



Environmental Activism in Russia: Challenges and Recommendations for Ensuring Freedom and Protection

Policy Paper

Climate Justice Project

Prepared by

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About the Author

Maksim Rebechenko is an environmental activist with a focus on wildfires and climate change. Rebechenko was actively involved in the development of fire volunteering in Russia, creating mechanisms to respond to and prevent forest fires. Additionally, he collaborated with several international environmental funds and organizations, which are currently prohibited in Russia. Unfortunately, due to these circumstances, Rebechenko had to leave the country. However, he is now continuing his impactful work in Kazakhstan, engaging in similar efforts to protect the environment.



About the Project

Addressing Climate Change and Human Rights in the OSCE Region is a project by Crude Accountability in partnership with the Climate Justice Working Group of the Civic Solidarity Platform. The project aims to explore the impact of climate change and environmental degradation on communities within the OSCE region and strengthen civil society's role in addressing climate change issues and ensuring the protection of human rights in the OSCE region.

For more information on the project, please visit Crude Accountability's website at <https://crudeaccountability.org/what-we-do/climate-justice/expert-recommendations-for-the-osce-on-climate/>.

About Crude Accountability

Crude Accountability is a non-profit organization committed to defending the human rights and environment of communities affected by oil and gas development in the Caspian and the Black Sea regions. Crude Accountability works to hold governments and corporations accountable for their actions and advocate for sustainable and just energy practices.

About Civic Solidarity Platform

About Civic Solidarity Platform is a network of human rights NGOs, activists, and experts from across Europe, the Caucasus, and Central Asia. The platform collaborates to promote and protect human rights, democratic principles, and civil society participation within the OSCE region.

Summary

Environmental protection is an important aspect of sustainable development and the well-being of people. Many active environmental groups in Russia are concerned with preserving the country's natural resources and biodiversity. However, the dilution of civil liberties in Russia and repressive measures against any opposition have negatively affected the development and activism of environmental organizations in Russia. In the past decade, government and business have escalated pressure on environmentalists.

In 2022, Russia saw fundamental changes in its domestic politics. Civil liberties were increasingly restricted, any opposition is practically a crime, and activism, including the work of independent environmental organizations, is perceived as a direct threat to the state. Those engaged in this work have been punished.

This briefing highlights the main threats faced by environmental activists in Russia and offers recommendations to ensure their protection.

History of the environmental movement in modern Russia

The history of environmental organizations in Russia spans decades and reflects various stages in the development of the country's environmental movement. Despite difficulties and obstacles, many organizations have dedicated their efforts to protect the environment and natural resources. For more than three decades, strong environmental organizations have been active in Russia, but their activism has not been without hurdles.

The rise of the environmental movement in Russia started at the end of the 1980s because of the process of glasnost and perestroika and the subsequent relaxation in government censorship, which enabled environmental organizations to advance to the forefront. They began to fight hard for environmental rights, identify pollution problems, and call for environmental measures.

Although society faced new economic and social hardships in the early 1990s, nascent environmental organizations and movements kept growing and evolving. This was driven by an increased awareness of the importance of resource conservation and environmental sustainability for future generations.

As environmental organizations grew and developed, they became a socially important force, capable of mobilizing significant human resources to achieve their goals.

For example, in 2000, during a nationwide environmental referendum, it took only three months to collect 2.5 million signatures. No other political force in the country could boast of such an effectiveness.

Unfortunately, the initiative failed due to pressure from the authorities, and the referendum was canceled for formal reasons.ⁱ

The mid-2000s saw the strengthening of regional environmental organizations active at the grassroots level, which interacted with local administrations and residents. The availability of foreign grants was vital to these organizations and enabled them to operate independently from Russian authorities and federal companies.

