

**MOLLY O'HARA**

# 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi: An Environmental and Human-Rights Disaster

**T**ypically when we think of environmental migration, what comes to mind is the forced displacement of a certain population as a result of a natural disaster, such as a hurricane, earthquake, etc. However, with the term 'environmental migration' itself constituting a fairly new kind of migration categorization, the parameters are not entirely fixed. While migration in the wake of natural disasters is perhaps the most explicit form of environmental migration, forced displacement can also be a result of slow onset climate change, such as sea-level rise or drought. In addition, although political, social and economic factors already make it difficult enough to assess traditional migration, the situation is further complicated when climate change and environmental factors enter the equation. As research in this field continues to grow, this paper seeks to shed light on yet another facet of environmental migration. In addition to natural disasters and slow onset climate change, migration can result from anthropogenic impacts or, in other words, human interference. Therefore, let us draw our attention towards one event in particular that has a history of creating situations of environmental degradation and forced displacement, namely the Olympics.

Ever since the environmental destruction that took place during the 1992 Albertville Winter Olympic Games, awareness has grown concerning the environmental degradation that can result from construction and preparation of such 'mega-events'. Subsequently, in 1994, the issue of environmental influence was presented for the first time at the XII Olympic Congress in Paris, followed by the International Olympics Committee (IOC) recognizing environmental protection as it became officially included in the general principles of the Olympic Charter (Popelarova and Janiga 2008). As a result, the IOC Sport and Environment Commission was created in 1995, and the concept of sustainable event management was born. According to the Official Website of the Olympic Movement (2015), "The IOC has acknowledged its particular responsibility in terms of promoting sustainable development, and regards the environment as the third dimension of Olympism, alongside sport and culture." However, if the results from the most recent 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi are any indication of how successful this Commission on the environment can be, the future for ecosystems, biodiversity and local populations affected by the Olympics does not look so bright.

This report will analyse the 2014 Sochi Olympics in order to discern the environmental damage and forced displacement that have occurred and to offer a more transparent picture of what has actually taken place than what the Russian government has been willing to disclose. Not only has preparation for these Olympics directly forced families to relocate, but the environmental destruction itself has also affected the living situation among the local population. Furthermore, when other political, social and economic factors are taken into account, from corruption to poverty, the gravity of the situation becomes even more apparent. However, since the Olympic Games are unlikely to be postponed or cancelled in the near future, understanding the complexities of such situations will be crucial in preventing their reoccurrence in future mega-events.

Following the introduction and methodology, the first section of this report will analyse the background of the Sochi Winter Olympics, starting with the steps to elect Sochi as the host city, followed by a discussion of the environmental impacts during and post preparation for the event. The second section will examine the forced displacement that took place from evictions imposed by the government, as well as assess the situation for the population that was trapped and unable to relocate. The third section will evaluate the various responses from the Russian government, organisations and local populations in order to more thoroughly tackle issues related to political, social and economic factors. Finally, the report will conclude with a brief recap of the situation in Sochi, followed by a suggestion for how similar issues should be dealt with in upcoming mega-events.

## 1. BACKGROUND

### 1.1 Sochi's Winter Olympic Bid

On July 4, 2007, Sochi was announced as the host city for the 2014 Winter Olympics. This was the result of the IOC's two-year preparation process that assesses each city's capacity to host the Games in a transparent process (Official Website of the Olympic Movement 2015). In 1994, Sochi officially bid to host the 2002 Winter Olympics but was ultimately rejected for economic reasons. The situation changed, however, when Russia experienced economic growth during Vladimir Putin's presidency from 2000 onwards, and to the possibility of transforming Sochi into a world-class ski resort became much more feasible (Gazaryan and Shevchenko 2014).

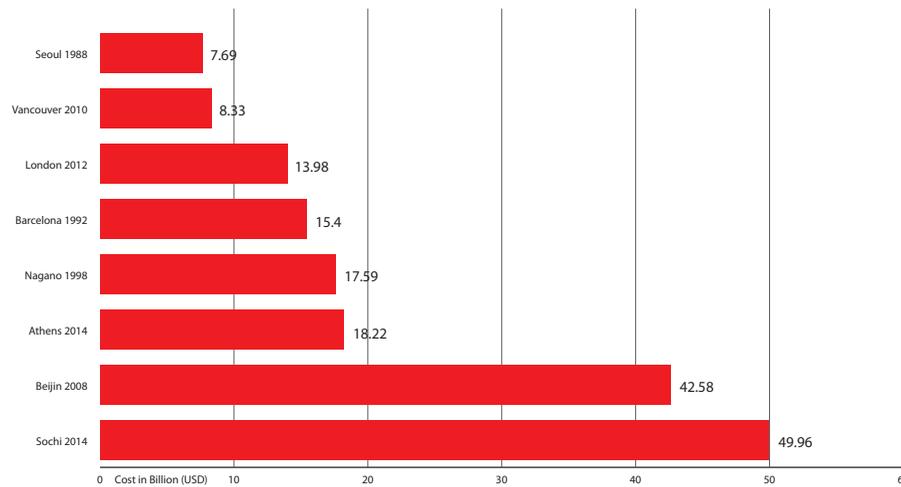
Following Putin's accession to the Presidency, a series of events took place: in 2003, the Russian state gas company, Gazprom, began construction in the Sochi National Park to develop their own ski resort; in 2005, the Gornaya Carousel began development in Sochi National Park without an environmental impact assessment; in February 2006, the Russian government ordered a change in the functional zoning of the Sochi National Park; in 2006, the coerced seizure of land and property from inhabitants began; and, in January 2007, a road to the Pslukh ranger station in the Caucasus reserve began illegal construction. Finally, in July 2007, Sochi won the bid, despite 47 Russian environmental organisations appealing to the IOC to avoid inflicting irreversible damage by not choosing Sochi. This was the first time a host city was chosen that had none of the venues completed (Gazaryan and Shevchenko 2014).

