

### Waste Management in Russia

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Electoral fraud at different levels and in different Russian regions is at the center of a further September cluster, where social media texts also dominate. The transregional political space that is constructed online is characterized by alienation. In a notable line of discussion, the official election results are contrasted with the experiences of voters and their personal networks in a way that suggests that the results are not legitimate (“All our friends and relatives voted against them. Such figures would not have been possible had the elections been held lawfully”).

The 2020 protests did not play a major role in the discourses analyzed here. They did, however, leave a trace. Protest voting was most visible in those Duma elections based on party lists: the Khabarovsk region is one of four regions where the current protest-voter party, KPRF, performed better than United Russia. As acting governor in an authoritarian regime, Degtyarev had a huge advantage over his competitors, yet he was elected with a relatively modest 57 percent of the vote (spoiler candidate Marina Kim received a respectable 25 percent). Regardless of the election results, social media enabled the construction of shared spaces of experience and opportunities for political action. That makes them very different from local online media, which first and foremost provided a stage for the acting governor’s PR activities.

#### *About the Author*

Tatiana Golova, PhD, is a sociologist and researcher at the Centre for East European and International Studies (ZOiS) in Berlin. She works on activism in large Russian cities, including mobilization on social media, and on post-Soviet migrants in Germany. This contribution is based on the preliminary results of the research project “Regional Protests on Russian Social Media.”

#### *Further Reading*

- Golova, Tatiana: Mobilising for Regional Protests on Russian Social Media: The Case of Khabarovsk, ZOiS Report 4/2021, <https://en.zois-berlin.de/publications/mobilising-for-regional-protests-on-russian-social-media-the-case-of-khabarovsk>.

## ANALYSIS

### Waste Management in Russia

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#### **Abstract**

The field of waste management in Russia demonstrates the consequences of stifling political opposition. Legislation censors environmentalists and activists who seek to reform current waste management practices, even as local politicians financially reward companies for dumping waste into deteriorating landfills. This article reviews current waste management practices in Russia and the effects of such practices on the Russian populace. It outlines the various protests and other forms of civic engagement that have taken place in response to inadequate waste management, and the government’s repression of such responses using the “foreign agent” law. Finally, the article examines the corruption in Russia’s waste management system and explores why reform of this sector is unlikely to occur.

#### **Current Conditions and the Need for Reform**

In 2014, the World Bank issued a report stating that in 2010, Russia produced 48 million metric tons of waste and sent about 95% of this waste to landfills, with 30% of such landfills failing to meet basic sanitary standards. Moreover, in 2010, of the 7,518 “waste disposal sites” in Russia, 5,243 of them were unauthorized (IFC, 2014).

The Embassy of the Netherlands in Russia released a similar report outlining percentages of waste in Russian landfills. According to this report, 34% of waste is food, 19% paper, 14% polymers, 12% glass, 6% wood, 6% street waste, 4% metal, 3% textile, and 2% “other” (Netherlands Embassy, 2019). The report stated that not only does Russia lack a “tradition of recycling,” but many of its landfills are also completely overfilled and

outdated. It noted that the top ten regions producing the most waste are Moscow Oblast, Moscow City, Krasnodar Krai, the Republic of Bashkortostan, Sverdlovsk Oblast, St. Petersburg, Rostov Oblast, the Republic of Tatarstan, Nizhny Novgorod Oblast, and Samara Oblast (Netherlands Embassy, 2019). On average, European Union member states recycle about 60% of their municipal solid waste (MSW), while Russia's MSW recovery rate lags far behind. Moreover, Russia has steadily been producing more municipal solid waste, yet has been ineffective in recycling or managing this waste (IFC Advisory Services, 2012).

An official report by the Russian state auditors found that only about 7% of waste in Russia is recycled, with the rest being dumped in landfills in remote areas (Moscow Times, 2020). There are over 8,000 landfills in Russia (Moscow Times, 2020). In 2019, Putin initiated a waste management reform with the goal of recycling 60% of Russia's waste by 2030.

