

A stinking business. Environmental issues, protests and big money in the waste business in Russia

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In recent months, Moscow oblast has seen a series of social protests against environmental problems caused by municipal waste landfills. The waste disposal sites are overloaded, lack adequate safeguards, emit toxic gases and contaminate the groundwater with harmful effluent. The situation is most severe in Moscow oblast because the capital city generates the largest volumes of waste; however, the problem itself extends beyond environmental concerns into the economic and social spheres. Waste management in Russia is marked by notorious overloading of legal waste disposal sites and the emergence of illegal waste dumps, inadequate waste disposal practices leading to air pollution and groundwater contamination which affect local residents, and bad practices by businesses with links to President Vladimir Putin which have monopolised the waste collection sector.

The worsening environmental problems, and especially the health conditions suffered by residents exposed to waste dump vapours, have triggered social discontent. Residents of many locations outside Moscow have been protesting for months, and in some cases have raised political demands. However, a closer analysis of how the protests in Russia unfolded (and subsided) offers little hope that they will bring about any systemic change in waste management or create long-term social effects such as the emergence of mechanisms for civic oversight or a gradual change in the relationship between the state and the citizens. The 'garbage protests' seem to be an accurate illustration of the general dynamics of social protests in Russia. These are usually spontaneous and local, focus on a specific problem, and peter out once the problem has been even partly addressed, when the people become tired of demonstrating or come under pressure from the authorities. Moreover, the protesters seldom see their problem as part of a wider system sanctioned by the top tiers of government. The most that they expect is for their petition to reach the 'good tsar' president and for the local problem to be solved, without affecting the system as a whole. This attitude allows the Kremlin to maintain its status as the sole decision-maker, and gives it broad possibilities to extinguish the protests by making small concessions, manipulating the protesters, or intimidating or bribing their leaders.

Moscow in the 'golden ring' of landfills

2017 was proclaimed the Year of Ecology in Russia, but unfortunately it also saw the emergence of a range of environmental pollution scandals connected to the waste disposal sites. The topic was publicised during President Putin's televised

conference with the public in June 2017, when a resident of Balashikha near Moscow complained about a massive landfill located just next to the residential areas and its detrimental impact on the people's health. The President decided that the site should be closed with immediate effect, and his decision was carried out. However, that

failed to solve the systemic problem of waste disposal because the waste from Balashikha was merely redirected to another site near Volokolamsk, exacerbating the problems and sparking protests there.

Moscow oblast is the third most densely populated region in Russia; it is part of the Moscow agglomeration and a popular location for suburban residences and summer houses, some owned by members of the Russian elite (such as the villa district of Rublovka, the summer house neighbourhoods of FSB functionaries and others). It is also bottom of the environmental ratings; in a recent survey it ranked 83rd out of 85 Russian regions (while Moscow itself ranked 23rd)¹. Apart from its own litter (3–4 million tonnes), the oblast receives twice as much waste from the Moscow City (8 million tonnes). Even though on average Muscovites generate twice as much waste as residents of other areas, the policy of the Moscow city authorities has been limited to 'exporting' waste outside the city limits². As a result Moscow oblast, inhabited by 5% of the Russian population, has had to absorb 20% of the total waste generated in Russia. On top of that, only half of industrial waste and a mere 1% of municipal waste is processed³. According to Sergei Ivanov, the presidential plenipotentiary for ecology, Russia processes between 7% and 10% of waste on average, while the rest is put into landfill without any processing or adequate safeguards. According to official figures, fifteen large landfills are operating in Moscow oblast, as well as

a difficult-to-estimate number of smaller sites, some of which are illegal. In recent years, 24 large landfills have officially been closed, but some of them reportedly continue operating⁴. One of the main problems plaguing landfills in Russia concerns overloading; they accept waste in volumes far exceeding their prescribed limits.