In the 2010s, the first outlines of the future repressive Russian state began to take shape, in which any independent activity was seen as an act against the country's leadership. Uncontrolled industrial development, lack of environmental awareness among the population, limited access to funding, and tighter legislation created adverse conditions for the environmental movement. The federal law on Foreign Agents, which was enacted in 2012, significantly restricted foreign funding for the NGOs, forcing them into the framework of public grants.

Big business has also become increasingly active in its environmental initiatives, creating a separate line of environmental projects. These initiatives are not always effective, but rather serve to position the business as a company that follows the trendy green agenda.

At the same time, the authorities also increased pressure and violence against representatives of environmental organizations. Regular attacks on eco-activists, searches, and burning property have become the norm.

Issues encountered by environmental activists

The most accurate study of the current environmental movement in Russia and the issues it faces is set out in the report published in 2022 as part of a joint program initiative of the RSEU (*Russian Socio-Ecological Union*) and the MHG (*Moscow Helsinki Group*).ⁱⁱ

The study itself consists of interviews with representatives of environmental groups, organizations, and initiatives in different regions of Russia. 34 in-depth *structured* interviews were taken from 39 people within the study: experts, activists, leaders of environmental organizations, and initiative groups. There were 22 women and 17 men among the respondents. The authors of the study managed to provide the entire profile of eco-activists and representatives of environmental organizations in Russia. The group of respondents included not only representatives of various organizations from different regions of Russia, but also people of all ages and professional backgrounds in the Russian environmental community who came to the environmental movement at different times. An effort was made to identify similarities and differences in the methodologies, attitudes, and approaches to activity among different generations of environmental defenders, and to determine where and how intergenerational bonds work. The

transcripts of the interviews were systematized, analyzed, and summarized, providing the basis for this document.

To date, this is the most comprehensive study of eco-activists in Russia. The authors managed to collect information into a single document that shows the problems of the modern environmental movement in Russia and the thoughts of its participants about the prospects for further work in present-day conditions. The report does a good job of capturing the general feeling of anxiety and uncertainty about the future of the environmental movement in Russia. The study also outlines the key hurdles faced by eco-defenders: the paralyzing foreign agents law, attacks and threats of violence and pressure, censorship and other restrictions on civil liberties, and other problems.

“Foreign agents” law

According to respondents, everything related to the “foreign agents” law causes the most difficulties in work. The main objective of this law is to deprive organizations of foreign funding, which supposedly engage in “political activities.”

However, the law’s vague wording leads to its free interpretation, and the dependence of the judiciary on regional and federal authorities leads to labeling as a foreign agent any individual whose behavior displeases the governing body.

Those organizations or individuals marked with the “foreign agent” label often find themselves having to close shop, pay hefty fines, or significantly curtail their activities. Such organizations also face negative public opinion, especially in recent times, when any organization with international ties raises suspicions. Public opinion often equates a “foreign agent” with a traitor to the homeland. This leads to the perception that any environmental activism is “paid for by the West” and “directed against Russia's interests.” Even mentioning foreign practices in activities causes a negative attitude. Those entities that continue to work in the environmental movement are in danger of becoming a “foreign agent” at any time, including individuals. Legislation in this area is rapidly tightening.

“Tensions in society around this topic reduce the potential for interaction among environmental organizations, initiative groups, and experts with the general public, authorities, and state-run institutions. This slows down the influx of people into the environmental movement; organizations and groups themselves are forced to think about the safety of their supporters,” the Group's report says.

Since the adoption of this law, 37 environmental organizations have been listed as “foreign agents” on the Ministry of Justice’s registry. 23 organizations were forced to close altogether, 8 organizations managed to get out of this registry, and 6 organizations continue working with this stigma.ⁱⁱⁱ

The only way for organizations to stay legal is to apply for federal or regional grants. The problem, however, is that these grant competitions are highly politicized and supervised by federal and regional authorities. If an organization looks problematic in their eyes, then it will be denied the chance to obtain funds for its operations.

