

[Abstract]

[By Ayushi Saini]

Environmental Non-Governmental Organizations and Activism in Russia: Evolution and Challenges

Report's Annotation

Rapid transition to capitalism after the Soviet Union collapsed in Russia during the 1990s has created political space for civil society and Non-Governmental Organizations. One of the major catalysts for the late Soviet environmental movement, was the Chernobyl Accident, giving rise to the mass mobilization around environmental politics. It was subsided by the Glasnost, which gave people freedom of expression. Environmental NGOs and private forest companies are non-state actors that entered the environmental policy arena in the 1990s after the Soviet Union collapsed (Ulybina, 2014). After the collapse, these organizations were scrambling to get state support to continue their activities. Due to the lack of substantial state interference, the period was described as “benign neglect” (Henderson, 2011), where the state was neither supporting nor constraining environmental activism. As a result, environmental activists started lean on foreign funding (Henderson,2022; Sundstrom, 2006). It resulted into a shift from their community-based organizing to the professional donor-driven priorities. Amendments in 2006 to the NGO law affected fledging ENGOS. 2010 was a turning point in the history of environmental activism which is related to Khimki Forest Movement.

Environmental NGOs operating with sustainable forest management issues are international and domestic professional organizations (Newell and Henry, 2017). Russian ENGOS have developed close ties with the West, are led by people with international backgrounds, and are heavily dependent on Western funding, while facing censorship and constraints from the local government. The issue of foreign funding in Russia has created highly politically charged debates and resulted in the promulgation of the Foreign Agents' Law against NGOs in 2012. As of December 2020, 30 environmental have been designated as ‘foreign agents’. Law obliged that organizations receiving heavy foreign aid are to be registered as ‘foreign agents’ which led to either ban or shutting down of many NGOs and INGOs (e.g., Green World), and compromised public trust in the non-governmental sector. It affected the Environmental activism in certain ways. After 2010, state neglect has pushed activists to remain informal and rely on mass mobilization, which created new opportunities for environmental activism to intersect with formal party politics. Environmental awareness in Russia has increased (source: Institute of the Environment at the Higher School of Economics).

The environmental movement has been identified by a number of authors as the most promising of Russia's social movements for the promotion of civil society development. I attempt to look at how environmental activism interacts with formal party politics in Russia. Engagement with political parties come with certain drawbacks, like- decreased local legitimacy, distraction from original movement goals and creating divisions within the

movement about the extent of proximity to political parties. Therefore, environmental activists face a challenge of balancing between staying true to their goals and political engagement.

Bibliography:

1. Arts, B. 2002. 'Green alliances' of business and NGOs: New styles of self-regulation or 'dead-end roads?,' *Corporate Social Responsibility and Environmental Management*, 9: 26–36.

(This paper gives a theoretical approach to study strength and weakness of green alliances. At the same time, it gives an historical account of development of Environmental NGOs in general.)

2. Newell, J.P., and L.A. Henry. 2017. The state of environmental protection in the Russian Federation: A review of the post-Soviet era. *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, 57: 779–801.

(It talks about the gulf that exists between Russia's formal environmental laws and state agency capacity and interest in enforcing them. The paper illustrates that how corruption, poor enforcement, and the muzzling of civil society render the state incapable of resolving arguably its most significant environmental challenge: illegal and unregulated resource use.)

3. Ulybina, O. 2014. Interaction, cooperation, and governance in the Russian forest sector. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 34: 246–253.

(Olga Ulybina illustrates that Business and NGOs are keen to cooperate, in order to compensate for the state's inability to effectively address environmental and socio-economic forestry problems and meet the requirements of international markets. However, the governance and transformative capacity of non-state actors is severely limited by the lack of consistent multistakeholder dialogue, and the future of business-NGO joint projects remains dependent on the state.)

4. Plantan, Elizabeth. [Davis Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies]. (2021, April 29). *The Evolution of Environmental Activism in Russia* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZEgWMzL6lhQ&list=LL&index=11>

(Tries to explain how the environmental activism in Russia evolved over the last decade, how has the state reacted to the growing environmental movement, and how does environmental activism intersect with formal party politics in Russia.)

5. Oldfield, J., 2011. *Review: Russia's Contemporary Environmental Movement*.
Reviewed Work(s): *Red to Green: Environmental Activism in Post-Soviet Russia* by
Laura A. Henry.

(Laura Henry's book *Red to Green Environmental Activism in Post-Soviet Russia*, explores the evolution of Russia's environmental movement post-1991. It is grounded on extensive interviews and associated fieldwork activity in various regions of Russia. It explores the nature and character of environmental movements and related democratic trends since the disintegration of Soviet Union.)