### 1.2. Reactions

As previously mentioned, 47 Russian environmental organisations pleaded with the IOC to not choose Sochi as the host city since all Olympic venues were planned on valuable protected natural territories. Consequently, once Sochi was officially chosen, the IOC had to make numerous statements to justify its choice (Gazaryan and Shevchenko 2014). At this point, it was already becoming clear that this project would face considerable challenges and fervent opposition. Furthermore, today it is widely recognised that the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi have been the most expensive Games in history. According to the Environmental Watch on North Caucasus (EWNC), "It was clear that no amounts of money would be spared for the project" (Gazaryan and Shevchenko 2014).

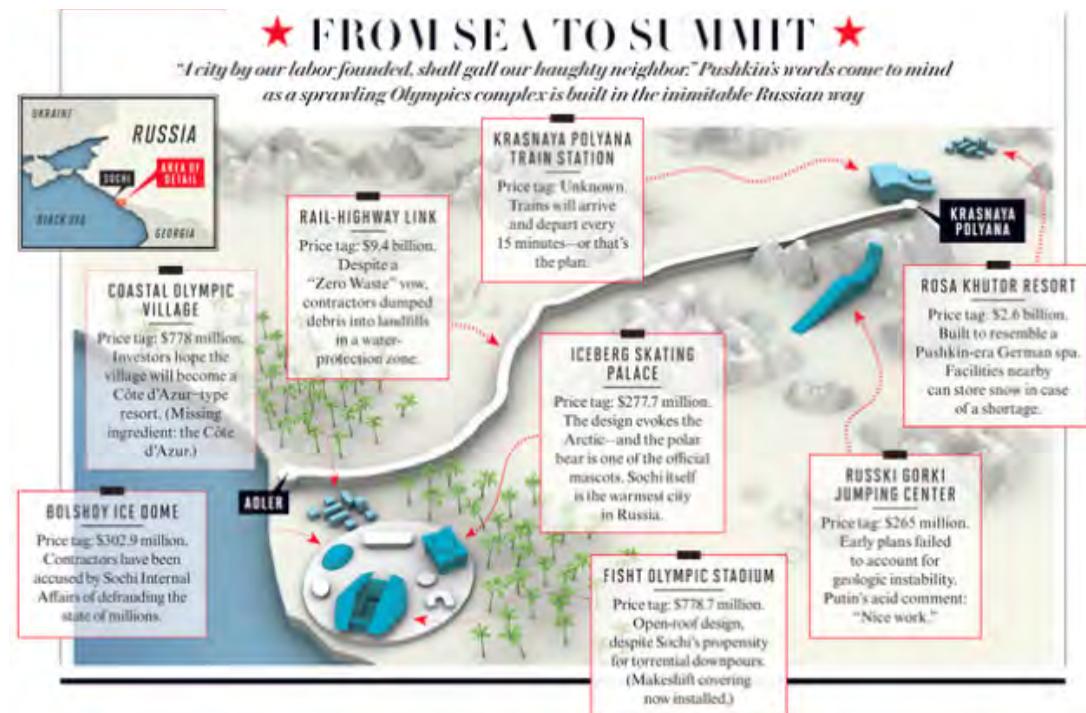
With a bill totalling around \$51 billion, some may wonder *why* so much money went into these particular Games. According to The Economist (2014), "[Vladimir Putin] spends much of his time at his Sochi residence and intends the games to be seen as proof of his mastery over nature and a symbol of his international legitimacy." As Figures 1 and 2 illustrate, Russia's Olympics were anything but cheap, costing more than twice as much as the Winter Games held in Nagano in 1998 (Business Insider 2014).

**Figure 1. Cost of Past Olympic Games**



Source: Business Insider, 2014

**Figure 2. Cost of Olympic Venues in Sochi**



Source: Vanity Fair, 2014

Given that Sochi is the warmest part in Russia, the fact that it is located in a war zone in the Northern Caucasus, and it is known for attracting shady visitors and organised crime, the cost was always expected to be significant simply in order to make the necessary arrangements. According to Russian opinion polls, nearly 50% of Russians believe that the main reason for these exorbitant costs is political

corruption, whereas 15% believe that the cost was genuinely due to the complexity of the project. Furthermore, an opinion poll by the Levada Center, an independent, Russian polling and research organisation, found that 38% of Russians feel that the real goal behind hosting the Winter Olympics in Sochi was to dispense state funds since less than 25% of the Russian population has felt any of the benefits (The Economist 2014). However, another poll by The Associated Press and NORC Center of Public Affairs Research (2015) found that 78% of Russians think the Olympics had a positive effect on Russia's international image, and 51% reported that it had a positive economic effect. Having established the background into the context of the Sochi Winter Olympics, this study will seek to further understand the state of the environment as plans for the mega-event progressed.

