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**LOOKING BACK: RUSSIAN ENVIRONMENTAL MOVEMENT  
IN THE LATE 1980s**

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**Abstract.** The Soviet environmental movement (the EM) has existed for more than 50 years now. It exerted a significant impact on the course of the early years of reforms (*perestroika*) in the late 1980s, when the author played the roles of the EM researcher, its critic and adviser. The article presents a combination of systematically organized field-research, the study of literature, and the author's personal experience. The description of approaches and methods, the main features of those turbulent years, the EM's diversification processes and the relationships with the power structures and other social movements, and the main outcomes of the early years of reforms are the main points of the article. The author concludes that despite all twists the EM has played a significant role in the *perestroika* processes.

**Key words:** critical state; diversification; environmental movement; methods; *perestroika*; power structures; the Soviet Union.

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**ОГЛЯДЫВАЯСЬ НАЗАД: РОССИЙСКОЕ ЭКОЛОГИЧЕСКОЕ  
ДВИЖЕНИЕ В КОНЦЕ 1980-х гг.**

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**Аннотация** Экологическое движение (ЭД) в СССР/России существует более 50 лет. Оно оказало существенное воздействие на процесс перестройки, в годы которой автор был одновременно исследователем ЭД, его критиком и советчиком. Статья представляет комбинацию полевого исследования, изучения литературы и осмысления накопленного автором опыта. Описание подходов и методов исследования, главных черт тех беспокойных времен, процессы диверсификации ЭД и его взаимодействия с другими социальными движениями, основные результаты реформ тех лет – главные темы данной статьи. Автор заключает, что, несмотря на трудности и ошибки, ЭД оказало существенное воздействие на ход перестройки в названные годы.

**Ключевые слова:** диверсификация; критическое состояние; методы; перестройка; структуры власти; экологическое движение; Советский Союз.

***Methods, Approaches, and the Competency***

As a city planner in origin, I was well acquainted with the literature on environmental processes and their studies across the world, especially focused on an urban environment. This article is a combination of the systematically organized field-research with the study of sociological and scientific literature as well as the comprehension of my personal inclusion in a range of public discussions and actions so popular in those times. Besides, being the member of the Soviet National Committee for the UNESCO's "Man and the Biosphere" program and in parallel the member of the ISA Research committee "The Environment and Society". I had access to the "club" of leading environmentalists of the world. In 1987-91s, I was the initiator and co-leader of the international

research project titled "Cities of Europe: The Public participation in Urban Environment Protection" in which we gathered about 16 environmentalists from the Western Europe and the Soviet Union [4]. In the same period, I studied the Soviet social movements by interviews with very different socially and politically public figures of those times [11].

In early 1990s, I took part in the French-Russian research project "Ecological movements in Russia" guided by Prof. Alain Touraine (France). It had been a rather interesting experiment of application of the "Sociological Intervention" method developed by Touraine and his colleagues. Later on, the results of such "intervention" were checked by means of individual interviews and by content analysis of the Green press, leaflets, manifestos, mottos, etc. Of course, in those times I widely used the method of

semi-structured in-depth interviews combined with building of the chronicles of particular environmental conflicts with a focus on the disposition of parties involved and the dynamics of its configuration. Finally, from the childhood and onwards I liked any historic literature, and my father, a historian in origin, maintained my interest to historical literature and in particular to the deeds of the pathfinders and other travelers. Finally, since my ‘big family’ was rather diverse in age and professional skill, I had a lucky chance to look on current social processes “top-down” and “bottom-up”. So, I was more or less well prepared to enter this multidisciplinary realm of studies and action as environmental sociology.

Looking back to the history of Russian environmentalism as such, there are, in my view, two authors, Douglas Weiner [8; 9] and Vladimir Boreiko [1; 2; 3] who have studied the history of the Soviet and Russian EMs most carefully and in detail. Of course, I should mention many other researchers, such as Nikolai Reimers, Felix Schtilmark, Sergei Zalygin, Valentin Rasputin and many others. But the first two were the most fundamental explorers.

