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ENVIRONMENTAL INITIATIVES OF PUBLIC ORGANIZATIONS
IN ENVIRONMENTAL REGULATION IN NORTH OSSETIA

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Abstract

The environmental problems accumulated over the past decades in the North Caucasus not only have a negative impact on the quality of life of people in the region, reduce its traditional competitive advantage for the development of the economy and culture, but also contribute to the formation of social risks. This article sets out the task of studying the public factor in the processes of environmental regulation in the Republic of North Ossetia-Alania. Among the public organizations there are “elite” and “systemic” ones, which activities are distinguished by positive interaction with the authorities, a certain planning and spectacular events supported by the media. These include the "Public Chamber of the Republic of North Ossetia-Alania", the Department of the People’s Front of the Republic of North Ossetia-Alania, public councils of relevant ministries and departments. Along with them, public organizations and associations are being created, including network groups, which environmental protection activities are of a protest nature, their rhetoric is intransigent, and the forms include network flash mobs, heated discussions, single pickets and even mass rallies. These organizations are determined and not inclined to compromise solutions. The article examines the environmental protection activities of public organizations, the degree of their influence on the environmental policy of the authorities and public sentiments, including in acute situations, the activities of public organizations, the degree of their influence on the environmental policy of the government and public sentiments, including in acute situations.

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1. Introduction

Effective environmental regulation is possible only through close cooperation between government agencies and society as a whole. According to the Law of the Russian Federation "On Environmental Protection", control of the state of the natural environment can be carried out by both state bodies and the public. In practice, the processes of interaction between administrative bodies and public organizations are most often characterized by misunderstanding and mutual prejudice, mismatch of goals and objectives. Civil servants, as a rule, are irritated by public activists, often accuse them of incompetence, a tendency to panic, and more often of using unfavorable environmental situations for their political PR. A significant part of public activists believes that government officials, faced with a choice, support not the protection of nature and human health, but the interests of big business.

In the Republic of North Ossetia-Alania, as in other constituent entities of the Russian Federation, there are "elite" and "systemic" public organizations, which activities are aimed at harmonizing the interests of citizens, public associations, government bodies and local self-government to solve the most important economic issues, socio-political and cultural development, are publicly funded and are distinguished by positive interaction with the authorities. Along with them, public organizations and associations are being created, including network groups, which environmental protection activities are decisive, and protest practices include network flash mobs, heated discussions, single pickets and even mass rallies. In conditions of ecologically dangerous situations, social and political processes are aggravated, which often leads to the transformation of an ecological conflict into an acute social format.

2. Problem Statement

Environmentally unfavorable situations, especially those that are protracted in time and ignore the real danger, carry social risks, and – as practice shows – can turn into social and political conflicts. Despite this, the problem of environmental conflict as a social risk remains insufficiently studied in sociology and political science, and, as a result, has not received proper understanding and adequate assessment in the dialogue between the authorities and society. Environmental regulation must take into account this socio-political aspect of the problem.

In modern regional studies, issues of environmental safety are considered, in particular, the impact of the anthropogenic factor on nature and human health (Alborov et al., 2019; Beriev et al., 2019), the impact of the media on solving environmental problems (Tsogoeva, 2010). At the same time, leading sociologists responded with silence to the acute socio-political situation in Vladikavkaz in 2018–2019 associated with the activities of the Electrozinc plant: the latest expert opinion on the city's environment dates back to 2017 (Dzutsev & Alikova, 2017). Attempts were made to substantiate specific environmental problems, such as the above-mentioned situation with the harmful Vladikavkaz plant and with the pollution of the Terek River basin, which caused negative public sentiment (Khapsaeva, 2019a, 2019b).

However, the environmental activities of public organizations of the Republic of North Ossetia-Alania as an important component of the process of environmental regulation and dialogue between

society and the authorities did not become the subject of a special study. This article examines the environmental protection activities of public organizations in the indicated aspect.

