

# Tourism: Chasing illusions made in USSR

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"Dreams of citizens came true!", 1950, illustration: Labrov A.

After WW2, tourism in the Soviet Union underwent phenomenal growth, and given the restrictions on foreign travel, this tourism was by definition domestic. Unlike the western understanding of tourism having as a form of "leisure activity", domestic tourism in USSR was a response to the perceived need to produce, after the war, "physically and ideologically healthy" Soviet citizens. In the early 1950s, travelers earned badges of "USSR Tourist" for traveling to Gori, Baku, and Tbilisi in a touristic reenactment of Stalin's childhood and early revolutionary life. Other badges were also created, and the perception, among citizens, of Soviet tourism as a kind of sport, an agonistic activity, was not uncommon.

## 1. "The tourism movement must become a mass movement."

Once pronounced by Joseph Stalin, during the Soviet era this objective can be said to have been truly achieved. Considering the extent of the infrastructure created and the volume of transportation achieved, one could even go so far as to say that it was the USSR's most impressive accomplishment.

With the parallel objectives of shaping an image of an opulent motherland within its citizens and physically connect the country, vast investments were made in transportation

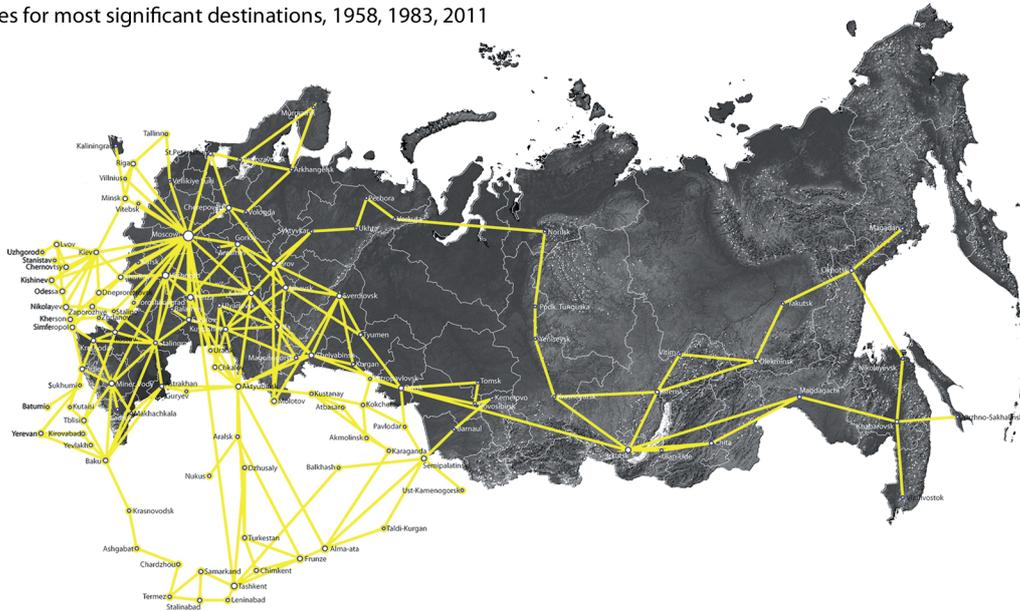
infrastructure. The ambition of this program was clearly demonstrated both by the number of flight passengers carried annually within the country and the growth in the number of airports between 1950 and 1987: passengers increased almost eightyfold, and the volume of passenger-kilometers grew by a factor of more than 170 in the same period. In the same time Soviet aircraft carried 119 million passengers, of which 115 million on domestic flights. Moreover, by 1987 regular air services were available to more than 3,600 cities and towns. At that time the thirty largest Soviet cities were directly connected with all cities with a population of 500,000 or more.

These remarkable statistics were not achieved solely through the technical development of transportation. Direct financial support to individuals was a key factor behind the movement: the average price for a domestic flight in 1970's was 25 rubles (5 rubles being the price of a bottle of vodka). In addition to the cheap transportation prices, special budgets were given to ministries to support vacations for every worker.

