

Green Russia's First Steps

by *Lev Gudkov*

Russians are increasingly worried by their deteriorating environment and now rank its decay as a major social concern. So far, the Putin regime has responded only with rhetorical reassurances.

JUDGING FROM OPINION POLLS, Russians are more worried about environmental problems than they are about crime, terrorism, malnutrition, living conditions, the quality of health care, and the overall status of the country's medical system. Pollution and environmental degradation ranks third on a list of the 20 most serious threats to the health and well-being Russian citizens, with a March 2012 survey showing a full 36 percent of respondents ranking it as the most serious problem of all. Only drug abuse (66 percent) and alcoholism (59 percent) were seen as more worrying.

But in terms of mass psychology it's worth noting that quality of life concerns, including worries about the environment, tend to rise alongside improvements in the standard of living. These concerns generally tend to take a back seat when deeper social and economic anxieties flourish. Still, Russian society noted is clearly becoming increasingly attentive to the problems posed by air pollution, the poisoning of lake and river waters, deforestation, and diseases induced or accelerated by harmful industrial emissions.

Pro-ecology movements were a vital part of the general revival of Soviet society during the perestroika period of the 1980s. The 1986 Chernobyl nuclear reactor disaster, which harmed not only Ukraine but also poisoned parts of Western Europe, led critics of the Soviet economy (including leading writers and scientists) to denounce the damage caused by the Communist regime's emphasis at industrialization at any cost, a legacy of the Stalin period. Those policies prized the development of heavy industry and mining, drafting projects that called for the diverting of Siberian rivers and recklessly encouraged "clean

ups" that called for the indiscriminate draining of swampland and major changes in river basins. The long-term consequences of some of these ill-advised programs became evident during the devastating forest fires that swept through parts of the country in the summer of 2011.

Soviet industrialization, as interpreted by the Communist Party, put military and geopolitical interests first. Absent competition and transparency, society had no voice in government decision-making. Production was based on state priorities alone, and its desire to keep costs to a minimum. The minimum cost structure depressed both the wages and living conditions of workers and ignored environmental concerns. Innovation was kept at bay and static, aging technology fell well behind most norms. In the absence of financing for waste disposal and air purification, the mining of coal, oil and other hazardous materials led to the spread of intense, unfettered pollution that affected both air and soil.

The Soviet urbanization model produced extreme damage the environment, some of which was quantified only decade later. Large cities were transformed into industrial centers, producing unmonitored jumps in energy consumption and a parallel increase in the presence of polluting emissions. The intense concentration of carbon dioxide, sulfur oxides, particulate matter, and heavy metals in city air eventually put the health of city residents, though many didn't know it. Virtually every major Soviet industrial center contained environmental degradation that usually spread between 150-200 kilometers past the center itself, depending on winds and local river currents.



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In recent years, the damage caused in Soviet has been added to by a new wave of polluting factors, including the rapid growth in car ownership (since the fall of the Soviet Union, the number of car owners, mostly in cities, has jumped from 1.5 percent to 32 percent of the population). Since most Russian citizens remain poor, two-thirds of the cars are domestic vehicles whose emission equipment doesn't meet European ecological norms. There are also plenty of used imports that still burn the low-quality gas that comes out of Russian refineries. The situation is made worse by a bad roadway system as well as the destruction of forestland around large cities, which is being cleared to build new residential housing complexes. Additionally, sewage treatment plants are few and inferior the urban noise pollution is high.

According to data from ecological and medical surveys (which calculate not only industrial emissions and anthropogenic pollution but also the decay in natural conditions and the ability of nature to regenerate

itself), the environmental condition of most Russian cities varies from the “worrying” to the “critical.”

Ecological rankings of Russian urban centers, which numbers cities with population of over 170,000 inhabitants (1,030 cities in all), show only about one percent as boasting good environmental conditions. In 18 percent of the cities, the situation billed as “satisfactory,” a condition that prevails mostly in smaller cities where the emphasis is on agriculture and tourism (including Suzdal, Bolshiye Ugli, Veliky Ustyug) or scientific research (Dubna, Obninsk, Troitsk).

In 46 percent of the cities the situation is characterized as “moderately worrisome” and in 26 percent “very worrisome” (mainly large industrial centers and regional capitals). The situation is considered “critical” in nearly 100 cities, or nine percent. That nine percent includes all of the country's densely populated mega-cities, including Moscow, St. Petersburg, Yekaterinburg, Nizhny Novgorod and others, as well as mining and processing cities (tied to metallurgy, the

chemical industry, pulp and paper production, and making of other heavy and polluting substances).