As to my personal experience, I am convinced that the childhood, family and its nearest milieu had played the key role in my choice of environmentalism in the widest sense of the word. My family and its immediate milieu were rather diverse and attractive. There were physicians, psychoanalysts, polar researchers, historians, geographers, etc. But it doesn’t mean that this milieu was an “elitist”. Later on, being already a professional environmentalist, I realized how important it is to be close to the nature, to understand its laws and to love it. To my mind, the environmentalism is not only a profession – it is a mission.

***Main features of the critical years: Glasnost, democratization vs. the decay of the social order***

Earlier, I have introduced the notion of critical area or zone [12]. But in this case we are dealing with the critical networks and processes. The years under consideration were rather contradictory and critically unstable. On the one hand, one could observe the processes of environmental turn everywhere: in politics, in public life, in mass consciousness, in the media, etc. The environmental issues have been at the top of public agenda. The independent green press has emerged (the info letters, press releases, memorandums, manifestos, appeals, etc.). It was the period of mass emergence of grassroots among the young as well as the old. The universities, research institutes, the unions of newspaper writers, architects, and cinematographers played the engendering milieu for them. This intellectual milieu played a double

role: it protected the civic initiatives from the Communist Party pressure, and at the same time educated the environmental activists. It was the period of “learning by doing”.

On the other hand, it was a period of industrial decay, political disorder and of the emanation of giant masses of energy of collapse (the mass of the jobless, the flows of refugees and forced migrants). During this very period, the stratum of the “wasted people” (Z. Bauman) has emerged. Then, it was an obvious trend of diminishing attention to such traditional for Russian science and practice issues as keeping the reserves, including the biosphere, and of shifting the public attention toward such nation-wide technological projects as hydropower stations, nuclear power plants, gas-and-oil infrastructures, channels, and the like. Finally, it was the period of mass protests against the northern rivers diversion project, in the defense of the Aral Sea and Lake Baikal. The weakening social order gave way to various asocial groups: criminals, shadow dealers, street-gangs, etc.

Just after the 2nd Congress of the Peoples’ Deputies of the USSR (1990), it became clear that the overall cohort of environmental activists have divided into two parts: those who were actually striving for the nature protection and those who used environmental slogans for building their political carriers. Nevertheless, the post-totalitarian system turned out far more flexible and adaptive than it was predicted by some western sociologists and politicians. Simulating its democratic stance, the system developed and refined its most efficient survival tactics: it converted its economic and political power into private property. Almost nobody noticed that this conversion was going on despite all mass protests and public opinion polls. The cause is that inside of the “socialist mode” of production the capitalist one was gradually shaping. The giant system of industrial production, not sufficient and sometimes backward, but still working was gradually literally taken to pieces by cooperatives. Then, the Young Communist League (the YCL) took the lead in launching such initiatives as the establishment of Centers for Scientific-and-Technical Creativity of the Youth (the CSTC), the Young Housing Cooperatives built by the hands of young people, etc. After then, the struggle against such mega-projects as the diversion of some Siberian rivers, the Volga-Don and the Volga-Chograi channels turned off public opinion from the processes of privatization of lands and enterprises in the interests of a few powerful groups. The upper level of national agenda was occupied by the idea of a quick conversion of the socialist mode

of production into a capitalist one. Finally, the main priority of the system was and still is the control over production and sale of oil, gas, and other nonrenewable resources.

Monopolization was another distinguishing feature of the Soviet system. Decentralization and self-government turned out into a particular form of monopoly. After a short period of small business flourishing, the economic and political monopolists took over in the majority of branches of economy. Some Russian environmentalists tried to combine their nature protection activity with small business but failed. In the end, a majority of politicians of the “new wave” used environmental mottos for the achievement of their political aims [6]. Any attempts of Russian environmentalists to “graft” sprouts of democratic self-government to the “administrative-command” system failed or turned around. Besides, *Glasnost* turned out a two-faced Janus. On the one hand, it was an instrument of a critical estimation of the past. On the other hand, *Glasnost* opened a way to destructive criticism of real achievements of the Soviet times.