### **1.3. Environmental Assessment**

#### **1.3.1. Zero Waste**

When Sochi was chosen as the host city, the Russian government was well-aware of the Zero Waste standard imposed by the IOC, which uses the three "R's" – reduce, reuse and recycle – to determine the Olympic city's waste management policy. Although the Sochi 2014 Organizing Committee boasts on their website of having turned Sochi into a 'city without landfills,' the EWNC has questioned those cited figures, as well as Russian officials' ability to understand the fundamental principles of the Zero Waste policy in the first place (Gazaryan and Shevchenko 2014). This report will provide evidence that this policy was, in fact, disregarded and has ultimately been a complete failure.

#### **1.3.2. More Detailed Timeline**

The first section of this study provided a brief timeline of events that took place leading up to the Sochi bid for the 2014 Games, which illustrated multiple activities that were undertaken without proper environmental assessment reports. The present section will explore these events more carefully and bring to light other environmentally damaging, sometimes illegal, activities that were supported by the government.

The city of Sochi, which has a population of 400,000 people, is situated in the region of Krasnodar, the third largest in Russia. As illustrated in Figures 2 and 3, the Games were split into a coastal cluster and a mountain cluster in the Krasnaya Polyana Mountains. The first cluster, which consisted of all the ice venues, was built in the Imeretinskaya Valley along the coast of the Black Sea, whereas the second cluster, which was home to the skiing and sliding sports, was located in a compact area with only about 4 kilometres between the venues and the mountain village (Official Website of the Olympic Movement, 2015).

The series of choices that represent the ongoing pattern of environmental neglect began in 2003 when the Prime Minister signed a Government Decree allowing valuable wilderness and lake areas in the Sochi National Park to be rented out for the construction of the sports resort and downhill ski projects. At the same time, plans were made for completing the reconstruction of an existing road from Adler to Krasnaya Polyana and bringing gas to the mountain village. Subsequently, Gazprom became the first beneficiary of the decree, and they began the construction for their ski resort before obtaining a completed environmental impact assessment. Despite the fact that the resort illegally encroached on the territory of the Caucasian State Biosphere Reserve, federal authorities never stepped in. Furthermore, regarding the gas line to Krasnaya Polyana, Gazprom used threats to pressure authorities to provide a positive environmental impact assessment and did not even bother waiting for necessary construction paperwork before destroying a protected area, a natural monument known as Kudepstinsky Canyon and about 2,000 protected box trees (Gazaryan and Shevchenko 2014).

**Figure 3. Location of the venues for the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi**



Source: ABC, 2015

In 2004, another major player entered the picture named Vladimir Potanin, who announced plans to build the Rosa Khutor ski resort, adding that construction would require very little excavation and zero logging. However, as we see in Figure 4, this promise could not be kept due to the fact that the territory of the resort was actually covered in forest (Gazaryan and Shevchenko 2014).

**Photo 1. Clearing of Aibga for the Rosa Khutor Ski Resort**



Source: Gazaryan and Shevchenko 2014

Still in the early stages of planning, the Sochi authorities created a plan in 2005 to develop the mountain-sea complex, 84% of which would fall within the Sochi National Park and Sochi State Natural Reserve. This project would include new ski complexes near the Krasnaya Polyana and Aibga villages, recreational facilities in the lower area of Sochi's Adler district, resort construction in the Imeretinskaya lowland and infrastructure development. About a year later, the Russian government changed the zoning plan of the Sochi National Park so that area previously under strict protection

became available for Olympic preparation. In the image below, all of the zones in yellow were released from strict protection. Consequently, since they were entirely removed from the strictly restricted zone and subject to Gazprom construction, the virgin forests on the Psekhako ridge made up the most environmentally sensitive site (Gazaryan and Shevchenko 2014).

Subsequently, the Russian government continued to plan the construction of resorts and venues in environmentally susceptible areas and approved these plans without first obtaining the necessary environmental impact assessments, which constitutes illegal behaviour. In addition, a large portion of the social infrastructure that was planned, including an illegal road, was located in the Caucasus and Caucasian reserves. Moreover, the combined railroad and highway that would link the coastal and mountain clusters became the largest and most expensive Olympic site, totalling around \$9 billion (West 2014). Its construction began without a positive conclusion from the environmental impact assessment and, thus, led to the following results: the road violated environmental legislation; it led to illegal deforestation; 1.5 million tons of gravel were illegally seized from the Mzymta River, leading to the degradation of the natural landscape and risk of floods and erosion; it contaminated the river with chemicals such as arsenic; and, lastly, it led to illegal soil dumping, which resulted in irreparable damage to aquifers and the disappearance of water from the Akhshtyr wells (Gazaryan and Shevchenko 2014).