**2. Sochi** Among all the touristic cities, Sochi was one of the greatest attractions for tourists. The unique environment—from the moist subtropic to eternal snow and glaciers—and the

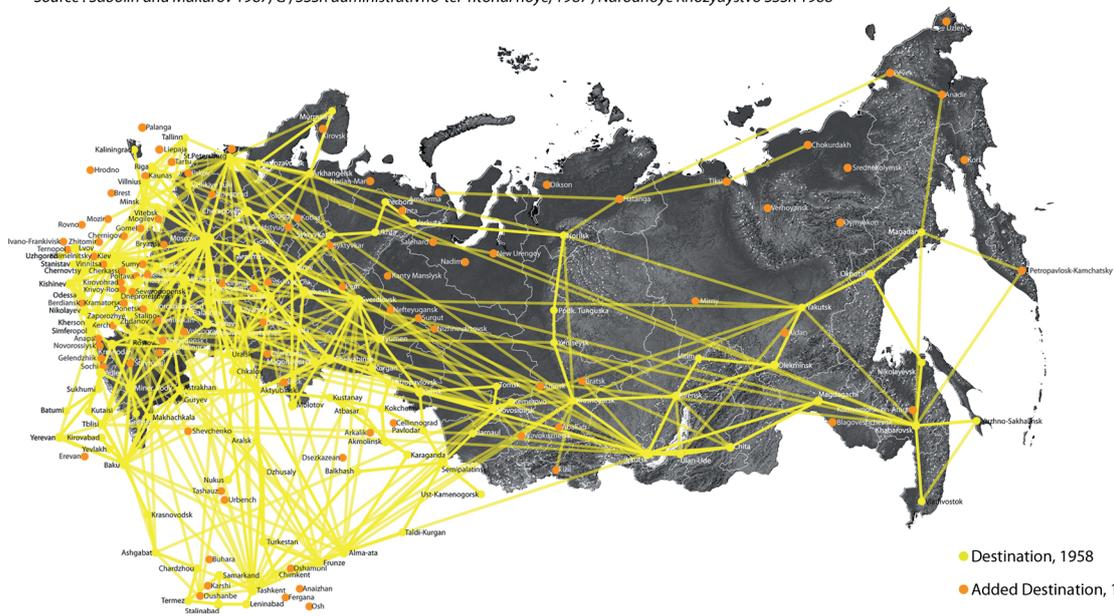
# System Map of Aeroflot, USSR

Direct airline routes for most significant destinations, 1958, 1983, 2011



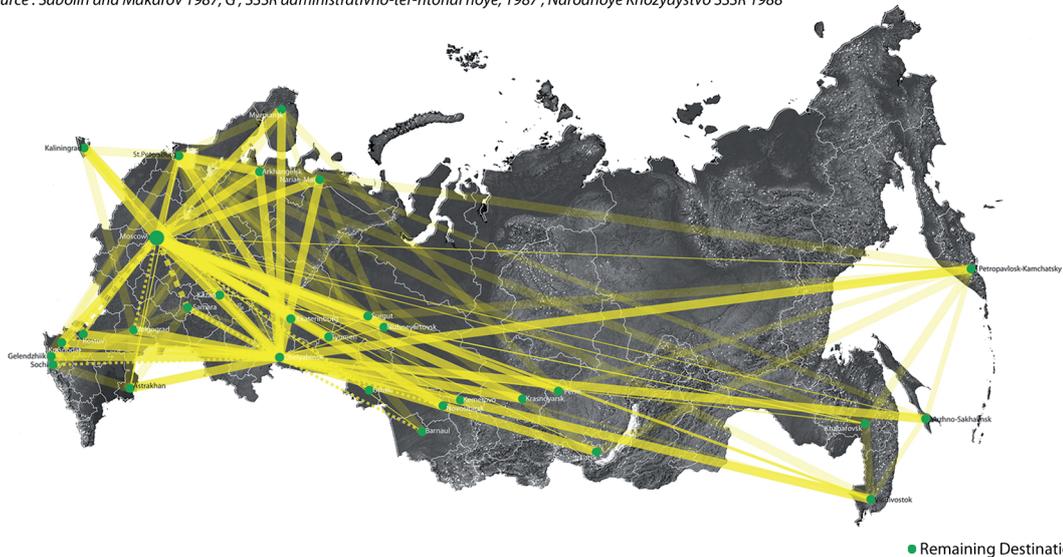
By 1968 regular air services were available to more than 3,500 cities and towns.