#### ***The environmental movement diversification***

To begin with, long before *perestroika*, there were thousands of grassroots in the Soviet Union. The majority of them was named as public organizations (*obshchestvennye organizatsii*) and was affiliated to the YCL, the Pioneer organization or to a particular enterprise. Besides, by and large such public organizations as the Fishers’, the Hunters’ societies as well as the societies of Inventors and the Rationalizers were established. To some degree, the Fishers’ and Hunters’ organizations fulfilled the function of nature protection. Finally, from 1932 and onwards, there was the All-Russian Society for Nature Protection but it was subordinate to the party-state machine. The only one public organization with more or less independent activity was the Moscow Society of Naturalists (the MSON).

From the late 1970s onwards, the process of diversification of the Druzhina movement has begun. Step by step the new branches of it shaped: the “Reserves”, the “Soot” (i.e. the fight against poachers, the “Tribune” (i.e. the education and propaganda of environmental knowledge and know-how), etc. The process of ideological differentiation was also going on. Up to the early 1990s, there were at least seven groups in the EM: conservationists, alternativists, eco-anarchists, traditionalists (enlighteners), civic initiatives (grassroots), eco-politicians, eco-patriots, and eco-technocrats.

As noted before, the conservationists were the core of the EM. Their starting point was bioscientism

(“Nature knows best”) and the idea that the ecological disasters were inevitable. The last statement resembles the well-known maxima of a “Normal accident” [7]. The conservationists strived for the creation of a world community of Greens and the construction of a society of modest needs.

The alternativists and the eco-anarchists were the most ideologically oriented groups. Their leaders were professional ideologists of eco-anarchism. Many members of these groups were the members of small green parties or the anarcho-syndicalist movement. The leaders of these groups permanently combined social activity with a constant reflection. Both groups were adversaries of the state as a political institution stressing the necessity of local self-provision and self-organization.

The traditionalists consisted of a humanistically oriented part of the Soviet intelligentsia which maintained the ideals of good, trust, tolerance, and non-violation. The traditionalists were oriented toward the Russian past maintaining the principle of succession of Russian culture of the 19th century. The core of the group consisted of historians and other scholars, journalists, writers, educators. Despite their ideological heterogeneity, this group was united by their reflective mode of thinking and their ability to assess critically any ecological ideas and projects as well as their own activity.

The civic activists (the grassroots) were and are now a locally-oriented group. It is wrong to think that there was no civil activism in the Soviet times. It had existed but within the frames of the communist ideology. The period under consideration was marked by the upsurge of environmental activism not only in capitals but also in remote provinces. The reader should not forget that the Soviet Union was not only a forcefully industrialized country but the country of predominantly rural mode of living. It is indicative that many leaders of the recent EM have emerged in small towns and villages. It was their advantage because they perceived and comprehended a reality as the integrity, as something inseparable.

The eco-politicians were and still are the most heterogeneous group of the EM. It consisted of conservationists, alternativists, eco-anarchists, traditionalists, nationalists, and independent politicians. This group was structurally diverse as well. It included environmental theorists, the leaders of local and nation-wide and even international environmental civic organizations (like the World Wide Fund for Nature or the Socio-Ecological Union), the members of national and regional parliaments and administrative bodies. There were cases when one person played multiple roles: a green

activist, a chairman of a certain environmental fund, an expert, and so on. It was a rather interesting period of the environmental policy formation.

The eco-patriots were very influential but a small group of the EM. The writers, Valentin Rasputin and Faddey Shipunov, were its ideologists. They were against mega-technological constructions like the cascades of hydropower stations in Siberia, and industrial pollution of Lake Baikal. They called for the protection and revitalization of endemic cultures of the Soviet Union. In such a manner environmental activists might be called as the ‘deep ecologists’ and therefore counter eco-technocrats.

The technocrats of the period under consideration were “naïve technocrats”. This small group had been recruited from the emerging small business strata. Its members were mainly blue and white collars who were inventors and rationalizers in the Soviet times. They thought that by means of the more rational organization of any productive process and sparing the use of resources a pressure of productive and consuming processes on nature could be seriously lessen. In the mid-1990s this group extinguished at all.

