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**ECOLOGIZATION AND RADICALISATION OF  
CONTEMPORARY CIVIC ACTIVISM**

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**Abstract**

The aggravation of ecological situations, and their epidemiological significance as well as awareness of the nature social value influence the level of ecological anxiety within society and that of both constructive and destructive ecological activity. Ecological nihilism is transformed into ecological activism making the state follow public demand for a favorable environment and ecological policy meeting the requirements of social security. Ecologization and radicalization of civic activism are also conditioned by the interaction of ecosystem problems; politicization trends, manipulation of environmental situations at the global and local levels; processes of informatization, individualization, and alarmism. Proponents of eco-activism initiate social and political movements, transformations, discourses, and actions, interdisciplinary assessment of which requires systematization and generalization. And the focus of this article is civic activism conceptualization in terms of greening and radicalization, based on the systematization of its interdisciplinary scientific definitions, explanations of its diverse manifestations. The scientific methods used are the authors' interpretative analysis of academic texts; comparative and derivative analysis of sociological empirical research results. Having considered interdisciplinary attributes and characteristics of civic activism forms, the authors propose their own interpretation of environmental radicalism. Environmental radicalism is a type of civic activity coherent with environmental problems, human rights-based approach and political radicalism, both non-violent and aggressive delinquent actions that pose public danger being used. An utmost form of environmentalism is eco-extremism, which risks for society are much higher due to the use of illegitimate and illegal violence against ordinary citizens and traditional institutions.

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## 1. Introduction

Speaking about the relevance of ecological issues for the state of Russia and the world community, it is necessary to mention ecological strengthening in fundamental law of the country. It concerns the amendments to the Russian Constitution which enshrine the importance of environmental protection and conservation, appropriate animals' treatment, ecological education, and eco-culture formation. Russia is currently implementing the national project "Ecology" (2018–2024), wherein an integrated waste management system is being created, reducing air pollution and improving drinking water quality, and developing specially protected natural areas being the focus of attention as well.

The report of the UN Secretary General "Harmony with Nature" boosted environmental legal approach development on a global scale, proposing universal legal recognition of the inalienable rights of Nature and the Earth (not a man or a state); enriching legal thesaurus with such legal categories as "Earth's philosophy of law", "Earth's right to a healthy environment", and the principles of "planet-centered law". All this puts the discussion of activism and radical environmental protection practices into a different perspective, where issues of eco-responsibility, equality, and eco-fairness are debated. The increasing environmental degradation is mostly attributable to anthropocentric ideological model dominance.

In the global socio-political arena (domestic and inter-state), environmental security takes an important place. Environmental security can be interpreted as a situation, or a position in which there are no challenges and risks of damage to the environment and population welfare. Therefore, in Russia, with regard to the increasing importance of environmental security, the understanding of the environmental security category through the prism of national security has become more relevant. It is essential to say that environmental security is a strategically important part of national security and is a component part of the national security system. The primary challenges and risks of environmental security, the foundations and ways of implementing the state policy to ensure environmental security of Russia are documented in the Strategy for Environmental Security of the Russian Federation until 2025, as well as in the Foundations of state environmental security policy of the Russian Federation (until 2030), approved by Vladimir Putin. These legal acts currently identify the following significant challenges and threats to Russia's environmental security: a group of global challenges (such as global warming, rapid consumption of natural resources, growing in geometric progression, biological diversity reduction); some internal challenges (overpopulation, air and water pollution, increased harmful waste, and the territories contaminated with radioactive and chemical substances, soil degradation, criminalization of natural resource markets, underfunding of environmental protection policies); and finally, a group of external transboundary hazards, i.e. fires, changes in watercourse, or animal migration routes, unauthorized resource extraction, cross-border movement of infected sources of epidemics, and others.

This article's relevance is also indirectly connected with environmental security problems exacerbated, which results in societal destruction and lower predictability of social activism forms. Turning to the evolving history of civic eco-actions and eco-protests, it can be noted that initially they were completely non-violent, popular and supported by society. However, in the dynamics of its

development, eco-activism shifted to a more aggressive, insolent actions against people, public and private property, which made the participants accused, prosecuted, and punished.

Yanitsky (2015) provides an outlook on the nearest future and points out that habitable space on the Earth will constantly decrease, but amount of trash, waste, migratory production and military conflicts will grow. Resource competition leads to ecological degradation, ecopolitical confrontations, symptomized by resource wars, and the emergence of ecofascist communities that protect nature and eco-dictatorship and resort of force against opponents.

