

National Pride, Professional Achievements and Local Troubles: Mobile Workforce of the 2014 Sochi Games

Elena Trubina (Professor of Social Theory and Philosophy at the Institute of Social and Political Sciences at Ural Federal University; elena.trubina@gmail.com)

Abstract of the plenary paper to be given at the interdisciplinary conference "*Mega-events for the regional development: citizen participation and social impact*" (March 23-24, 2016)

In this paper, I argue that the 2014 Winter Games were symptomatic in terms of oscillation between nationalistic and globalistic ways of their understanding. Nationalistic anxieties of the fans co-existed with their sense of entitlement: in February 2014, the Games were the best thing in Russia to go and to be seen at. The workers, professionals and experts were busy for a few preceding years preparing the lavish sport spectacle and also taking pride in it. Apart from pride, what were the workers' and professionals' attitudes toward the Games? How nationalism was commercialized through use of policy transfer and "best practices"? How do the interests of the local citizens intersected with the wide range of external actors and agendas? How a 'variety of socio-spatial lines of engagement and networks of association' (MacLeod and Jones, 2011: 2446) often extending beyond a concrete site of the Olympics, has made itself visible during the run-up and implementation of the Games? I am aware that I pose here too many questions for one conference paper but my purpose at this conference, as both a speaker and an organizer, is not only to present the results of my work but to, hopefully, find new partners for collaboration.

The Sochi Olympics were designed in such a way that it allowed no space for public debate on the bid and the following preparation, creating an atmosphere of mistrust and hostility between the government and many Russian citizens. While the cost of Games grew exponentially, they exemplified, ironically, 'relational politics of place' (Amin, 2004; Massey, 1991) in a sense that the whole country's economy was mobilized to sustain the immense expenditure (\$ 51 billion) (Yaffa 2014). The Olympics were prepared against the background of Russia's uneven economic development (Trubina 2013, Zubarevitch 2011, 2012) which includes thousands of people trying to have ends meet. Because of stagnation, the regions budget deficit grew in 2013 in 2,3 times and comprises - 1% GDP (Finmarket 2014) . In 2013, industrial manufacturing went down to - 0,2%, major capital investment - 7%, construction investment - 5,4%. A few plants announced mass layoff actions (Nikolaev 2014). The 2014 Olympics has been just one, albeit most controversial, episode of the Russian regions' entrance into the global circuit of events which reveals contradictions among the priorities of the federal state: the goal of restoring regional geopolitical hegemony by means of holding mega-events; the rent-seeking interests of the federal, regional, and municipal players; and the hollowing out of social services

(Muller 2011, 2012, Persson and Petersson, 2014). I seek to answer these questions focusing on the narratives of temporary workers who have come to Sochi from other Russian cities. Apart from a massive influx domestic workers, Sochi was effectually the site where another flows crystallized as well: the ones of workers who arrived to work via international migration channels, of capital (some of which never materialized on the Olympic site), of ideas (since the preparation to the Olympics was informed by the needs of broadcasting) thus confirming the calls to problematize “notions of ‘local’ and ‘global’, ‘concrete’ and ‘abstract’, ‘fixed’ and ‘mobile’, and ‘embedded’ and ‘ethereal’ to explore space in relational terms (Doel and Hubbard 2002).

Existing literature looks at the mobile workforce of the mega-events from different angles. Many of those who study the impacts of sporting mega events find positive effects associated with employment opportunities: the links between Olympics and employment opportunities for the local residents are considered (Bob & Swart, 2009; Zhou & Ap, 2009) and the claims about benefits that Olympics bring to those outside the host cities are optimistically made: “Those temporary workers who live outside the region will take a portion of their earnings back to their home area and their purchases will lead to growth in other regional economies. This is another example of spending associated with a mega-event that creates positive economic gains for regions beyond the boundaries of the host community. The economic impact takes place within the host city, and in that regard it is clear where expenditures occur. The ultimate development effects, however, can be in regions throughout a country or abroad, as when guest workers are employed and send a portion of their earnings back to their home countries” (Mills and Rosentraub 2013: 238-239). On the other hand, disproportional spreading of jobs have been analyzed and presented in recent studies: “Many Olympic contractors wanted people who were already employed, skilled, and having “the right attitude” to work, while a lot of the long-term unemployed and those from areas of high unemployment were not getting Olympic jobs” (Lenskyj, 2000, 115). It is unclear “whether these employment opportunities are taken up by people in the local communities” (Davis and Thornley, 2010: 89). Martin Crookston (2004, 56) considered uneasy balance between jobs for locals and outsiders before the London 2012 Olympics emphasizing that “getting the most out of all these kinds of jobs will need really positive, proactive policy programmes: otherwise the Games will be staffed entirely by cheery, competent Kiwis and Aussies, with minimal East End participation”. On the lower end jobs, as, for instance, in Atlanta in 1996, illegal immigrants and temporary workers comprised labour pools (Rutheiser, 1996, p. 241). Jacqueline Kennelly and Paul Watt (2011) interviewed marginalized youth in 2010 Vancouver and 2012 London. Harry H. Hiller (2012), also based on 2010 Vancouver Games, looked at thousands of city residents who were formally engaged in the Games’ preparation and implementation. The Chinese-American duo of authors Xiaoyan Xing and Laurence Chalip (2009, 218) interviewed lower-level employees of the Beijing Organizing Committee for the Olympic Games in order to

investigate “the workers’ interpretation of event symbolisms, their immediate work environment, the organization, and the broad social environment”. The role of intermediaries and brokers is considered by (Burt, 2005) who emphasize the brokers’ potential to integrate workers into the local communities and (Molm & Cook, 1995, Stovel & Shaw, 2012) who show that intermediaries seek personal benefits by living off workers’ backs. These studies are helpful to both scholars and practitioners involved in major sporting events’ run-up. However, I suggest that studying the Olympics preparation through lens of temporary workers’ and professionals’ perspective would add to our understanding of inequalities created and benefits distributed.

