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Municipal Solid Waste Management in Russia: Protest, Policy, and Politics

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Abstract

Russia has a garbage problem. Poor management of Municipal Solid Waste (MSW) has led to significant and sustained public protests in recent years in response to the expansion of landfill sites, poor environmental quality, and public health concerns. This article examines current policy reforms in the MSW sphere that have emerged in response to the crisis: the so-called “rubbish reforms.” It argues that despite strong policy activity, the scope of the reforms is limited and focused on attracting private-sector investment rather than addressing broader issues around recycling and sustainable consumption. The implementation of these policies also raises serious concerns about both the capacity of regional governments to enact reforms and the transparency of decision-making.

Introduction

More than almost any other environmental issue in recent decades, the issue of municipal solid waste (MSW) has attracted significant public attention. The scale of the problem and its visibility have led to sustained public protests. These have emerged in response to a range of concerns, including: poor environmental quality at existing landfill sites and the impact on surrounding areas; public health risks; illegal dumping; proposals to create new landfill sites and incinerators; and the trucking-in of waste from big cities, particularly Moscow.

The purpose of this article is to provide an assessment of key policy developments in Russia’s MSW management sphere. It first provides a brief overview of the waste management issue and the public protests that have occurred with considerable frequency in recent years. This is followed by an evaluation of government policy responses. Finally, the article considers some of the huge challenges associated with addressing this issue effectively.

The Issue of MSW in Russia

MSW (*tyordye bytovye otkhody*, or TBO, also known as *tyordye kommunal’nye otkhody*, or TKO) refers to the waste generated by households. This is distinct from the waste produced as a result of industrial activity. Industrial waste remains a huge problem in Russia, as clearly demonstrated by the recent disasters in Norilsk and Uso-lye-Sibirskoye, but it is beyond the scope of this analysis.

MSW is a serious and growing problem in Russia, which produces around 70 million tons of rubbish annually. To put this in comparative perspective, a 2018 World Bank report estimates that Russia produces approximately 1.13kg of MSW per capita per day, well above the global average of 0.74kg per capita per day. It is worth noting, however, that this is still below Euro-

pean levels, although the amount of MSW generated in Russia is increasing.

This problem is compounded by very low levels of recycling and waste recovery. A 2019 report by the International Finance Corporation, for example, reports that only 5–7% of MSW is recycled, with over 90% going to landfill and unauthorized dumps. In contrast, the average waste recovery rate for EU Member States is approximately 60% of MSW.

The problem is particularly acute in Russia’s largest city, Moscow. With a population over 12 million, the capital produces vast amounts of waste each year. A report by Greenpeace Russia, for example, calculates that in 2015 Moscow and the Moscow Oblast produced over 11 million tons of municipal solid waste, amounting to 20% of the total rubbish produced in Russia that year. Of this, 90% went to landfill sites and 6% was incinerated, while just 4% was recycled. The huge volume of rubbish being sent from Moscow to landfill sites in the surrounding region was the impetus for a number of protests.

The “Rubbish Crisis” and the “Rubbish Riots”

The growing crisis around urban waste and its management has led to public protests in recent years. These protests, known as the “rubbish riots” (*Musornye Bunty*), were grassroots and highly localized. They began in 2017, peaked in March and April 2018, and continued on into 2019. Protests were seen in numerous towns and cities across Russia, including the Moscow Region, Krasnoyarsk, Omsk, Arkhangelsk, and Nizhny Novgorod. They attracted considerable media attention and saw a few immediate successes, such as the removal of the head of Volokolamsk district and the immediate closure of the Kuchino dump in the Moscow region following a local resident’s complaint during Putin’s annual

Direct Line in 2017. They also prompted larger-scale policy change, dubbed the “rubbish reforms,” which are discussed below.

It is worth emphasizing that threats were made against individual activists; protestors often met with harassment, violent dispersal by the police, and even, in some instances, detention. However, the protests were for the most part de-politicized and not linked to broader criticisms of the regime. As a result, they were more tolerated than other large-scale protests in Russia in recent years have been. The MSW issue has in some ways been co-opted by the state and the protests neutralized politically, as demonstrated by the attention given to the issue. For example, Putin has spoken on numerous occasions of the need to improve waste management in Russia, while pro-Kremlin groups like the All-Russia People's Front (*Obshcherossiiskii narodnyi front*, ONF) have been publicly tasked with helping to address the issue.

Current Policy on MSW

Legislation dealing with MSW centers on Federal Law No. 89 ‘On Production and Consumption Waste’ (hereafter, the Law on Waste). The law, passed in 1998, establishes the basic principles of waste management in Russia. It emphasizes the protection of human health, the need to maintain the environment in a favorable condition, the need to reduce waste, and the use of the latest low-waste and zero-waste technologies.

