

# Sochi 2014: Ten years without the rule of law

## How “a better world” was built

A report on the ecological impacts of the 2014 Olympic Games

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### **1. Introduction: Sochi 2014: Ten years without the rule of law**

*Selections from the introductory letter written by Environmental Watch on North Caucasus*

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“If they [environmental activists], shaking the Constitution in front of our faces, will start shrieking that we can’t cut down fir-trees and pine trees, it’ll be easier for us to change the Constitution.”

Leonid Tyagachev

President of the Russian Olympic Committee from 2001 to 2010

On October 4, 2004, a group of high-ranking officials pompously poured the symbolic “first square cube” of concrete, beginning construction of the ski lift for the new resort “Gornaya Karusel” on the Aibga Ridge near Sochi. The event was covered in the media as a “major breakthrough” and “a new milestone in the history of Sochi.” But the media did not mention another “milestone”—an act of lawlessness: contractors for Gornaya Karusel did not complete an environmental impact assessment. Exactly in the same manner, violating various legislative norms, subsequent Olympic structures were built. The Sochi Olympics have created an extremely dangerous precedent for our country: federal laws being amended to allow for megaproject construction. Another shameful aspect was the role of international institutions such as National Olympic Committees and the United Nations Environment Programme in monitoring and enforcing environmental standards in preparation for the Games. They failed to fulfill their responsibilities; they closed their eyes to numerous violations.

International complacency allowed the Russian government to implement a large-scale construction project that destroyed a unique ecosystem and caused environmental damage unheard of since the industrialization era over a century ago. We really do not want this analysis of mistakes to turn into a blame game, but rather to be used as a serious lesson for all of us.

### **2. How Sochi sought the Olympics: the art of diplomacy and a little criminal pressure**

#### *The beginnings*

The first talks about Sochi hosting the winter Olympics happened in the '80s. In 1990, the Krasnaya Polyana area [the area that became the Olympic ski village] was surveyed by experts from international winter sports federations and the International Olympic Committee (IOC). An official bid to host the 2002 Olympics in Sochi was submitted in 1994, but the Black Sea resort town did not make it to the shortlist of candidate cities. The IOC concluded that Sochi did not meet the technical criteria.

The head of the Russian Olympic Committee, Leonid Tyagachev, said in an interview: “The 2014 Olympics project started [in 2000] when we visited Krasnaya Polyana with Russia’s President. We looked at the mountains and got to thinking, ‘How can we have a world-class resort here? Of course, we need the Olympics.’ And then this idea captivated the President. Of course, if he wasn’t an avid skier himself, he would have understood the charm of Krasnaya Polyana. There were just three supporters of the Olympics. Others didn’t believe that this miracle was possible. For me it was important to convince the President that this was necessary not for me, not for him, but it was necessary for the country. It was time for our country to have at least one real resort. It was important for our people, for sport.”

In February 2003, the Chairman of the Russian Government, Mikhail Kasyanov, signed Decree No. 238-r: “The description of the boundaries of Sochi National Park that can be leased for construction of sport and tourism resort Krasnaya Polyana.” This document actually became the starting point for all subsequent Olympic lawlessness. Kasyanov ordered valuable natural areas, such as the mountain ridges of Aibga, Psekhako, Gryshevui, and the area of Hmelevskih Lakes, to be earmarked for construction.

#### *Year 2004*

The construction of the gas pipeline to Krasnaya Polyana was the first legal violation during infrastructure development. The beginning section of the gas pipeline cut through the natural protected area "Kudepstinskij Canyon," in which, based on our estimates, about 2,000 rare, mature boxwood trees were cut down. There were alternative routes that would bypass the Canyon and minimize the tree clearing; however, it would have slowed down the construction.

In May, the LLC “Krasnaya Polyana” received 1,920 hectares [about 4,700 acres] of Sochi National Park land for Gornaya Karusel ski resort construction.

The same year, it was decided to build “Roza Hytor” ski complex, and another 541.5 hectares [about 1,340 acres] of Sochi National Park were allocated for construction.

#### *Year 2006*

In June, Sochi was among the three cities competing for the bid to host Winter Olympics. Immediately following, the Russian Government initiated the change in zoning of the Sochi National Park. The greatest environmental threat at that time was construction in the virgin forests on the Psekhako Ridge.