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Many landfills were created back in the Soviet times, and are unsuited to absorb the volumes of waste generated by today's society. On average, they take in twice as much waste as they are designed for, as even the authorities have admitted⁵. The problem has been exacerbated by the way the city of Moscow manages its waste; because of the high cost of disposing waste in landfills capable of cleaning up and removing biogas (such as Timokhovo), waste gets sent to other landfills which are technologically less advanced but offer lower prices. It is a common practice to bring excessive amounts of waste to landfills at night under the cover of darkness. Another problem concerns insufficient safeguards at landfills, i.e. inadequate insulation, no systems to capture and purify effluents, and the absence of protective layers of soil between layers of waste. As a result, the landfills emit toxic gases and effluents contaminate aquifer

¹ Environmental ranking by the Green Patrol organisation, 1st quarter of 2018, <http://greenpatrol.ru/ru/stranica-dlya-obshchego-reytinga/ekologicheskii-reyting-subektov-rf?tid=343>

² К. Руков, *Мусорный бунт: За что Москве должно быть стыдно*, "The Village", 16 February 2018, <https://www.the-village.ru/village/city/infrastructure/301663-musor-che-s-nim-proihodit>

³ *Свалки в Подмоскowie*, http://www.msknov.ru/important/IEkologiya_i_radiatsiya/Svalki_v_Podmoskove/; С. Сарджвеладзе, *Игорь Ротенберг взялся за отходы*, 4 June 2018, <https://www.rbc.ru/newspaper/2018/06/05/5b15229b9a79471f284ea171>

⁴ Б. Ляув, Е. Брызгалова, *Почему Московская область задыхается от вони со свалок*, "Ведомости", 16 April 2018, <https://www.vedomosti.ru/realty/articles/2018/04/16/766756-moskovskaya-oblast-voni-svalok>

⁵ Including Alexander Kogan, the Moscow oblast's minister for ecology. *Короли мусора и новостроек: как бизнес и подмосковные ОПГ богатели в эпоху Воробьева*, TV Dozhd, 14 June 2018, https://tvrain.ru/teleshov/reportazh/telegina_vorobev-465656

fers⁶. In some landfills, even hazardous medical waste or radioactive materials are disposed of⁷. Moreover, there exist so-called 'wild' waste dumps which are unregulated and do not comply with any rules; according to Sergey Donskoy, the minister for natural resources, 153,000 such illegal waste disposal sites were discovered in Russia in 2016 alone⁸. Because of the intensive truck traffic on access roads to landfills and the long queues, some drivers choose to dump their cargo in the nearby forests. The condition of the environment around many landfills verges on environmental disaster. According to studies, the concentrations of chemical substances (especially hydrogen sulphide) in the air and groundwater exceed the permitted limits by several times, while the data officially published by the authorities understates the problem⁹. The most problematic landfills that have caused the biggest resident protests are located in Moscow oblast: they include Yadrovo near Volokolamsk, the temporary landfill in the village of Sichovo near Ruza (within 500m of a school and oligocene water wells providing drinking water for the entire area), Zavolnye in Kurovskoye (which has been receiving waste again even though it was closed down in 2016), as well as landfills near Klin, Kolomna, Dmitrov and Serpukhov. Some highly problematic land-

fills are also located in other regions of Russia, e.g. Skokovo in Yaroslavl oblast (the region also imports large amounts of waste from Moscow), Yekaterinburg, Kaliningrad oblast, Yakutia and others.

The authorities of Moscow and Moscow oblast have partly responded to the garbage problem by planning to build waste incinerators and waste sorting plants. Ten waste incinerators and eight sorting plants are expected to be constructed in Moscow oblast, including in Klin, Mozhaysk, Kolomna, Dmitrov and Volokolamsk. The authorities are also planning to revitalise existing landfills; revitalisation is currently underway in Kashira, Elektrostal and Pavlov Posad, and is set to begin in seven other landfills in 2019.

