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Former Anarchists Make Sochi Environment Their Cause

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Construction waste and other garbage lying on a hill near Sochi, with Olympic venues visible in the distance. **Yekaterina Kravtsova for MT**

SOCHI — On a hill covered by blooming mimosa bushes in the small village of Verkhneye Vesyoloye, residents enjoy a splendid view of the Olympic Park and its modern facilities. But many of these villagers do not share the Olympic spirit.

The reason is that, mixed with the fresh scent of mimosa, the stench of garbage wafts up from a heap of trash brought to the top of the hill from various construction sites.

While the construction waste can be removed, local environmental activists are concerned that the Olympics have caused other damage to the Caucasus landscape that can never be repaired.

"If environmental protection legislation was fully observed, the Olympics would never be held

here," said Vladimir Kimayev, an activist with the Environmental Watch on North Caucasus, a group that has monitored the environmental impact of Olympic construction in Sochi since 2007. "That is why, by definition, holding the games in Sochi is illegal."

Kimayev's group has been perhaps the most visible and fervent of all local activist groups in the run-up to the Winter Games, and, possibly as a result, its members have been targeted by Russian authorities.

Group member Yevgeny Vitishko, who co-authored a damning 84-page report recently released by the group on the Games' environmental impact, was sent to prison for three years last week for spray-painting a fence that surrounded the house of Krasnodar region governor Alexander Tkachyov. And group co-founder Suren Gazaryan fled the country after facing what the group called an intimidation campaign.

In Verkhneye Vesyoloye, the house of civil and environmental activist Olga Prokhorova is located in front of the garbage heap. From one window of her house you can see the Olympic flame, while the trash is visible from another.

"This is not the only garbage deposit that has remained since the Olympics, it just happened to be near my home," she said. "It was what pushed me to become an environmental activist to some extent."

The last seven years, as Olympic construction took place, has been the busiest time for the activists from Environmental Watch on North Caucasus. Now, while tens of thousands of Sochi visitors are captivated by the athletic achievements of their national teams, the group's activists spend their days in City Hall, at police stations and in court trying to get answers to their complaints.

"I cannot support these Olympics because I know how these Games have been prepared and how both people and nature have been humiliated. The damage is immense, it is crazy," Kimayev said.

"When I was a child I explored all the mountains around Sochi and when I see how [the authorities] treat the nature that I love so much I cannot but protest their actions," he said.

Kimayev, a life-long Sochi resident and the head of the environmental group's Sochi branch, sat down recently with The Moscow Times at a cafe in central Sochi to describe the group's work, the impact of the Olympics on the local ecology, and pressure the group has faced from the authorities.

Former Anarchists

The group now known as Environmental Watch on North Caucasus was set up 17 years ago, but back then its main focus was far from environmental protection.

At first, it was a movement of students who shared anarchist views, were inspired by Che Guevara and wanted to see freedom in every aspect of life. They later decided that the best platform to express their views was in environmental activism, determining that nature was one of the most vulnerable spheres.

Over the years, the aggressively rebellious spirit of the activists has diminished and the group got involved in politics, becoming affiliated with a local division of the liberal Yabloko party.

"We are not environment professionals but all our people are very brave," Kimayev said.

"They are the real citizens of the Russian Federation who love their country with normal love and not like those swindlers who think only about their salaries," he said, referring to unnamed bureaucrats who he believes are corrupt.

There are some 200 activists in the group who operate in the Krasnodar region, of which Sochi is a part, and Kimayev said the group was in constant contact with internationally known groups such as Greenpeace, WWF, Bellona, Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch.

"We feel some protection from them," he said, adding that scientists from the local branch of the Russian Geographical Society helped the group to conduct research.



Trash covering a hillside in the village of Verkhneye Vesyoloye near Sochi. (Yekaterina Kravtsova for MT)

Damning Report

Last week, the group presented a report that called the Olympics a "shady business damaging the environment," and put most of the blame on President Vladimir Putin, saying that without his protection such an "unlawful move" could not be implemented.

"This is a very honest work — it is based on powerful scientific analysis and a large part of our complaints and letters to the authorities as well as their answers to us were included in it,"

Kimayev said.

