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Landfill Problem in Russia Is Mountainous

By Jennifer Rankin

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The Khimki garbage mountain started in the 1970s and is still growing. **Jennifer Rankin**

Yelena Stepanova's family never had a dacha, but as a child she gathered nuts, berries and mushrooms in the woods of her hometown in the Moscow suburb of Khimki. "It was a little corner of paradise," she recalled.

Today the "fairy-tale" woodland of Stepanova's memory is dominated by a 10-story high muddy mountain of garbage, which she can see and smell from her first-floor apartment less than a ten-minute walk away.

Now a 35-year-old mother, Stepanova does not open the windows and only drinks bottled water. "We don't know what kind of waste is there," she said. "It is awful to think of what we are breathing in," especially, she added, when the garbage is set on fire, sending plumes of smoke over the area.

“In the future I hope we move away from here, but at the moment we can’t,” she said anxiously.

At least 95 percent of Russia’s domestic garbage ends up in such landfill sites — giant open-air dumps mostly dating back to the Soviet Union.

As the nation becomes richer, people are throwing away more. Landfills are mushrooming and illegal dumps have sprung up across the country, spoiling forests and farmland.

Now Russia faces a warning that it will need to double landfill capacity by 2025 if current trends continue. A report by the World Bank’s International Finance Corporation published Monday urges the authorities to stop dumping waste in “insanitary” landfills and reduce trash sent there from landfills by 45 percent through a combination of recycling and “energy recovery” — using waste for fuel.

“[Russia] is generating too much waste,” Alexander Larionov, lead author of the report and operations officer on the IFC’s Russia Cleaner Production Program, said in an interview.

“These huge volumes of waste end up in open dumps, which pollute soil, destroy habitats, sometimes pollute groundwater and bring infectious diseases. More and more regions are beginning to experience these particular issues.”

The detritus of a decade-long consumer boom can be seen and smelled in Russian landfills.

The average citizen threw away 330 kilograms of garbage in 2010, up from 200 kilograms per head in 2000, according to the IFC, which expects this figure to jump to 500 kilograms by 2025 — bringing Russia in line with today’s European average.

The Khimki dump, originally set up by Soviet planners in the mid-1970s, has grown significantly in the last few years, said local environmental activist Sergei Ageyev in an interview near the base of the garbage mountain, where the sickly sweet smell of decay wafts on the breeze.

Seen from its southern side, the dump is a muddy hill with birds swooping over the recent piles of trash at the summit. At the base, stray dogs prowl through the debris and mounds of plastic bottles that lie under scraggly bushes.

Trucks kick up dust as they leave Khimki, an industrial town not far from where the Soviets halted the Nazi assault on Moscow in 1941, but which has more recently become known for vigorous protests against a planned highway that will slice through centuries-old oak forests.

“If [the authorities] really wanted to update the technology [of this landfill], they would have done it 10 or 15 years ago,” Ageyev said. “Now this is big business and no one is interested in changing it.”

Estimating the size of Russia’s current waste-management business is difficult because of the vast differences in tariffs for collection across Russia’s regions, the IFC says.

However, the market could be worth 2 billion euros ($2.50 billion) if the government increased recycling and energy recovery, the IFC analysts estimate, although this comes with

an up-front price tag of 40 billion euros' worth of investment to modernize the crumbling infrastructure.

According to the IFC, three in 10 Russian landfills fail to meet official sanitary standards, while up to 70 percent of the "waste-management infrastructure" — garbage cans, containers, trucks, sorting stations and landfills — is obsolete and needs to be replaced.

Environmental groups say this understates the problem.

"The situation is catastrophic," said Alexei Kiselyov of Greenpeace. "I cannot agree that [only] 30 percent of landfills are unsanitary. I would say that 99 percent of landfills are unsanitary."

"I cannot think of more than three landfills in Russia that you could say meet national sanitary legal standards," he added. "We urgently need legislation and regulation that strictly controls all stages of the waste cycle. The government does these things very badly at the moment."

Campaigners also worry about the thousands of illegal dumps that have sprung up across the country.

Russian authorities announced in April that since August 2011, they had found 22,243 illegal dumps covering 8,728 hectares; 58 percent were in water conservation areas, 15 percent on farmland, and 15 percent in forests.

