

## Sochi 2014 – Potential for conflict around the XXII<sup>th</sup> Winter Olympics

Kurt Scharr & Ernst Steinicke

Keywords: XXII<sup>th</sup> Winter Olympics, Russia, Caucasus, Sochi

### Abstract

Our paper starts by sketching the historical and cultural background as well as characteristic features of the landscape around the venue of the 2014 Winter Olympics. It continues by pointing out spatial aspects of ecology, economy, demography and culture in the run-up to the olympics as well as the social tensions that have already emerged in this context and the potential for future conflict.

Greater Sochi has a tradition as a spa and holiday destination that goes back to the foundation of the Soviet Union. The Olympic Games add the winter season to the existing tourist spectrum. At the same time, they provide the Moscow government with an opportunity for a new international positioning.

A key problem is the exclusion of the local population from the preparations. This is most apparent in the resettlement of inhabitants from Imeritinska Bay (Olympic Village). Moreover, the games are held inside a national park area, albeit in a zone that permits leisure activities. The games will, however, stay largely clear of the territory of the biosphere reserve and at most affect it at the edges.

### Profile

Protected area

World Natural Heritage Kavkazki

Zapovednik & Sochi National Park

Mountain range

Caucasus

Country

Russia

### Introduction

Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, the Russian Federation (R.F.), which emerged from the legacy of the USSR, has faced profound systemic transformation processes. The interaction of the Soviet heritage, persistent structural features and ongoing transformation processes is evident in the R.F. as increasingly fragmented spatial and social developments (Figure 1).

During the 1990s, the region of the *Caucasian Riviera* began, not least from economic necessity, to leave behind the Soviet tourist structures of recreation and regeneration oriented on the available range of services and to pursue new strategies of answering privatized demand. Urgently needed modernization and innovation are progressing only slowly, even in the privatized parts of the tourist sector. After two failed attempts (in 1989 and 2002), the Kremlin finally succeeded in 2007 for Russia to be chosen to host the 2014 Winter Olympics. The mega-sports project Sochi 2014 provides the region with a range of instruments privileged by the central state that makes it seem feasible to close structural gaps fairly soon. The necessary adaptation measures must be completed in a relatively short time (until the end of January 2014). This is the source of various problems, some of them severe, since the traditionally authoritarian and centralist Russian structures (Goehrke 2010, pp. 231–234 and 306–309) and the general lack of a civil society hardly permit any bottom-up processes. The Winter Olympics are thus a political prestige project that is in danger of expecting too much of the region (Figure 2).

In order to present the problems it is necessary to start by sketching the spatial peculiarities of the region



Figure 1 – Sanatorium “Iuzhnoe Vozmor’e” in a tributary valley of the Mzymta river, just before Krasnaia Poliana. The infrastructure, some of which still planned under Soviet rule and built in the 1990s, often stands empty because of unresolved ownership issues or lack of capital. © K. Scharr 2008



Figure 2 – Residence of the Russian President in Estosadok near Krasnaia Poliana. The (so far) only 5-star hotel in the valley and the ski lift of Gazprom are situated in close proximity. The lifts and infrastructure reach all the way to the boundary of the Kavkazki Zapovednik. © A. Borsdorf 2008

