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To cite this article: A V Egorchenkov and D A Egorchenkov 2020 *IOP Conf. Ser.: Earth Environ. Sci.* **579** 012099

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# Social aspects of environmental issues in the context of the national project “Ecology”

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**Abstract.** The article is studying the prospects of the environmental issues impact on social policy in Russia. Environmental issues are coming to the fore in the context of public discourse around the world - a new surge in public discourse on this topic is expected following the resolution of the pandemic crisis. Much attention was paid to the consideration of the national project "Ecology", which is a response to a public request related to changes in the field of domestic ecology and the approach to it. The authors come to the conclusion that public attention to environmental problems will only increase, while it is advised to the state to keep it in the system field. Otherwise, it is precisely the “environmental agenda” that may become one of the main factors of destabilization of the domestic political field in Russia. Further systematic expert development of this topic should designate state structures and public organizations as a sufficient set of “roadmaps” for a consistent reduction in the level of conflict in the context of a “green” issue.

## 1. Introduction

In the context of the new phase of the global 2020 economic crisis, the global “pandemic threat” and current trends in social development, the issue of lack of state social responsibility for the preservation and rehabilitation of the human environment have become more acute. There were and remain numerous unresolved environmental problems in Russia, which are increasingly acquiring a pronounced social meaning, which are the consequence of an accelerated change in the socio-economic model at the end of the 20th century.

Measures to overcome accumulated systematic failures in various areas of domestic, public life (“National Projects”), which were launched in 2018 by President V.V. Putin, are aimed at building a fundamentally new model of future development. At the same time, the logic of the strategy for the accelerated development of Russia formation is in increasing the volume of basic production of the “new technological structure” and the gradual output of the Russian economy to the long economic “wave” associated with this structure.

A necessary condition for success here is the achievement of a synergistic effect, which implies the complexity of forming paired production clusters of a new technological structure and the coordination of macroeconomic policies with the priorities of early technical and economic development [1].



## 2. Formulation of the problem

This understanding, among other things, means that among the necessary elements of sustainable economic, social (and political) development of Russia, environmental issues (Ecology national project) occupy a very special place. This raises a number of serious issues for the state and civil society. The last part of the puzzle is so far the most frustrating, especially in terms of information exchange dysfunctional channels, as well as the negative "narrative field" in terms of ecology, which has been forming in our country for decades.

Fortunately, today it is already quite obvious that ecology in Russia is an integral part of the social agenda, while its condition and state policy directly affect not only economic calculations, but directly the relationship between civil society and the state.

A significant historical trigger for the "special" attitude of Russian society to the environment along with "distrust of the state" in this area was the accident at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant. The attempts to "hide the catastrophe" that have become generally accepted mythology have for many years discredited the idea of protecting the environment by the state. According to M.S. Gorbachev, the accident might have been "one of the prerequisites for the collapse of the USSR," [2], so it has seriously affected the public's perception of the state's environmental activities.

For a long time, foreign structures used to "demonize" [3] the environmental Russian projects and took advantage of the organizational underdevelopment of domestic environmental institutions. That is very important that the creation of a full-fledged all-Russian public organization "Russian Ecological Society", aimed at resolving issues of public and expert support of environmental work of the state, was possible only in the framework of the Year of Ecology in 2017 [4].

At the same time, the country has been shocked by numerous social conflicts with environmental overtones over the past 10 years. Moreover, their last quantitative increase coincided with a general increase in protest sentiments in 2016-2019. It should be noted that especially in the context of the ongoing "hybrid confrontation" [5], environmental issues are becoming an increasingly important media and political technology tool.

The precedent with the Swedish student Greta Thunberg, "transforming existential horror into movement" [6] – is far from covering the potential of the international confrontation. For example, the website of the US Embassy in Russia announced an internship 2020 program for Russian youth with the following goals: "*The program involves the study of long-term measures to protect people's health and the rational use of natural resources. Russian participants will be able to learn about **social and environmental responsibility**, get acquainted with the most significant youth environmental and social projects, as well as with **involvement of citizens and local communities in these processes***" [7]. It would be too naive to believe that such programs are purely philanthropic.

## 3. Results and discussion

An opportunity to rectify the situation with an asymmetric response, including to such an urgent and acute social request, was the Ecology National Project [8]. In conceptual terms, this document identifies the following activities of the state: creating a waste management system, working to improve the quality of drinking water and air, conserving forests; a special group is the work on the environmental situation of the Volga River and Lake Baikal [8]. All these semantic blocks are the cornerstone of the Russian environmental agenda in its socially significant dimension. Note that unlike other countries, due to the specifics of the technological structure in our country at the moment there is no public demand for an immediate and ubiquitous transition to the use of exclusively "green technologies", but sociology clearly and regularly reflects the need to solve the very problems listed above, which accumulated in the field of nature management for literally decades [9].

In this aspect, the cases of the Volga River and Lake Baikal became the most revealing. In Soviet times, a whole chain of industrial enterprises was created around these natural sites, which, without proper control, undermined the state of the environment in the regions of residence. Moreover, in both cases, these problems are complex in nature, therefore their solution is impossible by closing one or

two "non-environmentally friendly" facilities or transforming them into one specific sector of the national economy. Note that it is the Volga and Baikal along the way that are the main natural symbols of our country and that attract the most public attention. Therefore they form the symbolic basis of the social contract between the state and the people in environmental matters.