Source: Sabolin and Makarov 1987, G; SSSR administrativno-ter-ritorial'noye, 1987; Narodnoye Khozyaystvo SSSR 1988



It again expands to 3,600 out of total 6,167 cities and urban settlements in 1987.

Source: Sabolin and Makarov 1987, G; SSSR administrativno-ter-ritorial'noye, 1987; Narodnoye Khozyaystvo SSSR 1988



Only 30 domestic destinations are available in Aeroflot.

Although most of the remaining regional airports, except the ones above, are used by smaller airlines divided from Aeroflot. However, the flight frequency rate of Aeroflot far outweighs the rest and the influence to users are still dominant.

rich infrastructure including sanatoriums hotels and theatres etc, were the main reasons for its fame. After Vladimir Lenin signed a decree transferring ownership of all resorts and spas to the state in 1919, there were three main development plans implemented in Sochi. The city's main axis, Stalina Prospekt, was the first creation in 1934, development of the sea front and renewal of the city's health treatment and resort facilities was the second in 1948, and dividing the city into three resort and conservation zones with the idea to make Sochi a all-year-round tourist city (only part of the plan was actually built) was the third, in 1967. Throughout these years, Sochi witnessed a astonishing increase in number of tourists—from 110 thousand people in 1940s to 4 million in 1980s.

dramatic change was the idea of property rights. Again Sochi, as a former tourist city, provides a clear case study.

**4. 1990s** During 1990s, due to the lack of legislation and the anxiety of people, massive land grabbing, not only by Moscow oligarchs but also by local dwellers, took place in Sochi. Large and small instances of informal, illegal construction occurred. 'Finders keepers' is an easy way to describe the situation: even the former state owned properties (for example sanatoriums and hotels) were privatized, but nobody knows how and when this happened. The city centre was unexpectedly overtaken by skyscrapers, and overwhelming numbers of small dwellings squeezed in the narrow strip along the sea shore between the



Abandoned resort in Sochi, Krasnaya Polyana. Photo: Alina Schmuck

**3. Collapse** Nevertheless, after the dissolution of the USSR and the sudden veer towards the market economy, the artificial life support of the tourist industry abruptly vanished. Since the industry was 100% dependent on centralised government support, the whole sector was vaporized within a second. There were no more visitors in touristic cities, airports stopped operating, and tourist facilities - resorts, hotels, etc - were abandoned.

A decade later, Stalin's dacha in Sochi has been turned into a luxury hotel, and tourists can sleep in his bedroom. Russia was the first country to adopt 'shock therapy' to shake off the economic lethargy of the communist era and transit to the capitalist system. The quick transformation, however, created a situation of monopoly. Unlike with the rapid transformation of the main economic sectors, there was a gap of time until it affected the tourism industry. The most powerful cause of this

former plans of Sochi. The rest of the territory(70%) is now unpopulated. Furthermore inside this intervals black market trading boomed and bartering proliferated.

"The search for regional diversity in the landscape has remained an important motive for travellers." (Mitchell, Murphy 1991)

Sochi, which since the very beginning was a proving ground for this theory, remained the only city in former Soviet territories which still had tourists, although the numbers dropped more than 70% from their former heights. Tourism, in fact, was the solely remaining economic activity.