3. Research Questions

The subject of research in this article is the environmental protection activity of public organizations in its various manifestations, forms and practices; its perception by the authorities and society, influence on decision-making on environmental problems. The organizations considered are divided into two categories.

The first category includes the Public Chamber and the Department of the People's Front of the Republic of North Ossetia-Alania, which environmental policy is carried out in line with close interaction and coordination with the authorities.

The second category includes public organizations and initiative groups created for the purpose of prompt response to the situation – "Electrozinc. What do we breathe?," "Stop.Electrozinc", "We are against "Electrozinc" and a number of other organizations that are not inclined to compromise solutions, which activities are of a protest nature.

4. Purpose of the Study

The aim of the study is to analyze the activities of these public organizations, to determine their role in the processes of environmental regulation, to identify the level of influence on the government and its decisions.

5. Research Methods

In the course of the research, the method of scientific objectivity was used, based on the analysis of office documentation of public organizations and media materials. The method of comparative analysis was also used to compare the nature of the activities of various public organizations and the level of their influence on the authorities and public sentiments.

6. Findings

The Public Chamber of North Ossetia-Alania has more than once become a platform for discussing this problem. In May 2018, Vladikavkaz hosted a large-scale forum chaired by Valery Fadeev, the Secretary of the Public Chamber of the Russian Federation. The resolution adopted following the discussion included proposals to elaborate a comprehensive action plan for the NCFD on environmental protection for 2018–2020, to develop a scientific and technical program "Environmental safety of the North Caucasian Federal District" with its inclusion in the State program of socio-economic development of southern Russia until 2025, to study the issue of creating an interregional pilot plant for the complex processing of SMW with the participation of federal and regional forces and means, and also, given the

exceptional importance of the Terek River basin for the socio-economic development of the North Caucasus Federal District, to prepare and initiate the adoption of an appropriate federal target program.

One of the problems discussed was the situation with the Electrozinc plant in Vladikavkaz. The toxicity of factory emissions has been repeatedly attested by environmental expertise and has been in the center of public attention for three decades, causing greater concern to the residents of the republic (Khapsaeva, 2019a). The result of a long-term dialogue with the management of Electrozinc OJSC was an agreement between the Office of Rospotrebnadzor in North Ossetia-Alania and Electrozinc to ensure a favorable sanitary and epidemiological situation in the city of Vladikavkaz. However, the terms of the agreement were not met, the schedule of measures to organize the sanitary protection zone was not followed, as were the promised environmental measures and assurances of improving the technological basis of production.

The active part of social activists strongly demanded the closure of the plant. The position of the Public Chamber of the Republic of North Ossetia-Alania in these conditions can be analyzed according to official documents, in which it proposed to form an effective system of management and regulatory support in the field of environmental protection and environmental safety, prevention and reduction of the current negative impact on the environment of industrial enterprises, and, first of all, Electrozinc. It also stipulated “the need to ensure the effective participation of citizens, public associations, non-profit organizations in addressing issues related to environmental protection and environmental safety” (Opalania, 2018, par. 5).

In response to the continuing strong demands from the public to close the harmful plant, the Public Chamber reminded that many residents of the city and the republic work at the plant, that the enterprise consistently fulfills its social obligations (Opalania, 2018).

However, on the night of October 20–21, 2018, a fire broke out at the Electrozinc plant in Vladikavkaz. At the cost of material and even human losses, it was possible to prevent a large-scale ecological catastrophe, to avoid irreparable consequences (Tekhov, 2018).

The emergency sharply aggravated the socio-political situation in the republic, clearly showing the model of the transition of the ecological conflict into an acute social format.

In these conditions, the Public Chamber of the Republic of North Ossetia-Alania composed recommendations. The Parliament of the Republic of North Ossetia-Alania was recommended to analyze the norms of the current federal and regional legislation in order to green it; to develop a bill that imposes strict requirements on the activities of enterprises operating on the territory of the republic, in order to increase the efficiency of public control in the environmental sphere, to speed up the process of adopting a bill on environmental information.

