

## Analysis

# The Environment and Politics in Russia

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### Abstract

Russia faces serious ecological challenges, which are having adverse effects on both the natural environment and the health of the population, demonstrated by its lower than average life expectancy for a developed country. The problems are exacerbated by the state authorities' policy of "de-environmentalism" or "de-ecologization", whereby environmental costs are deemed acceptable in the quest for economic gains. A significant change in mindset towards the environment is required in both the power-structure and wider society in order to arrest the trend of environmental neglect in Russia.

### The Consequences of Environmental Neglect

Every year in Russia, approximately 35,000 people die as a result of car accidents, 40,000 from alcohol poisoning and 490,000 from environmental-related diseases (data taken from WTO in 2004). Furthermore, experts claim that about half of Russia's 180,000 miscarriages per annum are due to environmental causes.

Russia is the only developed country where life expectancy has declined over the past 20 years. The life expectancy for men in 1986 was 64.0 and by 2006 life expectancy had declined to 59.3. It is significant that the average life expectancy is 3–5 years shorter in the most environmentally-unfavorable areas of the Russian Federation (approximately 14% of the territory, on which 40% (60 million people) of the country's population live) compared with less polluted areas.

Contrary to the assumption that increased economic development has a positive impact on the health of a country's population, life expectancy in Russia declined between 1998 and 2004, a period which saw substantial economic growth. This trend illustrates the huge impact that ecological contamination has on life expectancy.

### Air Quality

According to official figures approximately 60 million Russians live in areas of "high" or "very high" levels of air pollution. Industrial emissions have significantly increased since 2000. Traffic pollution accounts for around 50% of the increase in levels of anthropogenic emissions. In major cities and some regions, traffic accounts for 80–90% of air pollution.

One in every two Russians is negatively affected by the high concentrations of solid particulate matter (dust) in the air, with more than 2.4 million people exposed to concentrations of over 300µg/m<sup>3</sup>. By comparison, in the US, which has a population twice that of Russia and a significantly larger industrial-complex,

only about 2 million people are exposed to equivalent levels. In 49 of the Russian Federation's 83 administrative units, more than half of the urban population lives in areas with "high" or "very high" levels of air pollution. However, the official data on air pollution does not provide a comprehensive picture, because air quality is not monitored in large areas, in which around 40% of Russia's urban populations live.

### Water Quality

The use of environmentally unfriendly technology in industry and agriculture, the dumping of inadequately treated industrial, agricultural and municipal waste and the uncontrolled flow of such polluted waters has led to widespread water pollution. As a result, in many regions of Russia surface water is polluted to levels many tens of times above the permissible level, and thus it is not rare to find areas affected by "high" or "extremely high" pollution. Of all water-waste that enters Russia's reservoirs, 36.1% is contaminated, 7.4% of which remains entirely untreated. Water quality in the majority of Russia's water-bodies does not meet normal regulatory requirements. Only 12–14% of Russia's lakes and rivers are ecologically clean (see Figure 1 on p. 5). The quality of groundwater in Russia is also deteriorating, with some 30% already polluted. According to some views, inland and marginal seas contain pollutants 3–5 times over the permissible levels. As a consequence, every other Russian drinks water that does not meet hygienic standards. Almost 30% of Russia's surface water, which is used as drinking water, does not meet quality standards. In a number of administrative units of the Russian Federation, this percentage is even higher (see Table 1 on p. 5).

### Contamination of Land and Soil

The dumping of waste and contamination of soil and vegetation is a universal phenomenon in Russia. The

majority of Russia's industrial and agricultural land was initially environmentally damaged between 1950 and 1970. Since then, the process of environmental degradation has further accelerated. The decline in the fertility of land has accelerated as a result of soil erosion, disruption in land-use, reduction in the amount of natural/organic fertilizers and increasing chemical and radioactive contamination. At the present time, approximately 40% of the country's agricultural land is subject to wind erosion and 18% to water erosion.

Federal monitoring of land quality is carried out in only a small part of the Russian Federation. Yet, even this limited data shows that contamination of land is occurring in some areas on a massive-scale. On average, 11% of Russia's residential areas are contaminated by dangerous metals. In some administrative units, such contaminated land comprises half of the inhabited areas (see Figure 2 on p. 6).

This amount of sanitarily and hygienically (microbiological, parasites) contaminated land is unacceptable for a developed country. The level of contamination is a consequence of the state authorities' neglect of the need for sanitary removal of industrial and commercial waste from inhabited areas (including the appearance of illegal dumps), the absence of centralized sewage systems in some areas and the poor conditions of sewage systems in others.

In all territories that produce oil, the extraction, refining and transportation process has led to significant contamination of soil by petroleum products. According to expert estimates, 1.5% of Russia's soil is contaminated by oil products, and about 0.3% is contaminated by heavy metals.

The bottom of the Volga reservoirs and other such reservoirs have accumulated tens of millions of salts from heavy metals and other dangerous chemicals, which have turned these bodies of water into disorganized and uncontrolled depositories of toxic waste.

A major ecological problem remains the storage and reuse of solid industrial and home waste, the amount of which is growing. Presently, there exists hundreds of thousands of unsanctioned dumping sites, which have a negative impact both on air quality and the quality of groundwater.

