

Saving Forests is a Matter of Politics

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Her anti-road campaign put Yevgenia Chirikova at the center of attention. **Igor Tabakov**

Editor's note: This is the first in a weekly series about environmental issues in Russia and how they affect business and society.

Later this month, the small Moscow region town of Mozhaisk will witness the birth of a new political party.

Or at least, that is the plan. Oleg Mitvol — a former environmental inspector who made a name for himself exposing infractions by Shell and other foreign companies investing in Russia's natural resource sector during the mid-2000s — announced the creation of his Green Alliance party in March.

Taking advantage of reforms introduced by President Dmitry Medvedev in response to mass demonstrations in December, Mitvol envisions the new organization as the country's first real green party, forging disparate environmental movements into one mighty lobby group.

“Someone is defending Khimki [forest], and someone else is defending Lake Baikal and elsewhere other people are fighting their local battles. But there is no one to bring them together,” he said.

“By the time of the next Duma elections in 2016, we will be the third-largest party in the country, after the Communists and the ‘party of power’ [as he calls United Russia],” he declared boldly during an interview in Moscow.

The plan is impressive. Based on Mitvol’s own Green Alternative campaign group, which in 2009 won a surprise victory over United Russia in Mozhaik’s mayoral election, the Green Alliance will be contesting local elections by autumn. Mitvol has already singled out Kaliningrad and Samara as target regions where the environmental message should strike a chord with voters.

But as he is learning, bringing environmentalists together is like herding cats.

“I can confirm Mitvol was in talks with us on joining his party, and we have had some consultations on our conditions. But we’re not there yet,” said Vladimir Slivyak, a founder of the Eco Defense pressure group and one of the country’s most active anti-nuclear campaigners. Mitvol has publicly tipped him as a manager and possible candidate in the party’s campaign for the mayoral election in Kaliningrad this autumn. The region is the site of a proposed new nuclear power plant — a fact that Mitvol thinks will play into the Alliance’s hands.

Slivyak’s main condition is that the new party should oppose nuclear power.

Others, he points out, will have their own favorite planks for the platform. “There is not yet a party program, manifesto or constitution. That’s not a criticism, but environmentalists like to know what they are signing up for,” he said.

It is not the first attempt to build a Russian green party. The Green Party that evolved from the KEDR (the Constructive Environmental Movement of Russia) in the 1990s merged with A Just Russia in 2008 and more recently associated itself with United Russia. Another organization, called Green Russia, was folded into the liberal Yabloko party in 2006. Its leader Alexei Yablokov has made a point of attaching the party to every environmental cause in sight, especially controversial building projects in protected areas on the Black Sea coast.

Neither has been especially successful. Yabloko had new life breathed into it by the interelection protest movement that gripped Moscow between December and March, but it remains a marginal force in the country. The Green Party’s greatest electoral triumph to date was claiming 7.6 percent of the vote in the Samara region’s parliamentary elections in 2007 — a very modest success that it never repeated before it merged with A Just Russia.

Voting for Issues

In 2009, Dmitry Belanovich, a former colleague of Mitvol’s from the Federal Inspection Service for Natural Resources Use, won the mayoral election in the Moscow region town of Mozhaik — beating the United Russia candidate, who took second place. Mitvol, who masterminded that campaign, attributed the victory “to shaking hands, hanging out with

people and listening to their problems. Basically we tried to create a Western model of politics.”

It is less clear how many voters are ready to back green policies. A December 2011 survey by state-owned pollster VTsIOM that showed about 70 percent of city dwellers are unhappy with the environmental situation. “We hope that will be a big electorate for us,” Mitvol said.

But when the same pollster asked respondents to select from a list the most serious problems facing the country, only 19 percent picked the environment. Green consciousness was dwarfed by concerns about low living standards (53 percent), housing (51 percent) and inflation (47 percent). However, even fewer were worried about terrorism (15 percent) and democracy and human rights (9 percent).

Public Concern

World Wildlife Fund of Russia director Igor Chestin has little time for green parties, which he sees as selling a result — the universally accepted goodness of a clean environment — while avoiding the disputed ground of actual political differences between liberals, socialists and conservatives.

But he does think Russia’s voters care enough about environmental issues to force them onto the public agenda.