The Natural Resources and Environment Ministry said it had eliminated 61 percent of these dumps and levied 25 million rubles in fines, almost half of which has been collected.

A Room With A View

Not everyone is deterred by the Khimki landfill, according to one local estate agent. Roman Kulikov, who manages sales at Khimki Skver, a development of multistory apartment blocks in clear view of the dump, said that 80 percent of the apartments have been sold.

"I think [the landfill] is not a problem," he says. "Local people say there are times in the summer when it is very hot, when the wind is blowing in this direction, that they feel it. But not in winter, not in autumn."

"For me, it is not really a problem," said Yulia Petrova, a 26-year old lawyer on maternity leave, who moved to Khimki a year ago to an apartment without a view of the dump. "We don't notice the smell, but the people who live down [the road] say in the summer they can smell it," she said while her toddler played on a tiny sand patch in a brightly painted children's park, with the garbage mountain looming on the horizon.

"Probably, with all the crows and the seagulls that are there, it is not very sanitary. But they say that it will be closed," she said, although she expressed doubt that this would really happen.

Recycled Politics

Waste management has not traditionally been seen as a problem, as planners were confident that Russia's vast lands meant they would never run out of places to put trash.

Most landfills, however, are on the edges of towns and cities and are starting to run out of room.

Around 95 percent of waste ends up in landfills, according to the IFC report. The rest is incinerated or reprocessed by a small cottage industry in recycling, outside the remit of local authorities.

As Russia catches up with Western Europe's consumption habits, the IFC wants to see it emulate European standards on recycling.

In the 27-country European Union, 38 percent of waste ends up in landfills, although this varies widely. Eco-conscious Austria puts practically none of its garbage in the ground, while former Soviet countries Latvia and Lithuania send 91 and 94 percent of waste to landfill, according to statistics published by Eurostat in March.

The IFC is urging Russia to "recover" 45 percent of its municipal waste by 2020, mostly by recycling and partly through incineration to generate energy, although it does not make a recommendation on the precise breakdown.

Large cities such as Moscow and St. Petersburg should be aiming to recover 70 percent of their waste by weight, the IFC says, while sparsely populated regions in Siberia or the Arctic Circle could get away with recycling as little as 10 to 20 percent.

Hitting this goal would save 200 million metric tons of waste by 2025, the IFC estimates, generating fuel and preventing valuable raw materials from being lost in the ground.

Nikolai Mefedev, an environmental protection expert at the Natural Resources and Environment Ministry, said the IFC report did not take into consideration measures the government is currently taking to improve the situation, including the closure of illegal dumps and the revision of a production and consumption law intended to improve waste management by creating new self-governing waste-management organizations.

A new version of the law passed its first reading last week and could come into force by Aug. 1.

Everyone agrees that waste is a problem, Mefedev said, but the country currently lacks the infrastructure to increase recycling. In December, then-Natural Resource and Environment Minister Yury Trutnev said landfills would remain the main way of dealing with garbage for the near future.

Recycling is not profitable, and Russia is not ready to sort its garbage, he said, as reported by Rossiiskaya Gazeta after an official briefing to journalists.

"People are ready. For the most part it is the government that is not ready," countered Maxim Shulga, a 28-year-old freelance programmer who volunteered for a one-off recycling collection day organized by green campaigners in northern Moscow in April.

“I want to keep our planet green. I worry, especially in Russia, where we have lots of territory, we simply allow garbage to pile up on the land,” Shulga said after emptying his 85-liter hiking pack stuffed with papers and plastic bottles into different containers.

Over a two-hour period, a trickle of Muscovites came laden with old magazines, glass bottles and tin cans, but they were heavily outnumbered by activists and journalists.

“It is a great shame that in Moscow there are so few possibilities for recycling,” said Anya Sarang, who came bearing cardboard boxes filled with old newspapers. “I would hope [this situation improves], but for the last 15 years I have hoped it would get better and it hasn’t.”

Sarang, the 38-year-old president of a charity campaigning for a “humane” drug policy, sees a connection between her bundles of cardboard, other social causes and the street protests that exploded in December after alleged ballot fraud.

“Before December, people were more closed, more pessimistic, skeptical and ironic about any kind of social activity. ... Suddenly we have a civil society,” she said.

“We all understand there won’t be a revolution, there won’t be a new government,” she said. “But at the very least we can try to make sure that the government pays attention to important social problems.”

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