### 1.3.3. Coastal Cluster

First, since the subtropical, Imeretinskaya lowland of the Northern Caucasus Black Sea was home to approximately 200 bird species, scientists attempted to develop a Natural Park conservation project in 2004. Instead, with Olympic construction in mind, officials promised to conserve the lakes and habitats of protected bird and plant species, as well as to construct an Ornithological Park. However, when construction for this park began in 2009, there was no room for the promised 300-hectare park due to the fact that the lowlands had already been allocated for construction and lakes had already been filled. As a result, the park was reallocated to storm drainage ponds, Northern wetlands and, most absurdly, abandoned farmland that was not even located within the borders of the Imeretinskaya lowland. Furthermore, although some of the area around the drainage ponds could have still become stopovers for migratory birds, the land that was allocated for the Ornithological Park was also used for an amusement park. Other promised compensation measures were also unfulfilled, such as the planting of 13,000 arboreal specimens and 28,000 bushes, given that these areas of the lowlands had been already destroyed (Gazaryan and Shevchenko 2014).

### 1.3.4. Mountain Cluster

Within the mountain cluster, the area targeted for construction consisted of the Sochi National Park and the Caucasian State Biosphere Reserve, which together make up the largest protected area in the Caucasus. Results of the construction include the 60 square kilometres of Caucasian Reserve that were estimated to have suffered from fragmentation, the confirmed destruction of rare species due to the main road that was built to the Rosa Khutor resort and committed acts of deforestation for natural habitats of wild plant species. In addition, although the 2014 Sochi Organizing Committee claims that 1.1 million trees were planted in Sochi, the EWNC Environmental Assessment found that the actual number of trees planted is closer to 200,000. Additionally, while large mammals, amphibians and reptiles were all negatively affected, it was the brown bear population that was most intensely impacted, given that it has seemingly disappeared altogether from the Sochi National Park area since 2013 (Gazaryan and Shevchenko 2014).

Finally, it is important to note the impact that the construction and deforestation had on rivers and geological processes. Results from monitoring the Achipse,

Laura and Mzymta Rivers have shown that pollution has led to complete fish loss, erosion and mudslides. Geologists also warned ski resorts of potentially hazardous geological processes, such as erosion, landslides, mudslides and landslips, as seen in Figure 6. Furthermore, reports have concluded that such exogenous geological processes are not the result of natural factors but, rather, have resulted directly from cutting slopes, reconstructing motorways and building service lines. Unfortunately, instead of diminishing with time, the number of hazardous geological developments continues to grow (Gazaryan and Shevchenko 2014).

**Photo 2. Ecological Effects**



Source: Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty, 2014

## **2. MIGRATION**

### **2.1. Forced Displacement by the Government**

The following section of this report will begin an assessment of the families that were displaced during and after preparation for the 2014 Olympics. Unfortunately, forced displacement is not necessarily unusual for the Olympics, given that around 1.5 million people were moved during the 2008 Beijing Games, many against their will (Golubkova and Akin 2012). As we have already seen, some of the first reports of the coerced seizure of land and property from Sochi locals took place in 2006, once it had been decided that the land that had already been allocated for construction was insufficient (Gazaryan and Shevchenko 2014). Consequently, under legislation known as Law 301, the government had the right to seize and demolish privately owned land and buildings for the Olympics (Loiko 2014). This section seeks to provide more detail into the process by which Sochi residents were displaced, compensated and treated by the Russian government.

#### **2.1.1. Examples from Sochi families**

In order to better understand the types of situations Sochi locals found themselves in, we will look more closely into several stories from families who have been forcefully evicted, as they speak for many. To begin with, Human Rights Watch (HRW) (2012) defines forced eviction as follows:

“Forced eviction, or the coerced or involuntary displacement of individuals from homes or lands that they occupy or depend on, without provision of and access to appropriate forms of legal or other protection as well as provision of reasonable compensation, is a serious violation of international law.”

HRW (2015) has concluded that approximately 2,000 families have been evicted from their homes due to preparation for the Olympic venues and infrastructure. Furthermore, fair compensation was not provided for many families, while some families did not receive any compensation at all.

The following two examples recount the stories of 63-year-old Nina Toromonyan and a 42-year-old real estate developer named Angela Zilberg. To begin with, Toromonyan and her 13 family members were thrown out of their home to make way for the Games. When officers arrived, armed and wearing black masks, they dragged Toromonyan's older sister by the hair, attacked her husband for interfering and terrified the children into believing they would be killed. Despite Toromonyan's legal proof of land-ownership since 1970, officials and judges concluded that Law 301 applied in this case and that her house and land were, in fact, interfering with the new highway. Of course, officials asserted that residents were offered either fair compensations or other housing. Yet, the three families that make up the Toromonyan clan could not even buy a house with the \$152,000 in compensation, so they have been renting cheap apartments in Sochi. Nevertheless, Toromonyan still returns to the ruins of her old home every day to feed her family's dogs and cats that are still there (Loiko 2014).

