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Country Portrait

Sustainable Development à la Russe

The resource-rich country has long neglected environmental sustainable development and its leadership is slow to respond to citizens' demands.

In Russia, sustainable development has not been high on the political agenda in the past, but things are slowly changing. There is a noticeable shift towards more environmental consciousness among Russian citizens. The Russian government has, in turn, introduced some new environmental protection legislation.

But the country still has a long way to go – and major problems to solve – before it can claim to have fully embraced the principle of environmental sustainability. The issue of waste management is a case in point.

The concept of sustainable development in Russia

Shortly after the 1996 Rio Earth Summit, a presidential decree was issued which outlined the main thrust of Russia's transition to sustainable development. More recent documents have introduced the concept of a green economy and provided more detailed information on how sustainable development can be implemented in Russia. But the term sustainable development has slightly different connotations in Russia than in other European countries.

We need to remember that it is a Western concept, which doesn't have an exact equivalent in Russian. The Russian "ustoichivoye razvitiye" (*устойчивое развитие*) can also mean "stable development". So it's no wonder that Russians who are unfamiliar with Western sustainability discourse do not automatically associate the term with environmental protection.

! Zum Aktualisieren der Textelemente, Zitation markieren und dann F9 drücken !

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Indeed, in Russia, sustainable development is typically used in reference to sustainable economic growth, and the social and environmental aspects of the term are often overlooked. Even President Vladimir Putin usually [means stable \(economic\) growth, when he talks about “ustoichivoe razvitie”](#).

The “garbage protests”

In February 2019 the small town of Belushya Guba on the island of Novaya Zemlya in the Russian Arctic made international headlines when about 50 polar bears descended on it. Western media reports put this down to climate change. However, one of the main reasons was the town’s ineffective waste disposal system. The polar bears were drawn to the piles of rubbish on the town’s streets, especially in winter when food was scarce.

Poor waste management is a problem encountered throughout Russia, and it clearly illustrates the authorities’ indifference to environmental sustainable development. Frustrated at the government’s lack of action on waste, citizens in many Russian regions took to the streets, first in 2018 and again in 2019.

Since the beginning of 2018, [demonstrations have taken place in more than 70 towns and cities](#), the largest of them in Archangelsk (*western part of the Russian Arctic*) and Volokolamsk (*Central Russia*).

In March 2018, the citizens of [Volokolamsk began to protest against the Yadrovo landfill](#) site. The protests gained momentum when a number of children presented with symptoms of gas poisoning after being exposed to emissions from waste dumped there. The [Yadrovo site was established in 2008](#). After the closure of 24 out of 39 landfills in the Moscow Oblast in the period from 2013 to 2017, the amount of household waste sent there increased considerably.

Back in 2011, it received 200,000 tons of solid waste, but by 2016 the quantity had risen to 600,000 tons, far more waste than the site can cope with. The situation hasn’t really improved since the beginning of the protests. The landfill hasn’t been closed and only piecemeal steps have been taken to reduce toxic emissions in the short term.

Meanwhile in Archangelsk, the protests are ongoing. Here, people have been demonstrating against the [construction of the Shiyes landfill](#) site in the Archangelsk region since the summer of 2018. By February 2019, about 29,000 citizens had joined the protests, including people from the city of Archangelsk and smaller towns and villages in the region. The population of neighbouring regions, like the Komi Republic, have also gotten involved. In Shiyes itself, they even blocked access roads to stop trucks bringing construction materials to the site.

Since the Shiyes landfill will be a waste incineration plant rather than a waste recycling plant, people in the Archangelsk region are extremely worried about the prospect of hazardous emissions and environmental disasters. As it is, the Archangelsk region is particularly

vulnerable to all kinds of pollution, because the pace of climate change in the Arctic is twice as fast as the global average.

In this case it seems that the citizens of Archangelsk are not going to back down without a fight, and there is still a small window of opportunity to halt the construction of the planned landfill site. According to [The Barents Observer](#), Arkhangelsk Governor Igor Orlov has said that the landfill project's fate "will remain unresolved until late 2019".

Responses to the protests

How has the Russian government responded to the protests? [In January 2019 it launched a new waste management reform](#). As part of this reform, people are to pay more for the recycling of solid municipal waste and will be provided with new bins next to their houses, so that they can sort their rubbish for subsequent recycling.

It's hard to say whether the reform was a direct response to the protests. In any case, it has not found favour among citizens, because the dire waste situation has not changed in most regions despite increased public utility charges. People still complain of household waste accumulating next to their houses, even if they pay for a regular collection service.

Thus, the "garbage protests" continued in February 2019. On 3 February 2019, "ecoprotests" took place across Russia, with protesters brandishing placards with the motto "Russia is not a scrapyard" to draw the attention of the authorities to the household waste problem.

New environmental consciousness at grassroots level

The good news is that there is growing evidence of a more participatory culture among Russia's citizens. Especially among young people, there is a trend towards eco-friendliness. And the idea of sorting and recycling household waste is also becoming more popular. That said, some of those who attend the "ecoprotests" are not even aware of the concept of sustainable development.

But there are positive developments on that score, too. I was a participant of the [German-Russian Youth Forum](#) in May 2019. The topic of the forum was sustainable development, and young people from different parts of Russia spoke passionately about those who promote environmentally friendly lifestyles in their cities. Russia has [17 young Ambassadors](#) for each of the 17 SDGs, compared to just [two in Germany](#).

It is a good sign that Russians are generally more concerned about the environment nowadays. Although the Russian government is not ready to devote enough attention to environmental issues, there is a growing number of Russians who bring their small but meaningful actions to the table.