The combination of the intensive privatization and the economic dependency on tourism made Sochi into a mono-city. Government initiatives in 2005 even fostered this tendency by including Sochi as one of the seven regions of "Tourist and



Stalinist sanatorium covered by a skyscraper. Photo: Franca Scholz

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Skyscraper's on sale. Source: Magazine 'Real Estate'

Even though the statistics are showing a slight growth in number of tourists (nearly 1 million in 2008), it is not enough to keep up with the fast re-shaping of the city. Personal housing, in many instances, was rapidly transformed into informal hotel accommodation, and even more hotels and recreational facilities were built after the announcement. Now, 90% of skyscrapers and hotels are empty. The only international sea port in Sochi has become a vast shopping mall, and the factories have been closed or moved to other regions. Ironically, the city is at the same time burgeoning and emanating a stronger sensation of emptiness than ever before.

itself is too fragile to be the sole backbone of an economy. Since tourism is included in the post-industrial sector, it becomes the first target to be attacked whenever the economy loses its balance. That being said, it is possible to say that whether tourism is under planned or market economy, the risk will be the same. Nevertheless a question could be raised: is this the only way for the tourism industry to thrive?

**6. Olympstroy** In the current age of Sochi, a special organization for 2014 Olympic named Olympstroy is making a vast change of landscape under the slogan of "Re-invent Sochi". With a budget



3D image of 'Federation Island', Source: [www.federationisland.com](http://www.federationisland.com)

**5. Federation Island** "Federation Island", a proposed 350 hectare artificial island in the shape of Russian Federation, was the jewel in the crown of the new 2007 masterplan. It was conceived to include private residences and hotels as well as cultural and recreational facilities for more than 25,000 people. Now completely canceled due to financial problems after the crisis in 2008, it clearly drew on previous schemes such as 'The World' and the 'Palm Island'. The mere fact that the project was proposed is more than enough to demonstrate the government's ambition towards the 'Dubaiization' of the city.

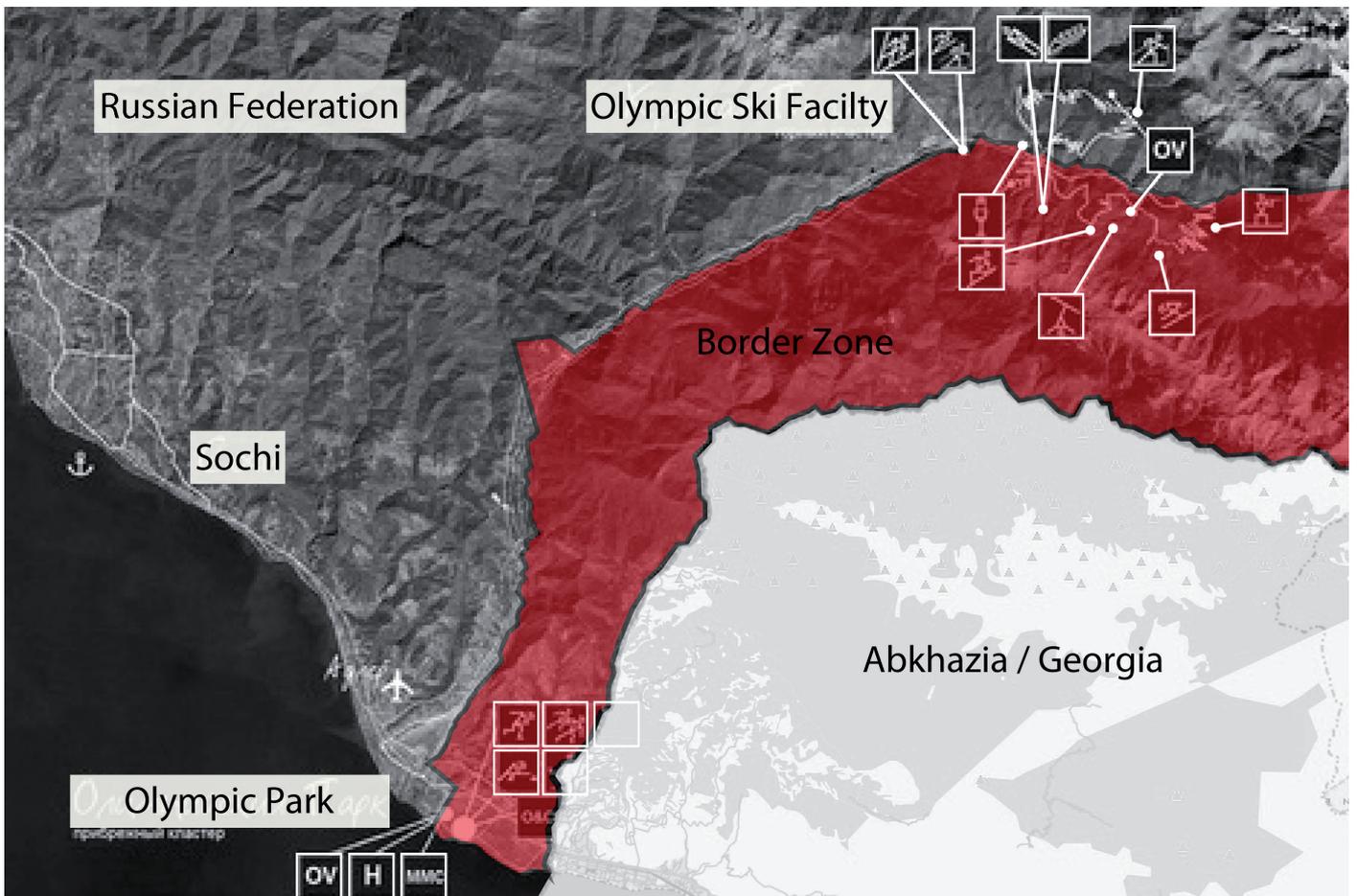
Dubai, as a tourism destination, was a protagonist in the creation of exclusive tourism and hospitality products inspired by the 'massclusivity' model, predicated on the idea of high-income groups consuming luxury products en masse. This very strength, however, was soon exposed as a weakness when its clientele's discretionary incomes were impacted by the current recession. Dubai's effort in constructing an image of 'Symbolic Capital', in which Andre Agassi and Roger Federer play tennis on top of Burj Al Arab's helicopter pad, turned out to be extremely vulnerable. From 2008, Dubai's ambitious urbanistic and geoengineering plans have been shattered by the global economic downturn. Dubai proves that the tourism industry

