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United Russia Pushes Dubious Clean Water Program

By Maria Antonova

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United Russia's multibillion-dollar Clean Water program has elicited stringent criticism from politicians and scientists alike since its inception, but instead of shying away from controversy, the party is doubling down and making the program a key policy objective.

Russian tap water is notorious for its poor quality, with 73 percent of residents of Russia's largest cities saying it is undrinkable, according to a 2008 poll. Twenty-two percent of Russians do not have running tap water in their houses, and less than half of the country's wastewater is treated properly.

The Clean Water program, initiated in 2006 by State Duma Speaker and United Russia head Boris Gryzlov, aims to change all that.

Since its proposal, the program has gained political traction throughout the country, with United Russia organizing high-profile Clean Water conferences and publishing magazines

advocating the project, despite a distinct lack of support from the scientific community.

In 2008, the program, which until then had remained a relatively minor policy proposal, garnered government support after the Economic Development Ministry contracted the Moscow-based Institute of Microeconomics to develop a federal Clean Water program.

The federal program, which would run through 2017, aims to supply public institutions, such as schools and hospitals, with clean water and to attract private investment that would stimulate the production of domestic water-purification devices.

The program claims that it will improve public health, as up to 20 percent of illnesses in the country are directly or indirectly connected with poor water quality.

The federal government will finance up to 60 percent of the project, with the rest coming from regional and municipal budgets. The program would also allow public water utilities to attract private investment starting in 2013.

Under the program's original draft, that would mean at least 20 billion rubles ($680 million) per year allocated from federal and regional budgets, and up to 40 billion rubles per year if an "innovative approach" is used.

Gryzlov estimated at the beginning of last year that the total price tag may run to 15 trillion rubles ($500 billion), a figure that includes the private investment that the program hopes to attract.

The program has already gone through 10 drafts. It was amended by the Economic Development Ministry at the Cabinet's request and resubmitted for approval on March 5, said Alexander Katkov, who is part of the working group that is designing the program. Katkov is also an adviser to Svetlana Orlova, deputy speaker of the Federation Council, who is another key supporter of Clean Water.

The current draft would allocate 5 billion rubles for the program in 2010, Katkov said, declining to give figures for the rest of the program's duration. He added that the program could get its first installment from the budget after the Duma votes on the budget in May or June if the Cabinet approves the program within the next month.

"There is no question of whether or not the program will be approved," Katkov said. "It's only a matter of time." The Cabinet's delay in approving the program is because of the necessity of ensuring its compatibility with other federal programs, such as the Zhilishche program, which aims to provide affordable housing for low-income families, and the federal government's water strategy.

Clean Water has already been launched in a pilot program in Novgorod, where filters were installed in public schools. Once approved on the federal level, the Novgorod region will get an additional 500 million rubles of federal support, Governor Sergei Mitin told Regnum earlier this month.

Two-thirds of Russia's regions are either developing regional Clean Water programs or have already passed them and are waiting for the Cabinet's approval, which will make federal funds available, Katkov said. A total of 1,300 regional projects have been submitted to the Economic

Development Ministry in hopes of obtaining federal financing, he said.

Although the program does not specifically indicate any companies that would benefit from the public money, critics say one of the major beneficiaries will be inventor Viktor Petrik, who, along with Gryzlov, holds a patent on a method for cleaning radioactive waste. Petrik's company Golden Formula produces a filter that was chosen to supply water filters for the Novgorod pilot project.

"They are not thinking about making the water clean, only about padding their pockets," said Viktor Danilov-Danilyan, who heads the Institute for Water Problems at the Academy of Sciences.

The Clean Water tenders are likely to benefit specific people like Petrik, and the program is not based on sound science, Danilov-Danilyan, who was an environment minister in the 1990s, told The Moscow Times.

In fact, the Russian Academy of Science's commission for fighting pseudo-science has said Petrik's filters may actually make water harmful. Sergei Aldoshin, vice president of the academy, said Wednesday that the commission had finished its scientific assessment of Petrik's inventions and would present its findings at the academy's next presidium meeting in the beginning of April.

Gryzlov has denied that the patent he and Petrik hold is related to the drinking water program and said Petrik's filters were chosen for the Novgorod pilot by a commission composed of respected experts.

In general, the program focuses too much on cleaning water just before it gets to consumers, Danilov-Danilyan said. Instead, the project's architects should be focused on figuring out why Russia’s water is so dirty to begin with.

Russia indeed has a serious water problem, but solving it requires cleaning up rivers and lakes rather than installing filters, he said. "The program reduces water issues to the technology of water preparation," he said. "But we are making our water resources so dirty that all of our national product will eventually have to be spent cleaning it. It's completely misguided."

The money should be used first to locate, catalogue and monitor water polluters, which has not been done since 2000, he said. The program approaches the problem haphazardly, without environmental considerations and without consulting experts. "I don't know any real scientists who support it, and I was never invited to participate in any of it," he said.

Gryzlov has lashed out against the criticism, accusing his opponents of a lack of patriotism.

"A few individual scientists don't have the right to claim that they are the authorities on truth," he told Gazeta.ru in an online interview. People who criticize the program "don't want our Russia to have healthy people who live long lives. They don't want Russia to become a powerful country," he said.

Opposition politicians have jumped on board. Last week, Just Russia leader and Federation Council Speaker Sergei Mironov trashed the program, saying the program was invented by charlatans.

"Instead of distancing themselves from the charlatans who 'invented' the water-filtering technology, United Russia is stubbornly sticking to it ... This is a stinking fraud," Mironov said.

Spurred on by its feud with the Just Russia party and some populist maneuvering, United Russia has turned the project into one of its main policy initiatives.

In response to the criticism of Gryzlov, United Russia has rallied around its party leaders and staked out a hard line on the issue.

"United Russia needs to take a stronger position. First of all, by speaking out in support of our leaders," senior United Russia official Andrei Isayev said at a party meeting Saturday.

"I believe that our coalition with the Just Russia party has fallen short. It has to be broken. And in the near future we must introduce draft legislation that limits the authority of the Federation Council speaker," he said, according to a transcript posted on United Russia's web site.

Although United Russia's reputation is taking some heat over the program, mostly because of Gryzlov's involvement with Petrik, "there is so much money on the table, that reputation is secondary," said Alexei Mukhin, a political analyst with the Center for Political Information.

Because of Gryzlov's "poorly concealed vested interest" in the program, "[Prime Minister] Vladimir Putin is cleverly distancing himself from it," and in the event of a big scandal, Gryzlov's political career may suffer, he said.

But Clean Water has more supporters than opponents in the government, and it's likely to be adopted in some form after media attention subsides, he said.

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