The Law on Waste establishes the powers and responsibilities of the different levels of government. It requires the federal government to implement a unified state policy on waste and establish rules and standards to ensure the safe management of waste. Regional authorities are responsible for developing and implementing regional waste management programs, as well as contributing to the design and implementation of federal-level programs and conducting environmental monitoring. Local authorities, meanwhile, are tasked with the collection and removal of MSW.

In other words, while the federal government sets the broad policy framework for MSW, regional and local governments play a central role in the management and implementation of MSW policies and are responsible for a range of key activities, including recycling and selecting waste operators, in addition to oversight and compliance activities. The result is a highly complex system in which a range of government actors operate at different levels.

Institutional responsibility for overseeing MSW at the federal level lies primarily with the Ministry for Natural Resources and Ecology (MNR) and its subordinate body, Rosprirodnadzor, which holds responsibility for the management and implementation of environmental policy.

The “Rubbish Reforms”

In response to the crisis, there has been considerable policy activity in the MSW sphere in recent years. These developments are broadly termed the “rubbish reforms” (*musornaia reforma*). These reforms, which address a series of related issues, aim to: reduce the number of landfill sites across Russia; prevent illegal landfills and clear existing dumping sites; and increase the processing of waste.

The central element of the rubbish reforms is part of the National Project on Ecology. Approved in 2018, one of the national project's eleven priority areas is a federal project specifically targeting the MSW issue: “an Integrated System for Municipal Solid Waste Management.” This project has a budget of 296.2 billion rubles and is due to be completed by the end of 2024. The overarching goal of the project is to recycle 36% of the country's MSW by 2024.

The focus of the federal project has been the creation of a public company tasked with building a unified, Russia-wide system for dealing with MSW. On January 14, 2019, Putin signed an executive order creating the Russian Environmental Operator (REO). This body has an extensive set of responsibilities: it is tasked with legislative and regulatory development, as well as overseeing the implementation of MSW policy across Russia. It is further charged with creating a recycling system and trying to create a market for private investment in MSW by providing co-financing. The REO oversees the development and approval of waste management plans for all constituent members of the Russian Federation, with the regions responsible for the implementation of these plans. The body is currently headed by Il'ya Gudkov, who was appointed in January 2020 after the previous director general, Denis Bustaev, was dismissed by Medvedev before the end of his tenure. The body is overseen by the MNR.

A related federal project, known as “Clean Country,” has a budget of 124.2 billion rubles and aims to eliminate unauthorized landfills across Russia. Its goal is to eliminate at least 191 unauthorized landfill sites by 2024 and clean up a further 75 sites considered dangerous by 2021. It also hopes to create a system that would enable the regional authorities to identify and eliminate illegal landfill sites in the future.

There have been numerous amendments to the Law on Waste over the two decades since it was first passed and it is widely regarded as being out of date. In recent years, there have been a number of important additions made in response to the rubbish crisis. A particularly important one, which aimed to consolidate the MSW industry by creating large regional operators to replace the large number of existing companies, came into force in January 2019. Under this amendment, regional oper-

ators are to be selected on a competitive basis and are to be responsible for the collection, transportation, and disposal of MSW. All regions were obliged to switch by January 2019, although exemptions were made for Moscow, St. Petersburg, and Sevastopol to delay their reforms until 2022.

MSW Policy Outcomes

In terms of policy outcomes, there have been some successes. It has been reported, for example, that of the 39 landfills in the Moscow Region, 28 had been closed by the end of 2019, with the remaining 11 to close by 2021. There have also been apparent victories for protestors, including the suspension of construction of the Shiyes landfill site in the Arkhangelsk region, which was a major focus of the rubbish riots in 2018. While the outcome of this and many other cases remains uncertain, particularly at the present time, the protests at the very least ensured that the issue was well and truly on the government's policy agenda and prompted serious talk of waste management reform. However, big questions remain, with the issue of MSW highlighting several key challenges for environmental policymaking in Russia more broadly.

First and foremost, the focus has been very much on market-based solutions to the MSW crisis. Part of the REO's role, for example, is to attract private-sector investment in MSW and participate in the establishment of public-private partnerships (PPPs). MSW management is framed as an issue of business or private-sector reform and around the need to create an industry that is attractive for business investment. This is reflected in the REO's key objectives and the two federal projects. In this way, the federal projects correspond to the overall focus of the national projects, which emphasize private investment and industry contributions. What this ultimately means, however, is that the scope of reforms is quite limited. While fundamental waste management reform is clearly necessary, very little attention has been paid to reducing the amount of waste produced in Russia. Nor has there been any real attempt to distinguish between different types of MSW, such as food waste or plastics, and develop targeted strategies for each one.