The Public Chamber recommended to the Government of the Republic of North Ossetia-Alania to prohibit on the territory of the republic any activities that pose a direct threat to national environmental security; to organize – with the participation of Rospotrebnadzor – a sanitary protection zone in Vladikavkaz, which will include the territory of the Electrozinc plant and enterprises located within this line.

The Department of the Federal Service for Supervision of Consumer Rights Protection and Human Welfare in the Republic of North Ossetia-Alania was recommended to ensure control of the results of all

verification activities carried out at the Electrozinc plant, to bring their results to the notice of the republic's public; take measures of the necessary influence up to the termination of the plant's activities; within the framework of the current legislation, with the involvement of scientific experts and specialized specialists, conduct an environmental and technological audit of Electrozinc OJSC.

The Public Chamber recommended to the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment of the Republic of North Ossetia-Alania to create an analytical center with the aim of operatively managed impact on environmental emergencies and to create an independent laboratory for environmental monitoring.

The appeal to the Public Chamber of the Russian Federation contained a request to organize a discussion of the issue of resolving the situation around Electrozinc at the federal platform of the Public Chamber of the Russian Federation with the involvement of representatives of the Ural Mining and Metallurgical Company and representatives of the public of the Republic of North Ossetia-Alania. Also noteworthy was the proposal to develop a package of legislative initiatives designed to improve the procedure for organizing the activities of an environmental inspector (Opalania, 2018).

The Public Chamber undertook a number of obligations, including the creation of a coordinating council on ecology under the North Caucasus Federal District with recommendatory powers when considering projects and programs for the socio-economic development of environmentally hazardous facilities at the stages of detailed design and when implementing design solutions; creation of a coordination council at the Public Chamber of the Republic of North Ossetia-Alania on the improvement of environmental safety measures.

The Public Chamber of the Republic of North Ossetia-Alania called on the industrial enterprises of the republic, including Electrozinc, to implement an environmental strategy in their work and announced their readiness to provide comprehensive support in its development.

The need to develop volunteerism, civil initiatives for sanitary cleaning of territories, and the formation of an ecological culture of the population was also declared.

These recommendations were adopted by the Public Chamber of the Republic of North Ossetia-Alania in conditions of active protest moods and actions, public discontent with its passive position and the demand to liquidate the harmful plant. However, the analysis of the recommendations shows their focus not on a radical solution to an acute environmental problem, but on achieving public peace.

The regional branch of the All-Russia People's Front in North Ossetia-Alania is also involved in environmental problems. The environmental policy of the All-Russia People's Front is strictly verified and formed in the context of interaction with the authorities. Thus, in relation to the situation with the Electrozinc plant, the ONF came up with an initiative to create a "green shield" around Vladikavkaz and other cities of the Republic: forest protection zones, special areas with a limited nature management regime and other economic activities within the framework of the given boundaries of cadastral passports of territories. The ONF submitted its proposal to the Public Chamber of the Republic of North Ossetia-Alania. At the Action Forum "Russia Looking to the Future" in 2017 in Moscow, representatives of the regional ONF on the platform "Ecology of the Future: Sustainable Development" discussed one of the burning problems of the region – the poor quality of drinking water in North Ossetia. According to public figures, the reason for this situation is the dilapidated state of the water supply networks.

The environmental practices of this organization are distinguished by activity, entertainment and youth involvement. Noticeable activity is shown by the "Youth of the ONF", which mainly works on such projects as "Ecology of the Future", "Overall Cleaning" and a number of others. Within the framework of the "Ecology of the Future" project, representatives of the youth wing installed waste bins for collecting used batteries in Vladikavkaz, Ardonsky, Alagirsky, Mozdoksky, Irafsky and Digorsky Right-Bank districts.