### Protests, Civic Engagement, and Responses from the Kremlin

At first glance, it might seem odd to talk about sustainability efforts in Russia given the current political climate in the country. In fact, Russia's strengthening authoritarianism and Putinism are crucial for understanding the country's lack of effective recycling.

The Kremlin's policies affect waste management in Russia in two specific ways. First, the leadership uses the "foreign agent" law to target activists in the Russian Federation, including environmentalists. Second, rather than reforming waste management, the current situation allows for the creation of more "dumping grounds" in provincial cities, damaging the health and quality of life of citizens who live there. Growing concerns about these impacts prompted many of the 2018 environmental protests in Russia.

Originally passed in 2012, the "foreign agent" law is a legislative tool used by the Kremlin to stifle political dissent and opposition in the country (Reuters, 2012). It labels any unapproved groups that receive funding from outside the country as "foreign agents," a known euphemism for "spy" in Russia, and subjects them to heavy fines and regulations, making it difficult for the targeted organizations to work effectively. Many human rights organizations, LGBT rights groups, and environmental groups have been unjustly labeled as foreign agents and have been harassed and blacklisted. For instance, not only was the organization *Ekozashchita* (Ecodefense) blacklisted as a foreign agent in 2018, but the leader of the group, 65-year-old Alexandra Koroleva, had to seek asylum in Germany in 2019.

Koroleva fled out of fear of being potentially imprisoned for two years on the grounds of refusing to comply

with the provisions of the "foreign agent" law (Human Rights Watch, 2019). Koroleva's organization refused to register as a foreign agent in 2012, when the law was passed, and was forcibly added to the list by the Russian government in 2014 (Human Rights Watch, 2019). Between 2012 and 2017, at least 14 different environmental groups shut down in response to the heavy fines and constraints imposed by the "foreign agent" law (Human Rights Watch, 2017). Yet this has not stopped many from protesting ineffective waste management practices. 2018 saw various protests in Russia's Arctic in response to the construction of new landfills in remote areas.

Though the alleged reason for Koroleva's arrest was her refusal to comply with the "foreign agent" law, members of *Ekozashchita* argue that it was in fact a direct response to the group's vocal criticism of the planned construction of a nuclear power plant in Kaliningrad (Human Rights Watch, 2019). In June 2019, *Ekozashchita*'s co-chair, Vladimir Sliviyak, confirmed that Koroleva had fled to Germany and stressed that her arrest was a political response by the Russian government to the group's campaign against power plant construction in Kaliningrad (Kireeva and Digges, 2019). Additionally, it is crucial to note that the Kremlin froze *Ekozashchita*'s bank account in December 2018, rendering its members unable to pay the fines (Human Rights Watch, 2019).

This would not be the first or only instance of the Russian authorities targeting environmentalists. Even prior to the enactment of the "foreign agent" law, the Kremlin actively silenced and harassed environmentalists who brought to light the corruption in Russia's waste management sector. Environmentalist Yevgeny Vitishko of Ecological Watch on the North Caucasus was arrested in 2014 for exposing ecological and environmental damage in the North Caucasus resulting from the Sochi Olympics. Prior to this, he had also been arrested in 2011 for exposing illegal land use by the governor of Krasnodar (Goble, 2014). In November 2008, journalist and environmentalist Mikhail Beketov was savagely beaten by assailants—requiring doctors to amputate his leg and several fingers, and rendering him wheelchair-bound for the rest of his life—after accusing the former mayor of Khimki, Vladimir Strelchenko, of corruption, nepotism, and destroying local forestry to make way for a new freeway (CPJ, 2013). Those who advocate for effective waste management and environmental practices are routinely abused, targeted, and harassed by both the Kremlin and local politicians. It is no wonder that Russia lags behind in waste management reform.

Most federal spending is allocated to the capital city, Moscow, while remote regions receive little fund-

ing. This disparity in government spending affects all aspects of Russian infrastructure, including waste management. Remote areas in the Arctic are often neglected, with landfills being built on the territory, while infrastructure in Moscow is more effective. This is why most of those protesting waste management and landfills do so in remote, Arctic regions.