The worst cases, which are borderline catastrophic, are found in cities that not surprisingly host an array of metallurgical and chemical plants, such as Norilsk (which produces 1.924 million tons of air pollution emissions annually), Cherepovets (333,000 tons), Novokuznetsk (301,000), Lipetsk (299,000), and Magnitogorsk (232,000). Omsk, Krasnoyarsk, Ufa, Chelyabinsk, Nizniy Tagil, Angarsk, and Bratsk also fall into this category.

Compared to Moscow and St. Petersburg, these are significantly smaller cities in terms of population but ones exposed to a far high concentration of pollutants. For the sake of comparison, Moscow, which has a population of between 14 and 15 million inhabitants and has long been considered a city with a hazardous and worrying environment, puts out “only” about 63,000 tons of noxious emissions annually. At the same time, on the list of the world’s 94 largest cities, it’s in 70th place when it comes to population mortality, worse than any number of global mega-cities. Moscow is known as a den of respiratory illnesses, asthma, allergy ailments, cardiovascular disease, liver problems, and the like.

At the same, the last 10 to 15 years have also witnessed a series of improvements in the country’s ecological status. Most of them are not the result of changes in government policy favoring environmental protection but the unintended consequences of economic reforms instituted in the 1990s. The transforming of the Russian economy led to sharp drops in production, the closing of dozens of major factories, and extensive industrial restructuring. Industrial production in heavy machinery and mining dropped off, as did the

production of chemical fertilizers and pesticides (both known to cause irreversible damage to nature and animal life). The depopulation of rural Russia, especially in less fertile central and northern regions (including Pskov, Novgorod, Vologda, Arkhangelsk, Kostroma and others) led to the transformation of arable land into fields and forests, allowing many species of birds and wildlife to repopulate. These developments have helped temper the generally pessimistic view of the country’s ecological situation.

The industrial production has led any number of cities and their surrounding areas to regain their ecological balance. Some rivers have become visibly cleaner, and many now teem with fish and plant life previously considered gone forever. Shrimp has returned to the Volga River basin, for example.

These details have helped improve the popular mood with respect to the state of the environment. Over 20 years, a positive view of the status of the environment has risen from 17 to 40 and 41 percent, with the negative view falling from 75 to between 53 and 59 percent.

But to speak of significant progress seems out of hand, particularly given the new wave of industrial growth that began in the second half of the 2000s, inducing new environmental setbacks to which Russians have reacted negatively, particularly over the past two years (Table 1).

The relationship between local, regional and national authorities and environmental groups is strained. Though the public appears to support these organizations and their leaders, Russians in general remain reluctant to back them actively, since the government of President Vladimir Putin has little tolerance for spontaneous social movements.

Ecologists have already faced criminal persecution and physical assaults. A journalist who underscored the environmental degradation in the Russian Far East was beaten up. So were protestors demanded the Khimki Forest near Moscow be spared from development. Activists protesting the pollution of Lake Baikal by a Bratsk chemical factory were detained. Greenpeace has repeatedly been warned against interfering in Russian affairs.

In some regions, environmentalists and naturalists have gone head-to-head with local people who've lost their jobs when polluting plants were limited or closed. In general, however, most Russians seek long-term government policies that would rationally apply environmental protection measure. Some say they'd accept the introduction of a "green tax."

Table 1
How do you view the country's ecological situation (air and water quality, noise levels, the natural environment, etc.) in the city or province where you live?

	1991	1992	1993	2008	2010	2011	2012
Excellent	3	2	1	5	5	7	3
As good rather than bad	14	17	19	28	36	33	29
As bad rather than good	45	39	48	37	38	43	46
Awful	30	38	27	28	15	16	19
Don't know	8	3	5	2	6	2	4
Negative views	75	77	75	65	53	59	65

So far, however, Russian leadership has done little more than issue general statements in favor of improved environmental protection standards. Clearly, Putin's advisors have become more sensitive to the issue, which accounts for television ploys in which Putin is seen "saving" whales, ensuring the preservation of Siberian tigers, or flying hang glider beside a flock. •

Table 2
What are the environmental problems that most worry you? What doesn't satisfy you about the ecological state of affairs where you live?

	March 1989	May 2011
Water pollution in rivers, lakes and waterways	45	50
Air pollution	57	48
Poor or contaminated drinking water	31	36
Bad land management	39	30
Chemicals in foods	34	28
Climate change	15	24
Deforestation	17	19
High radiation levels	8	13
Erosion, desertification, the unbalancing of water tables	7	12
Disappearance of bird, fish, animal and plant species; alterations in flora and fauna	13	10
Noise pollution	20	10
Failure to replant forestland	16	10
Acid rain	7	8
Lack of irrigation water	1	3
Don't know	2	2

In % based on those interviewed, no. =1,600.