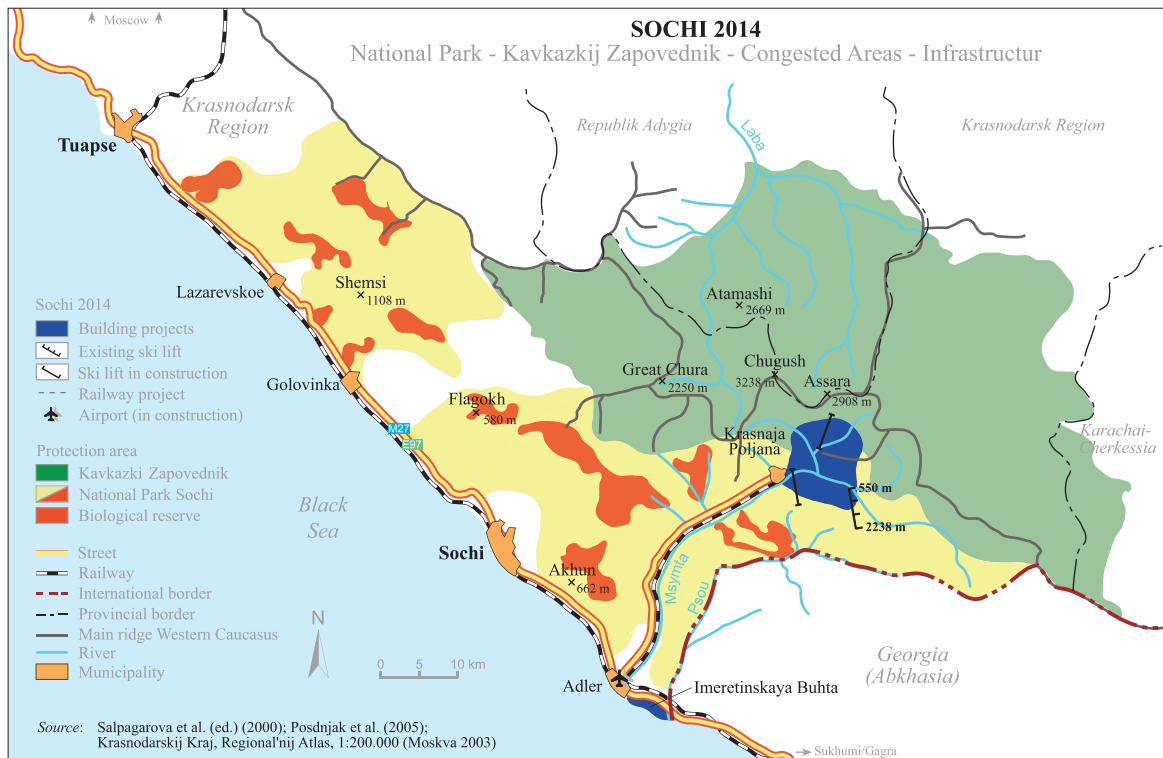


Figure 3 – Map of the area.

alluded to by the tourist motto *Olympic Games in a subtropical holiday paradise* ([www.sochi.ru](http://www.sochi.ru)). We will go on to point out the vulnerabilities of this sensitive area at the south-western declivity of the Caucasus and the fundamental structural changes and the diverse potential for conflict arising from them.

The Institute of Geography at the University of Innsbruck has, within the project module of its master degree course, evaluated very large sports events (Borsdorf & Steinicke 2009). A working group on *Sustainability in large sports events* that was created in this context has produced two ex ante analyses of Sochi 2014 (Scharr & Steinicke 2010; Scharr et al. 2011) and will investigate the effect of these games within another project module (Figure 3).

### The Winter Games on the Black Sea

Sochi is a surprising choice of a place to hold winter games in, both for its absolute and its relative location in the transition zone between European and Asian cultures. The main venue of Sochi is situated immediately on the north-eastern coast of the Black Sea, at 43° northern latitude (43° 35'07" N, 39° 43'13" O), i.e. roughly equivalent of Nice in geo-ecologic terms. Just a few hundred metres inland (as the crow flies), the contours rise markedly, less than 50 km inland the foothills of the western Caucasus reach altitudes of more than 3300 m. The coastal edge is characterized by a variant of the Mediterranean climate, with 200 sunshine days per year. The Caucasian Riviera features similar mean temperatures as the Côte d'Azur: 23 °C in August and nearly 5 °C in January (Chistiakov 1996,

pp. 12–13). The Olympic Village on the poldered Imeritinska Bay near Adler will be the warmest place in the R.F. during the Games in February. The close proximity of sea and high mountain wall is responsible for the high precipitation in late autumn, which falls as snow in the mountains. Krasnaia Poliana (566 m [sic!]), just under one hour by car from the coast and the site of most of the Alpine competitions, thus offers guaranteed snow cover (Efremov et al. 2007, pp. 133–134). At higher altitudes, however, this also means increased danger of avalanches for the new skiing areas and feeder roads (Stetham et al. 2008).