While this is certainly still an evolving policy area, there are some discouraging signs. A recent article in *Kommersant*, for example, notes that REO's current plans prioritize the creation of new landfill sites and incinerators, which goes against the original aims of the rubbish reforms. In line with the focus on technological improvements and market-based solutions, the emphasis of the garbage reforms is very much on improving landfill and incineration, rather than on recycling and sustainable consumption.

NGOs such as Greenpeace Russia, Separate Collection (*Razdel'nyi sbor*), and No.More.Rubbish (*Musora. Bol'she.Net*) have been more active in this policy space, focusing on issues like recycling and the circular economy. However, policymaking on MSW in Russia offers few opportunities for NGOs and citizens to participate, thereby limiting their ability to shape the policy debate. This is not unique to the MSW sector, but is rather true of a range of environmental policy issues in Russia.

One of the more promising policy developments in recent years that offers some hope of a more comprehensive approach to waste has been the introduction of the concept of Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) into Russian legislation. EPR is a policy approach that argues that manufacturers or importers should bear some of the responsibility for the environmental costs associated with their products. In relation to waste, this means that the manufacturer assumes some responsibility for the disposal or recycling of their product, or else pays an environmental fee.

However, EPR is still in its infancy in Russia. Amendments were introduced to the Law on Waste in 2015 and followed up with subsequent additions. EPR reforms were supposed to be in place in 2020 but have since been delayed until 2021. Although the MNR claims that this delay is simply due to the difficult economic conditions occasioned by the pandemic, the proposed reforms met with significant resistance from some areas of the business community given the potentially large costs involved for them. This remains an issue to watch in the future.

There have also been serious issues associated with the implementation of the MSW policy reform agenda. Policy implementation and enforcement is a challenge in Russia, and the MSW sphere is no exception. Many problems have arisen in relation to the regional operators, and there appear to be few mechanisms for effective oversight of regional and local officials in selecting companies. There are also reports of corruption, with one investigation suggesting that a company linked to the Rotenbergs—close contacts of Putin—has been awarded lucrative contracts for waste management and recycling, as have people with ties to the regional authorities. In other instances, contracts have been awarded to regional operators without competitive tender processes or to companies with no previous waste management experience.

With regional operators having reportedly violated fee agreements, not met deadlines, and refused to remove waste from smaller settlements in rural areas where collection is not profitable, there are certainly questions about how to ensure that regional operators are fulfilling their obligations. In April 2020, the government was forced to step in and provide financial support to keep

regional operators afloat as they struggled to cope with the recent increase in waste as a result of the COVID-19 crisis. Furthermore, federal bodies responsible for oversight do not necessarily have the capacity or financial resources to enforce regulations and monitor operators; the financial capacity of individual regions is also likely to have a significant impact on policy outcomes.

Conclusions

Overall, while the MSW sphere has seen considerable policy activity, sparked by the widespread, spontaneous, and grassroots protests that have emerged in recent years, there are serious issues with the design and implementation of the reform agenda. Despite promising signs, such as the recognition of the EPR principle in Russian legislation and the creation of a dedicated body to oversee MSW, the reforms do not go far enough in addressing the underlying issues around sustainable consumption, nor do they overcome the broader challenges facing environmental policy in Russia, particularly those around implementation. The MSW issue also highlights some underlying tensions in the relationship between the federal government and the regions in the environmental sphere. Policy reforms have led to a centralization of policymaking through the development of Russia-wide reforms and a resulting consolidation of the sec-

tor via the creation of large regional operators. At the same time, however, the responsibility for policy implementation remains decentralized, continuing to be delegated to regional governments. This means that the results of the reforms are likely to be uneven, dependent as they are on the capacity and resources available to each regional government.

At the same time, however, these are now federal policy reforms. There is a strong risk, therefore, that any policy failure would be associated with those at the top. Many of the protests that emerged around MSW already had a distinct anti-Moscow element to them, emerging as they did as a reaction to the transfer of waste from the city to the surrounding regions. It will be fascinating to see how these issues play out in the future.

Finally, the impact of COVID-19 on policy development in Russia should not be underestimated. We have already seen delays in several environmental policy areas, including the MSW sphere, with industry lobbying hard for concessions and a reduction in penalties for environmental violations to help them weather the economic impact of the crisis. It is highly likely that the environmental governance and reform agenda will not be the government's main priority in the post-pandemic recovery.

About the Author

Dr. Ellie Martus is Lecturer in Public Policy in the School of Government and International Relations at Griffith University, Australia. She is the author of *Russian Environmental Politics: State, Industry and Policymaking* (Routledge, 2018), in addition to a number of articles on Russian climate and environmental policymaking. Ellie's article, co-authored with Fengshi Wu, comparing the politics of waste management in Russia and China was recently published in *Environmental Politics* (<https://doi.org/10.1080/09644016.2020.1816367>).

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