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Gazprom Is an Environmental Hazard

By Vladimir Ryzhkov

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Gazprom goes out of its way to position itself in Europe as a modern and environmentally responsible company. At a recent meeting at the company's Moscow headquarters, Gazprom CEO Alexei Miller declared 2013 the "year of Gazprom ecology." But even if Gazprom intended to meet the most stringent environmental standards in its projects in Europe, such as Nord Stream, the same cannot be said of its work in Russia. This was spelled out clearly in a recent World Wildlife Fund report titled "Gazprom: One Group, Two Standards."

On Dec. 18, 2011, the Kolskaya oil rig capsized and sank while being towed in stormy waters off the coast of Kamchatka, claiming the lives of 53 people. Prior to that, the rig, which was operated by a Gazprom contractor, had drilled on the sea shelf near Kamchatka in violation of a government environmental-impact assessment. This shelf is a feeding ground for salmon and a breeding ground for red king crab, pollock, halibut, herring and other fish. Since one-fourth of Russia's marine-life resources are found there, it is unconscionable that oil drilling would be conducted anywhere within the 20-kilometer offshore limit. Yet the Kolskaya oil rig was drilling only 12 kilometers from the shore.

Another Gazprom project, the Prirazlomnoye drilling platform, in the southeast Barents Sea,

represents a serious threat to the fragile Arctic environment. Drilling is slated to begin next fall. The platform itself has been under construction for 15 years and is still unready for use. Environmental and drilling experts warn of a high probability of oil spills once operations begin. Cleaning such spills in the extreme ocean conditions and ice of the far north would be extremely difficult. An oil spill in the region could cover an area four times the size of Lake Baikal and pollute 3,000 kilometers of coastline. At risk are the Nenetsky nature reserve and the Baigach and Nenetsky wildlife sanctuaries. What's more, there are also serious doubts regarding the economic viability of drilling for oil and gas in the Arctic. Notably, both Shell and BP have halted projects in the region.

Since 2006, Gazprom has been a partner in the Sakhalin-2 and Sakhalin-3 projects on Sakhalin island. Environmentalists are sounding alarms over the monopoly's plans to build a third drilling platform when it lays oil pipelines on the island. The company is also drilling for oil on the shelf of Piltun Lagoon, in northeastern Sakhalin. This is the same area that serves as a feeding ground for rare gray whales, whose numbers are estimated at less than 300. Drilling in this area could easily lead to the extinction of this species.

What's more, Gazprom plans to build a major oil pipeline to China along the "western route," through the Altai Mountains, could also have disastrous consequences for the environment.

According to the plans, the pipeline will cross into China directly through a short section of the Russian-Chinese border that runs along the ridge of southern Altai. The problem is that the pipeline would inevitably cross over the Ukok Plateau, a UNESCO world natural heritage site, in which all construction is prohibited.

A powerful fire burned 10,000 acres of Ukok Plateau in September 2011 at a time when Gazprom surveyors were putting up markers along the route of future construction. Local residents and environmentalists blame them for the fire. The prosecutor's office in the Altai republic has acknowledged that the Gazprom work in the area is illegal. Gazprom continues work on the Ukok Plateau despite claims that a formal decision on construction of the pipeline is still pending.

The 36th session of the UNESCO World Heritage Committee was held in St. Petersburg in June and July, and a decision was adopted regarding the Gazprom plan to build a pipeline through the Ukok Plateau. The Committee expressed deep concern over the preparatory work and once again warned that any decision to move forward with construction would threaten the plateau and place it on the list of world heritage in danger. The committee also recommended that Gazprom halt all work on the plateau and consider alternate routes for the gas pipeline.

Gazprom cannot tout itself as an environmentally responsible company if it ignores those recommendations and continues its reckless disregard for the environment in Russia.

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