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The Targeting of Russian Environmentalists Must End

By Arshak Makichyan

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Arshak Makichyan at a picket in Moscow. **Arshak Makichyan / instagram**

As the political crackdown on any form of opposition in Russia continues almost a year into the Kremlin's criminal invasion of Ukraine, the persecution of Russian environmental activists is also increasing, which bodes ill for any eventual transition to a free society in Russia's future.

This is something I can speak to from first-hand experience. On Feb. 1, a Russian court upheld a ruling made last year stripping me of my Russian citizenship — the only one I have ever had — rendering me stateless. I was targeted for my work as an environmental activist and anti-war campaigner.

In stripping me of my citizenship, the authorities resorted to a long-forgotten Soviet method for dealing with dissidents such as the cellist Mstislav Rostropovich and the poet Josef Brodsky whom they felt unable to arrest.

Having allowed me to leave Russia last year, the government was determined to prevent me from returning, and I was accused of giving incorrect information on my application for Russian citizenship when I was just a child. My father and brother have also received similar treatment and were given just three days to leave Russia on Thursday.

While there has been international press coverage of my case, the numerous other environmental activists and movements being persecuted in Russia today generally receive no attention, but the need to support these people is now greater than ever.

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Global warming is occurring 2.5 times faster in Russia than the world average, the country's vast permafrost is melting and its infrastructure is under threat, and yet the government remains without a plan for the future.

Russians will soon come to understand that their enemy is not Ukraine or the collective West, but rather carbon dioxide emissions and environmental degradation. If the Ukrainian army and international sanctions on Moscow are unable to stop Putin, the climate crisis will.

At that point, environmental groups — should they still exist — will be called upon to perform a vital function in communicating the truth about climate change to the Russian public. As recent events show, the survival of these fringe movements will not be easy; several important environmental NGOs have been forced to dissolve in recent months, such as Sakhalin Environment Watch, which successfully campaigned to save a unique population of gray whales in the Russian Far East, and the Arkhangelsk region's Movement 42, which achieved a rare win by preventing the building of a vast landfill site at Shiyes in the Arctic wilderness.

Despite the considerable international press coverage of political repression in Russia, the persecution of the country's environmental activists often goes unreported. In some cases, environmental activists in Russia have become so marginalized that they themselves often don't realize quite how vital their work is.

Groups tend to find themselves in the crosshairs of the authorities when their outspoken campaigning strays too close to the political realm, while others make powerful enemies by standing in the way of those trying to make money from the exploitation of Russia's natural resources.

The fate of Movement 42 is case in point. While their name — a reference to the article of the Russian constitution guaranteeing every Russian citizen the right to a favorable environment — may be familiar to only a few people, the group's work defending the Russian Arctic from development over recent years has been invaluable, while its continued activism since the war in Ukraine began has been incredibly brave.

On Dec. 5, Movement 42 publicized the public consultations being held on the construction of another huge landfill site, this one in the uninhabited Arkhangelsk region village of Kholmogory. The authorities were keen to hold the public consultations without the public's

input, however. As a result, the consultations were postponed, and Movement 42 was declared a foreign agent by the Russian government a few days later.

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Foreign agent status greatly complicates the lives of any activist in a movement, as well as the legality of the movement itself. An individual deemed a foreign agent in Russia is barred from offering environmental expertise, making it a handy tool for the state to use against inconvenient environmentalists.

Movement 42 played an important role in the regional grassroots movement to stop the planned landfill site at Shiyes being built to solve Moscow's huge trash problem. That victory, after which bins for separate waste collection were finally introduced to the courtyards of the Russian capital, demonstrated Movement 42's commitment to fight for the planet even if it means taking on the Russian government — something incompatible with late-stage Putinism.

But despite all the repression and the forced closure of NGOs, environmental protests do still happen in Russia. State media may be able to lie to its audience about the war in Ukraine, but it's harder to lie about what's going on in front of people's noses. In one tragic example, Andrei Garyaev, the leader of the Poltava Anti-Dumping movement, committed suicide in October after months of harassment and legal pressure from various government agencies.

In many ways, being an environmental activist in Russia today is far more radical than performing sensationalist stunts in European museums involving pouring soup on world-famous works of art, which for some reason receive global coverage while the deaths of Russian activists go unreported.

As in any dictatorship, the situation in Russia is unique, but I believe that the greatest harm to the country's environment is being caused not by oil companies or greedy developers, but by the state's increasingly repressive machine and its cruel legislation on foreign agents.

While it's undeniable that Russian society has shown extraordinary scorn for the planet and the natural world, it is also noteworthy that environmental activism is the only branch of Russian civil society that has managed to secure any real victories over the government in recent years.

As every last medium for dissent in Russia is systematically crushed by the Kremlin machine, those outside the country have a responsibility to support the brave activists who continue to fight for our planet in the face of terrible consequences.

One day soon, the survival of Russia's few remaining activist networks could prove an essential resource for building a democratic society.

The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

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