

Migrant Workers and the Sochi Olympics

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Abstract

When Sochi was awarded the 2014 Winter Olympics in 2007, the Kremlin proclaimed its intention to use this mega-project to create new jobs and attract new migrants to the region in and around Sochi. However, the seven year experience of constructing the Olympic infrastructure has not seen this intention effectively realized, and has seen a change in approach from the Kremlin, reflecting a generalized increase in xenophobia within Russian society during this period. Both official and unofficial means were used to restrict the number of foreign migrant workers, and cases in which both foreign and domestic workers were exploited were numerous, culminating in a campaign by the Krasnodar authorities to deport migrant workers before the games begun. The Sochi Olympics, thus, suggest that the Russian authorities remain unable to manage both large-scale projects and the sensitive issue of migrant workers, often resorting to solutions based on brute force, rather than the coherent implementation of an appropriate legal framework.

In May 2013, less than a year before the start of the 2014 Winter Olympics, a group of Chechen workers organized a demonstration in Sochi against their employer, the construction company *Izbtransmonolit*, demanding to be paid their last three-month wage arrears and complaining about their poor working conditions and the lack of formal employment contracts. At the same time, they argued that they were unable to find either legal or better employment elsewhere, because of the informal rule imposed by the organizers of the Olympics preventing Chechens being hired.¹

Such cases are typical of the current problems experienced by workers at the Olympic site and reflect wider socio-political crises within contemporary Russia, which include issues such as xenophobia, corruption, human rights violations and insecurity. As a result of these problems and restrictions, the Kremlin's initial intention to use this mega-project to create new jobs and attract new migrants to the region in and around Sochi has not been realized. This raises the question: Why did the organizers of the 2014 Olympics in Sochi fail to establish the necessary legal and employment conditions to realize these intended goals in constructing and developing this mega-project, and what methods, if any, is the Kremlin currently using to manage the migrant issue?

Official Russian Policy Towards Migrant Workers and the 2014 Olympics

In the period between the submission of its bid to host the Winter Olympics and the start of the games, the official Russian position towards migrant labor has shifted dramatically, against a backdrop of growing xenophobia across Russian society. If in 2009, around 52 percent of Russians expressed a negative attitude towards foreign

workers coming to Russia, by 2013 (at the time of the deportation of migrant workers from Sochi) this number had jumped to 78 percent.² The Kremlin's change of policy in recent years demonstrates that even when it comes to politically vital events, such as the Olympics, the Russian authorities are unable to successfully manage the issue of migrant labor.

When Russia submitted its initial bid to hold the Olympics, the organizers hoped to improve the country's image as the most successful and positive example in the post-Soviet region. One of their key stated goals was job creation in and around Sochi, and the attraction of more workers to the region from elsewhere to build the Olympic site. Indeed, in 2007, the organizers of the Games assured the International Olympic Committee (IOC) that not only was the security situation in the North Caucasus now under control, but that migrant workers from elsewhere would be able to seek employment on the Olympic site.³

Initially, the Games' organizers did not differentiate between Sochi and the other parts of the North Caucasus, either in administrative or in ethnic terms. This, together with the organizers' pledge to attract more foreign and migrant labor, appeared to encourage other North Caucasus regions and non-Russian ethnicities to see the Sochi Olympic as economically beneficial for the wider region. It was estimated that about 200,000 migrant laborers would work on the Olympic site.⁴ Changes in legislation were also meant to simplify the procedure for employing foreign workers in Sochi.

