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Environmental Rescue: Civic Groups Ride to Cities' Rescue – on Bikes

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Bicycle parking stands, like this one outside Kievsky Station in Moscow, are also being promoted in regional cities as a means for retailers to attract environmentally conscious customers. **Vladimir Filonov**

Entrepreneurs thinking of opening a shop in Samara can add a fourth "p" to the classic success-defining trio of price, product and positioning — parking.

And not just any kind of parking.

Urban environmentalists hope that parking for bicycles will become a differentiator for customers.

"When choosing between two shops, a cyclist will naturally prefer the one that allows to leave his or her bike safely, even if you need to cycle a bit further to do so," said Alexei Korovin, manager of Bike Friendly, a private initiative that has received approval from Samara city authorities and works to expand cyclists' awareness of traffic regulations and increasing the

quantity of bike parking lots.

Although some cities no longer suffer as they did in Soviet times from the environmental damage caused by centrally located heavy industry, urban areas are still deteriorating because of vehicle exhaust, garbage and dwindling green spaces — while civic groups are emerging as the primary force battling such problems. Private individuals have banded together to do everything from teaching fellow city dwellers about the joys of low-impact eco-living to keeping track of how municipal governments fulfill their obligations to maintain parks, fill potholes and care for trees — and nearly all groups are using the power of the Internet to unite, discuss and act.

Over the past 10 years Russia has done a poor job of taking care of its ecological health. Scientists from Yale and Columbia universities put Russia in last place when they published their ecological rating of 132 countries in the Financial Times in January.

More than one half of Russia's urban population (58 percent on average) is afflicted by polluted air. In the two largest, Moscow and St. Petersburg, this number reaches 100 percent. Every year the list of cities with significant air pollution increases, according to a report published by the Natural Resources and Environment Ministry in February, which presents data for 2010.

In many cities the environment is still afflicted by large industrial enterprises that the population depends on. Such factories, as part of the legacy left by the Soviet Union, are the main source of local budget revenues. At the same time urban garbage dumps are growing, forest areas decreasing and the number of cars is skyrocketing. The natural resources ministry estimates that vehicle emissions in 2010 were the cause of more than 40 percent of total air pollutants.

Evolutionary Struggles

Authorities sometimes try to solve the cities' problems by taking controversial steps. For example, the city of Moscow's territory will increase by almost 150 percent because of the annexation of the Moscow region's lands to the south of the capital as of July 1, based on an order made by President Dmitry Medvedev. The main driver for creating "Greater Moscow" is the desire to transfer government facilities out of the city center and relieve congestion.

However, this ambitious project has come under attack by urban-planning specialists and ecologists. They point to the complex environmental situation already existing in the territory to be annexed: garbage dumps, testing grounds for chemical and biological waste, and nuclear waste burial sites. Experts claim that there is a shortage of drinking water, which has been already experienced by the capital and is going to become more acute when its area increases. Also, the city's green belt — forests growing around Moscow that are located in the new territory — may be afflicted as a result of infrastructure development.

Last month, the working group on ecology protection supervised by the Public Chamber requested to freeze the Moscow expansion project until public hearings are held and expert opinions are obtained. However, the federal government refuses to deviate from the chartered course and involve public organizations in the process, referring to a federal law that authorizes the project and has already been adopted.

Environmental issues are not on the top of the list for St. Petersburg authorities, either. Currently, the city's social and economic development concept till 2020 is being created. It specifies five priority directions: transportation, health care, education, the urban environment, physical improvements and culture. In order to decrease the load on the transportation network, officials propose introducing paid entry to St. Petersburg's historical center and prohibit parking in places designated for pedestrians. Also, it is proposed to prohibit smoking in public areas and increase places designated for green plants.

However, there is no separate ecology line item in the long-term concept. "It is not because the officials are bad and do not think about ecology — they do think about it, and there are many good ones," said Mikhail Vinogradov, general manager of Idea Optima Group, which organized public discussions of the concept on the Internet. "It is just that other issues are more complex and need to be solved immediately. They include traffic jams, parking and public transportation management."

Virtual Activism

Almost 35,000 citizens participated in the discussion of St. Petersburg's Concept 2020 via Internet blogs and social networks. Therefore, the concept came to be seen as enjoying wider public backing. "Citizens have actually become a huge group of competent consultants," Vinogradov said.

"The contemporary generation is native to the digital world. The presence of young activists on the Net is not in question, it's their natural environment," said Tatyana Kargina, creator of the EcoWiki Internet project.

EcoWiki was started as a repository where Tatyana and her friends interested in ecology gathered all current information related to the topic. However, soon the volume of content additions became large-scale: Its architecture allowed anyone to add something, and the creators became moderators. Eventually, EcoWiki took on an organizational role, providing information on recent events and announcements of civic ecological initiatives. EcoWiki rapidly attracted an active, loyal and competent audience. Today, 2,000 people are subscribed to EcoWiki's mailing list and several thousand people visit the website every day. In Tatyana's opinion, this is the core of the ecological movement in Russia.

Activists gather virtually and exchange up-to-date information, participate in discussions and develop ideas. However, the main thing is coordination of their real-life activities.

One of the examples is the Do It Yourself marathon, which gathers activists annually in autumn and spring in different Russian cities. They use the format of a game to spruce up the cities' territories and involve local residents. In order to demonstrate the benefits of second-hand items, this year during the St. Petersburg marathon artists and urbanists will use left-over items to decorate a yard with simple art objects.

