it has not yet been possible to find evidence to verify this specific causal relationship.

On the eve of the Olympics, Kazachiy Brod remains a village in confused transition. Despite some positive changes, people still face significant challenges in terms of infrastructure and access to resources, and they are tired of the endless construction activity. Electricity continues to be cut off regularly. The streets are in terrible condition and the culture of the village has been altered by the appearance of strangers. Ongoing construction is loud, disruptive, omnipresent, and relentless. At the same time, it is not accurate to say that material life has not improved. There is enough money for many people to improve their properties or to build new houses. There is municipal drinking water for the first time and the streets, though poorly maintained, are now lit at night. There are shops and restaurants being built. People in Kazachiy Brod have legitimate complaints about the changes in their village, even as they are benefiting from some of those changes. In sum, it appears as if the benefits they have received so far are

14 Author interview: Kazachiy Brod worker "K", July 1, 2013.

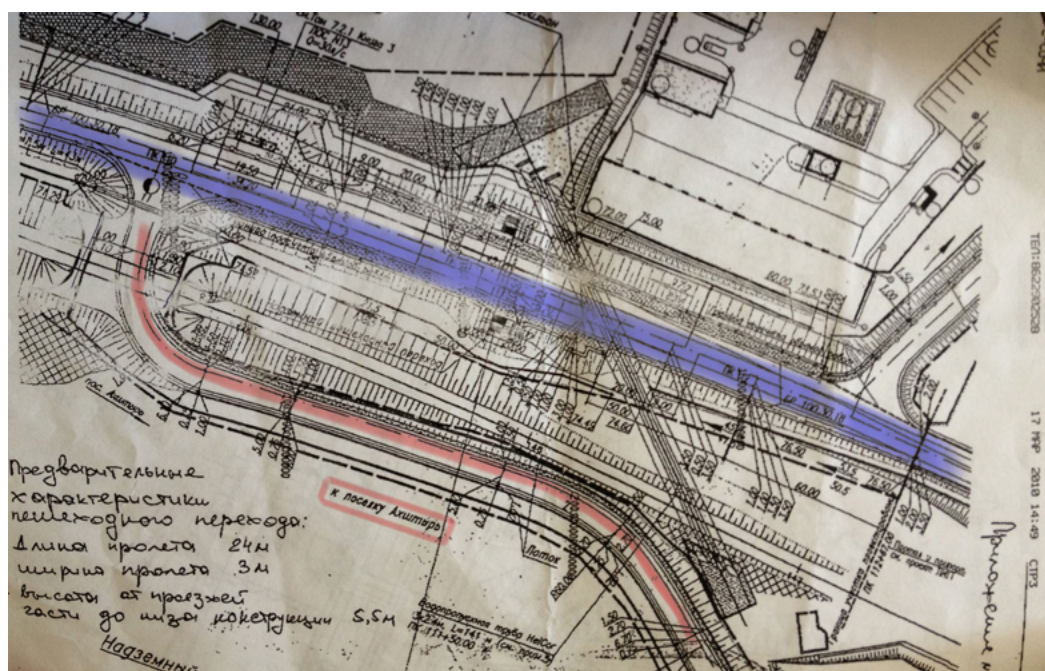


Figure 4. Federal highway marked in blue, onramp to Akhshtyr' marked in red.

not enough to outweigh the disruptions they are forced to endure.

AKHSHTYR': MARGINALIZED AND DESPERATE

As part of the preparation for the Olympic Games, a new federal highway was built between Adler and Krasnaya Polyana, running along the east side of the river, approximately 500m from the village of Akhshtyr'. In the original planning documents, Akhshtyr' was to have access to this highway using an onramp, as shown in Figure 4.

Naturally, the people living in Akhshtyr' were enthusiastic about this project. "A road means life, and a good road means a good life."¹⁵

¹⁵ Author interview: Akhshtyr' resident "O", August 2, 2013.

The onramp was never built. In response, families submitted letters and petitions to local administrators, including the mayor of Sochi and executives in OlympStroy, the State Corporation responsible for the construction of Olympic venues. Their concerns have not been addressed.

"We explained that there is a situation here but no one does anything. It doesn't matter that there was an onramp planned. There's nothing here now. Everyone says there's no money. The plan changed. But who changed these plans? No one ever wants to give us a real answer. They've told us, 'wait until the Olympics are over. Then you'll get everything you want.' But there is never anything concrete." (Author interview: Pogos Antonyan, Akhshtyr', August 2, 2013.)

Compounding matters, a new quarry was dug on the northern side of Akhshtyr', and a construction road was built through the vil-

lage (see Figure 5). The presence of the quarry is highly disturbing to residents. The drilling noise is ceaseless and can even be heard across the river in Kazachiy Brod, but in Akhshtyr' it is oppressive and inescapable. Work continues at night by the light of powerful spotlights. This activity creates a constant cloud of pulverized rock dust which is a daily disturbance to villagers. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the quarry itself represents the illegal destruction of a staggering amount of protected wilderness in a national park. Complaints



Figure 5. New quarry, set against the backdrop of the houses of Akhshtyr', 2013.

from local residents and environmental activists have brought about no results.¹⁶

Another problem confronting the people in Akhshtyr' is the lack of water. Many families had personal water wells which were de-

16 Author conversation: Akhshtyr' resident "I" and ecological activists "Y" and "Z", July 22, 2013.

stroyed by the appearance of heavy industry in the area.