1 "V Sochi chechenskie rabochie vyshli na stikhiinyi miting protiv zaderzhkek po zarplate", *Rosbalt*, 22 May, 2013, <<http://www.rosbalt.ru/federal/2013/05/22/1131437.html>>

2 Levada-Centr, "Pochti 80% rossiyan—protiv pritoka migrantov", *Fontanka*, 5 November 2013, <<http://www.fontanka.ru/2013/11/05/047/>>

3 *Sochi 2014. Candidature File*, p. 61, <http://web.archive.org/web/20100103043040/http://sochi2014.com/sch_questionnaire>

4 "Igor' Naumov. Sochi zastroyat inostrancy. Na vozvedenie olimpijskih ob'ektov zazyvayut do 200 tysyach gastarbatyterov",

Besides the creation of temporary jobs constructing the infrastructure for the Games, the authorities also promised to create new longer term jobs for Sochi residents in the catering and tourist sectors. Indeed, in 2007 the deputy head of the Federal Agency for Education, Evgeny Butko, announced that, by 2014, 150,000 new jobs would be created for Sochi residents.⁵

However, in practice, the number of legally employed workers at the Olympic site was much lower. According to the data provided by “Olympstroi,” only 12,959 workers from other Russian regions and 7,339 foreigners were working at the Olympic facilities in 2011.⁶ In May 2013, the numbers provided by authorities were much higher: out of a total of 80,000 migrant workers employed on the Olympic site, 17,000 were said to be foreign with the rest from other Russian regions.⁷ However, these numbers contrast sharply with those provided by the network “Migration and law”, which suggest that the numbers are much lower, with no more than 20,000 migrant workers in 2013.⁸

Several factors seem to explain the organizers’ inability to attract greater numbers of migrant workers. These include the ongoing security concerns within the region, legal wrangling and problems with corruption. Thus, while in 2007 the organizers could state that “to date, there have been no recorded incidents of domestic or international terrorist acts in Sochi,”⁹ this was no longer the case by 2009. The emergence of the *Caucasus Emirate*, a terrorist organization operating in the North Caucasus region, forced changes in the security strategy for the Games in 2009. Unable to stabilize the situation in the wider North Caucasus, the Russian authorities decided to isolate Sochi from the rest of the North Caucasus, particularly in relation to non-ethnically Russian populations. To enact an administrative split between Sochi and the rest of the increasingly unstable North Caucasus, the Kremlin created a new North Caucasus

Federal District, out of the existing South Federal District, in 2010. An unofficial ban was also placed on the participation of North Caucasian companies in public tenders for construction contracts in the Sochi area. Unofficially, the Olympic construction projects were also prohibited from employing workers from the ethnic Republics in the North Caucasus, a fact that stoked even more inter-ethnic tension in the region.¹⁰

Workers from abroad also had a hard time obtaining permits to come to Sochi, and mostly came by special request from the Olympic organizers. A typical case was, for example, when the FSB stopped 41 Turkish citizens who came to Sochi by boat in July 2007. They had tourist visas, but the FSB suspected that they intended to work on the Olympic construction sites and denied their entry into Russia.¹¹ In May 2009, the Russian and Turkish Prime Ministers, Vladimir Putin and Recep Tayyip Erdogan, officially agreed that Russia would allow Turkish workers to be employed on the Olympic construction sites in Sochi. In 2009, the Turkish Prime Minister stated that “the 2014 Olympics expect us and you know that Turkish construction companies are among leaders in the world market.”¹² However, in practice, this did not lead to many Turkish migrant workers being employed in Sochi. In 2011, only 546 Turkish workers were employed on the Olympic site (see table below).

Table 1: Foreign Workers at the Sochi Facilities in 2011¹³

Country	Workers
Uzbekistan	2,338
Ukraine	886
Belorussia	593
Turkey	546
Bosnia and Herzegovina	541
Moldova	511
Tajikistan	480
Serbia	317
Kyrgyzstan	187

Nezavisimaya Gazeta, 18 June 2009, <http://www.ng.ru/economics/2009-06-18/4_Sochi.html>