Sochi can confidently declare: “You can swim in the sea from April through October, and go skiing from November through May” ([www.sochiru.ru](http://www.sochiru.ru)).



Figure 4 – In recent years, many hotels were built between Krasnaia Poliana and Estosadok. They have to share the narrow valley floor with two road systems (on either side of the Mzymtma, here coming from the left) and one railway line (on the orographic left). © K. Scharr 2010

The flora and fauna of the area shows great diversity. As early as 1924, a nature park was created by the state on the western slopes of the Caucasus on an area of over 280 000 ha (302 ha of which are subtropical parts of Sochi and Hosta). In 1979 it was included in the UNESCO programme Man and the Biosphere and designated World Natural Heritage in 1999 (the only one so far in the Caucasus) (Brinik et al. 2000). To date this protected area has not succeeded in attaining the status of biosphere reserve, with environment-friendly and sustainable land use. The existing *biosphere territory* of *Kavkazski Zapovednik* is totally protected within R.F. law. There are plans to use the existing World Natural Heritage (*Kavkazski Zapovednik*) as future core zone of the envisaged biosphere reserve (Schmidt et al. 2006). In 1983 Sochi National Park (193 700 ha) was created with the aim of maintaining and using the natural and cultural landscape in an orderly fashion. Greater Sochi itself is situated with the territory of the park, which is fragmented into numerous zones of varying protection status. For these confusing delimitations of the national park alone, it does not fulfil the criteria for national parks as demanded by the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources.

The conurbation of Sochi (since 1968) follows the Black Sea between Tuapse and Adler as a narrow band of 145 km length. The total population numbers nearly 400 000 people, of which 134 000 live in the central part of the town of Sochi. In ethnic terms, Russians are the majority in the western Caucasus (> 70%). Armenians, Ukrainians and Georgians, as well as Adyghe (Circasians) form larger minorities (census date of 2010).

### Spatial conflict potential in the band-shaped Russian town of Sochi

The decision to stage the Winter Olympics on the Russian Black Sea coast in the western Caucasus holds opportunities for new dynamics within intensified



Figure 5 – The central district of Sochi. The political upgrading of the town through the regular visits by the president of the R.F. since the year 2000 triggered a building boom in the town. Lack of available land caused developers to build higher (background). The five-storey blocks of flats from the Chruschev era (mid-picture) are increasingly under pressure from newer buildings. © K. Scharr 2008

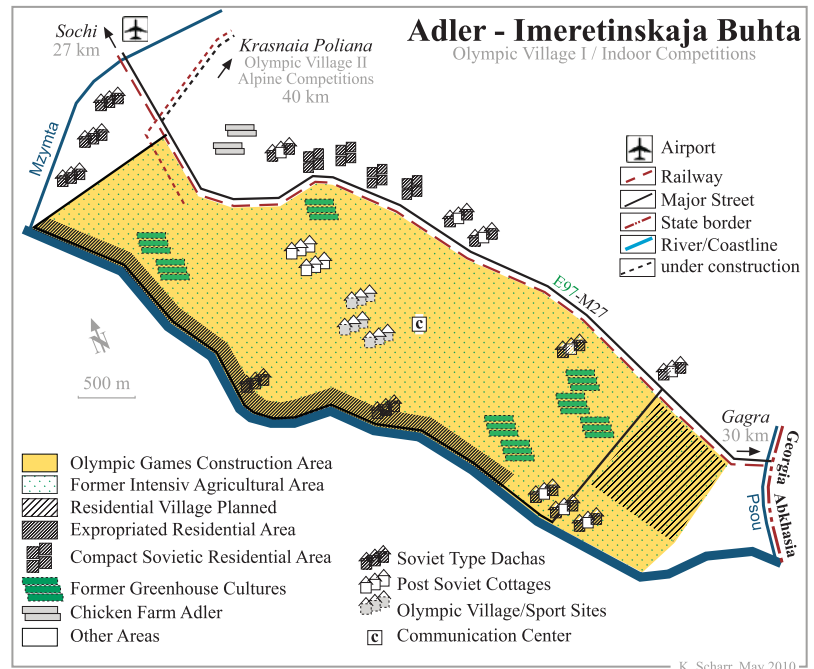


Figure 6 – Olympic Village I in Imeretinska Bay.

