

The Politics and Business of Going Green

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Abandoned infrastructure from an oil field littering the permanently frozen ground of the Yamal Peninsula in 2008. **Vladimir Filonov**

This year will see increasingly politicized environmental movements sprouting up around local issues, and an alliance between green groups and businessmen to open up Russia's potential in renewable energy — provided there are no more fires.

Last year started badly for environmentalists. In January, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's concerns about unemployment trumped any qualms about polluting Lake Baikal, and he authorized the reopening of the controversial pulp and paper mill on its shores.

In the summer, Russia got its first taste of global warming, as the hottest summer in history gave way to a devastating series of forest and peat bog fires that left the European part of the country reeling, with thousands homeless and at least 50 dead. The country lost some 30 percent of its annual harvest to drought, prompting the government to impose grain export

bans.

Meanwhile, workers began felling trees to make way for the controversial road through the Khimki forest. A media-savvy protest campaign made the struggle between local residents and the road builders the biggest environmental story of the year. A massive rally in central Moscow forced the government to back down temporarily.

It wasn't all bad news though. Putin won some plaudits for hosting an international conference in St. Petersburg in November on tiger conservation. A conference in September on the rapidly warming Arctic was hailed as a rare opportunity for ecologists, government and oil companies to work together.

Political Greening

Protesters failed to close the Baikal paper mill and a government-appointed commission gave the Khimki highway project the go ahead in December. But the public outcry over both "put regional environmental problems on the federal agenda," said Alexei Yablokov, who heads the Yabloko party's green wing.

That puts single-issue pressure groups in the peculiar position of being disillusioned with their current tactics, but in a strong position to open a new front: the overtly political.

"We're expecting a strengthening and greater politicization of the green movement in 2011," Yablokov said in e-mailed comments. "Groups that previously avoided politics have come to understand that, without political decisions, nothing gets done, laws don't work."

The most prominent of those groups is Environmental Defense of Moscow Region, or ECMO, which surged to fame as the chief defender of the Khimki forest outside Moscow.

Led by the charismatic and indefatigable local businesswoman Yevgenia Chirikova, their apolitical campaign snowballed until it culminated in a mass demonstration by 3,000 sympathizers, including rock legend Yury Shevchuk, on Moscow's Pushkin Square in August.

Days later, the government appeared to back down, suspending work on the road while a commission examined alternative routes.

When the commission approved the route in December, the group quickly took decisive action, pledging to field a candidate in the 2012 presidential elections and joining a sanctioned demonstration in defense of freedom of assembly on Triumfnaya Square on December 31.

"We tried dialogue, we tried public protest, and they did not listen, so we are going into the political sphere," said ECMO spokesman Yaroslav Nikitenko.

How successful the politicized single-issue groups will be remains moot. The Yabloko party has been vigorously involved in fights to stop development in nature reserves at Utrish and Tuapse in the Krasnodar region, with modest results. And with an election looming in 2012, few analysts think green issues by themselves will dominate either the Kremlin's or the opposition's agenda.

But political scientists point out that disputes over forests and lakes do have a habit of

aggravating already tense regional politics. “Environmental disputes tend to act as catalysts when there's already a good deal of local grievance against authorities who are seen as outsiders with dubious motives and no understanding of regional concerns,” said Nikolai Petrov, an expert on regional affairs at the Carnegie Moscow Center.

Hatred of such “carpetbaggers” was prominent in the campaign against the Baikal pulp and paper mill. A poll conducted by local Irkutsk web site Babr.ru shortly after Putin authorized its reopening in January rated the prime minister as “Siberia's greatest enemy.” In second place was Oleg Deripaska, whose Basic Element holding controlled the plant at the time.

Bearing that paradigm in mind, Irkutsk, Khimki and the developments in Krasnodar for the 2014 Sochi Olympics are likely to remain the most prominent battlegrounds, while the Altai republic, where Gazprom is building a pipeline to China, could also see green struggles.

But most disputes are not at the regional level. “The great success of the anti-road rally on Pushkin Square this summer was its slogan, 'Everyone has his own Khimki forest.' It attracted people from all over who fear their own patch of woodland or forest could be cleared,” Petrov said. Angelina Davydova, a freelance journalist and expert with the Russian-German Environmental Information Office, reckons the next disputes will be “in and around large cities” all over the country.

Where is Al Gore?

While activists turn to the political arena, investors are hoping this could be the year Russia embraces green business.

Renewable energy investors are looking to the government to draft and push through legislation needed to make wind farms and other renewable energy sources viable.

“If it goes through this year, we will see full-scale investment in renewables. If there's no legislation, there will be no development,” explained Anatoly Kopylov of the Russian Association of Wind Power Industry.

The regulations needed to make renewables work would include standards for compensation to renewable producers, standards governing connection of wind farms to the national electricity grid, and a system of incentives and tax perks similar to those enjoyed by other energy sectors.

Kopylov has found allies at the International Financial Corporation, a branch of the World Bank Group that used the last weeks of 2010 to start a lobbying and investment campaign to “open the door” for investments in renewables.

Renewables currently account for less than 1 percent of Russia's energy mix, but the government has set a goal of raising that to 4.5 percent by 2020.

IFC program director Patrick Willems says he is keen to find a “Russian Al Gore” to spread the word about climate change and the benefits of wind farms and biomass. In the meantime, he and his staff will spend 2011 galvanizing public and political opinion through a series of public events to raise awareness and, perhaps most tellingly, finding projects that already

demonstrate renewables' business potential.

Established environmental pressure groups like Greenpeace, alarmed at the prospect of a flurry of investment in nuclear energy following the conclusion of the U.S.-Russian civil nuclear cooperation agreement this December, have welcomed the IFC initiative.

Greenpeace says the new agreement includes a clause allowing the parties to send each other radioactive materials for reprocessing. That, they fear, is code for the United States paying Russia to act as its nuclear dumping ground. "2011 could see the first agreement on this, if not actual deliveries of American nuclear waste," warned Vladimir Chuprov of Greenpeace Russia.

The biggest obstacle is challenging the institutionalized skepticism about climate change and renewables that is personified by none other than Putin himself. In September, the prime minister told an international conference on the Arctic in Moscow that the Arctic Ocean "was once a tropical sea," and that hence the climate might well change without human impact. In December, he said windmills "seem to be an environmentally friendly kind [of energy], but in fact they kill birds."

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