In June, the Russian Government approved the “Sochi Development Strategy for 2006-2015.” According to this plan, 10 sport complexes would be built in Sochi National Park. To provide electricity to all these facilities, a thermal power plant would be built in the Adler District.

It soon became clear that not enough land was set aside for construction. The process of forcing residents in the Imeretinskaya Lowland to give up their homes and land began.

#### *Year 2007*

On the eve of the vote for the Olympic Games venue, a coalition of 47 Russian environmental organizations made an appeal to the International Olympic Committee to "make a responsible decision.” Russian environmentalists drew the attention of the IOC to the fact that in the history of the Olympic movement, never had all Olympic venues been placed in valuable natural areas. For the first time, the vote to hold Winter Olympic Games was given to a city where all of the structures would need to be built from scratch.

And then what happened?

### **3. The Imereti Lowland: "Avoiding the uncontrolled development of the territory"**

All of the so called "seashore cluster" Olympic venues are located in the Imereti Lowland bordered by the Mzymta and Psou rivers. The area that was destroyed by the Olympic construction was a unique biodiversity hot spot in the Krasnodar region with diverse populations of migratory birds and coastal flora.

According to the 1997-2006 data from the Bird Protection Union of Russia, the lowlands were home to 200 bird species, of which 26 species were in the Red Book [the Russian registry of endangered species] of the Krasnodar region. In the cold winters, one could count over 16,000 birds from 65 species. To protect the nature and birds, scientists in 2004 proposed to set aside 800 hectares as protected natural area and ornithological park. However their suggestion was not taken into account. According to the latest zoning information from October 1, 2012, 298 hectares spread over 14 plots of land were set aside for the park, and most of the land is not appropriate for migratory birds' habitat.

To compensate for the destroyed ecosystem of the Imereti Lowland, Olimpstroy [construction company] was supposed to plant 13,132 trees and 28,131 bushes. On multiple occasions, the company promised to replant with native plants, but most of the trees were palm trees imported from Europe.

### **4. Mountain cluster: How a man-made disaster is created**

More than 1,900 square kilometers of Sochi National Park with 280 square kilometers of the adjacent North Caucasus natural reserve form a large natural protected area that is home to virgin broadleaf forests. In 1999, part of the area became the Western Caucasus UNESCO natural heritage.

According to satellite images, the total area of Sochi National Park affected by construction of the mountain cluster and ski resorts is about 6 square kilometers. But more than 60 square kilometers of the park were negatively impacted by fragmentation; roads and ski slopes created more than 300 forest fragments.

#### *Impact on plants*

Unfortunately, no study was done to assess the environmental damage from Olympic construction. There is also no holistic restoration plan.

No data is available in regards to the number of trees that were cut down or the number of shrubs and other plants that were destroyed during construction. Olimpstroy gave Sochi National Park 55,000 tree seedlings to compensate for destruction. The website for Roza Hutor ski resort states that 25,800 new chestnut trees were planted to replace the cut down trees. But there is no information on whether other plants were replaced.

In the spring of 2011, Rospridnadzor (Russian Nature Protection agency) conducted an inspection of the snowboard park and Olympic village, and discovered that contractors that built Roza Hutor resort illegally destroyed Red Book [the Russian registry of all endangered species] plants on over 20 hectares. In January 2013, Rospridnadzor discovered that another 50 trees were cut down by "unknown individuals" on the Roza Hutor territory.

The mountainsides have undergone significant change due to construction of the ski lifts and slopes. Unfortunately there was no plan or strategy for replanting or compensating for the loss of plants in the highlands. Out of 967 registered species of vascular plants, 351 (36.3 percent) are endemic to the Caucasus region.

During the road construction from “Alpika-Servis” resort to the finish zone of the “Roza Hutor,” all Red Book [the Russian registry of endangered species] plants were destroyed. No attempt to transplant the plants was made.

An environmental report from Gazprom in 2012 indicated that since 2009, over 11,000 plants were planted or replanted due to Olympic construction. The area of total forest cut down exceeds 1.5 square kilometers. Comparing the reported restoration efforts and the damage that was done, it is clear that restoration activities were not sufficient.

No information exists in regards to replanting activities in conjunction with the Krasnaya Polyana construction. From the available project plans, over 6,000 seedlings of chestnuts, pears, and cherries should have been planted, but no information is available if this was done or not.