transformation processes but also considerable conflict potential for Sochi and for the small built-to-plan ski resort of Krasnaia Poliana only 40 km inland. This potential surfaces in various dimensions. In the following sections we concentrate our approach on spatial conflict-theory. Space-related conflicts often touch on several levels of conflicts of interest: ecological ones, demographic, socio-economic, cultural or political ones. Looking at the potential for conflict on the levels listed, we want to sketch the complex situation for the larger area of Sochi (Figure 6).

### Ecological dimension

The settlement topography is characterized by a narrow coastal strip and the main ridge of the Caucasus rising sharply only a few kilometres inland. In Soviet times, the increase in population and the dense tourist infrastructure combined to create additional traffic tensions. Since 2007 this situation has been exacerbated by a shift of local inhabitants into cheaper zones at the edge of town. Given its immanently precarious situation, Greater Sochi cannot handle these problems adequately. Nor does it have a solution for sufficient drinking water supply, connection to central heating and power stations or the electricity grid, etc. In June 2011 premier V.V. Putin opened a new gas pipeline laid on the seabed (Dzhubga-Lazarevskoie-Sochi) to supply the city with energy.

The waste-water system, insofar it exists, is overloaded and most waste water remains untreated and is led either directly through pipes or indirectly through natural tributaries into the sea. As far back as 1995, a study pointed out the extraordinary pollution of the coastal waterways by the central settlement area around Sochi (Nagalevski & Chistiakov 2003, pp.



Figure 7 – From Adler to Krasnaia Poliana and far into the Mzymta valley, for more than 50 km one building site borders on the next. Here they are constructing the second road on the left bank and a railway line along the Mzymta. The sign pointing to beekeeping station no. 22 and the sale of mountain honey seems almost surreal given the dust-laden reality. © K. Scharr 2010

106–107). The current degradation of the natural potential along the coastal strip and the Mzymta valley may be seen as relatively light compared with the total area of the Krasnodarsk region, but locally, and exacerbated by building activities since 2007, it can reach considerable intensity. Moreover, the protective function of the national park is severely compromised by its patchwork and elevation structure and its zonation within the urban area and along the Mzymta valley. The zonation of the national park, however, is no obstacle to tourist use around Krasnaia Poliana, quite the opposite: it was included in the original concept for the national park (Avdonin 2000). Whether holding Olympic Games, which strain the ecology of the region in their run-up, during the event and in any later use, is at all compatible with the conservation principles of a national park, remains to be seen. This is also true for the *Kavkazski Zapovednik*, although building activities (hotels, ski runs, etc.) only happen just outside its boundaries (Figure 7).

### Socio-economic dimension

At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, an infrastructure was gradually created in the region and aimed predominantly on the needs of tourists. The Soviet Union began to turn this part of the Black Sea coast into one of its leading recreation centres. In 1968 Moscow decided to merge the settlements between Tuapse and Adler into one homogenous urban area along one axis. During Soviet times, the Caucasus region and the Black Sea coast provided almost 40% of all tourist beds

(quoted from Noack 2006). So it is hardly surprising that overnight stays in the region fell drastically between 1991 and 2000, see Table 1. Population figures, however, are growing continuously.

Sports-economic ideas of the profitability of large sports events (Preuß 2011) can hardly be applied to the R.F. Market economy principles like those governing a venue such as Munich are clearly subordinated to political decisions in the R.F. The enormous time pressure to deliver, with the state powers as the only drivers, minimizes any participation in political decisions from the start (Chepikova & Leifse 2010). The local population is powerless to oppose the compulsory purchase of its land or its resettlement from the Imeretinska Bay to make way for Olympic sports venues and athletes' accommodation. This situation is comparable to that in Beijing (Flüchter & Wang 2008). Rising costs of living are driven by rising land and house prices while incomes remain relatively low (Figure 8).

