



Meeting with a State Duma deputy on the problem of the development of Krylatskoe district, Moscow, August 20, 2024.



Gathering of Sholmovsky Lake defenders in the Zaslavsky district of Ulyanovsk; Ulyanovsk, July 19, 2024.



Deputies meet with Strogino residents who are trying to save Moskvoretsky Park from road construction and the development of a water protection zone; Strogino, Moscow, July 31, 2024.



Protest to draw public attention to the forest fencing in Smorodino, Sengileevsky District, Ulyanovsk Region, July 20, 2024.



Mass protest against the landfill in Koryazhma, Arkhangelsk region, August 7, 2024.



Gathering of Sholmovsky Lake defenders in the Zaslavsky district of Ulyanovsk; Ulyanovsk, July 19, 2024.

The Russian environmental movement and its potential for broader political change

by Vitaly Servetnik

abstract

Despite the repressions against civil society in Russia, the independent environmental movement has managed to adapt and survive. The environmental agenda in Russia remains important for the people, for local politicians, and for authorities. These factors lay the groundwork for a potential mobilization, politicization, and demand for system change. To enact this transformation, however, the author argues that professional environmentalists need to combine forces with grassroots protestors and embrace a broader socio-economic and intersectional agenda.

KEYWORDS: Russia, environmental movement, environmental justice, protests, politicization, system change, climate, civil society.

For over 25 years, the Russian environmental movement, as well as civil society in Russia as a whole, has faced enormous pressure. This situation has led to continued degradation of the environment in Russia. At the same time, protest around local environmental issues not only continues but has also increased in scale. In 2023, there were 509 environmental protests documented, with 580 in 2024. The visibility of these environmental protests is also increasing: in 2023, environmental issues were the third most common reason for protests, while in 2024 they were cited as the second most popular reason.¹ In cities, most of these protests are directed against new or existing landfill sites, the destruction of parks and other green areas in or around the cities, new construction projects, and the pollution of air and water. In rural areas, people are protesting against extractive industries and tourism development.

Along with these ongoing environmental struggles, new grassroots environmental groups and initiatives are emerging.

Faced with pollution and development projects, local people fear significant negative impacts on their lives. This growing interest also reflects a desire for greater civic engagement, which environmental issues that directly affect people's lives seem to be well-suited to. For example, after a major oil spill in the Black Sea in 2024, thousands of volunteers from across the country came to the shores to clean beaches and birds. Many more assisted them from a distance with logistics, crowdfunding, and mobilization support. Volunteers organized themselves in a chat group in Telegram messenger with 100,000 members.²

In addition to the growing mass mobilization around environmental issues and protests, victories have been reported for some specific campaigns and certain rights protected. The majority of these victories concern local environmental problems and have been framed as "NIMBYism" [NIMBY standing for "Not in my backyard"]. 70 such victories were documented in 2023 and 78 in 2024, giving the protests a success rate of more than 10%. Of course, not all of the struggles included protests, and many victories were won on issues fought in previous years, but the recent successes still stand as empowering examples in the face of increasing repressions and war-time censorship.³

ON A LARGER SCALE, one can see that despite increased restrictions on political activity and the domination of the Kremlin-led agenda, national authorities view the use of seemingly democratic elections and other pluralist activities as a tool of self-legitimization. Local oppositional politicians use local environmental issues as an accessible arena in the political sphere, one that resonates with local people. The significant increase in attention paid to the environmental agenda in local politics started among independent municipal council members in Moscow and Saint-Petersburg in 2017-2018. Even with the subsequent restrictions, a high level of interest in the environmental agenda has still been palpable in recent years. In 2025, following a call from several

“SINCE THE FOREIGN AGENTS LAW WAS ADOPTED IN 2012, MANY NATIONAL AND REGIONAL ENVIRONMENTAL NGOS HAVE FACED INCREASED PRESSURES, INCLUDING COMPULSORY LABELING, FINES, AND PUBLIC DEFAMATION.”