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However, getting businesses and especially households to sort waste still poses the greatest challenge in Russia. The issue has been addressed in a bill on waste disposal which was amended in December 2017¹⁰. The bill introduced mechanisms to incentivise businesses and households to sort their waste; imposed a requirement to carry out public consultations concerning the locations of landfills, incinerators and sorting plants; put local governments in charge of landfill maintenance; and introduced a waste disposal fee for industrial plants and an ecological charge for citizens. However, as a result of the lobbying efforts by businesses and the people's unwillingness to bear additional costs in times of crisis, the implementation of the new rules, concerning charges has

⁶ К. Назарова, *Новая свалка около Волоколамска. Власти при поддержке ОМОНа ответили жителям на протесты*, TV Dozhd 17, May 2018, https://tvrain.ru/teleshov/vecheree_shou/novaja_svalka_okolo_volokolamska-463936/

⁷ Е. Самедова, *Противники полигона «Ядрово» требуют отставки губернатора Подмосковья*, "Deutsche Welle", 27 May 2018; *Жители Сычево перекрыли дорогу, чтобы не пустить грузовики с ртутью*, znak.com, 12 July 2018.

⁸ В. Иноземцев, *Как решить мусорную проблему в Подмосковье*, 26.03.2018, <https://www.rbc.ru/newspaper/2018/03/27/5ab8af559a79472cb7ddbdcde>

⁹ *Противники полигона "Ядрово"... op.cit.* According to alarmed residents, the authorities have been under-reporting hydrogen sulphide concentrations in the official figures: according to official data, in March the limit was exceeded tenfold, while according to measurements made by residents, the concentration was 90 times higher than permitted. Е. Брызгалова, *Каждый третий житель Волоколамска вышел на митинг против свалки*, "Ведомости", 1 April 2018, <https://www.vedomosti.ru/politics/articles/2018/04/01/755513-miting-protiv-svalki>

¹⁰ The text of the bill is available at <http://www.kremlin.ru/acts/bank/42728/page/1>

been postponed until 1 January 2019. President Putin has also spoken about the need to put the landfill situation in order. In this year's address to parliament, he stressed that there were 22,000 landfills in Russia, and the problems generated by them needed to be resolved, first and foremost by cleaning up and revitalising the landfills located within cities¹¹.

***Pecunia non olet:* the lucrative garbage business**

Meanwhile, waste storage and disposal are a lucrative business. In Moscow and Moscow oblast under the mayor Sergei Sobanin's rule, the waste sector has become almost entirely monopolised by businesses controlled by members of the ruling elite, including people with close links to President Putin. The 'king' of the garbage business in Moscow is Igor Chaika, son of the Russian prosecutor general: in 2015 his company Khartia won two fifteen-year contracts for waste disposal in Moscow worth a total of 42.6 billion roubles (\$635 million; all conversions based on the exchange rate from August 2018), in 2016 it was awarded further contracts worth 220 million roubles (\$3.3 million), and in 2017 more deals worth 182 million roubles (\$2.7 million)¹². Other important players in the waste business include Roman Abramovich, the oligarch co-financing the Kremlin's projects (via his company MKM-Logistics which has won a tender worth 40 billion roubles (\$600 million); the company is co-owned by Oleg Gref, son of the CEO of Sberbank), Gennady Timchenko, Putin's friend and oil trader (the Ecoline company, 25.6 billion roubles, i.e. \$382 million) and the CEO of Rostec Sergey Chemezov (12.4 billion roubles, i.e. \$185 million), another close acquaintance of the president.

¹¹ Transcript of President Putin's address on 1 March 2018: <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/56957>

¹² See among others Л. Соболь, *Абрамович, Тимченко и сын Генпрокурора Чайки*, ФБК, 26 August 2015, <https://fbk.info/investigations/post/88/>

In April this year the city of Moscow concluded a tendering procedure for the removal of waste to landfills in Moscow oblast for another ten years, worth a total of more than 190 billion roubles (\$2.8 billion). The biggest beneficiaries included RT-Invest, a Rostec subsidiary (winning contracts worth a total of 109 billion roubles, i.e. \$1.6 billion) and Igor Chaika's Khartia (35 billion roubles, i.e. \$522 million)¹³.

Waste storage and disposal are a lucrative business. It has become almost entirely monopolised by businesses controlled by people with close links to President Putin.