### Ethno-political dimension

In the southwest of Russia, the Krasnodarskii Krai and the *Respublika Adygeia* (since 1992) are two federation subjects with independent jurisdiction. The *Respublika Adygeia* had been an *avtonomnaia oblast* within the area of Krasnodarsk since 1922. In 1990 it was upgraded to Adyghe Socialist Soviet Republic, with the capital Maikop. It is completely surrounded by the Krai and the *Kavkazski Zapovednik* is partly situated in the southern area of the Respublika. The elevation from autonomous region to the status of a republic has to be seen as a concession to the nation of its title (Adyghes or Circassians), the second-largest ethnic group after the Russians. In functional and economic terms, however, the republic is largely interwoven with Krasnodar and dependent on it. In Sochi the collective memory of the systematic expulsion of the local Circassian population after the military conquest by Tsarist Russia in 1864 is negligible, in contrast with the situation in the northern Caucasian republics (King 2008). In the course of the fight for a share of the incoming investment in the preparations for Sochi 2014, however, a noticeable instrumentalization of this historical tragedy (with a political background) is taking place (Nefliasheva & Malashenko 2011).

Even back in the early 1990s, Adyghes in the R.F. had supported Abkhazian separatists in Georgia (O'Loughlin et al. 2007). This opens up an indirect connection with the more severe foreign policy conflict on the unruly southern border of Russia, particularly with the Republic of Georgia. The war of 2008

Table 1 – Population growth Sochi 1900–2010. Source: Koncevaia 2007 (p. 92) and census data 2002 and 2010.

|                          | 1900  | 1915   | 1939   | 1959    | 1970    | 1989    | 2010   |
|--------------------------|-------|--------|--------|---------|---------|---------|--|
| Sochi central            | 1 400 | 11 000 | 71 000 | 127 000 |         |         |  |
| Greater Sochi after 1968 |       |        |        |         | 224 000 | 312 000 | 343 000 – add to this ca. 64 000 inhabitants of adjoining rural districts. |

over the (Georgian) provinces of South Ossetia and Abkhazia – the latter less than 60 km away from the centre of Sochi – ended in the declaration of two internationally not recognized vassal states of Russia. This deepened the old conflict between the R.F. and Georgia further, which has been rumbling on since 1991.

Until the civil war of 1992, the Abkhazian towns of Suhumi and Gagra were among the leading tourist destinations in the region (Stadelbauer 2001). With its military intervention, Moscow not only succeeded in creating a *cordon sanitaire* around the games but also paved the way somewhat for Russian investment in this region (Anonymus 2008). Despite the recent presidential elections, however, Abkhazia remains a geopolitical uncertainty issue in close proximity to the XXII<sup>th</sup> Winter Olympics – *l'Abkhazie est un lieu devenu non-lieu* (Colm 2009, p. 6).

## Conclusions

In the conflict dimensions sketched above and their potential we can clearly see some interaction. The tensions arising from ongoing transformation processes on the periphery of Russia are heightened dramatically by the preparations for Sochi 2014. The tensions in Sochi itself between state powers and the local population – be it over ecologic, socio-economic or ethno-political issues – are intensified the more the suspicious central powers block off civil society structures from their inception (Gel'man 2010). In addition, such behaviour kills off any formation of a regional identity, which is indispensable for modernization, at an early stage (Busygina 2002). Spatial disparities have increased sharply since the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Overcoming them is turning into an unfair competition. Even within a region like Krasnodarskii Krai, the massive political support for specific development is creating considerable tension between the coastal strip and its hinterland. In part these tensions are the result of structural differences between the agro-industrial region north of the main Caucasus ridge, around the capital Krasnodar, and the largely tourist-dominated coastal strip of the band-shaped town of Sochi. Another source of these tensions of the diversion of available funds caused by the Olympic Games 2014 and deemed unfair. The regional capital Krasnodar does indeed benefit from investment from Moscow, but it is doubtful whether this is also true of the surrounding, largely agrarian, rural area where more than 45% of the population live (Russia total 2002: 27%; census data 2002).

