

PUBLIC ATTITUDES TOWARD ENERGY DEVELOPMENT IN SAKHALIN

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In September-December 1998, we distributed a survey questionnaire to 120 individuals in Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk to assess their views on the impact of the offshore oil development upon the lives of Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk citizens generally and on their own personal lives specifically.¹ We received 111 completed surveys. We entered 110 of them into a database using the Excel spreadsheet program. We are currently conducting a follow-up survey in Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk with the cooperation of an NGO group in the city. We present below a summary of the findings from the 1998 survey and general conclusions.

Summary of Findings

First, a good majority of the respondents to our survey generally expected positive benefits for the citizenry. About one-third of them anticipated no benefits. Among the benefits expected, employment was by far the most prevalent hope among the citizens of Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk. Other anticipated benefits included cheaper and more abundant gas for home and industrial use, regional economic development, improved living standards, improved infrastructure, and increased tax revenues and budget for the regional government.

Second, an overwhelming majority of the respondents expected some negative effects on the citizens of Sakhalin. Utmost among their concerns was the potential environmental impact of the Sakhalin projects. There appeared to be two types of apprehension about environmental consequences. Lack of information and apparent ignorance were at the basis of much of the concern among students and other younger respondents. The concern expressed by members of the scientific community was based on their knowledge of environmental problems in general. They were also worried that the ongoing offshore projects were not supported by adequate and effective pollution control or by environmental monitoring mechanisms. Among those who appeared fairly knowledgeable about the projects there was suspicion that there might not be appropriate allocation of the funds for the energy resource development. This concern came through even in the responses of Oblast дума members and administration personnel who were the most intimately familiar with the details of the ongoing projects.

In addition to environmental concerns, the depletion or misuse of natural resources was an important source of anxiety. A smaller but significant number of respondents in our survey were apprehensive about the problems of crime and exploitation of cheap labor associated with international participation in the projects. A few citizens were also worried that their economy might become heavily dependent on foreigners. Many respondents, not just young students and secondary school teachers but also business people, university professors, and even some scientists were left in the dark about many aspects of the projects, including what operational measures and technological responses were in place to prevent or counter any accidents, including oil spills. The abundance of information among the regional government officials and дума deputies made it clear that fears and apprehensions might be alleviated by a more effective and wide distribution of relevant information.

Third, there appeared to be a fracture in the public opinion regarding the benefits and costs of the development projects. That is, some expected more benefits than others did while

others emphasized costs more than benefits. As well, there were some differences of views among different professions and age groups.

Fourth, Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk citizens also had mixed expectations--ambivalence as we noted above--about the impact of the Sakhalin projects on their personal welfare. People who expected no benefits for themselves outnumbered those who did by about 10 percent, and by a somewhat larger margin (12 percent) expectations of negative consequences prevailed over expectations of no negative impact on personal welfare. Expectations among citizens were mixed regardless of their profession. The only exception was found among Oblast дума members and administrators, most of whom could and did expect benefits for themselves.

Fifth, a solid majority of the respondents believed that the oil and gas development projects would bring Sakhalin closer to the rest of the world, and they welcomed it. