

Lies and Disinformation Cover Up Russia's Environmental Assault on the Baltic Sea

By [Maria Georgieva for Coda Story](#)

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A deeper look into Russia's role in Baltic Sea pollution reveals a whole ecosystem of disinformation and denialism. **Maria Georgieva / Coda Story**

Sergei Gribalev's rubber boots sank into the open field's thick, foul-smelling mud. As he prepared to take water samples and examine a nearby stream, seagulls landed atop swimming pool-sized basins, filled with brown manure.

"This is just the tip of the iceberg," he said, through a respirator mask that covered the lower half of his face.

Gribalev is a leading figure in an environmental group named the Green Alliance. We stood on the outskirts of Pobeda in the Leningrad region. Located 50 miles northwest of Russia's second-largest city, St. Petersburg, and home to 2,000 people, Pobeda's name translates as

“victory.” The stench in the village was appalling.

Four lagoons overflowed with thousands of tons of animal waste. Some were dotted with rotting chicken carcasses. These lakes of excrement, containing hazardous amounts of phosphorus, have been created by Udarnik, one of the biggest poultry farms in the area. The facility has been dumping manure onto nearby land since it first began operations in the 1970s.

The contents of the lagoons have leached into the soil and polluted nearby rivers, discharging between 10 and 20 tons of phosphorus annually, according to estimates from the Finnish Environment Institute. Half of it ends up in the Baltic Sea and flows into the Gulf of Finland, which also takes in the coast of Estonia. The contaminated waters then head south towards Sweden and Poland.

Phosphorus pollution contributes to a process known as eutrophication. This occurs when a body of water becomes overly enriched with minerals and nutrients, which promote excessive algae growth. Such growth can result in oxygen depletion and the consequent devastation of marine life. In the Baltic Sea, eutrophication has led to expanses of dead seabed that adds up to an area roughly the size of Denmark.

Much of the pollution responsible comes from the Leningrad region in northwestern Russia. Several countries around the Baltic have pressured the Russia’s government to reduce its discharge of phosphorus, Finland chief among them. Over the years, Russia has presented itself as a partner in this endeavor; a concerned nation, keen to help solve ecological problems. Officials in St. Petersburg have even trumpeted their own cooperation with other countries around the Baltic.

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But a deeper look into Russia’s role reveals a whole ecosystem of disinformation and denialism. This toxic environment has been created by lobbyists, corporations and politicians, who refuse to entertain the possibility that the dumping of vast amounts of untreated animal waste on Russian soil could possibly lead to pollution and ecological disruption elsewhere. Far from working to address the issue, they have instead dismissed and attempted to discredit the work of independent researchers whose findings run contrary to their own interests.

For years, Udarnik has denied violating environmental laws relating to the dumping of manure to local media, prosecutors and activists. The company also declined to answer questions for this article.

Udarnik is only part of the problem. The area around St. Petersburg is home to at least 145 large-scale cattle, pig and poultry farms, each with about 172,000 animals. There are more than 10 active poultry farms left in the region. According to researchers, every year a single poultry farm can deposit around 10 tons of phosphorus into the Baltic sea.

Denying the facts

Seppo Knuuttila, a leading researcher from the Finnish Environment Institute, has witnessed

the conditions in Pobeda first-hand. He describes them as the worst he has ever seen.

“Manure lay spread in the countryside, not in such a way that it served as fertilizer. Huge quantities completely covered the ground,” he said.

Knuuttila has been monitoring pollution in the Baltic since the 1980s and first began surveying possible sources in the area surrounding Saint Petersburg in 2008. “It was pioneering work in Russia, because no one had information on emissions from large animal production plants,” he said.

When he first identified several large polluters, the Russian reaction was openly hostile. Knuuttila found himself attacked in the Russian media and referred to as a “hooligan and a provocateur” by the state-run news agency RIA Novosti.

“There was an urgent need for preventative measures, but our results were not received enthusiastically,” he said.

In the spring of 2011, as Knuuttila was working on a project to document emissions in the area, his research revealed a massive spillage of manure into the Ladoga River after a dam broke at the Nevskaya poultry farm in the Leningrad region.

The Nevskaya spill first made the news in Finland, but it also received coverage in Russia. “Once it became known to the Russian media, the authorities could no longer hide the company’s problems. This may explain the irritation towards me,” said Knuuttila.

Knuuttila said the local environmental chief of the Leningrad region accused him of “lying and slandering Russia,” after he had revealed the details of the accident. The official told Knuuttila that she had been in contact with the management of the poultry farm and had been assured that nothing had happened.

After the incident, Knuuttila analyzed water samples and monitored satellite images of the site. He estimated that between 40 and 50 tons of phosphorus had been released, much of it into nearby waters.

Neither representatives from Nevskaya nor local government officials replied to interview requests for this article.

Despite the negative attention, Knuuttila continued his research investigating the source of the pollution from Russia. The worst was yet to come. At the start of 2012, Knuuttila discovered what would later be known as the biggest ever phosphorus leak into the Baltic Sea – a massive 1,000 tons a year, according to his calculations. It emanated from the Russian fertilizer company Eurochem’s Fosforit plant, along the River Luga in Kingisepp, an ancient town located 85 miles southwest of St. Petersburg.

Knuuttila’s efforts to trace the leak back to the source and investigate it led to his arrest by the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) in April 2012. Knuuttila says he was on an official data-collection trip, taking samples from the river. Eurochem, however, said he had trespassed on factory owned land.

While detained, Knuuttila was interrogated by the police. Upon his release the following

morning, his computer was confiscated by the FSB.

His arrest escalated into a confrontation between the Finnish and Russian officials. In a sharply worded statement, the Russian Foreign Ministry's press officer Alexander Lukashevich described Knuuttila's actions as "unacceptable" and called upon Finland to explain his activities.

Now, fearing arrest, Knuuttila says he can no longer work in Russia. This has effectively ended his research in the region – at great potential cost to the environment of the Leningrad region and the Baltic Sea.

"Something nasty can happen to me in Russia," he said. "My work was not completed, even though the results achieved were very significant. If I'd try to take samples or to approach a pollution source, I would almost certainly be re-arrested."

Denials and fines

Farms such as Udarnik have been dumping manure on the land of the Leningrad region since the Soviet era, causing environmental devastation there and in the Baltic sea. It appears to be more convenient and cost effective for them to continue to do so, facing only occasional fines from the local environmental authorities, than to invest in expensive new waste treatment technology.

"There are no systems for managing the manure. While local supervising authorities impose fines and penalties, they turn a blind eye to the ecological problems, which get worse year after year, worsen year after year," said Gribalev.

In 2010, Udarnik formally changed its management and its new owners expressed their wishes to do things differently. The company made some promising moves to address the pollution. In 2013, it joined forces with the Finnish environmental organization the John Nurminen Foundation, which focuses on protecting the Baltic Sea, to investigate options for minimizing the risk of runoff from the manure lagoons to the environment.

A joint Finnish-Swedish project was launched to install a large filter system with the ability to rinse the manure and reduce the phosphorus leaking into the Gulf of Finland.

But, according to Marjukka Porvari from the foundation, Udarnik could not afford to fully implement the system. "We had a project ongoing up until June 2017, but manure has been leaking for over 40 years, and it has gotten worse since we were there," she said.

Some continue to flat-out deny that untreated manure is harmful to the environment. "They are not doing anything wrong," said Nikita Melnikov, the billionaire former owner of Sinyavskaya, Russia's largest egg producer. "It's more important to handle the municipal sewage systems than to talk about chicken farms."

The facilities at Sinyavskaya, also in the Leningrad region, house around 3.58 million egg-laying birds and the farm produces over two billion eggs per year. In 2017, more than 3.2 billion eggs were produced in total around the Leningrad region.

'I'm worried about my children's health'

Local ecologist Gribalev spends much of his time monitoring the pollution around Pobeda. He uses a DIY laboratory, set up in a van that looks like something from the movie Ghostbusters.

After returning from the manure dumping site outside the poultry farm Udarnik, where he was taking water samples, Gribalev returned to his van where he analyzes the tests.

"Many people fear they will become ill or poisoned," he said, while analyzing data in the village of Pobeda.

According to the Vyborg district's City prosecutor's office, which has filed a lawsuit against Udarnik, the company has repeatedly violated environmental standards related to untreated wastewater in Pobeda and will be obliged to build sewage treatment plants. According to the prosecutor's office, the damage caused to the environment is estimated at approximately \$68,700.

In 2018, Grigory Chistyakov, director general of Udarnik, was issued several fines for dumping untreated sewage. The sums ranged from \$45 to \$450.

The prosecutor's office declined to comment on the action. Chistyakov, also refused several requests for an interview and did not respond to written questions.

Last year, local authorities promised to rebuild a wastewater treatment plant in Pobeda, but the project has not yet seen the light of day, owing to local bureaucracy. The reconstruction costs are estimated at up to \$5 million. Now, residents say officials are no longer even responding to their complaints, regarding the stench of leaking manure and the lack of wastewater treatment in the village. The project has now been postponed until the end of 2021.

"They do not want to cooperate with representatives from other organizations or with us villagers," said local activist Nadezhda Oporova. "It's convenient for those in power. The corrupt poultry farm is the city's source of income, they work together — the authorities and the farm owners."

Melnikov now works as a lobbyist, shuttling between farm owners and local politicians. As such, he prefers to blame Finland for the pollution of the Baltic Sea. "The poultry farms have no negative impact on the environment. Why is Russia to blame? Finland is responsible too," he said.

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The consequences of the Russian media and security forces targeting researchers like Seppo Knuuttila are grave. The total amount of pollutants discharged from agricultural and industrial facilities into the nearby rivers and the Gulf of Finland is unknown.

"The only existing data has been gathered during international projects, and there have been no such studies carried out since 2012," said Knuuttila.

He is not surprised to find out that the situation in the area surrounding Udarnik has deteriorated.

“When nobody monitors such things, there is no risk of being caught. The authorities are not interested, or are bribed and there is simply no incentive for these companies to take better care of the environment,” he said.

Meanwhile, the Baltic Sea continues to be flooded with phosphorus, fragile marine ecosystems perish and the residents of Pobeda and other places like it suffer.

As Oporova explained, “I moved here to breathe fresh air. But now I have brown tap water, I can’t drink it and I’m worried about my children’s health. It’s all a direct result of the farm owners’ indifference.”

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