The issue of ideological and political divisions between the abovementioned groups deserves special attention. I would only mention that the “iron cage” of market economy leveled the differences between many of them. Roughly speaking, modern Russian environmentalists are divided into two big camps: Those who continue to defend nature and those who think that the “state knows better”. It is indicative that today world’s intellectual community is rather concerned with the issue of restoration of Palmira and other historical-cultural monuments counted as the “world heritage” whereas dozens of war-ravaged big and small oases of life in Syria are still beyond the world public attention.

It is well understandable that the above groups of the Soviet EM, being the members of the Socio-ecological Union (the SoES), were not tightly interdependent and in many times compete with each other even in front of the overall state pressure. Another weak point of majority of them was their reluctance to focus on urgent vital needs and social problems of the Soviet Union population. Such alienation was a means to defend them from the accusations of excessive politicization. Another reason for such alienation was that the biologists took the leadership in the SoES, the WWF-Russia, and in the overall environmental movement from the very beginning. More than that, the relatively young leaders of the SoES, the WWF and other NGOs were supported by Russian outstanding biologists and

public figures such as Alexei Yablokov, Nikolai Reimers, David Armand, Sergei Zalygin, and Valentin Rasputin.

Finally, I would underscore that the very term “ecology” had been used by many politicians and public figures as a political motto designated the move towards a better life. It meant that this term lost its initial meaning and acquired a very uncertain sense. Sometimes it was a kind of demonstrative behavior, no more. The idea of an integral approach to the analysis of social structures and processes has been lost or at least lags behind.

### *The Greens and the power structures*

In my early articles on the Soviet/ Russian environmentalism, I uncritically accepted the ‘state-civil society’ dichotomy [10; 13]. Now I have realized that it was a mistake. The perestroika period was very contradictory and full of inner conflicts between adversarial groups. A more detailed analysis shows the following. First, initially the Soviet leader M. Gorbachev called for the acceleration of the scientific-technological progress. The question of which type of society we did want to build was not discussed at all. Second, the substantial goal, that is, what type of society we want to construct was replaced by instrumental goals, that is, by the acceleration (of what?), glasnost’, and democracy. Third, as it is clear now, the pursuing of these instrumental goals turned into the weakening of the so called administrative-command system and finally into the decay of the Soviet Union. This decay was accompanied by the emanation of giant masses of energy of collapse (the jobless, the homeless, refugees, forced migrants, etc.). To my mind, it was not perestroika – it was the beginning of a civilizational turn which has been still continuing now. Nevertheless, in the eyes of Soviet environmentalists the very state was their main opponent. Therefore, it is methodologically possible to use the above dichotomy for the analysis of their relationships. More exactly it is focused on the relationships between various the EM’s branches and bureaucratic organizations of the state of different levels.

Roughly speaking, the weakening Soviet state treats the Greens negatively in general. But at the same time its attitude towards particular groups varies. As to the conservationists, the state regards them as “romantics” (D. Wiener called them *chudaki*, i.e. a bit not adequate people) and their ideas as a wishful thinking. At the same time, the state was inclined to cooperate with them. The state agreed neither with their goals nor with their forms of public activity. It is the classic case of pre-emption [5]. At



the same time, at the international level the Soviet state tightly cooperated with other countries in the construction of the network of the Biosphere reserves across the globe. I remind that in the period of 1960-80s, the major environmental protests were initiated by the leading naturalists, writers, and journalists. And some of the leading naturalists were the state's advisers. The state's attitude towards the traditionalists was ambiguous: it neither opposed nor supported their propensity to enlightening and cultural activity. Some leading figures of the movement, especially, writers, were open nationalists while others spoke for the protection of cultural heritage of the multi-national country. As I've mentioned earlier, the period under consideration was marked by the mushrooming of local civic initiatives, i.e. grassroots, mainly of protest character. It was a rather remarkable period of mass rise of such initiatives in small cities and towns in remote provinces. But there were a lot of initiatives of creative character: the establishment of charitable organizations and groups of self-help, of small business aimed at the restoration of historical and cultural monuments and local crafts, etc. All this meant that the local population has accumulated a lot of creative energy and has been ready to direct it for a production of common goods. In sum, the relationships between this initiatives and power bodies were the combination of contract and conflict.