of 30 billion dollars, Olympstroy is building 270 settlements including stadiums, resorts and hotels. The size of the budget is already 20 times more than the Vancouver Olympics, and altogether amounts to one tenth of the Russian Federation's GDP. More than 80% of this virtually limitless Olympic budget is being used for constructing a new transportation network: the new plan includes expanding the former north and south road connection with an east-west connection along side the borderline, a high speed railway, and a new international sea port.

Throughout the history of Russia, Sochi was used as a proving ground to test the idea of tourism of the country. During the 1980s, lavish support from the government produced a rich image of Sochi, making it one of the only three cities (with Moscow and St.Petersburg) which was opened to foreign visitors. After the dissolution of the USSR, the city experienced chaotic privatisations. Moreover, from 2007, as a consequence of the reformulated ambitions of the government, a whole new city is being built on top of the remains of the USSR, craving global attention.



Olympic main stadium plan, Imeretinskaya Lowland. Source: Olympstroy



Olympic objects constructing in the border-zone. Source: Kommersant news

**7. Weaponising the Olympics** “To use special environmental conditions in Sochi, having the moist subtropic to eternal snow and glaciers, the main idea is to plan two separate zones. In a total of 11 competition venues, it will be split between a pair of venue clusters – one coastal, one mountain – set, 48 km from one cluster.”

Throughout the history of the Olympics, Russia is the first to hold the event on the border with another country—one which in this instance is characterised by remarkably unstable political conditions. The choice of Imeretinskaya Lowland was expensive, in that it forced the authorities to spend several millions of dollars just to cover the mud to actualte the fundamental conditions to build. What is the intention behind this decision?