The conservation interests of the *Kavkazski Zapovednik* as well as of Sochi National Park are subordinated to the political project of the Games. The organization of the Olympic Games does take both protected areas into account, at least nominally. However, the protected area authorities are not included in any discussions about planning or implementation of the Games. The



Figure 8 – Settlements in Imteretinska Bay, abandoned since. In the background the main ridge of the Caucasus. © K. Scharr 2009

authoritarian situation in the R.F. prevents any conflict a priori. There is no opportunity for a civil society to form or to voice their concerns and the park authorities report to Moscow. Even so, all ski lift operators in Krasnaia Poliana now strive to create a pro-environment public image, particularly for the Western public.

The venue for the XXII<sup>th</sup> Winter Olympics is in many ways symptomatic for the societal situation of the R.F. at its periphery. Since the programmatic speech of president D.A. Medvedev in autumn 2009, the ruling powers have been proclaiming the necessity for modernization. Identifying this problem without setting any concrete measure at any level reminds us of the double speak familiar from Soviet times. As a result the gap between supposed and actual reality is widening dangerously.

## References

- Anonymus 2008. Депутаты Думы считают, что признание независимости легализует российские инвестиции в Абхазию (The Duma representatives believe that recognition of independence legalizes Russian investment in Abkhazia). Available at: <http://www.newsru.com/finance/09sep2008/dumaki.html> (accessed 30/08/2011)
- Avdonin, V.E. (Авдонин, В.Е.) 2000. Сочинский Национальный Парк (Sochi National Park). In: Salpagarova, D.S. (Салпагарова, Д.С.) (ed.), *Заповедники и национальные парки северного Кавказа, Ставрополь* (Protected areas and national parks of the Northern Caucasus, Stavropol): 65–69.
- Beroutchachvili, N. & J. Radvanyi 2009. *Atlas géopolitique informatique du Caucase*, Paris.
- Borsdorf, A. & E. Steinicke (eds.) 2009: *Anstoß zur Nachhaltigkeit? Eine Studie zur Bewertung der langfristigen ökologischen, sozialen und ökonomischen Effekte der EURO 2008 in Innsbruck/Tirol*. Innsbruck.
- Busygina, I. 2002. Russia's Regions in Search of Identity. *Acta Slavica Iaponica* 19: 296–312.
- Brinich, V.A. (Бриних, В.А.) 2000. Кавказский Государственный природный биосферный

