

ENVIRONMENTAL ACTIVISM IN RUSSIA - November 21st, 2016, SciencesPo

On November 21st, 2016, Sciences Po Environnement and Sciences Po Samovar welcomed, on behalf of Russie-Libertés, Evgenya Chirikova, a Russian environmental activist, and Vincent Brengarth, a lawyer from a law firm “Bourdon and Forestier”, who is now working with Sherpa, an organization that fights corruption. Yevgenya Chirikova was awarded the International Woman of Courage Award, also recognized by other types of commencements for her continuous uphill fight against environmental injustice in Russia. She had to move to Estonia a year ago due to security and logistical reasons. The conference mostly focused on the relation between environmental problems, corruption and Vladimir Putin’s regime.

Evgenya Chirikova

Chirikova argued that it is important for Russian activists to inform foreigners of the environmental problems and activism in Russia. Environmentalists there find themselves in a very particular context. On the one hand, one can witness an aggressive Putin’s foreign policy in Syria, Ukraine, and, earlier, Georgia. On the other hand, there is persecution against opposition in Russia. People like Alexey Navalny and Boris Nemtsov have been in jail, prison, or killed. Some of them needed to go into exile to foreign countries because of that. At the same time, though, there is another trend. The number of grassroots groups in Russia is increasing. This is an interesting phenomenon, as it is completely new and breaks with the suppressed Russian character. Throughout the 20th century, there have been repressions against the society, with millions of people killed. Consequently, the Russian people had a systematic fear of authorities. Even recently, in 2010, when she organized a movement to save Khimki forests in Russia, there were no inside local organizations fighting environmental injustice. Now, in 2016, there is a growing number of activists, which can be seen in a website called “activatica.org.”

The growth of local activists’ groups is closely related to the environmental problems that Russia is facing. The country is at the epicenter of being affected by climate change. Climate change in Russia is 2.5 times faster in Russia than in the rest of the world. However, the Russian government does not really care about this. In August 2010, there were forest fires and 50000 people had health problems after. Russian authorities did not want to address these problems, so people decided to organize. In the same year, 5000 people demonstrated for the preservation of the

Khimki forest. Dmitry Medvedev, who was the president at the moment, decided to stop the highway project for which the forest was supposed to be cut down. It was the first time that the Russian government listened to the people, at least for a little bit. However, the project continued.

The number of grassroots movements in Russia is, thus, still growing. This is related to multiple mistreatments of the Russian environment by the authorities. Historically, the regime aimed at extracting all the natural resources. After the economic crisis (post 2013, because she refers here to the economic sanctions after the Ukraine invasion and the drop of price of commodities, such as oil), the authorities decided to extract money directly from the people. This is being done through liquidation of green zones and selling them for developers of infrastructure, shopping malls etc. As Chirikova pointed out, forests don't generate money, but malls that can be built there can. Not all people agree with this logic, so there is a growth in environmental activism to protect those green zones. A good example of this is the Tarfyanka (please double check!!!) campaign. A new church was supposed to be built instead of the park. People wanted to save the park and asked to move the church. The Church send in state sponsored thugs to deal with protesters, which, obviously, grew discontent.

Evgenya Chirikova has been involved since 2010 in a project to save the Khimki forest. This is an interesting case, since it reflects how related the environmental problems are with corruption in Russia. In 2010, the authorities started demolishing the Khimki forest for the Moscow-Saint Petersburg highway and the infrastructure related to it. She first spread the information around state institutions, because demolishing the forest was unconstitutional. The government told her that there was nothing to do about it, since the project was promoted by Putin. Disillusioned with state institutions, she decided to organize a campaign to save the forest. She created a petition to save the forest and went door to door to organize a campaign.

Media largely ignored the problem, because it had nothing to do with criminal topics that are popular in Russia. Mikhail Beketov, however, decided to cover it, because the highway project is connected to government corruption. He got attacked and was disabled after his stories on the Khimki forest and, later died. After that, many independent journalists agreed to help out and cover the story.

In order to save the forest, Chirikova and other activists set up a camp in the Khimki forest. The camp was attacked by state sponsored bandits. They attacked activists/ Police refused to work with this case, however.

The organized group did not limit itself with militant action – they also carried out an investigation on the project. They questioned the involvement of a French company “Vinci”. The government chose the most expensive project, for which the taxpayers were supposed to pay. After that, part of the money paid to Vinci would be distributed in offshore companies, for example in Cyprus, in the companies owned by Rotenberg.

Sherpa

Vincent Brengarth in this meeting represented Sherpa. Sherpa aims to fight corruption. Corruption, according to him, is the main problem in the society today. It contributes to the growth of populism, destroys competition, ignores environmental problems. It also poses problems for sustainable development abroad in developing countries, which fosters terrorism.

Corruption, according to Berngarth, has to be fought using international tools. OECD had issued declarations that aim at fighting corruption. Similar conventions have been adopted by the EU, the UN. Proving misbehavior is hard though, because corruption is often passive. This can be seen in the “Vinci” case, where the company is simply an intermediary.

Sherpa filed a complaint against “Vinci” in June 2014, for alleged bribery to get the right to build the highway in Russia. Russia decided to reject all bids and chose the one that belonged to the Vinci group. It is the most expensive and the least beneficial project for the environment from all possible projects. This case illustrates the link between corruption and environmental problems. Company should not be let off the hook for participating in projects in countries where legislations are loose and corruption is active. However, acts were committed abroad, which will make the case hard to investigate and will not possibly lead to a good outcome.

Questions

Q. Why did you leave Russia? Why is it so hard to fight environmental activism?

A. She moved to Estonia because it was impossible to continue her activities in Russia. There was a personal risk – after criminal case against her, the authorities

were trying to take her children away. Chirikova also thinks that at the moment, she is more helpful by having a low profile and working from distance. For example, she decided to create a medium to spread information about grassroots. She invited volunteers and journalists in Russia to work with the in Estonia and in Russia. It's easier like this, because by tackling environmental problems she tackles corruption and if you do that, you are a target for the Russian authorities.

Chirikova also noticed that people change their perception of the world after participating in grassroots organizations. They mature and start thinking progressively. Once they are tackled with the same propaganda that is used against Ukrainians while protesting for the preservation of their green zones, they see that all that Russian government and media is spreading is lies and that that has to change.

Q. Putin declared 2017 the year of the environment. Is it only propaganda?

A. Chirikova claims that Putin likes to play roles – sometimes he says one thing, but then does another thing. He lies all the time. Putin finds it easy to do, because he was trained as a KGB spy and it is normal for them to lie. If he says something about ecology that means he just wants to completely destroy the traces of it.

Q. Where is Russia's Snowden? Why is there no one from the inside who would undermine the system?

There are no insiders to reveal information, because everyone in the authorities are only concerned with making money (corruption). A good example is the Magnitsky case. It exposes the corruption in Russia.

Sergei Magnitsky was a lawyer. He found how Russian authorities stole 20-30 million dollars directly from Russian budget. His boss, Bill Browder, shared the case with the authorities, but Magnitsky got arrested and tortured, because he was asked to change his testimony and to say that he was the one who stole the money. This is a good example of men, who open criminal cases against the regime, are killed.

Magnitsky act, however, is a useful tools against Putin's regime. According to this act, Russian officials related to this case cannot enter the US and use American bank accounts. It is, according to Chirikova, a good anti-corruption tool.

For further information :

<http://activalica.org> : the website where you'll find all the initiatives that Evgenya mapped

<https://www.asso-sherpa.org/home> : the website of Sherpa