**Photo 3.** Nina Toromonyan crying in the remains of her home



Source: Loiko, 2014

Similarly, when Zilberg found out that her two apartments in central Sochi were somehow in the way of the Olympics, she made the mistake of thinking she could challenge the ruling. Although the apartments were built in 2010 and were home to

more than two-dozen families, officials claimed that they violated the building code. When the police and demolition teams arrived, they threw as much furniture as they could out into the pouring rain without even waiting for the conclusion of the appeal period. Moreover, when Zilberg met with the judge, he confessed to her that he would have been 'rolled into concrete and asphalt' if he had ruled in her favour. Zilberg later discovered that documents used against her in court were falsified, and neither she nor her tenants ever received compensation. Moreover, Zilberg was fined \$100,000 per house for demolition, but she refused to pay (Loiko 2014).

The third example involves Sergei Khlistov, who learned on September 14, 2012 that his home of 16 years in the Adler region of Sochi would be demolished for the construction of Olympic infrastructure. Furthermore, the Sochi administration sued the family on claims that the land and home were illegally used and refused to recognise the evidence proving otherwise, even though the regional prosecutor's office did not agree. Because the court repeatedly failed to inform Khlistov about his hearings, he went back and forth with appeals for about a year until the court finally decided to move forward with the demolition. As a result, Khlistov and his wife, daughter, son-in-law and two grandchildren were evicted from the house and forced to watch as it was demolished. The family did not receive any compensation whatsoever (Human Rights Watch 2012).

Although these stories hold true for approximately 2,000 families, not everyone is displeased with their forced evictions. In fact, some consider their situation to have improved thanks to the Olympics. The final example introduces Viktor Altunyan, an employee in the Sochi department of culture, who was forced out of his small house that he built himself and had lived in for fifteen years. However, he claims that the new village to which he moved with his mother, wife and young child was more than twice the size of his old house and better in terms of location, utilities, electricity and water (Golubkova and Akin 2012). According to Altunyan, "The president's words came true for me...It's only positive" (Golubkova and Akin 2012).

### **2.1.2. Government housing**

The next section will examine in greater detail the villages provided by the government in greater detail in order to assess how fair they really are.

Evidently, the Russian government defends its actions on the grounds that the residents subjected to forced evictions were offered either fair compensation or appropriate housing (West 2014). However, according to the article by Angus West (2014), "HRW also found that those who did receive new houses, in some instances, were relocated to buildings that lacked proper heating and had structural problems." As a result, one might begin to wonder which reality is true: the reality for Altunyan, who could not be more pleased with his new housing, or the reality observed by HRW, in which living conditions in the new buildings were/are simply insufficient. In all probability both realities exist.

While this is good news for those who are truly content with the outcome of these forced displacements, we must now turn our attention towards the other reality. According to Nils Bøhmer (2015), managing director and nuclear scientist at the Bellona Foundation, squatters currently occupy the majority of the new houses that were built for the displaced Sochi locals. For example, the villa community in Veseloye-Psou in the Adler district is made up of 79 houses, yet only 20 are occupied. The houses have never been guarded since construction work was finished in 2011, so they have been regularly plundered. Furthermore, the administration continues to claim that there is no vacant housing in the city (English Russia 2015). Above are a series of images from these 'new,' 'non-vacant' houses. One can only assume that the government did not intend for such conditions to befall these homes when they were originally built. However, as Bøhmer (2015) suggests, the reality for many evicted locals is to either accept living in an unsecure, looted area, as the photos portray, or to move somewhere else.

When the Savelyev family, comprising Alexey and his wife Natalya, their two children and his mother Lyudmila, were evicted from their home due to construction on the new highway, they were denied adequate compensation. For the family of five, they were offered a temporary two-bedroom apartment with a shared kitchen. As compensation, they accepted a plot of land where they planned to eventually build another house. However, although Alexey owns a construction firm and has built a handful of schools in Sochi, officials refused to provide the family with a plot in Sochi. Even after 72 court appearances in the past four years, the family still does not know where they will be living in the future (West 2014).

**Photos 4-7. Villa Community in Veseloye-Psou**



Source: English Russia, 2015

Another facet of this situation is the question of priority. In Russia, welfare benefits like monetary payments and land first go to those in the government, followed by the military and families with at least three children. After losing their home and their land, Alexey and Natalya were told by the mayor that if they had wanted to be given land, they should have had a third child (West 2014). Furthermore, according to Natalya, “We wanted to take our children to the mayor, but he told us, ‘don’t bother, it leaves me cold. Your children leave me cold’” (West 2014). Unfortunately, no matter how many similar stories arise, the evicted families in Sochi have not seen, and most likely will not see, their situation improve, especially not thanks to the government.

**2.2. Trapped Population**

Although HRW has suggested that around 2,000 families were displaced, it is uncertain whether this approximation only takes into account the families that were

directly evicted by the government or if it includes all displacements, including those that occurred indirectly, such as from environmental damage. Nonetheless, what we know for certain is that this number most likely does not include families whose living conditions were negatively impacted by the Games, or even destroyed, yet have nowhere else to go. This group can be referred to as ‘trapped’ individuals or families.