The contracts are highly profitable: the companies charge between 2000 and 3000 roubles (\$30–45) to collect one tonne of waste in Moscow, and pay a mere 600 to 800 roubles (\$9–12) to the landfill managers¹⁴. Importantly, local governments in Moscow oblast are now required to conclude ten-year waste disposal contracts with the tender winner assigned to their location, while previously around 300 waste disposal companies had operated, and local governments, private individuals and landfills were free to select with whom to co-operate. Many of the landfills themselves, according to investigative journalists' reports, are controlled by criminal groups. The landfills in Lesnaya (the second largest in Moscow oblast) and Aleksinsky are controlled by the notorious organised crime leader Nikolai Nefedov (aka Nefed) and the dubious Foundation for the Support of War Veterans¹⁵. The foundation is also linked

¹³ Khartia also operates in other regions: in 2018 it established itself as a monopoly in the waste disposal sector in Yaroslavl and Tula oblasts. For more information, see Б. Ляув, Е. Брызгалова, *Мусор Подмосковья вывезут компании «Ростеха» и Игоря Чайки*, "Ведомости" 23 April 2018, <https://www.vedomosti.ru/business/articles/2018/04/23/767604-musor>

¹⁴ *Короли мусора и новостроек...*, *op.cit.*

¹⁵ *Ibidem.*

to the entrepreneur Pyotr Katsyv, the former minister for transport of Moscow oblast and the deputy CEO of Russian Railways, who has been included in the US sanctions list (the so-called Magnitsky List). The Kuchino landfill in Balashikha, which President Putin ordered to be closed, was controlled by Anatoly Petrov (aka Petrukha), a member of the criminal world who allied with the town's mayor Evgeny Zhirkov; the media have published recordings of Zhirkov's meetings with Petrov where the two men discussed extorting money from local entrepreneurs and sharing profits¹⁶. The Kulakovsky landfill in the town of Chekhov is reportedly controlled by organised crime group based in Podolsk¹⁷.

The programme for the construction of waste incinerators and sorting plants in Moscow oblast has also been controlled by businesses with close links to the Kremlin. Ten incinerators are planned to be constructed in the oblast, and four projects are already in the preparatory stage. RT-Invest, the company mentioned above, will be the main contractor building the facilities (the construction of each project will cost 31 billion roubles, i.e. \$463 million), while Trest Gidromontazh – owned by Igor Rotenberg, the son of President Putin's close friend – will be a subcontractor¹⁸.

Protests by 'ordinary' people

The environmental and health problems caused by the landfills have galvanised protests by residents of Moscow oblast. People who have hitherto not sympathised with the opposition or participated in demonstrations are now tak-

ing to the streets. The protests were sparked by the dramatic situation in Volokolamsk, a town of 20,000 inhabitants located 120 kilometres from Moscow. In March this year, 57 children (or according to other sources, more than 200) were admitted to hospital with symptoms of poisoning by gas vapours from the nearby landfill, which triggered a spontaneous protest by parents and other residents. The people were further angered by the official medical reports which claimed that no poisoning had taken place.

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Regular protests took place in the town in the months that followed. In some cases, they turned violent: in March, outraged parents of the hospitalised children roughed up Evgeny Gavrilov, the head of Volokolamsk district, insulted Andrei Vorobyov, the governor of Moscow oblast, and hit him with snowballs; while in May, shots were fired at one of the garbage trucks heading towards the landfill.

The protests have been joined by a significant proportion of the residents; the largest one in Volokolamsk was attended by a third of the town's population (7000 out of 20,000 people), while the rally on 3 March brought together 5000 people, and the one on 29 March 6000 people¹⁹. Several hundred-strong protests were also staged in Balashikha, Kolomna, Klin, Sergiev Posad, Tuchkov and Serpukhov, as well as in Yaroslavl oblast, which has been the final

¹⁶ See *Мэр подмосковной Балашихи рассказал, как раздает откаты и забирает местный бизнес*, 30 January 2017, <https://crimerussia.com/corruption/mer-podmoskovnoy-balashikhi-rasskazal-kak-razdaet-otkаты-i-zabiraet-mestnyy-biznes/>