"Now we get water from a truck once a week. We don't know where it comes from. We fill up containers and use that water. Next week the truck comes again. But after Olympic construction is done, those trucks will go away. What then? How will we go on? They drilled new wells but no water came up." (Author interview: Akhshtyr' resident "L", August 1, 2013.)

In protest, the residents of Akhshtyr' decided to block the federal highway and alerted the media. One young woman explained the results:

"The evening before we were planning to close the highway, the police came around to every house in Akhshtyr'. They said, 'listen, if you go out onto the highway, we'll simply take you away. Just don't say we didn't warn you. You can feel free to go out onto the highway tomorrow if you want, but don't be surprised when you know what's going to happen.'" (Author interview: Akhshtyr' resident "I", July 22, 2013.)

interview: Akhshtyr' resident "I", July 22, 2013.)

In the end the residents succumbed to this pressure and stayed home. No vocal protest took place, though people continue to write letters. In August 2013, Akhshtyr' residents learned that the authorities plan to use the quarry as a dump for construction debris. Currently they are circulating a petition against this plan, but they are not optimistic. The general opinion in Akhshtyr' regarding

the Olympics can be summed up in the words of a man who lives in a house overlooking the new quarry:

"I am very disappointed. There was supposed to be a new connection between Akhshtyr' and Kazachiy Brod. There was supposed to be an onramp to the federal highway. There was supposed to be gas, water, electricity, internet. All the things for a normal life. Nothing happened. There's no money for us. They're spending millions but there's no money here for the things they promised us." (Author interview: Akhshtyr resident "L", August 4, 2013.)

Locals are particularly frustrated by the unaccessible highway so close to their village, and they worry about their access to water after the Olympics are complete. People in Akhshtyr' feel significantly marginalized, and they have not seen any benefit from hosting the Olympics. On the contrary, by almost any measure, their lives have grown dramatically worse.

CONCLUSION

In examining the experiences of villagers in Kazachiy Brod and Akhshtyr', this paper attempts to explore the changes that occur in ordinary life during mega-development in a rural area. Despite sharing a common spatial bond and social history, the two villages have diverged wildly since Olympic construction began. People in Kazachiy Brod have legitimate complaints about development even as they build houses and businesses and benefit from certain infrastructure improvements. Across the river, people in Akhshtyr' have endured the loss of their water supply, the construction of an illegal quarry, and the threat of imprisonment for trying to bring attention to their plight. Regardless of the differences

in their developmental trajectories, people in both villages are united by their almost universal desire for the Olympics to end.

The divergence between the two villages can be traced to the uneven distribution of resources, itself due to the historical legacy of the original road between Adler and Krasnaya Polyana. The existence of this paved road represents the critical difference between the villages. Because of its location along this road, Kazachiy Brod has been the recipient of investment and attention. This has inspired noticeable material changes in the lives of its residents. Despite the fact that residents' opinions are generally negative, no one can reasonably argue that people in Kazachiy Brod are worse off than the people across the river in Akhshtyr'.

In contrast to Kazachiy Brod, Akhshtyr' does not enjoy direct access to an important paved road. Indeed, the residents of Akhshtyr' traditionally have left their village and walked across the river into Kazachiy Brod to access the road and the associated benefits of transit and shopping. In context of Olympic development, this unequal relationship has become amplified. Whereas Kazachiy Brod is, for better or worse, a recipient of development, Akhshtyr' finds itself in the role of victim. The rock that is used to build Olympic infrastructure is taken from Akhshtyr', and the process of drilling that rock is hugely disruptive to local residents. Further, the construction equipment and heavy trucks that are necessary for this operation are responsible for destroying the village's wells and removing their access to potable water sources. Finally, the newly-built federal highway which could have integrated Akhshtyr' into the region runs past the village with no onramp or offramp. Access to any benefits of development is denied.

The key variable defining the differences

in recent development between Akhshtyr' and Kazachiy Brod is the original paved road. The existence of this road in Kazachiy Brod connects the village to certain fruits of Olympic development, while the lack of this road has left Akhshtyr' with no water, no reliable transit links, and the promise of an Olympic dump once construction is complete.

Using the opinions and reactions of local residents as the foundation for investigation, this work focuses on the geographical and infrastructural differentiation between these two villages in order to bring a more nuanced approach to the understanding of mega-event development in rural areas. Mega-events are not only about infrastructure improvements, increased tourism, and a more robust GDP; they are also about individual lives and land in the context of dramatic upheaval. Examining the micro level contributes to a more complete picture of the complex changes inherent in mega-development. Against the backdrop of events held in a spirit of international unity, there should be no room for local people to feel marginalized, forgotten, or ignored.

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The Online Journal 'Euxeinos. Culture and Governance in the Black Sea Region' is published by the [Center for Governance and Culture in Europe](#) (GCE-HSG), University of St.Gallen, Switzerland with the financial support of [Landys & Gyr Stiftung](#).

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ISSN 2296-0708

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