



Norges Naturvernforbund

Friends of the Earth Norway

Increased pressure on Russian environmental organizations

– Manipulation of public participation

Note by Yngvild Lorentzen, Head of International project department,

yl@naturvern.no, +47 92 01 94 54

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During the last months the environmental organizations in Russia have been facing political attacks and various forms of pressure from governmental structures or from circles close to the political establishment. The Russian environmental organizations have since the breakdown of the Soviet Union constantly been exposed to various forms of pressure from the authorities, but the situation has significantly worsened during the last half year.

Naturvernforbundet has discussed this situation with several organizations in Northwest Russia. In this note we outline the main processes and incidents we have come over, which we can document, and which have been directly affecting our partners. Surely there are more incidents that we do not have information on.

Why now?

The natural question to ask is why the political attacks are increasing in number and severity just now. Also this issue we have discussed with our partners, and they believe that this is due to many potentially controversial issues that are emerging on the political agenda in the coming years. These are issues more or less related to the challenging sphere of energy security: Supremacy over energy and marine resources in the Arctic and Far East, climate change, nuclear development program,

transport of oil and gas etc are all such issues, but there are also prestige projects as the Olympic Games in Sochi that seem to be reason for increased pressure on NGOs.

The organizations that we have discussed with consider the attacks to be directly initiated by the so called “power block” of Edinaja Rossija. With these potentially controversial issues on the agenda, it might seem that is of importance of the authorities to secure support, or silence, from NGOs by more or less taking them over, by creating new organizations, or by limiting their access to decision making processes. A civil society that is controlled by the authorities, and which from the outside can seem to support the authorities in crucial issues, can give increased legitimacy to the Russian authorities’ political positions on a false basis. The more the authorities can use these controlled organizations as alibis in political processes, the more the possibility of the many smaller and uncontrolled environmental organizations will decrease.

Regarding the national environmental organization Russian Socio-ecological Union (RSEU) that Naturvernforbundet is supporting, despite of many local members, they are not very strong on national level yet. RSEU has so far not faced any attempts of political pressure on the organization.

Political take-over of organizations

Two well-known Russian organizations have during the last half year experienced attempts of political take-over of their organizations.

All-Russian Society for Nature Conservation (Vserossiiskoe Obschestvo Okhrany Prirody, or VOOP) is the oldest environmental organization in Russia, and was established as long back as in 1924. During Soviet period it was governmental controlled, but after the breakdown of the Soviet Union it has gradually transformed into an independent and democratic organization.

During spring 2009 new persons appeared in the central management of the organization, half of the staff was fired, and the president resigned, as we understand, under pressure. The local member groups received a letter with suggestion for new statutes, which implicated a strong commercialization of the organization. In conversations with the management, they got more or less subtle threats that they could lose status as local group of VOOP if they did not follow the processes laid out by the management. They were also summoned to separate meetings with the new management, a practice that has never been used before. Several of the local groups have boycotted the process of formation of new statutes, and have also refused to meet the management separately.

The organization need to elect new president in a formal way, and the new management has already a candidate. The problem for the local groups is to have a possibility to gather and decide about an alternative candidate. This can be done on a formal assembly of local groups, which also prepares the congress. The congress is the highest decision making organ of the organization, where the also president is elected. An attempt to organize a formal assembly was made in October 2009, but its formal status was no approved, as the Moscow groups did not show up. A congress is now under planning, but the preparations now are undertaken by the new management.

As long as the local groups have managed to block the introduction of new statutes, and the elections so far not have taken place, there is still a hope that the organization can resist the attempts of take-over and transformation.

In the well-known and well respected organization **Russian Geographical Society**, the process for political take-over was completed fast in November 2009. At the elections Vladimir Putin was elected as head of Stewardship Committee, while Sergey Shoigu, Minister of Civil defense, emergency situations and natural catastrophes, was elected president. The Russian environmentalists Naturvernforbundet has discussed the political take-over of the Russian Geographical Society with, believe this is a conscious attempt to get a well respected “civil society” organization to appear as supportive to governmental political positions in the upcoming struggle for resources in the Arctic areas that will be available as result of climate change.

Manipulation of NGO access to public environmental impact assessments.

Oleg Bodrov from the organization Zelenyj Mir from the closed nuclear city Sosnovyj Bor outside St. Petersburg tells that the organizations possibility to influence on big industrial projects with high potential ecological risk has been gradually reduced. In theory there is an open access for the organizations to make **public environmental impact assessment** on big projects. However, the regulations give **right to project documentation only to two organizations**, leaving others with no documents to work on and thus without possibility to making a real assessment.

Recently two very important rounds of EIA have been conducted for building of the four new reactors at Leningrad Power Plant (LNPP). According to Oleg Bodrov, in both processes the two organizations that managed to register and get the project documentation were organizations under control of Rosatom.

In the first process for the 1st and 2nd reactor, Bodrov contacted the administration of Sosnovyj Bor when the EIA was announced, and asked to register Zelenyj Mir for a public assessment. The answer was that two organisations were already registered. Both were Moscow-based, the experts they should use worked in or in close contact with Rosatom. Later on Bodrov found the assessment results in the administration of Sosnovyj Bor, and discovered that the person that was stated as responsible for the assessment in one of the organisations was Gratchov. He was at that time was president of the Ecology committee in the state Duma, and thus represented the state system. The results were also published in the local newspaper, under the headline that stated that the new reactors would give no whatsoever impact on the environment.

In the second round for the 3rd and 4th reactors in 2009, a similar process happened. Even by the end 2008 there was no clear date for then the public environmental impact assessment should be opened. However, in two separate letters, both dated 31.12.2008, the same two organisations from Moscow that participated in the first EIA asked for registration in the new public EIA for the next reactors. It was later clear that the local administration at that time had got no information about dates for the EIA process, but decided to register the two organisations anyway.