In 2000, after the government of then-President Vladimir Putin abolished the Federal Forestry Agency and the Environmental Protection Committee, the WWF organized a petition to force a referendum on nature conservation. “We gathered 2.5 million signatures in three months. The Central Elections Commission knocked that down to 1.9 million by saying some were invalid — when you needed 2 million to force a referendum.”

According to Chestin, no one else ever came so close — petitions for referendums on touchstone issues like abolishing conscription and private land ownership didn’t even reach the 2 million threshold. “We scared them enough that they changed the law, and now it really is impossible to get the required signatures.”

Khimki

No recent event is more symptomatic of the unifying power of environmental issues than the struggle over the fate of the Khimki Forest and the new Moscow to St. Petersburg highway.

The route for the \$8 billion road through the forest on the northern outskirts of Moscow was immediately opposed by local campaigners and journalists — and a handful of officials, including Mitvol.

But when logging began in July 2010, the issue snowballed until it made the national agenda. In August 2010, when the smog of that year’s tragic forest fires had barely cleared, 5,000 people rallied against the road on Pushkin Square in central Moscow.

At the time it was the biggest “opposition” demonstration in central Moscow in years and attracted celebrity endorsement that would become typical of the anti-government rallies this past winter.

It even earned a limited victory — in the wake of the gathering Medvedev ordered a halt to work on the controversial road while a special commission investigated protester complaints.

But those involved in the campaign did not credit its resonance to some great untapped public love of forests.

“It is really basic justice — the right to say how your land, the place where you live, will be treated,” said Yevgenia Chirikova, the young mother from Khimki who took the helm of the protest movement and has found herself catapulted to the status of a leader in the country’s nascent political opposition.

“It is quite simple. It is about a slogan — a concrete issue. That is why people came onto the streets for Khimki,” Mitvol agreed. “It could be any message, it doesn’t have to be an environmental one — the point is to have one.”

Influencing the State

The battle over the road in Khimki recalls the heydays of what one campaigner called “environmental glasnost” — the period in the 1980s when environmentalists and community groups won a string of victories against ambitious infrastructure projects — including a cancellation of a planned conveyance system linking Rzhev with the Moscow-Volga canal and, in a foretaste of the battle for Khimki, blocking construction of a section of Moscow’s Third Transportation Ring through the historic Lefortovo district.

Environmental struggles flared elsewhere in the capital. Residents of the Bitsevsky Park neighborhood in Moscow’s south defeated a plan to move the city’s cramped zoo to the park.

Activists on the north side of town rebelled against a plan to construct a new power plant in Mytishchi.

For a brief moment in 2010, it looked like the Khimki Forest demonstrators had won a similar victory.

But when Medvedev’s commission reported back in the autumn, they green-lighted the original route — although with strong caveats, including a complete ban on roadside construction and the erection of sound barriers along the route to reduce noise and air pollution.

Ultimately, Kremlin policy proved as unstoppable as a bulldozer.

“I don’t think that Khimki taught [the government] anything,” said Nikolai Petrov, a political analyst at the Moscow Carnegie Center, when asked whether the protests prompted a rethink. “Khimki was an anomaly — a local issue that became a national one. It was treated as an obstacle that had to be overcome, and which they dealt with without looking at the roots or context of the issue,” he said.

“It went a long way to developing civil society and had a big impact on the activism we are seeing at the moment. But I don’t think that it caused any change in government policy. If it had, the project would have stopped,” Sliviyak said.

The question then, is how can you influence government policy? Mitvol, who after leaving the natural resources inspection service in 2009 served for two years as the prefect of Moscow's Northern Administrative District under former Mayor Yury Luzhkov, is convinced that "to change something in this country you have to be in power."

Skeptics point out that policy is decided at a very high level in Moscow. A midlevel official might be able to influence some things at a local level, but if you are not in the Kremlin you are not going to be able to change the government's course.

Inseparable From Politics

Chirikova, who says launching a green party is probably premature in Russia's current political climate, has vowed to continue the battle on the streets.

Last seen being arrested on Sunday for trying to pitch a tent on Red Square — an apparent attempt to start a Ukraine-style color revolution — Chirikova has long given up on any distinction between political and environmental goals. After several years, she says, she came to the conclusion that saving trees is a fundamentally political business.