It is important to note that such projects within the framework of the Ecology national project as "Clean Water", "Clean Air", "Forest Conservation" [8] also fully comply with the formed social request. The general direction of their corrective action can be identified by the names of the projects themselves. Let us note another: in this example, we are already talking about systematic integrated work in all regions of the country, which the national system of state planning previously lacked. While the Pure Water project inherently intersects with conservation measures of the Volga basin and Lake Baikal, in the case of the Clean Air and Forest Conservation projects, we see activities to strengthen control over the entire forest fund and reduce harmful emissions in the federal scale.

The last paragraph, by the way, is systematically correlated with the Paris Agreement of 2015 [10], which Russia, unlike some international partners, is fully implementing. And the problems of forests (forest fires in Siberia and the Far East) virtually every year attract the attention of the whole of Russian society. The importance of a comprehensive and socially oriented approach to solving the problems of forest use and forests as a whole was repeatedly emphasized in the framework of regular events held under the auspices of the State Duma of the National Forest Forum [11].

If we return to the text of the passport of the Ecology National Project, then the subproject "Integrated Solid Waste Management System" [12] takes a natural significant place in it. It has great social significance, touching directly on every citizen of Russia. That is why the idea of centralized waste management seems more than timely, but the form of its implementation should be seriously worked out. Otherwise, social consequences cannot be avoided.

A perfect example in this context was the situation around the Arkhangelsk village of Shies. Due to the lack of the decision, residents strongly opposed the construction of a modern and technologically advanced landfill. It is noteworthy that, according to monitoring data, in the 2nd quarter of 2019, more than half of all environmental protests in all of Russia were devoted specifically to Shies [13]. The Presidential Council for the Development of Civil Society also gave a negative assessment of the construction of a landfill in Shies [14]. In this case, we are witnessing a situation similar to the Khimki Forest scandal (2007-2012).

On the one hand, a lot has been done by the state to protect the environment, and on the other hand, a serious federal destabilizing factor has appeared in the nearest future, which was easily exploited destructive political forces. The reason for this state of affairs lies in the lack of preliminary expert elaboration, appropriate support in terms of social consequences, and thoughtful dialogue with society - at the regional and local levels.

This leads us to the idea of the need for a more systematic and consistent development of the Ecology National Project from the point of view of its social effect. It must be admitted that the society in Russia as a whole is still unsatisfactory in assessing the work of the state in terms of environmental management and environmental protection. This problem is not new. The inclusion of ecology in the general unwritten social issues is a stage that has long been passed by many countries. Although, Russia is still on this stage. In this regard, it is clear that environmental safety issues have outgrown the scope of purely environmental activities, the industrial sector, technological challenges and business interests. Ecology has already become a factor in social policy - affecting the health of society, its sustainability, its development and future.

In such conditions, it is extremely important to understand how is the dialogue between the state and society going in environmental matters. If similar activities are conducted by domestic NGOs that do not pursue the goal of destabilizing the situation within the country, then they are an important accelerator of social and state attention to the problem. This leads to a gradual removal of the acuteness of perception of existing environmental problems, the cooperation of the state and society in their resolution (including through mechanisms of the volunteer movement, etc.).

O.Y. Semenov, candidate of historical sciences, expresses a very positivist attitude to the activities of such NGOs (Lobachevsky state University) [15]. His assessment is extremely positive in relation to the activities of environmental NGOs in the international arena. However, there is another point of view: Candidate of pedagogic sciences AB Shatilov (Financial University under the Government of the Russian Federation) writes about a direct connection of foreign law enforcement agencies with "international" environmental NGOs that act to undermine the situation within a country or to collect the necessary information [16]. International experience shows the importance for any state of the sovereignty of instruments to control the processes taking place on its own territory. Ecology today is not an exception in this aspect, but it is tightly included in the field of political discourse, modern mythologized mass culture, and social relations in their entirety [17].

#### 4. Conclusion

Given the above understanding, the real mechanism of civil society, accumulating social environmental activity itself, is the social mechanism for the implementation of the National Project "Ecologists" - in its extreme terms, we can talk not only about domestic NGOs, but also about the classic "green" patriotic parties. In general, in the world there recently has been a trend towards an increase in the popularity of "green" political forces: a gradual increase in the presence of greens can be traced on the example of the European Parliament [18].

Moreover, in some months of 2019, the popularity of the "greens" in Germany reached 27% and exceeded the traditional political forces - the CDU and the SPD [19]. Russia has not yet shown such results, but a trend in this direction is already visible in the activities of political forces oriented towards the youth electorate of a wide ideological spectrum, which confirms their desire to intercept the environmental agenda and remove it from the system field.

At the same time, an interesting analysis of the "green" political parties of Russia was carried out by the authors from TUSU under the leadership of A.V. Makhurin, candidate of pedagogic sciences [20]. The authors of the study studied Russian parties with an environmental ideology and concluded that they are not yet able to get a similar European one.

We only note that in Europe, the politicization of the social aspects of ecology, of course, took more than a decade, while in Russia (including within the framework of the global trend), everything can develop much faster. Especially if the fulfillment of the goals of the Ecology National Project continues to stall for various reasons. Stopping these risks is possible only through the systematic building of eco-friendly instruments of social policy - and the sooner this understanding becomes a common place, the more time we will have for thoughtful, including academic, study of all social aspects of the new model of the future.

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