- 5 “V Sochi k 2014 godu budet sozdano 150–160 tys. novykh rabochih mest”, *Olimprus*, 16 September, 2007, <<http://olimprus.ru/articles/new150workplacetoolimp>>
- 6 Anastasiya Chelok’yan, “Migracionnyj bum po-sochinski”, *Edinyj Informacionnyj Centr 2014*, 5 December 2011, <http://infocenter2014.ru/events/publications/publications_3712.html>
- 7 “V Astrahani prohodit vyezdnoe soveshchanie Sovbeza RF”, *Astrahanskaya oblast’.RF*, 16 May 2013, <<http://astrobl.ru/news/71518>>
- 8 Irina Druzhinina, “Trudovaya migraciya v Sochi: ‘za’ i ‘protiv’”, *Sochi-express*, 31 July, 2013, <<http://www.sochi-express.ru/sochi/news/sochi/7031/>>
- 9 *Sochi 2014. Candidature File*, p. 29, <http://web.archive.org/web/20100103043040/http://sochi2014.com/sch_questionnaire>

- 10 Emil Souleimanov, “Security Concerns Ahead Of The 2014 Sochi Olympics”, *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst* 13, no 7. April 13, 2011, p.10, <<http://www.silkroadstudies.org/new/docs/publications/110413analyst.pdf>>
- 11 Aleksandra Anisimova, “Sochinskie pogranichniki ne pustili v Rossiyu gruppu nelegalov iz Turcii”, *RIA Novosti*, 9 July 2007, <<http://ria.ru/incidents/20070709/68599792.html>>
- 12 Igor’ Naumov, “Sochi zastroyat inostrancy. Na vozvedenie olimpijskih ob’ektov zazyvayut do 200 tysyach gastarbajterov”, *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, 18 June 2009, <http://www.ng.ru/economics/2009-06-18/4_Sochi.html>
- 13 Mariya Sergeeva, “Trudovye migranty iz 29 stran rabotayut na olimpijskoj strojke v Sochi”, *Sochi1.ru*, 20 July 2011, <<http://sochi1.ru/newslines/415974.html>>

Most of the migrant workers in Sochi instead came from the former Soviet Republics, mainly from Uzbekistan, Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. It was much easier for citizens from these states to find employment, as they did not need entry visas and are permitted to stay in Russia for up to 90 days, during which period they sought to find a way through the existing red-tape to obtain a work permit.

Violations of the Workers' Rights

In view of the growing instability in the wider North Caucasus region, additional security measures were put in place in and around Sochi. These measures served to encourage a rise in suspicion of, and exploitative and corrupt practices towards, the increasingly vulnerable group of foreign migrant workers in Sochi. The increase in suspicion occurred in spite of the fact that no foreign worker has, as yet, been implicated in any terrorist activity. In spite of the creation of additional security measures, the safety of foreign workers was far from guaranteed. In February 2009, one foreign worker was killed and another wounded as a result of a bomb at one Olympic facility.¹⁴

Foreign migrant workers were further marginalized due to their lack of labor rights and poor working conditions. When first arriving at their work place, migrant workers were forced to submit their passports and visa registration applications to the employer, who promised to take care of their registration and provide them with a work contract. However, such promises were often not kept, as the employers would hold on to these documents for weeks if not months, or returned them but without the required registration stamps or work contracts.¹⁵ In 2013, *Human Rights Watch* reported many such cases of "employment without contract"; the employers did not provide sufficient accommodations for the employees; the workers did not receive the whole salary or did not receive it in time.¹⁶ Such problems persisted across the board.

On the Olympic site itself, an unofficial ban was put in place on the use of all languages other than Russian, which further alienated and marginalized migrant workers. At the construction sites of the Olympic venues in Krasnaya Polyana district of Sochi, a sign was displayed

that read "*Speak only Russian on the building facilities. Fine 100 RUR*"¹⁷, translated not only into a number of foreign languages, such as Uzbek and Kirgiz, but also in Circassian, the official language of Adygea Republic, a region in the South Federal District. The authorities maintained that such measures were necessary to clamp down on, and prevent the spread of, any unrest and illegality on the construction sites.¹⁸