Use of physical violence against representatives of environmental organizations and activists

The use of physical violence against political opponents has long become a sad norm in modern Russia. High-profile assassinations of politicians and journalists and attacks on civil society actors have shown a dismal trend of impunity on the part of the attackers. And Russia's decision to end the jurisdiction of the European Court of Human Rights means that Russian citizens no longer have access to this last resort means of justice.

Significantly, the situation varies from region to region and depends on the willingness of local elites to use force. For example, the authorities in Krasnodar Territory, located in the south of Russia, have not only a willingness, but an entrenched practice of using physical violence against activists. The close cooperation of law enforcement agencies with criminals means that such attacks are not investigated.

Some examples of high-profile attacks or pressure on environmentalists that occurred in the Krasnodar Territory include:

In 2016, there was a night-time attack on a volunteer camp on private property, whose participants were involved in extinguishing wildfires. The attackers used firearms and edged weapons and damaged the volunteers' cars and property. Several volunteers sustained injuries and fractures. The case was closed because of lack of evidence.^{iv}

On December 28, 2017, in Krasnodar, Andrei Rudomakha, the leader of the NGO *Environmental Watch on the North Caucasus*, was brutally assaulted. The attack was captured on [video surveillance cameras](#).^v

[The video](#) (camera recording starts at 00:40) shows that the attackers were waiting for the activists' car for almost an hour and a half. After the ecologists got out of the car, Andrei Rudomakha was attacked by three men in masks. He was kicked in the head and lost consciousness. Another eco-activist, Viktor Chirikov, was punched in the stomach, and a third was pepper-sprayed. The attackers also stole equipment from the car: computers and cameras, including photography equipment, which contained data from an environmental inspection. The attackers wore balaclavas and quickly fled after the attack. Rudomakha ended up in intensive care with multiple injuries.

The criminal case is still under investigation, and the police have failed to find the perpetrators, even with the available video recordings of the attack.^{vi}

From 2017 to 2020, five searches were done with the help of special forces and police at the office of *Environmental Watch on the North Caucasus*. During the searches, special services officers in masks broke down doors, stormed into premises with guns, fully armed and protected, confiscated equipment and safes, destroyed furniture, and used violence against activists.

These actions are conducted either in criminal cases against employees of the organization or within criminal cases against activists known to the organization. Such actions are part of the Russian authorities' strategy to combat non-governmental organizations. By confiscating equipment and documents, the law enforcement agencies effectively paralyze the organization's work.^{vii}

In 2019, during a volunteer fire camp to put out forest fires, police put pressure on activists. The camp had to be curtailed ahead of time and all participants were taken to a secure location in order to evade aggression from governmental and criminal entities.^{viii}

According to 2020 data, the leading regions in the number of recorded cases of pressure on environmentalists are Moscow and Moscow region, Bashkortostan, Arkhangelsk, and Kemerovo regions.^{ix}

- Moscow - 48
- Bashkortostan - 20
- Arkhangelsk region - 18
- Moscow region - 11
- Kemerovo region - 9
- Tatarstan and Udmurtia – 8 each
- Vologda region - 6
- Chelyabinsk region - 5
- Volgograd region - 4
- Republic of Buryatia, Kirov region, Krasnodar Territory, Kurgan region, Pskov region, Primorsk Territory – 3 each
- Irkutsk region, Leningrad region, Nizhny Novgorod region, Republic of Karelia, Republic of Chuvashia, St. Petersburg, Sverdlovsk region – 2 each
- Rostov region, Republic of Khakassia – 1 each.

The most resonant environmental conflicts in the past years were the construction of a landfill site at Shiyes in the Arkhangelsk region (20 episodes), an attempt to develop the Kushtau shikhan in the Republic

of Bashkortostan (17 episodes), protection of the public garden on Ivan Franko Street in the Kuntsevo district of Moscow (14 episodes), the construction project "Festival Park-2" in Moscow (11 episodes), and the construction of the South-Eastern Expressway in Moscow (8 episodes).