From the above data, we calculated that about 100,000 new trees were planted to compensate for the mountain cluster constructions, and the Russian Railroad made a statement that they planted about 70,000 more trees, so no more than 200,000 new trees were planted in Sochi National Park. The website for the Sochi 2014 planning committee claims that 1.1 million new trees were planted, and in September 2013, vice president Dmitriy Kozak made a statement that 2 million new trees were planted.

The monitoring of changes in vegetation in the mountain cluster is not possible because the majority of observation plots set up by scientists between 2007-2010 were destroyed by developers. All three plots on the territory of the Gazprom resort, two of the three plots in Gornaya Karusel, and one of the three plots on Roza Hutor were destroyed.

#### *Impact on the animal world*

Prior to the construction of the Krasnaya Polyana ski resort, zoologists pointed out that new ski slopes and other infrastructure would lead to the destruction of the migration routes of large mammals. The greatest negative impact was on the population of brown bears. New construction destroyed three migration routes of the bears and led to the loss of one-third of the southern population. The animals are cut off from the majority of the chestnut forests that once served as their main feeding ground.

The population of the Caucasus Mountains red deer declined, as well.

In the territories of Roza Hutor, Gornaya Karusel, and Gazprom, scientists recorded in early 2013 a decrease in the density of amphibian and reptile populations, which is a direct result of the transformation of forest and mountain-meadow biotopes.

In the territory of Gazprom, the population of Asia Minor frogs is in critical condition, and the population of Artvin lizards disappeared.

#### *Impact on water ecosystems, pollution of Achipse, Laura and Mzymta rivers*

Deforestation and construction work on unstable slopes led to heavy pollution of Achipse, Laura, and Mzymta rivers, and a total disappearance of fish in the construction area.

The segment of Mzymta River adjacent to Roza Hutor and Gornaya Karusel no longer serves as a spawning and feeding ground for trout. The situation is similar with Laura and Achipse rivers adjacent to Gazprom resort.

#### *Erosion, landslides, and mudflows*

At Krasnaya Polyana's construction planning stage, geologists warned that dangerous geological processes such as erosion, landslides, and mudflows would increase as a result of deforestation and disturbance of the natural landscape. This proved to be true. In October 2012, geological inspection identified 18 occurrences. In June 2013, the number increased to 21 (with seven large-scale landslides), and in November 2013, it reached 30 occurrences.

#### **5. Mzymta: victim of the most expensive Olympic construction**

The largest and most expensive Olympic construction is the Adler - Krasnaya Polyana highway. Highway route selection was finalized without consultations with scientists or public feedback. 194 hectares of Sochi National Park forest land was affected by construction. Representatives from the contractors, Russian Railroad, announced in May 2013 that about 55,000 new trees were planted to compensate for the damage. In 2012, the Russian Nature Protection agency visited the two sites with new trees and they discovered that out of 55,133 saplings planted, 28,817 failed to take root. This is due to violations during planting and complete absence of subsequent care. The Russian Ministry of Natural resources, in their recommendations for mitigating the damage, had called for transferring and replanting 888,000 grass samples and 222,000 trees and shrubs. So the restoration efforts completed are significantly less than what was recommended.

#### *Destruction of the Mzymta river watershed and death of fish*

In 2007-2010 about 1.5 million tons of gravel were illegally extracted from Mzymta River and used for construction. From 2010 to 2013 at least 26 sentences were handed down for illegal gravel extraction. Due to the damage of the watershed, flooding became an issue. In the spring of 2013, over 700 construction workers had to be evacuated due to the flooding of the building site.

In April 2010, World Wildlife Fund Russia conducted an independent analysis of the chemical composition of water in the Mzymta River and found high concentration of petroleum products, arsenic and phenol. In some areas arsenic concentration was three times higher than normal, petroleum concentration was 35 times higher, and the concentration of phenol was 60 times higher.

In June 2013, WWF included Mzymta in the list of natural places in Russia that may lose their ecological value.

To compensate for the destruction, Russian Railroad contractors released 3 million Black Sea salmon minnows. However, scientists doubt the minnows will survive.

In the vicinity of the village Akhshtyr, contractors set up a giant illegal dump of construction material. Movement of heavy equipment and storage of soil caused irreversible damage to fresh water aquifers in

the village. The village wells had dried up, and the residents suffered from dust storm and high air pollution for five years during construction.