### **2.2.1. Runaway Homes**

The following section will examine the cases of families that became trapped as a result of environmental disruptions and damages caused by preparation for the Olympics. Many of the following cases will demonstrate why the trapped population would have preferred forced evictions to the helpless conditions in which they have found themselves. Due to the economic situation of the Sochi locals, unless the government had offered compensation or other housing, moving was not an option for those whose living conditions deteriorated as a result of the changes inflicted on the environment. As discussed above, environmental degradation from preparation for the Olympics includes biodiversity loss, deforestation, exogenous geological processes and pollution. For the Abzhan family, such forms of degradation became their reality when their home started to fall apart due to a landslide that was triggered by illegal dumping on a slope above their street (see Figure 12 below). Additionally, although the family was entitled to compensation through a court ruling, the compensation never arrived (Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty 2014). According to Abzhan, “There should be some future ahead, but the fact is we – local residents who were born here and grew up here – have effectively been left homeless” (Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty 2014).

Next door to Abzhan lives an 85-year old woman named Polina Kalayzhan, whose home is slowly sliding down a hill. Although she shares her home with her 89-year old husband and 8 other relatives, Kalayzhan has been unable to obtain the compensation she has been promised. Despite writing to the President, Prime Minister and administration, all decisions remain in the hands of local authorities, a state of affairs that has left her feeling completely powerless (Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty 2014).

### **2.2.2. The Highway that Cost More than the Entire Vancouver Winter Olympics**

Another major cause of ecological degradation has been the famous \$9 billion, 50-kilometer combined railroad and highway, cited above due to the fact that it was the cause of many forced evictions. In addition, construction work around the highway has created a thick cement dust that has reached the nearby village of Akhshtyr. As a result, farming has been disturbed to such an extent that residents have been unable to sell their home-grown persimmons (Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty 2014). According to HRW (2015), “Many resettled residents lost a portion of their livelihoods because they depended on agriculture or income from seasonal rentals in their seaside homes.” Consequently, a similar phenomenon can be observed – the only difference being that, in the village of Akhshtyr, this phenomenon is happening among trapped, rather than resettled, residents.

Furthermore, locals in the Akhshtyr village have lost access to public transportation to the Adler district of Sochi because authorities failed on their promise to build an access road to the new, expensive highway (Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty 2014). As stated by Alec Luhn (2014), “...Russian Railways had...built only a twisting footpath surrounded by barbed-wire fences and a crosswalk that Human Rights Watch has called unsafe.” Without a road out of the city, residents have become burdened with many concerns. For example, 65-year old Viktor Kolenin worries about how he will get to the hospital if need be, given that he was disabled from the Chernobyl nuclear disaster and now has a stain on his lungs from the construction dust. Kolenin is especially angered by the fact that his village, which used to be the cleanest in the

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Adler region, has been turned into a garbage dump. Additionally, 53-year old Yelena Runovich worries about how she will support her family since she had to quit her job in order to walk her young daughter through construction sites and across two highways simply to get home from school (Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty 2014).

**Photo 8. Dmitry Abzhan's Family Home**



Source: Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty, 2014

**Photo 9. Mr. and Mrs. Kalayzhan**



Source: Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty, 2014

Finally, the highway construction has caused extended electricity cuts within the regions of Sochi and interrupted the water supply to many villages. Concerning the electricity shortages, one resident wrote in her blog that the moon in Sochi has taken on a new significance ever since it became the main source of light in many villages. Residents claim that, for two months, local authorities have turned off electricity for twelve hours or more – sometimes even for two days (Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty 2014). In terms of water supply, as discussed above, illegal dumping and unsustainable construction have caused serious damage to aquifers, and this study will now examine how this damage has affected Sochi locals.

Since most of the noticeable damage to wells and water supplies has been reported in the village of Akhshtyr, this village will serve as the point of reference to assess the situation more closely. In 2009, it was reported that Akhshtyr had already been without water for a year due to Olympics-related construction. As a result, the village depended on five remote, public wells that ran through the village for their water supply. However, construction on the combined railroad and highway caused four out of the five wells to be completely covered, while pollution, runoff and dirt from traffic rendered the fifth one unsafe. For months, the local population was without any kind of water supply (Human Rights Watch 2009). According to Bøhmer (2015), since the authorities failed to settle the problems with drinking water, people had to buy drinking water and transport it by car. Accordingly, when the locals in Akhshtyr were finally able to procure a truck, each resident was limited to 200 litres per week (Human Rights Watch 2009).

### **3. OTHER FACTORS**

The environmental damage, forced evictions and trapped populations caused by the Sochi Olympics have been exacerbated by political, social and economic factors. The next section, explore these three factors in greater detail and study the way in which they have impacted the case of environmental migration in Sochi.

#### **3.1. Political Factors**

As the previous examples have suggested, Sochi residents have been the victims of political corruption, a lack of transparency and outright injustice. The Russian government's attitude to even the most protected, valuable parts of the environment, has proved just as deplorable. According to the report by the EWNC, "Under the pretext of realization of this 'national project,' lawmakers amended numerous laws that now allow practically any type of construction in a national park" (Gazaryan and Shevchenko 2014). While this statement specifically refers to the fact that the Russian government altered the zoning of the Sochi National Park in order to continue construction, it also alludes to the idea that, in the name of a 'national project,' laws do not have to be binding. Through illegal actions, such as undergoing construction without the legal paperwork, the government has repeatedly abused its power by using coercive measures to obtain cooperation. As Bøhmer points out (2015), a technical difference between a national park and a national reserve is that, in a national park, the government can do whatever it wants. He also suggests that the problem is not just that the government has relaxed controls over nature but that it is still doing so by cutting down natural forests to expand downhill slopes in the mountains (Bøhmer 2015).