"It was not an immediate realization. It took several years," she says of her journey from local tree-hugger to implacable enemy of the Putin regime. "Eventually, I realized that under the current system it will be impossible to change anything."

Chirikova, who has taken to heart Alexei Navalny's term for the United Russia party as "crooks and thieves," blames the country's environmental ills — and most other ills — on what she calls "Putinomics," a term she credits her husband with coining to describe the country's reliance on natural resources exports.

In her view, "Putinomics" is entirely reliant on exploitation of the land — whether for oil and gas, metals, diamonds or forestry and agriculture. Besides relegating Russia to the role of a supplier to Western economies (proof, she says with a twinkle in her eye, that Vladimir Putin is a Western spy), this system means that the interests of those who actually live on the land will always be abused.

Meanwhile, Chestin's WWF has devised a way of influencing power, rather than opposing or trying to displace it. The WWF is currently trying to reverse the watering-down of a draft law to protect the Arctic Sea from oil and gas exploration by testing Putin's pre-election suggestion that any cause gathering 100,000 signatures should be debated in parliament.

The WWF has managed to gather 115,000 signatures backing its original draft of the bill and has secured the backing of several high-profile Duma deputies, including ex-boxer and professional endorsement celebrity Nikolai Valuyev.

"The truth is probably that the most successful [environmental] campaigns are those that try everything," said Slivyak of Eco Defense. "There was a campaign between 2005 and 2009 to stop the import of radioactive waste from Germany. Environmentalists in both countries tried protests, and lobbying and all kinds of things, and eventually it worked."

To confirm the concept, Chestin on Wednesday went swimming in frigid arctic waters to

attract attention to the WWF campaign.

Discourse Improving

Mitvol and Chestin, both optimists, point to a combination of public protests and lobbying that prompted Putin in 2006 to personally redirect the route of an oil pipeline 40 kilometers to the north to avoid Lake Baikal. In the early stages of planning for the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics, ecologists managed to get three stadiums relocated. Greenpeace and the WWF, who were both invited to advise the organizers, have since ended their participation, complaining that their other advice was being ignored.

Chestin argues that the quality of discourse has changed. “Up to 2006, government policy was pretty bad — it seemed to amount to simply destroying the progress made in the 1990s. But I would say since then, and certainly partly because of public protests, the tone has definitely changed,” he said.

Both Putin and Medvedev have begun to hold meetings and issue directives on environmental matters more often. Medvedev has dedicated sessions of his human rights council to environmental affairs and in 2011 made a show of ordering the cleanup of a vast open-air chemical waste reservoir near Nizhny Novgorod, called the “white sea.”

The most recent public flaunting of green credentials came last week, when Putin questioned Norilsk Nickel chief executive Vladimir Strzhalkovsky about a cleanup of the eponymous city — which is one of the most polluted in the world. Strzhalkovsky said on record that an Italian-led consortium has won a \$2 billion contract to clean up the city’s sulfur dioxide emissions — a tender, he was careful to say, that was held on Putin’s order.

Back in Khimki, Chirikova has vowed to battle on. When asked whether it isn’t time to throw in the towel, she likes to tell the story of how her partisan grandfather fought the Nazis with stones when he ran out of ammunition. “People wanted to surrender then, too. Should we have listened to them?” she asks rhetorically.

Activists, lobbyists and other green groups are readying themselves for the next epic struggle: the projected expansion of Moscow, which is set to more than double in size with the addition of 144,000 hectares slated to be joined to the southwest of the city under a project signed by Medvedev last year.

Local consultations on the massive project, which envisions building new residential areas, headquarters for ministries and a financial center, are to start in August. Analysts anticipate arguments about the impact on the forests surrounding the city — the so-called “green belt” — which will be compounded by property disputes between residents of the region and the city and federal governments.

Whether the coming struggles will be enough to unify the environmental opposition is another question, however.

“There are lots of environmental groups, and there is no shortage of leaders. The problem is trying to get them into one organization,” Sliviyak said. “For a long time there has been a tradition of what you might call ‘horizontal’ organization. Because people don’t like being

told what to do.”

“After the latest reforms, lots of people are thinking about green parties, just as they did 20 years ago during glasnost,” he added. “Well, 20 years ago it didn’t work.”

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