Moscow politicians, hundreds of people came to the reception of Putin’s administration to collectively submit their complaints regarding local social and environmental issues. With the usual form of mass protest impossible to arrange in Moscow, this act of gathering in a line to register a complaint was one of the biggest mass political actions of the year.⁴

However, Putin’s officials, fearing the potential for mass mobilization on environmental issues, are manipulating the environmental agenda in order to frame the narrative around environmental problems, show care for the environment and nature, and supposedly solve certain problems. In this way, officials are trying to manage the potential for protest within grassroots environmental groups. President Putin has long been known for his pictures with a tiger, for flying with endangered birds, and for saying he would join Greenpeace in his retirement. In 2025, he established the *Presidential Fund for Ecological and Nature Conservation Projects*, which receives 1 billion rubles each year.⁵ Most of these projects are focused on ecological education, recycling, waste cleanup programs, and tree planting – everything except challenging Russia’s extractivism and other systemic problems.

IN THE SAME VEIN, a countless number of pseudo-public consultative bodies have been created in the last decade at almost every federal, regional, and sometimes local ministry or body. They serve to create an illusion of public participation in decision making on environmental issues, or to record concerns over environmental problems. The goal of these agencies is to mire the issues in constant and misleading bureaucratic procedures until local people and genuine activists run out of time, energy, and hope. For the same reason, a number of environmental GONGOs (Government organized NGOs) were established in order to replace critical voices within independent environmental NGOs with a depoliticized “patriotic” or “constructive” environmental agenda.⁶

Internationally, Russia is also engaging in various fora on global environmental issues. Exploiting the fact that global environmental issues cannot be solved without the involvement of the world’s biggest territory, Russia sees these spaces as providing an opportunity to reduce its international isolation. For example, by joining the Paris Agreement in 2019, Russia has shown its openness to international cooperation after the isolation that followed its annexation of Crimea. Additionally, Russia was planning to manipulate its geopolitical influence by becoming a supplier of carbon credits to richer countries while also providing its technologies – such as nuclear power plants – to the Global South.

This international engagement opens up a possibility for the Russian environmental movement to influence Russia’s envi-

ronmental policy by challenging it in these spaces. In fact, we see that in all these areas, from local politics to the government’s openness or quasi-openness and its international forays, such engagement simultaneously creates the possibility and motivation for engagement by true environmental advocates.

The Russian environmental movement

The pressure on environmental NGOs in Russia started with Putin’s coming to power in 2000, increased over the years of authoritarian unification of power, and was exacerbated most recently by the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. As a result, the Russian environmental movement has experienced a gradual deregulation of environmental legislation, along with the shrinking of the civic space by means of growing repressions. In the last three years, more than 500 environmental defenders were killed, imprisoned, arrested, or fined in Russia.

Since the Foreign Agents law was adopted in 2012, many national and regional environmental NGOs have faced increased pressures, including compulsory labeling, fines, and public defamation. Since that time, many of these NGOs were forced to close their organizations or significantly limit their activities. 38 environmental NGOs, 2 environmental media outlets, and 4 individuals have been added to the registry of foreign agents, 34 of which have decided to close their legal entities entirely because of the difficulties of operating with stigmatizing labels. This pressure also caused great damage to nature conservation NGOs, the professionalized part of the environmental movement.⁷

IN AN ESCALATION of this trend, shortly after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, most branches of the international environmental NGOs were labeled “undesirable” organizations, an action that criminalized all their activities in Russia and forced them to leave the country. This made the work of the environmental watchdogs and their national-level advocacy almost impossible in Russia.⁸ At the same time, environmental problems in Russia didn’t disappear. On the contrary, having been turned away from some of the global markets, Russian capital has seen more investment directed toward development inside Russia. Without professional environmental NGOs addressing unsustainable development at an earlier stage, the country’s population is now facing more environmental issues at later stages: pollution, construction, and extraction.