In addition, the system of compensation and forced evictions lacks transparency and is blighted by corruption. Concerning the example of Mrs Toromonyan, although her home was demolished after it was considered to be in the way of the new highway, one may wonder why her home was singled out, given that the two houses on either side of hers were not demolished nor even considered to be in the way (Loika 2014). Other non-transparencies by the local courts include their blatant disregard of official papers, the falsification of certain documents and the failure to disclose pertinent information, such as when a person's court hearing will take place.

The government is also guilty of unjust treatment towards its migrant workers. When HRW interviewed many of these migrant workers, the organisation found that the living situation was anything but sufficient. According to an HRW report (2013), "In all cases, housing and meals were provided to workers as a component of compensation... Often several dozen workers were living in one single-family house with one bathroom or outhouse." Despite the government's obligation under both

national and international law to protect all workers from abuse, these obligations have been simply ignored (Human Rights Watch 2013). As Bøhmer (2015) points out, while the government has refused to make any policy changes, organisations' scope for assistance is also limited in that, any attempts on their part to fix anything will lead to them being labelled enemies of the state. In some cases, migrant workers never received their wages at all. For example, when one private construction company was mysteriously liquidated and the man posing as general director disappeared, a total of 108 workers were deprived of their wages. One man so desperate for his wages even sewed his mouth shut in an act of protest (Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty 2014).

### 3.2. Social Factors

From deporting foreign migrant workers to imprisoning activists, the social situation in Sochi around the time of the 2014 Olympics was not especially positive. Sometimes, in addition to not being paid, foreign migrant workers were deported after completing their jobs, despite having legal working papers. As a result, thousands of migrants were detained in police stations and deported, while many others went into hiding or fled the country in order to avoid the risk of being caught (Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty 2014). In addition, the possibility of being harassed, beaten, or even arrested has become quite commonplace for anyone speaking out against what was taking place in Sochi; and activists, in particular, became targets.

For instance, the leader of the EWNC, Andrei Rudomakha, was detained on his way to Sochi and prohibited from leaving the Krasnodar region because, a year earlier, he was quoted criticizing a judicial decision. Alexander Valov, the editor of a blog that features local activists, was also targeted and charged with fifty hours of corrective labour for allegedly planning a protest that never actually happened. The EWNC geologist, Yevgeny Vitishko, was accused of vandalism during a protest and convicted with a three-year suspended sentence (Luhn 2014).

**Photo 10.** Nadya Tolokonnikova whipped and thrown to the ground by militiamen



Source: Bellona, 2014

During the same protest as a result of which Vitishko was arrested, – a protest that exposed an illegally built mansion in the Sochi National Park – Suren Gazaryan became a suspect of attempted murder and was forced to flee the country in 2012 and seek political asylum in Estonia. Gazaryan was not only an EWNC zoologist but also a co-author of the EWNC environmental assessment frequently cited in this report. For years, Gazaryan worked tirelessly with his colleagues to expose the political

corruption, environmental devastation and human rights violations by the Russian government. They also exposed the IOC for their neglect in overseeing environmental sustainability through their “Zero Waste” policy and their neglect in taking action against other human-rights violations that were reported to them. In fact, as a result of his hard work, Gazaryan received the Goldman Environmental Foundation \$175,000 award in 2014, which is essentially equivalent to an ‘environmental Nobel Prize.’ However, Gazaryan has been explicit in his desire to share the credit of his achievements with his colleagues at the EWNC. Furthermore, despite the sum of money bestowed with his award, Gazaryan’s life has not been easy post-asylum.

Soon after the Sochi Winter Olympics officially began, Gazaryan’s colleague and friend, Vitishko, was arrested and imprisoned for allegedly swearing in public. The image above shows Nadya Tolokonnikova being whipped with horsewhips for performing a protest song in support of Vitishko. Consequently, Vitishko’s arrest came after both he and Gazaryan filed to have their suspended sentences overturned on the grounds that they were disproportionate punishment for spray-painting a construction fence during the protest. Conversely, rather than simply turning down the appeal, the court sentenced Vitishko to three years in a penal colony, while Gazaryan was not sentenced because he had not been in court that day (Bellona 2014). Currently, Vitishko remains in jail – or in Bøhmer’s words in a ‘labour camp’ – with little hope of a reprieve (Bøhmer 2015). In his last interview before going to jail, Vitishko said the following:

“If going to a prison colony helps show the international community, or at least the International Olympic Committee, that they should give the Olympics to countries that can actually handle them responsibly, then I have succeeded in sending part of the message I want to send” (Bellona 2014).

Although it goes without saying, Gazaryan has been left feeling angry and powerless, as are the countless others who have selflessly attempted to expose the injustices that have transpired.