Starting Small

Russia has not yet adopted any broad laws, like recycling, that would involve citizens in the process of caring for the environment. So far only specific individual initiatives exist.

In addition to the Samara Bike Friendly project, whose promoters hope will result in more cycling infrastructure in the city and retailers installing bike stands, there is Moscow's Ecoloft project. According to the idea's creator, Muscovite Roman Sablin, this was an attempt "to conduct an experiment on ecological life within the city." A year ago, he rented a large flat in the very center of Moscow with four of his friends and set himself the goal of decreasing their ecological impact — the quantity of resources consumed daily. This task was solved by the Ecoloft residents using relatively simple rules. For example, they monitored water and power consumption, stopped using plastic bags and practiced separating their garbage in an attempt to minimize their waste.

Later Ecoschool, an educational project, was organized under the auspices of Ecoloft. Within its framework, Ecoloft residents and invited experts taught all comers how to decrease their footprint using simple approaches. In total, 40 workshops and lectures were held during the year, which were attended by approximately 1,000 people. Ecoschool organizers marketed the events via the Internet.

There are people promoting eco-friendly home repairs. A standard recipe for eco-friendly paint is milk, chalk and food coloring, said Alexei Shirshov, one of only a handful of eco-friendly renovation experts. This method is not only natural but also saves money. But eco-friendly renovation has not yet become popular. "A city resident thinks in stereotypes: plastic boards for the floor, wallpaper for the walls, etc. You need to abandon the stereotypes to commit your mind to eco-friendly renovation," Shirshov said. "Also, the consumer society likes guarantees, and there are no guarantees here. There are no books on the subject, no research, no experts, there's no one to ask."

Designers and Scientists

The nonprofit organization Free Space, which includes architects, artists and urbanists, is proposing to create a new architectural strategy for the Frunzensky district of St. Petersburg, according to which the visual appearance of the neighborhood will be defined by designers and urbanists. The first phase, which is set to start in May, will involve the district's residents and nonprofit organizations, including those in the ecological sphere, as well as concerned citizen groups, like cyclists.

According to the plans of Free Space, the city will not need to allocate money for implementation of the design — it could be provided by developers that perform construction within the district's territory. "In Western countries there is a '1 percent rule,' which says a developer carrying out any territory-development project must allocate 1 percent of the financing for urban land improvement and art. That is why public art is so well developed in New York," said Mikhail Klimovsky, head of Free Space. Currently, he estimates that the chance to make such a rule into law is minimal. However, he believes that it is quite possible to make a public agreement about a territory's design between the authorities, developers and the district's residents. The project includes four modules, each of which will be available for discussion on the Internet.

In 2010, experts from the St. Petersburg Natural Scientists Society, or ECOM, established an Alternative Public Inventory project to allow for a precise inventory of green areas that will allow them to be protected and preserved by the city government. This was the ecologists

countermeasure to the law on public green spaces, according to which the green areas of St. Petersburg were to decrease dramatically. In order to implement the project, the organization's members visited all parks and gardens and counted the number of plants. Members of the public also participated in the inventory process after having completed special training where for several hours they were taught how to draw trees. The effort revealed that in one of the two administrative districts in which the inventory was done, about 30 percent of the plants had been left out of the count stated in the law.

Also in 2010 a compromise was worked out between activists and city authorities with respect to the list: The green area was decreased according to the law, however the authorities undertook to perform a full inventory and keep a file on all parks and gardens and allocate financing to them.

The Alternative Public Inventory project is to be continued as a tool for public control after the specified goal has been achieved. "We were able to perform an inventory in five districts of the city and get a good understanding of how everything is organized," said Alexander Karpov, ECOM director. "At the end of 2011, when the official inventory was initiated, ECOM's representative was made a member of the city working group."

Political Ecology

In recent years, political activists in opposition to the authorities have often become involved in ecological issues.

For example, in 2007 a group of activists led by Yevgenia Chirikova was formed to oppose the construction of the Moscow to St. Petersburg federal highway. The construction involved partially felling the Khimki forest located close to Moscow. The protest against the forest clearing caused such public discussion that President Medvedev was forced to intervene. He postponed construction of the highway. Eventually, the project was modified: the territory to be cleared in the Khimki forest was decreased from 140 to 100 hectares, funding for ecological compensation was increased from 3 billion rubles to 4 billion rubles ($100 million to $135 million) and the construction companies promised to install noise protection shields alongside the highway in the forest district and make passages for animals.

St. Petersburg residents formed the St. Petersburg Observers Association, which was at the forefront of the protests against falsifications during the recent elections, but also addresses environmental issues. The activists are involved in current issues in city districts — from housing services, utilities and potholes to infill construction and declining park areas.

Civil oversight of municipal government was made part of the organization's charter during its formation, association head Alexandra Krylenko said.

We only have to announce the initiative in a district and it begins to take shape, she said. By cooperating with people holding the same views, it is easier to monitor violations, and any collective effort takes on more importance in the minds of officials, she added.

But the record shows that there are no stable mechanisms of interaction between the authorities and society in ecology. This leads to a vicious circle of policymakers making decisions that can negatively affect the environment, which in turn increases public

discontent. For now, civic initiatives seem to be the only way to rectify problems and sometimes even avoid them.

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