¹⁷ К. Руков, *Мусорный бунт*, *op.cit.*

¹⁸ С. Сарджавеладзе, *Компания Ротенберга стала подрядчиком «мусорного» проекта «Ростеха»*, *rbc.ru*, 4 June 2018, www.rbc.ru/politics/04/06/2018/5b15229b9a79471f284ea171

¹⁹ Е. Брызгалова, *Каждый третий житель Волоколамска вышел на митинг против свалки*, "Ведомости", 1 April 2018, <https://www.vedomosti.ru/politics/articles/2018/04/01/755513-miting-protiv-svalki>

destination for a significant portion of Moscow's waste in recent years. The preferred form of protest often consists in blocking landfill access roads. The protest communities now have leaders, the Volokolamsk entrepreneur Andrei Zhdanov being the most recognisable one. Acting on a request from the residents, the town councillors of Volokolamsk have decided to hold a referendum on the closure of the landfill in September.

The protests are a challenge to the authorities – they resort to pressurising the leaders and activists, the use of force during demonstrations, making apparent concessions and employing propaganda.

In addition to staging protests, the residents have been monitoring the quantities of land-filled waste and information about plans to build new landfills, they have commissioned local environmental studies, operated informative profiles on Telegram, vKontakte and other social media portals, and produced thematic t-shirts and car stickers. The protests now also have both a symbol and a 'mascot' – a ten-year old girl who threatened Governor Vorobyov with a meaningful gesture during his speech at one of the rallies. In some cases, individual opposition activists have joined the protesting residents, including representatives of the Communists, the Yabloko party, activists from the radical Left Front of Sergei Udaltsov, aides of Aleksei Navalny, and members of the unregistered Libertarian Party. Ksenia Sobchak, who was then a presidential candidate, took part in the rallies on 10 and 21 March. The protests were also backed by several representatives of the local authorities, including the mayor of Volokolamsk Pyotr Lazarev, of the Communist Party, and the head of Serpukhov district Alexander Shestun. However, apolitical local residents still constitute the core of the protests.

Even though most of them have distanced themselves from politics, in some cases political demands have been raised nonetheless; for example, Governor Vorobyov has been called on to resign, and demands for the reinstatement of direct elections of mayors have been raised. During the demonstrations, the protester held banners which said 'Trash Vorobyov', 'Crimea got a bridge, we got a graveyard', 'The government is as toxic as the landfills'. The slogans attacking the governor are particularly important in the context of Vorobyov's bid for re-election this September. However, even more common were slogans calling on President Putin as the 'last resort', which referred to his image as a politician who cares about the ordinary people, and to his decision to immediately close the Balashikha landfill last year.

The protests, which have already lasted for several months, have posed a significant challenge to the authorities, especially the regional government. Predictably, they have resorted to methods tested on many previous occasions at the federal and local level, such as pressurising the leaders and activists, the use of force during demonstrations, pretending to make concessions, and employing propaganda. The demonstrations have been secured by the OMON, which has intervened brutally in some cases (especially where access roads were blocked), dispersed the crowd and removed the most active protesters (including women and seniors). Protest leaders have been detained and arrested: following the protest on 1 April, ten activists were detained and the leaders, Andrei Zhdanov and Artyom Lubimov, were arrested for 15 days. Law enforcement agencies, including the Moscow branch of the Interior Ministry's department for the prosecution of economic crimes and the immigration service, undertook inspections at the companies of Zhdanov, another Volokolamsk activist Ramzan Bayramov and their business partners. Alexander Shestun, the head of Serpukhov district, has been held in a high-security detention facility since June