While, in practice, many of these regulations were broken, law enforcement agencies also played a part in the growing marginalization of foreign workers in and around the Olympic sites. If, between 2007 and 2010, Russia sought to publicize its measures to liberalize registration and labor laws in and around Sochi, by the early 2010s, many of the workers that came to Sochi as a result of these liberalized measures had in fact been deported or fined. Indeed, in 2011, 154 foreigner workers in Sochi were expelled, while others faced a total of 31,727,250 RUR (more than one million USD) in fines.¹⁹ In 2013, the authorities registered 24,000 violations of migration law and deported 3,000 foreign workers from the Krasnodar region, half of them from Sochi.²⁰

In some instances, the authorities even went against the organizers of the games, as for example, in the case of the Sochi branch of Russia's Investigative Committee. In this instance, it was suggested that the state corporation, *Olimpstroi*, which controlled state funding for the Olympics, had embezzled 23 million RUR from 2007 to 2010 and claimed compensation for employment contracts that never existed. This scandal resulted in the departure of the head of *Olimpstroi*, though no charges were filed against him personally.²¹

Local and federal law enforcement agencies did not, therefore, stand idly by, they were busy deporting and imposing fines on migrant workers and investigating failures at the highest level of the *Olimpstroi* management. However, this did not resolve the situation. The problem was not a lack of information about poor working conditions and high levels of corruption in and around the construction of this mega-project, but

14 "Urozhenech Chechni osuzhden za podgotovku teraktov v Sochi i Anape", *Kavkazskij uzul*, 29 September 2009, <<http://georgia.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/159967/>>

15 Maksim Kazakov, "Sochinskaya specoperaciya po vyyavleniyu nezakonnyh migrantov", *Sotsialnaia Set Goroda Sochi*, 12 September 2013, <<http://www.sochi07.com/blogs/203/1792/>>

16 "'H'yuman Rajts Votch': vlasti prodolzhayut prepyatstvovat' rabote pravozashchitnikov na Severnom Kavkaze", *Kavkazskij uzul*, 22 January 2012, <<http://www.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/199683/>>

17 <<http://ncontent.life.ru/media/2/news/2011/08/66414/400.jpg>>

18 Irina Desyatnichenko, "Stroitelej Olimpiady shtrafuyut za rodnoj yazyk", *Life News Online*, 11 August 2011, <<http://www.life.news.ru/news/66414>>

19 Anastasiya Chelok'yan, "Migracionnyj bum po-sochinski", *Edinyj Informacionnyj Centr 2014*, 5 December 2011, <http://infocenter2014.ru/events/publications/publications_3712.html>

20 "Aleksandr Tkachev potreboval ubrat' iz Sochi vseh nelegalov cherez dva mesyaca", *Blogsochi*, 9 November, 2013, <<http://blogsochi.ru/content/aleksandr-tkachev-potreboval-ubrat-iz-sochi-vsekh-nelegalov-cherez-dva-mesyatsa>>

21 *Kavkazskij uzul*, January 31, 2011.

the regime's inability to create a fairer, more transparent and legal business environment in Sochi.

Deportation of Migrant Workers on the Eve of the Olympics

The ongoing wide-spread violation of workers' rights all pointed to the organizers' failure to establish effective bureaucratic procedures or proper working conditions for the construction of the Olympics. And despite criticisms from the highest political levels in Russia about the lack of coordination between the different government departments involved in the preparations for the games, President Medvedev himself did not offer any new legal, political, or management measures for solving these problems. Instead, the Presidential apparatus sought to do away with some of the existing bureaucratic layers and to move towards more direct presidential control over the preparations for the Games.²² However, the problems caused by inefficient bureaucratic coordination and implementation persisted throughout the course of the Olympic construction project, and even as late as February 2013, President Putin spoke about the need to simplify bureaucratic procedures, whilst calling for greater and more direct political control over the mega-project.²³

It is hard to imagine that the Kremlin sanctioned the wide-spread corruption and human rights violations seen during the run-up to the Olympics. Indeed, with the Games approaching, the Kremlin kept an ever closer eye over the developments on the ground, with Putin remarking that he was busy dealing with Olympic issues on a daily basis.²⁴ Apparently this inability to create a self-regulating mega-project resulted in the President being forced to personally becoming involved in the daily running of the project.