These local environmental problems are in close proximity to the people and therefore easy to see, smell, and feel. Such environmental issues are connected with a range of human interests, from health and well-being to the future, especially for children. The local and visible nature of these issues is driving the commu-

nities they affect to react with further mobilization, despite the widespread fear of repression.

Without many avenues and tools for public participation and advocacy, local inhabitants are left with protest, sometimes including direct actions such as blocking roads and machinery or bringing down illegal fences. This, of course, most likely results in various forms of repression against the protestors, but the protests continue anyway. A common slogan for the grassroots activists is: "I'm not afraid of a fine if I have nothing to breathe."

Politicization of the environmental agenda and the environmental movement

For many years, the majority of the members of the Russian environmental movement positioned themselves as non-political for various reasons. First of all, years of repression and the intentional depoliticization of society in general made forging political plans a dangerous endeavor. Secondly, engaging with political forces on any specific point on the political spectrum was seen as dividing people who were actively engaging in environmental protection but happened to have different political views. Therefore, many professionals and expert NGOs sought to avoid any politicization of environmental issues.

Other, more internal reasons for the environmental movement avoiding the politicization of environmental issues concerned the movement's methodology, which focused on professionalized environmental NGOs. This meant that the movement relied mostly on environmental expertise, close ties with academia, and an ability to maneuver bureaucracy, with the result that the environmental watchdogs seldom looked towards popular mobilization efforts. It was this lack of interest and knowledge in popular mobilization that led to the lack of broader support for environmental groups when it was needed most, in the face of organized repression.

Additionally, professional environmental NGOs have tended to be focused mostly on global environmental issues, such as climate change and biodiversity. Environmental watchdogs often overlooked local environmental problems, sometimes even ignoring them. The channeling of international financial support for work on global environmental issues only reinforced this pattern. And finally, an inability within the environmental NGOs to explain the connection between local and global environmental issues, combined with the environmental movement's methodology, led to an even more entrenched divide between international, professional environmentalists on the one side and local, grassroots environmental activists (and the local population) on the other.

HOWEVER, THIS DIVIDE, along with governmental repression and green-washing, has had the result that those who are engaged with local environmental issues are often left unheard. But instead of being a purely negative force, this tension helps to further transform local activists into even more active citizens who question more deeply the dysfunction of the government and systemic structures, leading some of them into further politicization.

For example, many environmental groups in the beginning of



December 15, 2024, two Russian Project 1577 Volgoneft oil tankers, Volgoneft-212 and Volgoneft-239, were caught in a storm just south of the Kerch Strait. Volgoneft-212, which was reportedly carrying about 4,900 tonnes of mazut, broke in two and sank, resulting in an oil spill and the death of one crew member. Volgoneft-239 was damaged, causing it to drift for several hours before running aground near the Port of Taman, Krasnodar Krai.

PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS



Kerch Strait oil spill elimination (2024).

PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS



A tent camp during the garbage protest at the Shies station in the Arkhangelsk region in June 2019. Photo taken by a protest participant.

PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

the full-scale invasion of Ukraine made statements condemning the aggression and also protested in the streets.⁹ This was a clear extension of their environmental activism. The regions of Russia with the most active environmental groups and protests over environmental issues are among the top regions with environmental activists being persecuted for their anti-war stance.¹⁰

With the current level of repression and the regime's focus on the war in Ukraine and the war economy, professionalized NGOs cannot any longer effectively influence significant policy change in today's Russia with the same methods they previously used. For a more effective advocacy for system change rooted in popular support, the movement lacks the structures and strategies needed for popular mobilization. At the same time, grassroots environmental activists have the energy of the masses, fueled by evident environmental issues connected to similarly evident demands for environmental justice. Bringing together the knowledge and experience of professional environmental NGOs and the energy and mobilizational capacity of grassroots environmental activists is crucial and has already started to show us the power of political force.