The alternativists were the ideological opponents of the state and therefore did not join any state or municipal organization because, in their opinion, such participation could disorganize the EM. They preferred the so called "contract" relationships with the authorities. The contract meant an "informal, mutually beneficial, and time-limited interaction of the group and the local body of power, not assuming any mutual obligations in the future. As a rule, the alternativists organized mass protests and campaigns, perform acts of civic disobedience, and develop alternative settlement projects" [13, p. 70]. The eco-politicians were a very diverse group. Let me stress that in those times the very notion of "politics" was rather uncertain. Any public action, verbal or real, might be qualified as "politics" by the state's representatives. In my view, there were two main groups of eco-politics. The former strive for the cardinal reforms of the whole sphere of existing principles of state environmental policy. The latter used ecological slogans for building personal political carriers. This division became obvious on the early stage of perestroika [10; 11]. Initially, the eco-patriots gained political weight and public support. At the local level they became the allies of

the new bodies of power, especially at the municipal level. But in time, the power structures realized that such patriots were a potential threat of further decomposition of the RF. Being pushed aside from the power structures, the eco-patriots became their strong adversaries. But today, the eco-patriots have not only backed the right-ward shift in the environmental politics but have tried to revitalize their political position as advisers of the federal and regional powers. Strictly speaking, the eco-patriots were never among the leaders of perestroika and democratization processes. Finally, the naïve eco-technocrats very soon disappeared from the public arena. But historically, it is interesting that this group was mainly generated by the Centers for Scientific-and-Technical Creativity of the Youth.

#### *Environmental and other social movements*

Let me quote my own article written in 1996, because my estimates of their relationships have remained the same. The environmental movement stands a little aloof among other social movements in Russia. The first reason for such distancing is that the ecological movement was formed long before *perestroika*. Second, the movement was not only protest- and destruction-oriented, but also creative (research and development, ecological education, expertise, etc.). Third, the struggle for power was never the main or even secondary goal of the movement. Fourth, the ecologists did not represent the interests of a certain stratum of Russian society. Fifth, the strategic goals of the ecological movement, no matter how they were formulated, always were qualitatively different from those of the other movements.

As to the reasons for this distance, the "main factor is unwillingness of ecological movement leaders to have any contact with the other movements, such as Housing, Women, or the Movement in Defense of the Self-government. The leaders of the SoES and other ecological organizations always preferred to involve new people and groups in their own activities rather than to cooperate with the other movements. Another subjective reason why the movements remained separate is the conviction of the ecological movements' leaders that the other movements and parties do not pay due attention to ecological issues in their programs or political actions. During the periods of democratic upheaval (in 1987 and 1991), the Greens supported the Democrats, giving them professional assistance (such as making up their election programs), as well as a political support by taking part in meetings and mass actions of the

Popular Fronts and then of the Democratic Russia movement...

The deeper reasons for this distancing are intrinsic to the difference between the nature and political status of these movements. The ecological movement is first of all oriented toward enhancing its identity, developing and implementing environmental and other projects. The movement is nearly independent of the current political situation, and is hermetic to oppose political pressure. The democratic movement was purely political from the start. This is a power-oriented movement aimed at fighting the communist ideology and the administrative command system. There are practically no relations between the Greens and the communist movement. Until 1993, the communists were not a mass movement. As our studies show, the Greens' assessment of the communists is unambiguously negative". Later on, "the communists have become a serious political force again. Having become a large faction in the new parliament, the communists will be forced to somehow take into account the environmental concerns of the public. Furthermore, the communists' electorate consists of not only the former party *apparatchiks*, but also the state employees and pensioners – the least socially and ecologically protected groups. The eco-movement's leaders did their best in the pre-perestroika and early perestroika years to neutralize its patriotic-oriented branch and not let to the patriots shape the tactics and strategy of the movement. The Greens achieved their goal, but, as a result, lost the support of the moderate wing of the Russian national-patriots and at the same time fueled the tightening of positions held by its radical wing. At the same time, the Greens still do not take into account the fact that Russian patriots are a social force with a growing political influence. One cannot help observing that the ecological points of the programming documents of the Greens and the patriotic organizations have much in common" [13, p. 73-74].