The ONF is most active in the "Overall Cleaning" project paying special attention to unauthorized garbage dumps that are revealed during environmental raids and actions. During the environmental action "Youth Subbotnik of the Country", an illegal dump was found in one of the densely populated districts of Vladikavkaz, discussed with the local administration options for correcting the epidemiological situation,

The activists of the All-Russia People's Front in North Ossetia, as part of the celebration of the Day of the Ecologist, organized a Republican Ecological Running Marathon – 2018 and took an active part in it. The marathon runners did not just run but were armed with bags and gloves and collected garbage on the way. The ONF has its own interactive resources for individual projects, for example, a "landfill map", on which problem points and resolved issues are marked. Several actions were devoted to planting walnut seeds and oriental beech seedlings in the forestry of the region.

All mentioned and other actions deserve and receive public approval, are widely covered in the media and bring unconditional benefits to nature and society. At the same time, we note that in the conditions of an acute ecological crisis, the regional branch of the ONF did not notice a clear position.

At the time of the extreme aggravation of the ecological situation, the loudest and most decisive voice came from the self-created organizations and groups. In 2009, the initiative group "Electrozinc. What do we breathe?", which eventually developed into the "Stop "Electrozinc!" Movement. For many years, this movement fought for the right of the republic's residents for clean air and a healthy life (Gabaraev, 2009). On July 5, 2011, activists of the "Stop ElectroZinc!" held a picket near the UN Information Center in Moscow and near the building of the Public Chamber of the Russian Federation. The picketers' claims were addressed to the ElectroZinc plant. In Vladikavkaz that day, they also tried to draw the attention of the authorities and citizens to an acute problem: they held a bike ride, and distributed ribbons in one of the central squares of the city with an appeal to stop the poisonous activities of the ElectroZinc plant.

In 2009, after the massive poisoning of the atmosphere of Vladikavkaz by emissions from the ElectroZinc plant, more than 8 thousand citizens of the Republic united in the Odnoklassniki social network. The group "We are against ElectroZinc" also appeared on Facebook, the number of participants reached more than a thousand people. There is almost no blogger and social network user left in the republic who would not write about this and would not participate in all sorts of actions. Each "step" of "Electrozinc" was documented: residents of the republic posted photos, videos and comments on the Internet.

The group "For Healthy Vladikavkaz" discussed environmental and health problems of Vladikavkaz residents caused by the 100-year activity of the ElectroZinc plant, assessing the prospects for plant closure, possible programs to withdraw the plant from the Republic of North Ossetia-Alania,

employ its employees, and rehabilitate the territory. Speaking with the slogan "Electrozinc" must prepare to move!", a group of 750 participants held pickets in different parts of Vladikavkaz.

The rhetoric of appeals by various groups to the authorities was distinguished by a pronounced protest, intransigence in the demand for the elimination of harmful production. The slogan "We will not allow, for the sake of the benefit of several oligarchs, to continue to persecute our children, to destroy our gene pool, was actively developed. And for the sake of children, as you know, people are ready for a lot, if not for everything".

Violent discussions in the networks, pickets, flash mobs, rallies – this is an incomplete list of the public reaction that was caused by a sharp aggravation of the ecological situation in North Ossetia. Finally, there was a mass rally in Vladikavkaz, when the Head of the Republic came out to the audience and promised to make every effort to liquidate the plant, if the commissions created confirm its harmfulness. The plant was closed, the authorities showed the ability to take care of the health and life of citizens, to hear and share their concerns.

7. Conclusion

The difficult decision made by the Head of the Republic of North Ossetia-Alania to close the harmful plant had many reasons, but one of the main ones was the social protest. "An active civil society is a mechanism for influencing the government," the Head of the Republic said, and this is really so. But the authorities were not influenced by the recommendations of the Public Chamber of the Republic of North Ossetia-Alania and the regional branch of the People's Front, which activities were aimed not at a radical solution to an acute environmental problem, but at achieving public peace. The demand of the general public had a significant impact on the authorities, behind which stood precisely independent, persistent groups that showed qualities that were lacking in "systemic" organizations. A more decisive voice of the latter, a balance between the two categories of the public and a productive dialogue with the authorities could prevent the transition of the ecological conflict to the socio-political plane.

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