## **2. Problem Statement**

As large-scale sociological studies of Russian eco-activism show (Gorshkov & Petukhov, 2015), according to the population, forward-looking areas of civic activism are those that transcend private interests (environmental protection, human rights, charity). Local eco-activism radicalization is also confirmed by news, surveillance data and content analysis of Internet memes (Shcheblanova et al., 2020) that demonstrate the growing protest greening, as exemplified by social tension in the regions, numerous anti-dumping movements; protests against the construction of chemical enterprises, or facilities to process toxic, or radioactive waste (in Saratov, Kurgan, and Kirov regions).

In particular, the results of the authors' research got by interviewing student activists (N=40, June-July 2019, Saratov region), and supported by the Russian Foundation for Basic Research, show that student volunteers who belong to eco-movements are ready to support citizens' protests based on certain demands (environmental protection, trash recycling). Another expert survey (N=31; August-September 2019, Saratov region) confirmed the risk of social activism destructiveness growing in regions due to the aggravation of environmental problems (construction of environmentally harmful subsidiaries; rubbish disposal). Eco-activism takes a more radical stand through social media involved in social digitalization.

Thus, "green" movements step up in their radical manifestations, which makes the issue of working out theoretical and methodological approaches to the problem of the "man – society – nature" relationship more actual. This article focuses on civic activism conceptualization from the perspective of greening and radicalization, based on the systematization of its interdisciplinary scientific definitions, as well as explanations of its diverse manifestations, which is significant to make environmental interests of society coordinated and to prevent socio-environmental conflicts.

## **3. Research Questions**

The subject matter is the problematization of environmental activism processes and their radicalization in contemporary society.

The article examines the distinguishing characteristics of civic eco-activism compared to other related phenomena.

Interdisciplinary explanatory and conceptual potential of that radical phenomenon is systematized.

#### **4. Purpose of the Study**

The aim of the paper is to provide an interdisciplinary analysis of scientific approaches and research findings to explain and define contemporary radical environmental activism. Ecological activism is conceptualized by a number of sciences, which causes diversity of ambiguous approaches that concerns understanding that phenomenon, and numerous interpretations by both Russian and foreign scientists.

#### **5. Research Methods**

The methods used in the research are author's interpretation, substantial analysis of academic texts on ecological activism theme, comparative and derivative analysis of sociological empirical research results.

#### **6. Findings**

Eco-activism, in general, is an activity of ecological organizations and movements aimed at environmental protection (lawbreaking is possible among other things). From legal point of view, eco-radicalism is a form of extremism, extremist crimes, and administrative offences realized through violent actions against the legitimate activities of individuals and legal entities that potentially threaten the environment (Aleksieva & Anisimov, 2017). Eco-radicalism is legally distinguished from, for example, eco-terrorism by causing property damage to some legal entities and individuals; not involving deliberate acts against their lives, or health; and not exerting pressure on authorities. In addition, eco-radicals also use criminal methods, but in order to preserve the environment, not to destroy it. In contrast, eco-terrorists intentionally harm the environment (to cause fear, terror, and cause social response) or ignore eco-problems.

Contemporary socio-political approach considers eco-radicalism in the aspect of the party-political development of modern states. Ecological activism radicalization, i.e. conscious or unconscious extreme views, or actions, is manifested in violent actions. Environmentalist ideas' implementation into political practice and ideology is explained in terms of soft revolution, or reformist environmentalism (smooth transition to economic environmentally friendly practices) and radical environmentalism (abrupt changes in economic practices up to polluting production bans despite economic recession). Frustrated by reformist measures, radical environmental groups use direct action tactics (tree sit-ins, road blockades, ships' ramming), making eco-destructive activities unsustainable (Alberro, 2020).

Environmental knowledge becomes more valuable for community if environmental problems are sociologically conceptualized. Within the framework of sociological research, the following are distinguished two sociological research directions that analyze the social aspects of environmental problems and the ways to maintain socio-environmental balance and harmonize relations. Environmental activism appears to be the result of societal development, concerns about environmental security or uncoordinated environmental policies at the federal and regional levels, as well as at the level of economic entities (Titarenko, 2015).

At a time when public interest to environmental issues grows, there appear new parties and movements that intentionally escalate environmental issues' significance making social response more radical. In this context, the socio-psychological approach is also relevant, in this case as it highlights the alienation of individuals and the severance of social ties, which could nudge any individual to join a radical party.