- Заповедник (Kaukasisches staatliches Biosphären-territorium). In: Salpagarova, D.S. (Салпагарова, Д.С.) (ed.), *Заповедники и национальные парки северного Кавказа, Ставрополь* (Protected areas and national parks of the Northern Caucasus, Stavropol): 19–26.
- Chepikova, K. & O. Leifse 2010. Russlands simulierter Föderalismus Regionalpolitik unter Putin und Medvedev. *Osteuropa* 60 (1): 15–26.
- Chistyakov, V.I. (Чистяков, В.И.) (ed.) 1996. *Атлас Краснодарский Край – Республика Адыгея* (Atlas Krasnodarskii Krai – Respublika Adygeya, Minsk).
- Colm, L. (2009). *Improbable Abkhasie. Récits d'un État-fiction*. Paris.
- Efremov, Iu.V., V.D. Panov, P.M. Dur'e, Iu.G. P'ichev, S.V. Panova & D.A. Lutkov (Ефремов, Ю.В., В.Д. Панов, П.М. Дурье, Ю.Г. Ильинев, С.В. Панова & Д.А. Лутков) (2007). *Орография, оледенение, климат большого кавказа: опыт комплексной характеристики и взаимосвязей, Краснодар* (Orography, Glaciation, Climate of the Great Caucasus: Experience of the complex characteristic and interrelations, Krasnodar).
- Flüchter, W. & W. Wang 2008. Enteignungsverfahren in Peking. Chinesisches Bodenrecht im Zeichen von Kollusion und Korruption. *Geographische Rundschau* 60 (5): 58–64.
- Gel'man, V. 2010. Sackgasse autoritäre Modernisierung in Russland. *Osteuropa* 60 (1): 3–14.
- Goehrke, C. 2010. *Russland. Eine Strukturgeschichte*.
- King, Ch. 2008. *The ghost of freedom a history of the Caucasus*. Oxford.
- Koncevaya, T.L. (Концевая, Т.Л.) (ed.) 2007. *Сочи. Страницы прошлого и настоящего. Иллюстрированный Сборник статей, Сочи* (Sochi. Pages of Past and Present. Illustrated essays, Sochi).
- Nagalevskii, Iu.Ia. & V.I. Chistyakov (Нагалевский, Ю.Я. & В.И. Чистяков) 2003. *Физическая География Краснодарского Края, Краснодар* (Physical Geography of Krasnodarskii Krai, Krasnodar).
- Nefliasheva, N. & A. Malashenko (Нефляшева, Н. & А. Малащенко) 2011. *Черкесский вопрос и Олимпиада в Сочи* (The Circassian Question and the Olympics of Sochi). Available at: <http://carnegie.ru/events/?fa=3244> (accessed 03/03/2011)
- Noack, Ch. 2006. Coping with the Tourist. Planned and "Wild" mass tourism on the Soviet Black Sea Coast. In: Gorsuch, A.E. & D.P. Koenker (eds.), *Tourism. The Russian and East European Tourist under Capitalism and Socialism, Ithaca and London*: 281–304.
- O'Loughlin J., V. Kolossov & J. Radvanyj 2007. The Caucasus in a Time of Conflict, Demographic Transition, and Economic Change. *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 48 (2): 135–156.
- Preuss, H. 2011. *Kosten und Nutzen Olympischer Winterspiele in Deutschland. Eine Analyse von München 2018*. Wiesbaden.
- Radvanyi, J. & N. Beroutchachvili 2009. *Atlas géopolitique du Caucase*. Paris.
- Salpagarova, D.S. (Салпагарова, Д.С.) (ed.) 2000. *Заповедники и национальные парки северного Кавказа, Ставрополь* (Protected areas and national parks of the Northern Caucasus, Stavropol).
- Scharr, K. & E. Steinicke 2010. Trouble in Paradise. Olympische Winterspiele in Soči 2014. *Osteuropa* 60 (8): 47–60.
- Scharr, K., E. Steinicke & A. Borsdorf 2011. Sochi 2014: Olympic Winter Games between High Mountains and Seaside. *Revue de Géographie Alpine* 99 (accepted and in print).
- Schmidt, P., K. Erdmann & H. Schmauder 2006. Naturschutz im Kaukasus. Sicherung der biologischen Vielfalt durch Schutzgebiete. *Geographische Rundschau* 58 (3): 44–49.
- Stadelbauer, J. 2001. Krisenregion Kaukasien. Ethnographische Differenzierung, politische Konfliktpotentiale und wirtschaftliche Entwicklungschancen. In: G. Meyer & A. Thimm, A. (eds.), *Ethnische Konflikte in der Dritten Welt. Ursachen und Konsequenzen* (=Interdisziplinärer Arbeitskreis Dritte Welt) 14: 99–130.
- Stetham, C. & R. McCarthy 2008. Avalanche Protection for Rosa Khutor. International Snow Science Workshop Whistler. Available at: [www.issw2008.com/papers/P\\_\\_8009.pdf](http://www.issw2008.com/papers/P__8009.pdf) (accessed 01/09/2011)

## Authors

### Kurt Scharr

studied geography and history (with optional Russian Studies) at the University of Innsbruck. His research focuses on the geographical areas of the Eastern Alps, the Carpathians, Romania, Ukraine and European Russia. Key themes are issues of historical geography, settlement geography, transformation research, the concept of the nation state in the 19<sup>th</sup> C. (esp. within the Hapsburg monarchy).

### Ernst Steinicke

degrees from Innsbruck and Toulouse universities. PhD thesis on "La Valcanale (Italien). Sozialgeographie einer alpinen Minderheitenregion." Habilitation (venia legendi) on population and ethnicity in Friuli. Key research themes: ethno-geographic minority research, counter-urbanization/amenity migration, regional geography of the European region Tyrol-Alpine Space, mega sports events/regional development. Key geographic research areas: California, Uganda, Kenya, Alps-Northern Italy, France, Western Caucasus.