Locally, fears were increasingly raised about the threat of worker strikes and labor disputes over wage arrears during the actual event, as have been seen in the run-up to the Games. The solution from the local authorities was rather radical, a mass deportation of migrant workers just before the opening ceremony. The governor of the Krasnodar region, Alexander Tkachev, stated that "[a]fter finishing the big Olympic construc-

tion in Sochi, the migrants should leave the region."²⁵ The authorities recommended to the 44 largest-employers in Sochi that they should not pay workers' salaries until the migrants had purchased their return tickets home. This method was, however, obviously ineffective for those that had been employed illegally on some of the construction sites.

Realizing that they were unable to resolve this issue legally, the authorities decided to deport en masse all of the migrant workers in Sochi and the Krasnodar Region. The scale of the deportation was akin to a Stalinist measure. Sixty "raid brigades" were established to search and deport "hundreds of thousands migrant workers illegally living and working" in Sochi and the Krasnodar Region.²⁶ Raids began immediately following the September 3 speech by the governor of Krasnodar Region in which he called for "raid brigades" consisting of the police, the Migration Service, the Federal Security Service, and other officials, as well as Cossacks, to go through Sochi's streets to "clean them up." Detentions continued during the IOC's final inspection visit to Sochi in late September. According to a Human Rights Watch report, local authorities had also raided workplaces, homes, and public places, rounding up both foreign and migrant workers from elsewhere in Russia and holding them in police station courtyards and overcrowded temporary holding cells. In some cases, these detainees were denied access to a lawyer, whilst police officers denied that these workers were being held in custody. Many of them were subsequently expelled from Russia, following court hearings, without lawyers present.

However, in spite of the adoption of this deportation strategy, the Russian authorities were unable to resolve the migrant issue. After month-long raids, the governor of Krasnodar region stated that 60,000 illegal migrants had melted into the local population and disappeared from the official radar. This did not, however, deter the authorities from doubling their efforts and continuing their policy of deportations.²⁷

22 "Medvedev raskritikoval chinovnikov za volokitu s olimpijskoj strojkoi v Sochi", *Newsru*, 23 March 2009, <<http://www.newsru.com/russia/23mar2009/medvedso4i.html>>

23 "Vladimir Putin potreboval usilit' kontrol' za rashodovaniem sredstv na stroitel'stvo olimpijskih ob'ektov v Sochi", *Federaciya gornolyzbnogo sporta i snouborda Rossii*, 6 February 2013, <<http://www.fgssr.ru/Sport/ui/Page/Organisation/OrganisationPageNewsItem.aspx?id=4276&o=4355&so=3275&fp=3>>

24 "Vyhodnyh ne byvaet': Putin prinyal v Sochi vpechatlennogo stroitel'stvom Yanukovicha", *Newsru*, 26 May 2013, <<http://www.newsru.com/russia/26may2013/sochi.html>>

25 "HRW: Rossijskie vlasti vysylayut trudovyh migrantov iz Sochi", *Grani*, 3 October 2013, <<http://grani.ru/Politics/Russia/Regions/m.219692.html>>

26 "Administraciya: potok migrantov v Krasnodarskij kraj zashkalivaet", *Sochi-2014*, 25 July 2013, <<http://sochi-24.ru/obshestvo/administraciya-potok-migrantov-v-krasnodarskij-kraj-zashkali vaet.2013725.65871.html>>

27 "Tkachev: pochti 60 tysyach nelegal'nyh migrantov 'rastvorilis'", *Sochi-24*, 24 October 2013, <<http://sochi-24.ru/politika/tkachev-okolo-60-tysyach-nelegalnyh-migrantov-rastvorilis.20131024.69681.html>>