Eco-extremism, with its inherent manifestations (rebellion, ultimatums, alternative power structures, civil disobedience and armed resistance to constitutional bodies) is considered to be an extreme form of environmentalism. Acceptable is the idea of Archakov (2016) who says that radicalism and extremism are not distinguished by the fact that one phenomenon covers the sphere of ideas and another belongs to the sphere of actions. A clear criterion distinguishing radicalism and extremism is the use of illegitimate and unlawful violence by extremists. That is, eco-extremism should be understood as the actions of eco-activists who use force illegitimately and unlawfully.

It is also necessary to interpret one significant type of extremism. That is the phenomenon of terrorism, which from a large spectrum of already mentioned methods inherent in extremism, includes the most radical, such as the destruction of entire objects, spaces, murder of empowered and ordinary random people. The phenomenon of terrorism (as compared to extremism) is always characterized by its deep political motivation. The post-industrial, technetronic world is filled with risks and threats of high technologies that create the political potential of biological, social and man-caused disasters, affecting nationwide, public and personal security of people.

Environmental terrorism in natural and anthropogenic environment has large-scale, difficult to predict but preventable consequences. For example, a specially organized action of leakage of chemical, poisonous, or toxic substances required for a vital production process may lead to an ecological catastrophe. Or the ingress and presence in the environment of radioactive products, affecting the human body, the animal world, could result in millions of deaths.

What concerns ecological terrorism, such actions include destruction of dangerous enterprises, facilities, or environment; population contamination; using extremely harmful substances, materials, tools and weapon. Violent actions covered with eco-protection ideology, and eco-blackmail aimed at solving political problems and achieving political aims should also be attributed to ecological terrorism.

At the same time, there are specific examples of situations in which terrorist methods (applied after peaceful methods failed) were used by radical "greens" in civil initiatives with ecological purposes (to protect the climate, provide healthy environment, stop deforestation and the construction of nuclear facilities). Some animal rights activists, adherents of biocentrism, united in organizations and civic communities and perpetrated illegal actions, started burning shops, machinery, hammering nails into trees, and removing animals from kennels, causing damage to property and business activity of sea and land flora and fauna fishing or hunting professionals.

While ignoring legitimate forms of civil protest, using violence and destructive vandalism but finding excuse (that is, in their opinion, protecting environment), Greenpeace representatives, for example, sometimes destroy fishing property when they cut nets and violate the integrity of national oil platforms. Another vivid example is the situation in Voronezh, where terrorist actions were used by

protesters coming from various Russian regions to oppose against nickel mining and the construction of a nickel plant on the Khopyor River.

Thus, environmental extremism (including terrorism as its extreme form) is characterized by higher public danger due to its destructive actions against ordinary citizens and institutions; it destabilizes the work of industrial companies. The destructive actions of eco-extremists, and their attacks on businesses, allegedly under the auspices of social and natural good, shall be prevented. Foreign researchers consider the activity of neoliberal radical eco-communities as models of serial public danger (Carson, 2014). Thus, within the sociological paradigm, radical eco-activism is explained as a complex result of an environmental crisis, its sources and essence being social, political and economic by nature.

## 7. Conclusion

This analysis is based on the need to understand and determine the actual development directions of modern civic activism with the support of interdisciplinary conclusions, monitoring data of sociological researches, including that of the authors of the article. The article describes public consciousness ecologization, transformation of nihilism into eco-activism that demands that the state would provide more favorable and safe surroundings; environmentally oriented policy of regional development; dissatisfaction of eco-activists with reformist measures; use of direct tactics for optimization of relations between society and nature through radical environmental practices.

Based on the above interdisciplinary characteristics of the analyzed phenomenon, the authors propose their understanding of environmental radicalism. Environmental radicalism is a type of civic activity coherent with environmental problems, human rights-based approach and political radicalism, both non-violent and aggressive delinquent actions that pose public danger being used. An utmost form of environmentalism is eco-extremism (including ecological terrorism), which risks for society are much higher due to the use of illegitimate and unlawful violence against ordinary citizens and traditional institutions.

The phenomenon of terrorism, in general, is always associated with power struggle, with the threat or use of such violence that is politically motivated. And the phenomenon of environmental terrorism entails political, socio-economic consequences through the destruction of dangerous enterprises, entire facilities, environment, or contamination and extermination of people and animals through the use of extremely harmful chemicals, radioactive materials, tools and weapon.

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