on charges of abuse of power. Inspections have also been carried out at the offices of the Volokolamsk mayor Lazarev, and the man himself has been summoned as a witness in an embezzlement case and had his apartment searched. The regional government has also made some token concessions, designed not so much to alleviate the situation as to create an appearance that the authorities are concerned, and to distract the protesters. After the protests started in March, Moscow oblast's governor Vorobyov dismissed the head of Volokolamsk district and imposed a state of emergency at the landfill (which nonetheless continued to accept waste). The governor also pledged to send his plenipotentiary to the town and install a screen to display air quality monitoring results. At the same time the government has suppressed information about the protests: the two largest state-owned television stations refused to cover the most vocal protest in Volokolamsk that followed the children's poisoning. In some other cases, coverage of the stories was presented at the end of news shows and was dominated by long statements by the governor. Some news channels implied that the protests had been inspired by external agents who sought to fan a conflict between the residents and the governor, as allegedly evidenced by Ksenia Sobchak's visits and the interest in the developments at Volokolamsk shown by Aleksei Navalny²⁰.

Russian protests and their limitations

The landfill protests are another instance of social discontent to have surfaced in recent years, proving that after a period of social apathy and public consolidation around the Kremlin following the annexation of Crimea, people are becoming increasingly frustrated by the deteriorating economic situation. The first such large-scale expression of discontent was the truck drivers' protest against road charges

(the Platon system) in late 2015 – which spanned 40 regions in Russia, was joined by thousands of road hauliers and continued for more than a year. In the months that followed, different cities in Russia saw protests by farmers, teachers, opponents of the demolition of 1960s-era blocks of flats and resettlements, victims of fraud by developer companies and fraudulent banks, people protesting against increasing the retirement age, and political demonstrations organised by Navalny.

The protests are usually local, spontaneous and time-limited. Society adopts the 'suppliant' attitude vis-a-vis the Kremlin, therefore the government has broad possibilities to extinguish protests by making symbolic concessions and intimidating or bribing their leaders.

Protests have resumed because the memory of the government's brutal reaction to the 2011–12 demonstrations has faded and social problems have accumulated. Russians have been made to bear the costs of their government's foreign policy sanctions, restrictions on food imports, etc. Organising protests is undoubtedly easier now thanks to new technologies, especially with regard to the ability to co-ordinate efforts and look for allies online. However, a number of factors in Russia still undermine the potential of the protests, many of them related to the specific social and political culture in Russia. The protests are usually local and insular, spontaneous and time-limited; they subside quickly and do not transform into more durable institutionalised formulas such as mechanisms for civic oversight of various spheres of public life. The potential of the protests is also affected by the weakness of the organisers (e.g. trade unions) and their pliancy in relations with the authorities, as well as the weak solidarity and lack of co-ordination between the different protest

²⁰ А. Перцев, *Что рассказал Волоколамск об эволюции российской вертикали*, carnegie.ru, 23.03.2018, <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/75870>

groups, which often treat one another as rivals competing for the state's assistance²¹. Moreover, the protest groups do not expect systemic changes, but merely a local solution that will meet their expectations, and they are satisfied when their demands are even partly met. The citizens expressing their discontent are seldom willing to assume part of the responsibility for the given sphere; for instance the landfill protesters oppose landfills as well as incinerators, and are unwilling to pay the costs of implementing a household waste sorting system. Finally, people in Russia have little faith that social pressure can be effective or that they could engage in a dialogue with the government on an equal footing. The government, and President Putin in particular, are seen as the only actors with any agency and ability to solve problems, while society is entirely disempowered and reduced

to the role of a supplicant appealing to the President's good will. Presenting a humble petition to the 'good tsar', e.g. by dialling the television hotline during the President's dialogue with the nation, is considered to be a more effective method of protecting one's interests than protesting. By adopting this 'supplicant' attitude, the people offer the Kremlin broad possibilities to extinguish protests: by making partial or symbolic concessions, manipulating the protesters, or intimidating or bribing their leaders. Bearing these entrenched limitations in mind, it is likely that even a problem as acute as the impact of landfills on people's health will not lead to any change in Russia's waste management system or any lasting social activation in the sphere of environmental protection, and despite their original dynamics, the protests will gradually subside.

²¹ Д. Волков, *Не только большие протесты*, "Ведомости", 6 May 2018, <https://www.vedomosti.ru/opinion/articles/2018/05/07/768724-ne-bolshie-protesti>

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