Green World quickly created a lot of public attention about the process, and complained that this was manipulation of their possibility to participate. When they some time later wanted to contact the organisations and ask for their results, it became clear that the EIA task just like that was passed on to two new organizations, obviously to avoid the criticism.

When Bodrov contacted one of these new organisations, a secretary asked him to call to those who were responsible, and gave him a phone number. When he called this number, he ended up at the secretary of the very same Gratchov that was in charge of the first assessment, and who now is an advisor of Kirienko, the head of Rosatom.

Bodrov states that if practice with “artificial” organizations that get hold of the documentation for environmental impact assessments earlier happened now and then, this has increasingly become a standard.

Various incidents

11th of December 2009, on the very popular program on actual issues Gordon-Kikhot (on main governmental channel, TV “first channel”)the environmental movement received a massive attack. The thematic of the program was whether Russian environmental movement work on western money, not understandable with how and for what. The journalist Aleksander Gordon had among others leader of Russian Greenpeace, Ivan Blokov in studio, who after extremely provocative questions, with repeated interruptions from the journalist, walked out of the studio. Attempts from Oleg Mitvol, representative of national nature inspection, to talk positively about the environmental movement, were also constantly interrupted.

In January 2010 the name of the web site of the antinuclear organization **Ecodefense** was bought by pronuclear forces. 10 years since registration, the site <http://www.antiatom.ru/> had become very popular. But as it was time for re-registration, the owner/host called for an auction. The site was bought for 3000 USD by pronuclear forces. It is still called “antiatom”, but confuses the readers by promoting nuclear energy as a good solution. Ecodefence had to open a new site, now with the address <http://anti-atom.ru/>.

28th of January 2010 was the office of the organization Baikal Environmental Wave raided by police after they criticized the reopening of a paper mill. The police confiscated the organization's computers under the pretext that they were using unlicensed software. This was done despite the fact that it was shown documents that confirmed that all applications were either licensed or for free use. Please see a NGO declaration about this in Annex 1.

Another, but not new problem is the establishment of completely new “NGO”s in order to have alibis in potentially difficult issues. This has been done in connection with the Olympic Games in Sochi.

Another organisation called The “Russian green movement” was funded 8th of December 2009, with persons from culture, show-business, and all of them close to political establishment. These are

people with no former activity within environmental issues and with obviously no interest to contact with existing environmental organizations. Their position and intentions are still unclear, but our environmental partners consider such organisations also to be part of a broader attempt to reduce the role and impact of real organisations.

HANDS OFF THE DEFENDERS OF LAKE BAIKAL!

Declaration of NGOs

In the name of the NGOs of Russia, we express our decisive protest against the provocation which has targeted the environmental NGO “Baikal Environmental Wave.” We demand an objective investigation and punishment of the provocateurs.

On 28 January 2010 the office of “Baikal Environmental Wave” was blocked by representatives of the State Direction of Internal Affairs (GUVVD) of Irkutsk Oblast. Without showing a warrant, the GUVVD representatives took computers from the office under the pretext of verifying the “use of non-licensed software.” These actions of the militia took place despite the fact that they were shown documents, confirming that all the computer software is either licensed or is distributed free-of-charge.

The desperate effort of three of the female employees of “Baikal Ecological Wave” to halt the carrying away of the equipment by six militia was later cynically described as “*restraining law enforcement officers.*”

We are appalled by the inappropriate use of law enforcement – not for protecting the rights and freedoms of citizens, but instead for pressuring those NGOs that are engaged in defending those rights and protection of the natural riches of Russia – the foundation of life and of the activity of ours and our descendants.

Those for whom it is more important to receive a dirty profit are acting through methods that have become customary in wild Russian capitalism – that is, to use any means to remove an obstacle on the path of receiving profit, profit, and profit. It is not a secret that “Baikal Environmental Wave” is in practice a center of public protection of Lake Baikal from pollution, and a center looking for a solution to the problem of development of the town of Baikal’sk without the polluting Baikal Paper and Pulp Mill.

Together with “Baikal Environmental Wave” we demand: the relaunching of the Baikal Paper and Pulp Mill represents an environmental catastrophe; the decree of the Russian government, which gives permission for the relaunching of the work of the Mill and of the construction of new mills around Lake Baikal must be repealed!

We demand the immediate return to “Baikal Environmental Wave” of those computers taken by the militia, and the halting of provocations against this NGO.

We ask that this declaration be considered as an appeal to the General Procurator of the Russian Federation with to conduct a detailed investigation of what has taken place, including who the initiators were and the punishment of the leadership of this shameful provocation.

A.V. Zimenko, Biodiversity Conservation Center (Moscow)*

A.V. Yablokov, Marine Mammal Council (Moscow)

S.V. Simak, International Socio-Ecological Union

N.I. Rybakov, Environmental Human Rights Center “Bellona” (St. Petersburg)

G.G. Rezhbek, Northern Caucasus Branch of the International Environmental Fund (Rostov on the Don)

V. Servetnik, “Nature and Youth” (Murmansk)

N.O. Terekhova, Committee of Soldiers’ Mothers of Kostroma Oblast

I.S. Reznikova, Kostroma Branch of the Fraction “Green Russia” of “Yabloko”

T.I. Dobretsova, “In the Name of Life” (Kostroma)

S. Shaparenko, “Pechenegi” (Khar’kov, Ukraine)

O.V. Bodrov, “Green World” (Sosnovy Bor, Leningrad Oblast)

* To sign the statement, please send an email to: bcc@biodiversity.ru

Signatures are given in the order of receipt; at 31/01/2010 the statement is already signed by over 70 NGOs.

Originals of electronic signatures can be found in Biodiversity Conservation Center office.