## **6. Green standards on the Olympic construction sites: a fig leaf to cover up shame**

Green standards refer to the use of environmentally clean construction materials, renewable energy, minimizing waste, reducing emissions, and conserving water and energy use. At the time of the green standards adoption, all of the major construction projects had already been approved, so the new standards were not taken into consideration. Out of about 350 constructed Olympic facilities, only six are BREEAM certified. There are no enforcement mechanisms for contractors to use the green standards.

## **7. ZeroWaste: "zero" didn't happen**

Sochi-2014's website states that, "97% of construction waste was reused immediately at the Olympic construction sites," and that, "Sochi became a city without landfills; that 2 sites (with about 7 million cubic meters of waste) were closed and reclaimed." In reality, the scrap hard rock and construction waste became the biggest problem for Olympic construction, which was solved by creating large-scale landfills and dumps.

In April of 2011, two large illegal dumps of soil, rock and construction debris were found near the village of Nizhnyaya Shilovka, which is in the Valley of the Psou River. One of the dumps provoked a powerful landslide, which uprooted hundreds of trees and blocked the flow of springs into the river. Another illegal dump site was discovered in May 2012 in the Valley of the Mzumta River. The exact amount of illegally buried construction waste in Sochi is unknown. The contractors estimated that between 2013-2014 over 217 million tons of construction waste was generated. According to the Russian Ministry of Natural Resources' website, over 35 illegal dump sites were reported in and around Sochi.

## **8. The myth of purified air**

Prime Minister Dmitri Kozak made a statement that, "the air quality in Sochi improved compared to December 2007," however data from the Russian Federal Service for Meteorology and Environmental Monitoring indicated that air quality in Sochi has been steadily declining.

## **9. Olympic Games 2014 should serve as a lesson!**

Statement from Environmental Watch on North Caucasus

Damage from the Olympic construction is unfortunately irreversible; it is not possible to restore the lost ecosystems in Sochi National Park and the Imereti Lowlands. But we can carry out valuable lessons for the future. Environmental Watch on North Caucasus urges the President and the Russian government to take measures to prevent the destruction of unique ecosystems during future construction in the North Caucasus and in Russia in general. This can be achieved by making appropriate changes in environmental laws, expanding natural protected areas, and preventing future environmentally destructive projects in protected areas.

We call for:

1. Undo the changes made to the federal legislation in connection with the 2014 Olympic Games that led to a weakening of environmental standards. It is necessary to restore federal legislation laws prohibiting construction of sports and recreational facilities in national parks and protected areas. Cancel amendments that allow the withdrawal of land from protected natural areas, and the altering of boundaries.
2. Increase the area of Sochi National Park and Kavkaz preserve by adding undisturbed natural territories without protected status.
3. Compensate for the negative impact on birds and lowland plants from the destruction of Imereti Lowlands by creating a protected natural area on Kuban River Delta, as was ordered by decree № 572-p on 23.04.1994.
4. Increase the size of the natural reserve "Utrish" to the scientifically recommended size and include Utrishskiy lagoons, as well as "corridors" set aside for the future construction of roads and other infrastructure.
5. Formally abandon all plans to build new ski resorts on the Lagonaki plateau and Fischt-Oshtenskiy ridge, and stop trying to change the boundaries of the World Heritage "West Caucasus" in order to legalize the construction of these resorts.
6. Abandon plans to convert Teberdinsky reserve to a national park and provide protected status to the corridor connecting Kavkazsky and Teberdinsky reserves.
7. Stop the construction of the ski resort "Lunnaya Polyana" located on the World Heritage site "Western Caucasus" and masked as the Science Centre "Biosphere." Ensure that it is used solely for the purpose of research, monitoring and education (not recreation) in accordance with UNESCO requirements.
8. Stop the construction of the so-called "road to a weather station" in Kavkaz reserve. The road is being built near the watershed of Shahe river on the territory of Kavkaz reserve and Sochi National Park.
9. Dismantle the sea port "Imereti" that was built for Olympic construction cargo delivery. The port impedes the transfer of pebbles, and the natural accumulation in the beaches of Imereti Lowlands.
10. Abandon plans for construction of any main roads on the territory of the Kavkaz Nature Reserve and Sochi National Park.
11. Ensure, in accordance with the water laws of the Russian Federation, free access to the shores of the Black Sea in Russia for all citizens.
12. Introduce in Sochi real zero-waste standards. We strongly oppose taking the mixed waste for burial or burning outside of Sochi.
13. Fulfill the promises to restore the watershed and ecosystems of the Mzymta River, create a plan and ensure funding for it.