According to the report, Russian environmental legislation was altered to accommodate the demands of the Winter Games, with many laws supposedly being violated along the way.

The report said that no ecological examination was conducted prior to the construction of some of the Olympic facilities and that many of the territories where facilities were built were part of nature reserves. It also said that the boundaries of some of the reserves were changed after Sochi was chosen as one of three possible host cities for the Olympics.

Among its other allegations, the report said that during the construction of mountain resorts in Krasnaya Polyana, there was massive deforestation, while a promise to plant trees to replace the uprooted ones has not been fulfilled. It said that in the process of constructing roads and the Rosa Khutor resort, hundreds of endangered plants were destroyed, while the building of new ski trails led to the disappearance of bears and other animals near Krasnaya Polyana, where they used to spend winters.

Kimayev said that while some of the environmental damage can be mended in the future, some of it can never be repaired. For example, he said the measures that were used to fortify the shores of the Mzymta River would not allow biodiversity to develop there again.

"There are always concerns about ecology issues at the Olympic Games, but the negative consequences of construction can be diminished if the authorities have dialogue with society and activists," Kimayev said. He argues that there was no dialogue on the Sochi Olympics.

From the start of the Olympic project, Russian authorities have said they intended to make Olympic construction meet all necessary green standards. RIA Novosti reported in 2010 that more that 80 environmental checks had been conducted at Sochi construction sites, with more than 100 Olympic facilities getting positive expert assessments.

In 2010, state corporation Olimpstroi received an international certificate acknowledging that the construction of the Olympic facilities met ecological standards. Olimpstroi president Taimuraz Bolloyev said at the time that all the concerns that standards were being violated during construction were unwarranted since the company used innovative technologies and carefully observed the environmental situation at construction sites.

In October, with the Games a few months away, Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Kozak said that Russia had fulfilled all its obligations to protect the environment in Sochi.

"We have conducted a number of compensatory measures and now it is obvious that the ecology in Sochi will improve after the Olympics, since the compensatory measures exceed the environmental damage many times over," he said.

Targeted by Authorities

Kimayev's group planned to hold two demonstrations in Sochi during the Olympics, but city authorities refused to give them permission and instead invited the activists for a discussion at City Hall.

"This is the first time the authorities have taken a step toward us," Kimayev said. "They are

scared of any protests during the Olympics and they hate us because they know that we could have a rally even if they have banned us from doing so."

But he said the group intended to cooperate with City Hall if the offer was genuine.

The typical procedure followed by the group's activists during Olympic construction was to check building sites and, if they believed there were violations of environmental legislation, to write complaints to the Prosecutor General's Office and the police, asking them to verify that the construction was legal.

Kimayev alleged that the authorities and businessmen harbored "deep hatred" toward the group, saying that, in addition to the jailing of Vitishko, at least nine other activists had come under official pressure.

"There are constant searches of our activists. I was also searched — police tried to find guns or drugs but they did not find anything and left," Kimayev said, adding that the apartments of his two adult sons had also been searched by police. "I was called to multiple interrogations by the FSB [Federal Security Service], my car has been stopped several times."

He said he did not expect anything good from the authorities in the future and believed that as soon as the Olympics were over, the government would likely cease any dialogue with activists. But the group plans to continue its work.

"There will be a new general plan on further Sochi development as a resort soon. We are going to push the authorities not to damage the environment further, and we will continue to give them our recommendations," Kimayev said.

The group has some confidence that its future activity will be successful given its victories in the past.

Together with other environmental activists, they pressured the authorities to move the luge and bobsled track off national park land. Kimayev said the construction of the Kudepsinsk hydroelectric station, worth 22 billion rubles, and the Imertinsk port, worth some 100 billion rubles, had also been suspended after a request by his group.

"Can you imagine allocating $51 billion to one city?" he said, referring to the estimated cost of the Games and related infrastructure projects. "Not only as an activist but also as a Sochi resident, I am really concerned about what will happen to Sochi in the future, how my children will live here."

"I know what comfort in this city is — I lived here when it was comfortable, when rivers were crystal clear and you could drink water from them. Now it is impossible."

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