

Greenpeace Rebuffs Talk of Arctic Protest Conspiracy

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Greenpeace activists on a rigid-hulled inflatable boat, or Rib, sailing alongside the Arctic Sunrise.

In early October, Rosneft head Igor Sechin made a brief, enigmatic comment suggesting that there was more than meets the eye behind a Greenpeace protest Sept. 18 against a Gazprom oil rig in the Arctic, an action that resulted in the arrest of 30 people and a black eye for Russia's image abroad.

"Look who is paying them for this action," said Sechin, whose state-owned oil firm has an exclusive right to drill in the Arctic together with Gazprom.

Sechin did not elaborate on his statement, and calls to his spokesman for clarification went unanswered. But allegations that Greenpeace and other environmental groups act at the behest of business interests or sovereign powers are long-running.

What such accusations usually lack, however — including in the case of Greenpeace's protest

in the Arctic — is concrete evidence to support them.

The main theory voiced with regard to the Greenpeace action, in which activists attempted to hang a banner from Gazprom's Prirazlomnaya oil rig in the Barents Sea, is that a Gazprom competitor paid for the stunt to hurt the gas giant's reputation and perhaps even to create an opening to gain a foothold itself in the Arctic.

Most other countries with access to Arctic energy reserves have barred exploration — a fact that Greenpeace takes partial credit for, having organized protests against Total, Statoil, Shell, BP and other companies — making Russian territory potentially more attractive for international firms.

"As most countries closed their Arctic territories for exploitation, all the companies are rushing to our Arctic," said Yevgeny Shvarts, director of the WWF Russia's conservation policy program.

But at the moment, only Gazprom and Rosneft have been given the right to explore the region. The two state energy companies are, however, allowed to sign cooperation agreements with foreign firms, which they have been eager to do, as, unlike some foreign companies, they do not have the necessary technical expertise or the experience to drill in the harsh Arctic conditions.

Rosneft has already concluded agreements with the U.S.'s ExxonMobil, Italy's Eni and Norway's Statoil, while Gazprom has a contract with Shell and both companies have signed a contract with China's CNPC.

"There is no serious competition between the companies," said Vladimir Chuprov, head of the energy program at Greenpeace Russia. "Russia has neither the experience nor the technology to drill in the Arctic, so it chooses almost anyone who has money and technology. So the only competition is about which company will get more land [to exploit]."

Alexei Knizhnikov, who heads the energy program at WWF Russia, agreed with Chuprov, saying that because no company could work in the Russian Arctic without Russia's approval, there could be no real competition.

"According to Sechin's logic, only Rosneft could pay Greenpeace for their protest against Gazprom, but that is ridiculous and unlikely because a similar action was organized against one of Rosneft's partners that conducted a seismologic expertise in the Barents Sea," he said.

Chuprov also said there would be no reason for Gazprom competitors to seek access to the Arctic since, according to him, the actual amount of energy reserves there is quite small. He argued that the leadership of Russian firms want to explore the area to reap corrupt personal gains.

"Huge business is being formed in the Arctic, but all contracts will then be run on budget money," he said.

Gazprom Neft Shelf, which runs Prirazlomnaya, declined to comment for this story. But energy experts such as Alexei Kantorovich, of the Novosibirsk division of the Russian Academy of Sciences, said Chuprov was incorrect in his evaluation of Arctic oil reserves,

arguing that they are in fact substantial.

Pavel Salin, a political analyst and director of Moscow Financial University's Center for Political Research, said environmental protests always served outside interests, whether of companies or governments.

Salin said that simultaneously with the Greenpeace protest, there appeared calls for all of the Arctic to come under international control, which could open the door to foreign companies gaining an edge over Russian firms if drilling were allowed.

Sovereign Interests

Some observers see other forces potentially at play in the Greenpeace protest.

Ilya Ponomaryov, a State Duma deputy who used to work for the now defunct oil firm Yukos, said he doubted there were any financial interests in the Arctic at the moment since companies had to invest much more money than they could gain from drilling. But, he said, what could be at work were the geopolitical interests of various countries who wanted to break their dependence on Gazprom for oil and gas and live on their own alternative resources.

"If there was someone who pushed Greenpeace for this action it was a political structure abroad, not companies," Ponomaryov said.

The overall budget of Greenpeace Russia is about \$2.9 million, according to Greenpeace's financial report for 2012. Of that, \$353,000 was in private donations. No state bodies, corporations or political parties were among its stated sponsors last year.

Ponomaryov said he believed Greenpeace was guided strictly by benevolent intentions when protesting at the Pirazlomnaya rig, although he alleged that environmental groups often used businesses to reach their aims.

"They have to maneuver between different influential groups, and Greenpeace knows how to do that well, knows how to make deals with oil companies, for example, when they fight against power plants," he said.

While Greenpeace denies having any links to corporations, the financial histories of some environmental groups raise questions about their business ties.

In September, the Sydney Morning Herald reported that one of Australia's most prominent environmental groups, Keep Australia Beautiful, was lobbying the government to oppose a bottle and can recycling program while being funded by Coca-Cola. According to the report, Coca-Cola provides a quarter of the group's funds.

Keep Australia Beautiful chief executive Peter McLean told the newspaper that he was not ashamed of its cooperation with Coca-Cola, arguing that it helped to achieve mutually beneficial outcomes and was directed toward achieving better recycling outcomes.

Ponomaryov said the best example he knew of cooperation with corporations purportedly helping to reach environmental goals was the activities of State Duma Deputy Maxim

Shingarkin, vice chair of the Duma's Natural Resources and Environment Committee and a former Greenpeace activist.

Media reports have said Shingarkin has organized several environmental campaigns whose real purpose is to lobby the interests of large corporations, including Gazprom. He denies these allegations.

"I am a Duma deputy — I cannot collaborate with corporations," Shingarkin said. "When I see that people are suffering somewhere, I go to that place and talk to the heads of companies that people are protesting against. I am trying to have a dialogue."

But his interests often seem to differ from those of environmental groups. When the WWF opposed Gazprom's plans to launch exploration of an oil and gas field in the Okhotsk Sea, Shingarkin supported the plan, and the the exploration started this year.

As for Greenpeace, Chuprov said he had often heard accusations that his group colluded with corporations, but when he has asked those who make the allegations to name a specific company, he has never received an answer.

"All they can do is blame us for what they would blame another commercial company, but we are not a commercial company — we cannot be bribed," Chuprov said.

Ponomaryov said that government officials like Sechin based their remarks on the vague belief that Greenpeace had agreements with different companies and therefore some commercial entity ordered the Arctic protest.

"The government rejects the idea that Greenpeace could act alone because they are all former KGB agents and look for conspiracy theories everywhere," he said.

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