Not only is there a lack of effective federal infrastructure in these remote regions, but they are often used as dumping grounds and landfills. Many of the 2018 protests followed the government's announcement of plans to build a landfill near Shiyes in the Arkhangelsk region (Staalesen, 2018). Specifically, participants protested the corruption in trash collection.

Many of the inefficiencies surrounding Russia's waste management system have to do with corruption, which exists at both local and regional level. Those who participate in illegal logging and then setting fires to destroy the evidence are often rewarded, only exacerbating the issue. Additionally, the Russian Federation is behind on implementing effective waste management and recycling practices, having made few advances since the Soviet era, when the population generated much less solid waste (Arnold, 2019).

One of the largest protests occurred in the Tambov region village of Dmitrievka (Arnold, 2019 and Radio Liberty, 2018). Over 3,000 people came to Dmitrievka to protest the expansion of a landfill in the region, a number made especially impressive by the fact that only 7,000 people live in the village (Radio Liberty, 2018). Such landfills have had crippling effects on the environment and on the health of locals.

The Severny Samarka landfill in the Leningrad Region is one of Russia's largest, opened 50 years ago. Despite making various vocal complaints and protesting, locals are ignored by regional politicians. There are no regulations or restrictions, so the landfill has only been growing. Moreover, locals have reported respiratory problems due to the extensive gas emissions coming from the site. Area resident Oleg Yakovlev reported, "If there's wind blowing from the side of the landfill, there's simply no way to breathe here. It's such a horrible smell. And what can you do with a child here? We've written letters. People from the town of Samarka have written as well. We've collected signatures. There's no point...The authorities say nothing." Residents have protested and filed complaints to authorities, but to no avail (Mansuryan and Feofanov, 2021).

In 2020, Rosprirodnadzor, Russia's environmental watchdog, fined the owner of the site and demanded the end of continued dumping in this landfill. The court ignored this fine and allowed operations to continue, with over 1,000 tons of garbage dumped into the site every single day. This landfill now contains over 30

million cubic meters of waste (Mansuryan and Feofanov, 2021).

The problems can be traced back to financial corruption. Another local resident, Larisa Mukhina, stated, "How can we talk about the law when there's a flow of illegal cash? Yesterday, we witnessed it and interviewed the driver of this garbage truck. He told us that private vehicles [dump waste] for money. And he's not the first person to tell us this...The official annual revenue of the business exceeds \$5 million. The amount of dirty money? No one knows for sure" (Mansuryan and Feofanov, 2021). Locals in this region protest regularly, often stopping trucks from coming in with large amounts of waste.

Protests take many forms. Some are smaller and happening with increased frequency; some are larger, as in 2018. In 2021, ballet dancer Ilmira Bagrautina danced on the Bataringaya Bay on the Gulf of Finland near St. Petersburg to protest the planned construction of a new port this year. She and other residents have expressed concern that this port will pollute the water and ecologically destroy the area. Many have signed a petition to Putin to halt construction (BBC, 2021). The video of Bagrautina dancing went viral, with over 1.2 million views.

### Future of Waste Management Reform in Russia

Unfortunately, it does not appear as if there is much hope for waste management reform in Russia. In 2018, opposition activist Alexey Navalny took to Twitter to say that the political leadership of the Tambov region must resign over the corruption in waste management (Arnold, 2019). In 2015 he spoke out against contracts and money awarded to private companies for disposing of trash in an illegal manner. Many view trash reform as impossible in Russia (Arnold, 2019). Though the Kremlin has closed several landfills, the waste itself has simply been moved to different areas, which has not solved the issue of pollution. Many organizations, including Rosneft, benefit from this corruption and dump industrial waste near their production sites (Baev, 2018 and Podobedova, 2018).

### Conclusion

Though there have been some efforts aimed at waste management reform, the hostile domestic political climate and large number of unauthorized landfills present major obstacles for those concerned about the environment. For actual reform to take place, the government must repeal the "foreign agent" law and end its crippling effect on the work of environmentalists. Local politicians, for their part, must stop the lucrative and corrupt practice of dumping waste in remote landfills.

*Please see overleaf for information about the author and a bibliography.*

*About the Author*

Leah Silinsky holds a Master's Degree from the George Washington University Elliott School of International Affairs.

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