**Photo 11.** Vitishko and Gazaryan “in better times”



Source: Bellona, 2014

### **3.3. Economic Factors**

The last section of this report will evaluate the economic factors that have affected the situation in Sochi, starting with the the current economic situation, particularly in terms of how the \$51 billion was allocated in preparation for the Olympic Games. Despite possible alternative motives by the government, many Russians were

optimistic that the Olympics would have a positive effect on the country's economy (AP NORC 2015). Furthermore, these opinions were supported by the Russian President, himself, when he made a promise in 2007 to turn Sochi into a 'world-class resort' for a 'new Russia' and the rest of the world. Rather than a mere sporting event, President Putin considered the Olympics as a way to rejuvenate the entire Caucasus region (Yaffa 2014).

Yet, many became suspicious as they scrutinised the overall budget in greater detail. Anti-corruption blogger and opposition politician, Alexei Navalny, asserted that there was a total cost over-run of 150-250%. He also suggested that the level of spending was 'all the more extraordinary,' given that some of the hotels have not yet been finished (The Economist 2014). Another report claims that building the new Olympic Stadium in Sochi would cost \$19,000 per seated fan, whereas the average cost in previous games was only \$6,000 (Koba 2013). In support of these assertions, Bøhmer (2015) further criticises the government for destroying valuable wetlands in order to build 'economy-boosting hotels,' all of which are currently empty except for one, which only welcomes around 40-50 guests at a time. Moreover, the \$9 billion combined railroad and highway – that led to habitat destruction, biodiversity loss, depletion of water sources and the eviction from and demolition of countless homes – is reportedly used only once a day (Bøhmer 2015).

Concerning the current economic situation in Sochi, it is important to understand that the city was not extremely affluent in the first place, and many Sochi locals made their living from farming. Therefore, losing access to their land not only left many families homeless, but it also left them jobless. Since residents have not received any support from the government, some have no choice but to restore to creative means in order to make a living and have even resorted to making moonshine (Bøhmer 2015). According to Vasilyeva (2015), the government has also begun imposing more taxes on residents now that the oligarchs (i.e. rich business men with political influence) want their money back. Subsequently, by taking into account the possible tax increases with a possible lack of transportation, drinking water, electricity, jobs and homes, it is safe to conclude that the economic situation in Sochi is declining, with little hope for improvement in the future.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The present case study has closely examined the kind of environmental destruction, social injustices and environmental migration that can result from a manmade event. The first section of this report detailed the background of the Sochi Winter Olympics, including the process of electing Sochi and a discussion of the environmental impacts in preparation for the event. The second section analysed the forced displacement that took place from evictions imposed by the government, as well as the population that remained trapped and unable to relocate. The third section assessed the various responses from the government, organizations and locals to more thoroughly tackle issues related to political, social and economic factors. Finally, the conclusion provides a brief overview of the current situation in Sochi and suggests how similar issues should be dealt with in upcoming mega-events.

In February 2014, HRW submitted a series of suggestions for policy changes and reforms to the IOC. These proposals suggested that the IOC take the necessary steps to strengthen the Olympic Host City Bid process, ensure that future host city contracts with governments include specific human rights pledges and amend Principle 6 of the Olympic Charter that prohibits discrimination so as to include sexual orientation and gender identity (Human Rights Watch 2014). Subsequently, in another document submitted to the IOC in April 2014, HRW called for more detailed policy changes. For example, the following human rights benchmarks should be

included in host city contracts: media freedom, labour rights, freedom of expression and association, liberty and security and non-discrimination. As stated more explicitly under the liberty and security benchmark, the IOC should ‘guarantee that there will be no unlawful forced evictions of host city residents’ and ‘guarantee that there will be no arbitrary detentions and/or forcible removal from the host city of any population groups or individuals deemed undesirable on various grounds by the authorities’ (Human Rights Watch 2014).

Consequently, the IOC has since introduced a specific anti-discrimination clause to the host city contract (Gibson 2014). However, the IOC has not been as successful in terms of overseeing the cleanup in Sochi. According to Bøhmer (2015), following meetings between the local organising committees and the IOC to discuss the issues remaining and organise a cleanup, 70 illegal dumpsites have been uncovered. Yet, because the local authorities have been inactive and there has been no follow-up by the IOC, the dumpsites still remain. Additionally, Bøhmer (2015) is critical of the impact that the upcoming 2018 World Cup will have in Russia, stating that the country already has a ghost stadium from the Olympics, and is now building another one for the World Cup.

While the host city changes every four years the legacy of the Olympics will endure. According to Popelarova and Janiga (2008), “In some way all Olympics profit. Unfortunately the profit is often not felt by the residents in the area the Olympics touched; it is felt only by a narrow circle of interested corporations.” Although there is still much work to be done in Sochi, it is crucial that those who are responsible for overseeing such mega-events take note of the loopholes and mistakes. Concerning the environmental degradation, human-rights violations and environmental migration documented by this report, it would not be naïve to assume that such injustices may be repeated in the future unless serious, concerted action is taken to prevent them. Therefore, it is crucial that everyone, from sports fans to non-profit organizations to private businesses, media and governments, is not just aware of what happened in Sochi but is dedicated to creating a more environmentally compatible and beneficial experience.

**Photo 12.** “The Rosa Khutor resort may be finished, but other venues slog toward completion.”



Source: Vanity Fair, 2014

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