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COMMENTARY

Environmental Activism in Russia

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Over the last few years, there has been a noticeable increase in environmental activism in Russia. From protests against landfills and trash incineration plants to local movements against the development of sacred natural monuments, Russian citizens across the country are mobilizing to protect their backyards. But underlying the recent examples that dot the headlines is a long history of environmental activism in post-Soviet Russia.

In the 1990s, while most Russians were struggling with the political and economic turmoil around them, environmental activists were beginning to formalize as non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Many of these first environmental NGOs were founded by people who had been active participants in the late-Soviet environmental movement or who had worked in the Soviet environmental bureaucracy. These early groups were largely financed by grants from international donors who were funding Russia's fledgling civil society with a view to supporting the larger goal of democratization.

During this period, formal environmental organizations were founded not only in major cities like Moscow and St. Petersburg, but also across Russia's regions. Strong regional environmental NGOs began to appear in cities like Irkutsk, Nizhny Novgorod, Novosibirsk, Murmansk, and Arkhangelsk. These organizations work in diverse areas ranging from environmental law and justice to recycling and trash clean-up to wildlife conservation. Some of them have also engaged directly in mass mobilization campaigns, including high-profile cases like Baikal Environmental Wave's involvement in a 2006 campaign against the Eastern Siberia-Pacific Ocean (ESPO) oil pipeline or a 2010 campaign against the Baikalsk Pulp and Paper Mill (BPPM).

Over the last few years, however, Russian environmental NGOs have felt the atmosphere for their work change considerably. The 2012 law on "foreign agents," which stigmatizes and penalizes domestic NGOs that receive foreign funding and engage in vaguely-defined "political activity," cast a chill over the third sector in Russia. Furthermore, according to data that I have collected from the Russian Ministry of Justice, environmental NGOs have been the second most targeted group under the "foreign agent" law after rights organizations. While not all ENGOs have been labeled "foreign agents," many of Russia's strongest regional environmental organizations have encountered consequences from the law,

including fines for violating the law, reduced international funding, and increased administrative burden.

As a result of the "foreign agent" law, some domestic ENGOs are now pivoting away from foreign funding and toward domestic sources. Some environmental organizations—often those that are deemed comparatively less "political"—have enjoyed increasing access to government grants and other opportunities for civil society development. In contrast to Baikal Environmental Wave, which was labeled a "foreign agent," another environmental NGO in the same city, Great Baikal Trail, has won several presidential grants for its work building a system of trails for eco-tourism around Lake Baikal and beyond.

Still, the "foreign agent" law and decreased reliance on foreign funding has significantly reduced incentives for environmental organizations to formalize as NGOs. In fact, many environmental groups originally registered with the Russian Ministry of Justice as formal legal entities in order to receive foreign grants. Now that the "foreign agent" law has made foreign funding a potential liability, many groups are de-registering and remaining informal.

Other grassroots environmental activists have internalized similar lessons, citing policies like the "foreign agent" law as reasons not to formally register as NGOs. The grassroots environmental movements that have proliferated across Russia are in many cases explicitly remaining informal to reduce the number of institutional or legal mechanisms that the state can use to shut down their activities. Furthermore, some of these activists have started to run in local elections as candidates affiliated with opposition parties like Yabloko or PARNAS. Yet environmental activists often run not to win, but to attract attention to their cause and to use the legal protections accorded to election campaigning in order to hold rallies. Although running in local elections could be a win-win for political parties and environmentalists, the decision can distract from the environmental campaign's main goals and create divisions between supporters, some of whom may think the movement should remain squarely apolitical.

These two trends—the proliferation of informal environmental movements and environmentalists' participation in formal party politics—have also raised the stakes for state actors, compelling them to respond. Instead of ignoring environmental claims, many local or regional

officials have acquiesced to protestors' demands. Plans to send Moscow's trash to a landfill in Shiyes, in the northern region of Arkhangelsk, were recently cancelled after sustained public opposition that culminated in one of the movement's leaders attempting to run for regional governor. In September, activists in Bashkortostan were able to stop a potential mining project at sacred Kushtau Hill and secure its status as a specially protected natural area. There, too, local environmental activists had tried to run as candidates in local elections.

Of course, the authorities could renege on their promises—as we saw in the case of the highway through Khimki Forest in 2010—but environmentalists still see that their efforts can make a difference, which emboldens first-time activists. Some environmental activists in local NIMBY movements have been transformed by that experience into full-time activists. Even though the Khimki Forest defenders ultimately lost, many of the core activists have remained involved in local politics and have started to “coach” other grassroots environmental movements around Moscow.

Environmental activists' potential to bring about change is not lost on the regime. The use of the “foreign agents” law to crack down on “troublesome” environmental NGOs is but one example. In 2019, the Federation Council's internal affairs report specifically named “pseudo-environmental” groups as a threat to national security. And considering the mass mobilizational potential of the late-Soviet anti-nuclear movement, perhaps the authorities have reason to be concerned.

Environmental issues often go hand-in-hand with issues of corruption in Russia. It is not uncommon for Russian environmental activists to uncover local, regional, or even national corruption in the environmentally-unfriendly projects or illegal construction plans that they oppose. In the late 1980s, the post-Chernobyl environmental movement provided opportunities for nationalist mass mobilization that hastened the Soviet collapse. It is possible that some environmental movements could provide a similar boost to anti-corruption or anti-systemic mobilization in modern-day Russia.

About the Author

Elizabeth Plantan is an assistant professor at Stetson University. Her current book project compares environmental activism in China and Russia. Recently, her work comparing NGO laws in China and Russia appeared as a chapter in *Citizens & the State in Authoritarian Regimes*, an edited volume published by Oxford University Press in 2020. She is currently working on a new project on environmental activism and party politics in Russia.

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