#### **Conclusion: The major shifts**

The EM under consideration was a qualitatively new phenomenon in the Soviet history. It was a bottom-up created movement embracing grassroots initiatives in many strata of the Soviet society. The movement was rooted in the very thin layer of Soviet intelligentsia in cities and towns. It might be said that the EM is an urban one generated by a rise of living standards and capability to estimate their living milieu more critically.

It is wrong to state that the Soviet society was "one-dimensional" or uniform. In my view, the

movement resembled the process of growing diversification of the modes of production and the ways of life. On the one pole were those who entered the postindustrial society, whereas on the other pole were those who still remained at the first stage of so-called mechanical urbanization-and-industrialization processes. But all of them realized that the natural environment suffered from the growing pressure of forced industrialization.

It is indicative that the struggle of Soviet scientists, journalists and writers against the most harmful industrial projects began in the most ecologically fragile regions like the central industrial region, on the one hand, and in Irkutsk Oblast' and Buryatia Republic, on the other. The Russian writer V. Rasputin stated that Russian EM had emerged in Siberia.

The movement's institutional base was the universities, the research institutes, the unions of writers, journalists and architects as well as some independent public organizations of naturalists like the MSON. The students' nature protection activity (the Druzhina movement) from the late 1960 onwards is of a no less importance. It means that by the late 1980s, the Druzhina movement had already existed more than 25 years. The Druzhina joined the students, post-graduates and academics and it pursued the principle of "learning by doing".

Another important feature of the Druzhina movement was its network character. These networks had emerged long before the beginning of the era of informatization. Nevertheless, the exchange of letters, leaflets, and reports as well as interpersonal contacts had played a substantial role in the shaping of the Soviet/ Russian EM. When the process of computerization began this movement was the first which used information technics most efficiently and quickly.

The Druzhina and its allies activity was a mighty factor of the early socialization of young environmental activists. This activity includes all its elements (steps): perception of environmental issues, their comprehension through learning and consulting with professionals, the discussions, and one or another form of social action. The early socialization included a public activity in various social milieus (local people, municipal authorities, farmers, foresters, militia, etc.) as well. All this contacts taken together meant a smooth adaptation of the new generation of eco-activists to uneasy conditions of their future work. Later on, some of my respondents stated that this kind of activity shaped them as the persons.

In the run of the EM development, the process of “natural selection” was going on. Some local initiatives left the public arena while others gained strength and were converted into the all-Union (and later, the All-Russian) nature protection organizations like the SoES. It was a normal process of restructuring the EM in accordance with the changing social environment and new challenges.

The value shift is of no less importance [14]. In the 1970-80s, the motto of the Russian Greens was “We are professionals, therefore, we know better”. But it was a vulnerable position because the mushrooming grassroots were not professionals in nature protection and in defending their human rights. In time, the Greens realized that the environmental issues are rooted in a mode of production and in a top-down decision-making and in the lack of democratic procedures. Therefore, in the mid-1990s, the Greens became more democratic and paid much more attention to the environmental education of rank-and-file population. Nevertheless, in the period under consideration, the Greens were still insufficiently concerned with industrial pollution and the metabolic processes which followed them.

Finally, the second half of the 1980s was a *critical period* in the changes of the social order which existed more than 70 years. I would remind that the EM operated in the quickly changing political and social context. The Soviet greens launched their activities within a closed and rigidly structured context. Three-four years later, this context became much more open and loosely structured and in some cases acquired “chaotic” character. Any transition period is usually accompanied with the weakening of social order. As we now know, after the rise of the EM in the late 1980s – early 1990s, there was a sharp decline of it caused by the economic crisis and the decay of the Soviet Union.

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