Sometimes, to quote Vladimir Putin’s words, the part of “people from around the world gather on our territory” delivers a different meaning aside of peace and unification. Just as the Chinese communist party utilised the Olympics to consolidate its legitimacy and to showcase Beijing’s modernity, now the essence of the Olympics is using it as a geo-political tool and a demonstration towards the global audience. It is difficult not to perceive in the choice of this particular Olympic site a declaration of Abkhazia’s independence. Or even, some suggest, as a subtle attempt to reframe Abkhazia as a 84th region of Russia.

**8. Borderzone** As a matter of fact, a process of colonization has already been started. Since the war, local phone exchanges have been replaced by Russian ones, so that to call to Abkhazia



Main ski resort area in Krasnaya Polyana. Photo: Franca Scholz

After Russia and Georgia’s brief war in 2008, Moscow recognized Abkhazia’s declarations of independence. Since then, Abkhazia has, with the Kremlin’s support, lobbied for others’ recognition but have, for the most part, failed. The territories are internationally isolated and increasingly dependent on Russia for security. The shape of the former well known touristic place has been changed to the figure of emptiness. With so few people, Abkhazia lacks the human capital to build a viable government, or to defend itself. Abkhazia lies a mere 5km from the Olympic stadium. Is this just a coincidence?

“We will use this money not to buy guns, not to buy ammunition, not to buy combat aviation, not to buy tanks. We will use this money with one purpose, so the people from around the planet could gather here, in Sochi, on our territory, and extend hands to each other.” – Vladimir Putin, during meeting with the members of IOC evaluation commission.

requires the Russian country code. The ruble remains the common currency. Furthermore, in less than two years Abkhazia and Russia have signed more than 30 agreements on cooperation in various spheres, and vast majority give Russia the license to impose its standards, transfer its human capital or, in some form, absorb some sliver of the Abkhaz state or an entire agency or enterprise under the cover of an international accord. This is just a part and there are more.

By making Sochi into the setting for the Olympics, the meaning of the word ‘gathering’ is deformed to become a powerful geo-political tool of international reach, reinforced by its inclusion within a “special border zone”. This border-zone is defined as a special zone governed by FSB (Federal Security Service) located inside – but with no limitations in width - near the border-line of the country. Entry to the border-zone can be made only with the individual or the group permissions granted by the border administration of FSB of Russia, with the identity documents.



Hotel Magnolia. Photo: Alina Schmuch

By placing almost all the Olympic facilities inside the border-zone, the Russian state gained 100% control of the construction. Using their authority in the lands, numerous legal challenges were sidestepped. The total area of the border-zone around Russian Federation is approximately 550,000 km<sup>2</sup>, thus giving Russia a powerful diplomatic weapon 5 times the overall size of Great Britain.

**9. Void** Despite all the doubts and conflicts related to the new development, however, if the vision of a touristic city will remain the same as if it was in USSR it will itself be taken in by the illusion it created. The image of tourism in the USSR was an artifact made by the closed border and control of people, but this scenario in the present conditions is all but impossible. A more diversified structure of economy is needed in order to remain sustainable and to reduce the dependency on tourism. At the same time, a concrete legislation—to manage the uniqueness of environment and historical circumstances of Sochi—is needed. Russia should stop chasing the illusions and face the new reality.

In the centre of Sochi there is a hotel called Magnolia. It was built during 1970's and after the perestroika, like every other hotel, it was abandoned. From 1992, Turkish merchants started trading leather inside the empty building. The scale of the market grew due to cheap prices and good quality—they even export the goods to Germany—and it became the biggest leather market in Russia. In 2006, the building started to function as a hotel again. Nevertheless, unlike many other temporary black markets, the leather market still remains by sharing half of the former hotel's area. This case maybe the only part of the economy of Sochi which is sustainable by itself and not relying on tourism. Furthermore, it can be shown as a positive example of reusing the void.

Throughout this year of research, the link between tourism from the past and the present of Russia, observed through the

case-study of Sochi, became evident. Sochi, with its population of 400 thousand, is now building for more than 2 million. The investment is soaring and emptiness is following. It is impossible to predict the future of a city, yet the upcoming five years of Sochi will be the most important in terms of redefining 'tourism' in contemporary Russia.

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