Conclusion

The problems relating to migrant workers in Sochi play out on many levels. Firstly, it reflects a generalized increase in xenophobia across Russia, whereby in 2013, 74 percent of Russians expressed negative attitude against foreign workers migrating to Russia. Secondly, the Kremlin's inability to resolve the migrant issue, even within this tightly controlled state-led mega-project, raises doubts about the prospects of them resolving this problem across the rest of the country. Thirdly, the contrast between the regime's good intentions of attracting as many migrant workers as possible at the beginning

of this mega-project, and the recent mass deportations of migrant workers suggests that the regime continues to engage in projects it cannot adequately control and for which it cannot establish an adequate legal framework. Finally, rather than addressing employment and migration issues in a peaceful and competent manner, the Russian authorities continue to rely on brute force to resolve such problems. The story of the Sochi Olympic mega-project makes it clear that the current regime is unable to tackle sensitive issues in a timely, effective and comprehensive fashion, using substantive legal, economic, and political means.

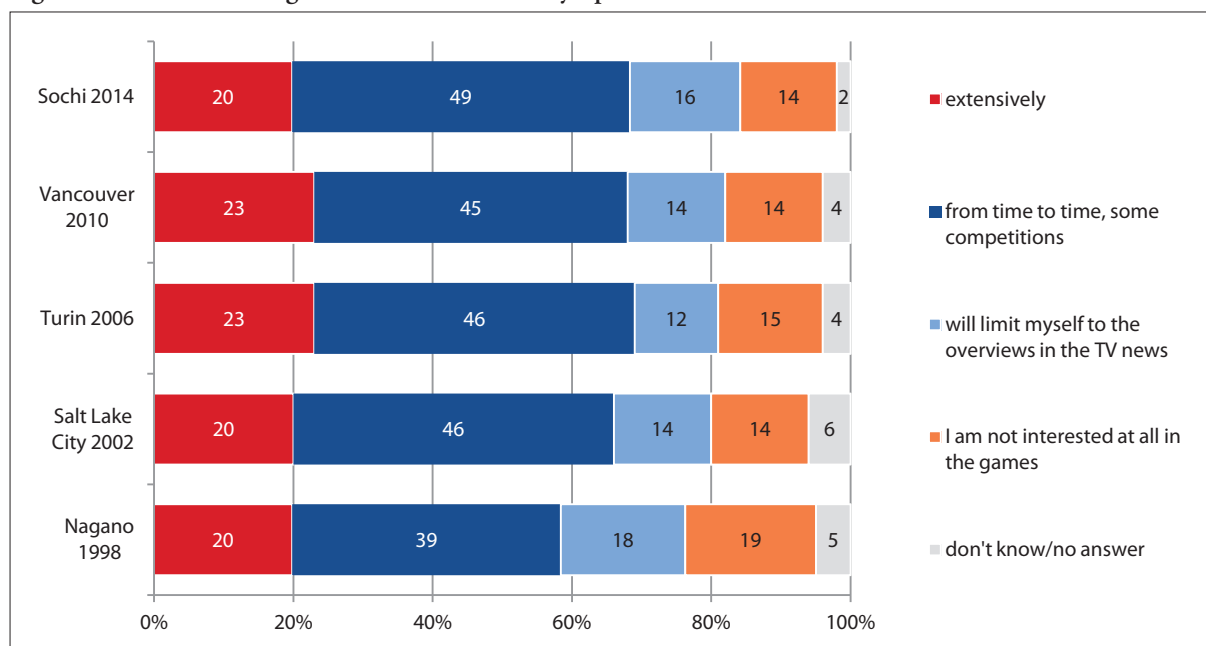
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OPINION POLL

“The Most Expensive Games, Ever”: Russian Opinions on Sochi

Figure 1: Are You Going to Watch the Winter Olympic Games on Television?



Source: representative opinion polls by Levada Center, January 1998 to 24–27 January 2014, <<http://www.levada.ru/print/05-02-2014/zimnie-olimpiiskie-igry-v-sochi-interes-nadezhdy-i-otsenka>>