Although economic malaise and stagnation in many regions undoubtedly afflict many people, there were certain economic benefits and symbolic gains of the Olympics which reverberated with the citizens of the country rather positively (Kozlov 2014). Moreover, it is exactly because in many regions of the country the workers do not enjoy high wages and a chance to work on the ambitious projects, that Sochi as a site of temporary work seemed so appealing. While many Russian citizens were angry about human and urban cost involved in the massive preparation processes, others were seeking an occasion to make a profit or a name (or both). In contrast to many other Olympics, the substantial national resources were mobilized to have the Games: only 4% of all expenses were not coming from the state budget (Nazarets, 2014). Together with higher ranks of government officials, thousands of people who have come to work on the construction sites (or contributed to cultural economy of the Games from the distance) did benefit from the event. By focusing on the narratives of those immediately involved into the run-up, I emphasize “polyphonic, multivoiced, many themed” character of the Games and join the colleagues’ attempts to demonstrate variety of different voices and problems (Price and Dayan, 2008). By setting the analysis within the context of the Sochi Olympic site “being shaped, reshaped and challenged by the social and spatial practices of various groups and individuals” (Silk 744), I trace the links among the finance capital and cultural capital, the knowledge and skills, the attitudes and values which shape people’s perception and use of this mega-event.

Driven by an unprecedented investment boom in infrastructural works and numerous large-scale projects, Sochi in 2009-2013 experienced a critical change in real estate market dynamics. Associated with this change was the growth of a new property development pattern which displaced the conventional small-scale, self-financed model, combined with the Soviet government-sponsored construction that was a main spatial development mechanism during the second half of the twentieth century. The cohort of businessmen around the President Vladimir Putin which used state structures and state finances to produce “a merger of state budget and party organization” (Smyth, Wilkening, & Urasova, 2007, p. 9) was able to boost Sochi through concerted efforts at a national level by mobilizing national resources.

The views expressed by my informants about the diverse group of temporary workers some of which spent in Sochi seven years while some only a few months can be summarized as follows. Together with thousands of skilled professionals, Olympics involved immense migrant manual labor force which is woven into the tapestry of a long history of colonial and post-colonial oppression (Loginova 2013). The migrants from Central Asia were engaged in petty industrial jobs requiring physical work. The big groups of migrants from Croatia, Serbia (Glavonich and Arnautovitch 2014) Turkey (Ic, duygu and Karacay, 2012) and other countries worked in construction. Temporary workers from the Russian regions worked in the whole range of jobs, from catering and watering to supervising the construction. Most of them cite confusing and ambiguous contracting schemes in which it was difficult to identify an employer. The complicated relationships between the main contractors and the client company included sometimes a procurement contract of labor service workers where only total budget covering all salaries was indicated. Often the contracts included no labor and health insurance or pension allowances. Because of the lack of strict regulations and other legal safety nets, many disputes and controversies emerged during which workers realized that the range of their responses to wages delays and exploitation may be very limited (Akopyan,2014). Yet they couldn't question the power exercised by an immediate employer, particularly given that they not always knew who an employer was. The docile Asian migrants were referred by informants as being most vulnerable and abused. In construction, "a grey secondary market" (Jon Erik Dølvik and Line Eldring, 2006: 225) which avoids labor market regulation is ubiquitous. When the informants mentioned Central Asian and Caucasian migrants who were underpaid, worked around the clock and shared cramped apartments, they linked these appalling conditions to the profits made by intermediaries and temporary work agencies. Many migrants in question worked in Central Sochi contributing to erasure of parks and alleys, dividing the park surrounding Kavkazian Riviera and Platanovay Alley between the private investors who built on this land several pavilions, cafes, pubs, and 'ugly high rises', building several skyscrapers on the main city avenue Kurortnuy prospect. All this frustrated the locals and, as one informants said, they would express their feelings passing by the migrants working on the streets thus reproducing biases comprising scorn and political backlash of conservative groups bent on targeting both migrant workers and illegal immigrants in many regions (Karanov 2013). According to Bernaciak (2012) "black employment can be considered an extreme case of dumping, as it places illegally employed workers in a particularly vulnerable position while at the same time negatively affecting the labour market as a whole". This reverberates with one informant's remark that the conditions on Sochi were about "survival of the fittest: only those with good communication skills and bargaining skills would get from those on top what they want while the workers from afar would be treated really badly".

Relations between workers and entrepreneurs varied but highly skilled and experienced manual workers emphasized that if assignments were fulfilled in time, wages followed. Many didn't mind this form of

temporary employment although admitted to the burden (or a threat) that their long absence posited for the families. Wages were firmly set although some workers managed to have them raised after negotiations with the managers. There had been several strikes on construction sites of 'Olympstroy' (Gidasov and Kotova 2010, Sonne 2013). A fear to be unemployed (or self-employed) grows as the economy is stagnant in many regions and relatively high wages that many received created an illusion that these conditions will continue. As long as workers were fortunate to receive promised wages, they didn't mind that other employment standards were depressed (working long hours (often without extra compensation), paying high fees for housing or transport to the workplace, facing wage deductions for tools).