One such example of successful cooperation has been seen in the "Russia is not a dump" movement.¹¹ Originating in a small village in the Arkhangelsk region, located on the border with the Komi Republic, it has been opposing a mega-landfill site intended for Moscow's residual waste since 2018. The movement brought together grassroots protesters and professionalized environmental groups. It also brought together people from different points on the political spectrum and received support from all the regional political parties – even the governing one. The movement quickly ignited solidarity across dozens of regions in Russia that suffered from similarly inadequate waste management policies by the Russian government, and it eventually sparked massive protests across the country, leading to demands for a change in national waste policy.¹² At some regional levels, protesters also called for the removal of governors who did not support the demands. As a result of the protests, not only was the landfill project canceled, but the governors of both the Arkhangelsk region and the Komi Republic were replaced by the Kremlin.¹³ With these actions, we saw the establishment and continued growth of an interregional environmental justice movement. Unfortunately, the Covid pandemic greatly impacted the movement, freezing the mobilization process and splintering the groups over their positions on isolation measures and vaccination. The following invasion of Ukraine also contributed to the fading of this movement and a further split over that invasion.

NEVERTHELESS, within Russia's collapsing environment and social system and the protests around it, the potential of the environmental *justice* movement is still there. In undemocratic and

unequal social and economic systems, environmental issues are often seen as environmental injustices. To name just a few examples: the extraction of mineral resources in the regions of Russia in order to accumulate profit in the offices of Moscow-based extractive companies; reducing urban parks and green areas for the sake of more skyscrapers and malls, while the wealthy move to the still-green suburban areas; and transporting residual waste away from wealthy regions and overconsuming areas such as Russia's capital into other regions, sometimes thousands of kilometers away. The social and economic inequalities between the capital and the other regions are often reflected in protests against new development projects. Within Russia's national republics and areas with indigenous populations, such inequalities are exacerbated by racial inequalities, with the result that struggles for sovereignty are linked to demands for environmental justice. Similar systemic inequalities linking the environment with socio-political concerns are a disproportionate burden on women, which explains their increased engagement in grassroots environmental activism.¹⁴ This participation in the environmental movement reflects how,

as with indigenous sovereignty, women's liberation is also intrinsically linked with environmental demands.

As this article shows, however, engagement with these issues can lead to more attacks, and that is what we have seen within the human rights movement. It has been the object of attacks made in a more systemic and consistent

way than before, and also at an earlier stage. The previously mentioned feminist movement is currently undergoing a major crackdown and is being portrayed as "western", anti-family, and a threat to Russian traditional values.¹⁵ Similarly, the LGBTQI movement was not only attacked but declared illegal by a corpus of homophobic legislation and labeled as an extremist organization.¹⁶ Indigenous rights movements were also criminalized by declaring some of them "extremist organizations" and spreading fear of collaboration with others.¹⁷ Meanwhile, the Russian environmental movement protected itself by hiding in depoliticization and not showing enough solidarity to more marginalized parts of civil society.

Moving forward towards system change

With the current global economic model, the demand for development and for natural resources will only increase the number of environmental conflicts both worldwide and in Russia. This offers the ongoing potential for popular mobilization against environmental injustices and related social and economic injustices. Similar trends are being seen across the globe in many countries with different political regimes, where, as in Russia, environmental issues are intrinsically linked to socio-economic issues.

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Because of its relatively privileged position of not being completely criminalized, the Russian environmental movement currently has great potential both for maneuvering within Russian political-administrative spaces and for collaboration across movements inside and outside of Russia. If we have the space, we should use it.

THE RUSSIAN environmental movement thus has great potential to turn local mobilization and rebellion into a mass movement for system change. To do so, however, will not only require linking the various social, economic, environmental, racial, gender-based, and other movements together but also that such work is done in both local and global arenas, ultimately establishing a united front of knowledge and efforts. Such a movement in Russia could not only significantly impact broad politicization and democratization of Russia itself – similar to the role of the environmental movements before and during perestroika – but also contribute to the global social-ecological struggle for justice.

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