### **Radiation and Chemical Contamination**

Many areas in the Altai *Krai*, Altai Republic, the *oblasts* Chelyabinsk, Novosibirsk, Tomsk, Orenburg, Sverdlovsk and Irkutsk, and the *Autonomous Okrug*s of Yamalo-Nenets and Khanty-Mansiysk remain (and will be for the long term) contaminated by radioactive fall-

out from the production and testing of nuclear weapons. The real time-bombs are 85 underground nuclear explosions carried out "in the interest of the national economy" in Sakha (Yakutia) Republic, Astrakhan, Perm, Orenburg, Arkhangelsk *oblasts* and some other areas of Russia between 1964–1988. The nuclear accident at Chernobyl in 1986 has created dangerous levels of radioactively contamination in Bryansk, Tula, Kaluga and Orel *oblasts*. Dozens of radioisotope thermoelectric generators, which were used in the 1990's at meteorological stations and lighthouses, have been abandoned or lost and are now the source of dangerous radioactive contamination along the coasts of the Baltic, Barents, Arctic and Far Eastern seas. In addition, in medical procedures, too high a level of radiation is used.

### **Public Health and the Environment**

The poor condition of the atmosphere, water and soil in Russia impacts on public health. Environmental pollution, past and present, is an important factor in the high mortality rate in Russia. It would not be an exaggeration to say that illnesses related to poor environmental conditions touch the majority of the Russian population. Half the number of people dying from environmental causes is preventable. As a result, 2.5–3 million lives could have been saved between 1995 and 2009 had it not been for dire environmental conditions.

### **Policy of "De-environmentalism"**

Russia's environmental problems are the result of the state policy of "de-environmentalism". The logic of "de-environmentalism", which is often seen in official documents, is that Russia will start dealing with environmental problems once it is rich, and that economic growth requires the use of all of Russia's available natural resources, which necessitates lower standards of environmental practice (laws, norms, practices, ecological controls and monitoring). The outcome of this approach, which was established under Yeltsin and developed under Putin and Medvedev, has been to turn Russia into a reservoir of natural resources for other countries, and the place where outdated technologies can be used. The "de-environmentalism" policy has developed through the following stages:

- The dissolution of The Environmental Protection Agency in 2000
- A weakening of environmental protection legislation (since 1998), including in the Forestry sector (2004–2006), in Water (2006) and Urban Planning (2006)
- A weakening of state environmental controls (since 2000)

- A reduction in the sphere of activity of official environmental-impact assessments (2004)
- A slowing down in the creation of environmentally-protected territories (2000–2008)
- The pursuit of environmental activists and the obstruction of environmental NGOs (since 1997)
- The destruction of the system of environmental education (since 2000)
- A reduction of funding for environmental programs (since 1995).

In 2001, federal expenditure on environmental protection amounted to 0.4% of the total federal budget. In 2008 and 2009, it amounted to less than 0.1% of the total budget. Taking into account the significant increase in the state budget during this period, this reduction seems even more dismissive.

A major source of the increase in Russian income is from energy exports. The Russian Federation's resource-economy is linked with the development of consumer-driven ethics. Figure 3 on p. 7 illustrates the increase in Russian income from energy exports. Greed and the pursuit of money have intoxicated both elites and society, with petro-dollars corrupting the Russian power-structure. As a result, the overarching principle of Russian society, in the last decade and a half, is to get rich at any price.

The huge profits from the resource-economy in combination with an autocratic regime have led to a split in

Russian society. This is demonstrated by the disproportionate gap between the average salary and the number of billionaires in Russia, which is significantly greater than the gap found in other European societies.

Against the background of this split society, environmental issues play a significant role for the health of some in Russia, but not for others. Some are able to drink clean water, consume environmentally clean products and use the health of others, who live and work in environmentally dirty conditions. As a result, the life expectancy of the former is 80, and the latter is 60.

### Conclusion

The resolution of Russia's environmental problems is connected with the need to renew the electoral process, restore the independence of courts and to reestablish weakened environmental legislation. It is necessary to restore federal agencies for the protection of the environment, reestablish environmental safe-guards, sharply increase state environmental controls and monitoring and strengthen nature-conservation prosecutors. In addition, it is necessary to dramatically increase expenditure on protecting the environment, dispense information about the state of the environment, highlight the connection between pollution and health and develop environmental education, instruction and scientific research.

#### *About the Author*

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#### *Recommended Reading*

- Zubarevich, N.V., "Sotsialnye problemy Rossii" [Russia's Social Problems], *Otechestvennye zapiski*, no. 5, 2008.
- Kotovets, V.A., "Ekologicheskaja bezopasnost poka ne garantiruetsia" [Ecological safety is so far not guaranteed], *Ekologicheskii navigator (Volgograd)*, no. 6, 2009.
- Revich, B.A., "Goryachie točki" khimicheskogo zagriazneniya okružhaiushchei sredy i zdorove naseleniia Rossii [The "hot spots" of chemical pollution of the environment and the health of the Russian population]. Moscow 2007.
- Yablokov, A.V., "Rossiya: zdorove prirody i liudei" [Russia: the health of nature and people], *Seriia "Ekologicheskaja politika" RODP "YABLOKO"*, Moscow 2007.
- Yablokov, A.V., "Okružhaiushchaia sreda i zdorove moskvichei" [The environment and the health of Muscovites], *Seriia "Ekologicheskaja politika" RODP "YABLOKO"*, Moscow 2009.