Moscow is recognized as the absolute leader of crackdowns on environmentalists, which is associated with numerous environmental issues faced by the residents of this megalopolis and the harsh response of local authorities and business groups to public protest actions.

Based on available data, 450 acts of pressure and one death of eco-activists were recorded in 2020.

Military censorship and new threats to activists

Since the outbreak of Russia's full-scale war of aggression against Ukraine on February 24, 2022, Russia has enacted a number of laws severely restricting civil liberties, and specifically freedom of speech. For instance, Russia's parliament passed a law imposing a jail term up of to 15 years just for saying or writing that Russia's military aggression against Ukraine is called a war. This gives free reign to various levels of government and business elites close to them to crack down on inconvenient citizens, including eco-activists.

According to the monitoring of crackdown on environmental activists, conducted by the SEU experts in February-December 2022, 160 episodes of crackdowns were recorded in Russia: fines, detentions, beatings, property damage, and the initiation of criminal cases.^x The judicial and law enforcement system now has no restrictions on the tools for repression.

The Moscow Helsinki Group's Spring 2022 survey notes an entire cluster of difficulties that activists encountered after February 2022 and after the sanctions pressure. Among them, environmental respondents name:

- De-greening;
- Limiting the work of social networks;
- Departure of many volunteers and activists from the country;
- Threat of forced mobilization;
- Mass media became closed to cooperation.
- Decline in liberties, enforcement of de facto military censorship, persecution of dissent.^{xi}

Recommendations

Dealing In the overall coordination to mitigate climate change, Russia, due to its geographical position and territory, will be one of the key allies.

The current geopolitical situation and the isolationism of the acting government of Russia are putting many conservation and climate change processes on pause.

Civil society and environmental activists who have been forced to flee abroad because of the threat of imprisonment or being sent to war need international support. If the situation inside Russia changes, the vast majority of activists plan to return and continue their activities. The challenge for the international community in this period of uncertainty is to support independent environmental activists and keep organizations alive.

What specifically can be done for the representatives of the environmental sector?

1. *Strengthening legal protection.* It is essential to develop and implement an effective system for legal protection of environmentalists in Russia. This may include improving the legal framework to make sure that their rights and liberties are firmly and securely defended, as well as establishing punishment mechanisms for violators.
2. *Combating violence and persecution.* Government authorities and law enforcement agencies must take measures to prevent and stop physical attacks and threats of violence against environmental defenders. All such incidents should be properly examined and those involved should face justice.
3. *The international community must help its Russian colleagues who experience challenging situations.* Many activists now find themselves in neighboring countries and unable to obtain Schengen visas. Since most of them do not have sufficient funds, they must adjust to new circumstances and find incidental jobs, often illegally. In these circumstances, it is impossible for them to persist with their activities. Easing the humanitarian visa process for activists would enable them to move to wealthier countries, collaborate with local associates, and obtain legal authorization to reside and work there.
4. *Development of support and exchange of experience programs to attract specialists from environmental organizations who are forced to leave the country.* This will allow the movement of valuable human resources to other countries to share experiences and maintain professional competence.

5. *Financial support for organizations and eco-activists who stay to work in Russia.* Despite the difficulties associated with foreign funding, this type of support can help independent environmental organizations continue their activities in dire circumstances.

Endnotes

- ⁱ <https://greenpeace.ru/stories/2020/05/21/kak-ne-proshjol-pervyj-i-edinstvennyj-jekologicheskij-referendum/>
- ⁱⁱ <https://rusecounion.ru/ru/envmov2022>
- ⁱⁱⁱ https://rusecounion.ru/sites/default/files/inline/files/2022-10-12_EnvFA-table-rus_0.pdf
- ^{iv} <https://www.yuga.ru/articles/society/7564.html>
- ^v https://crudeaccountability.org/rudomakha_video_attack/
- ^{vi} <https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2018/01/09/75092-antivahtovyy-metod>
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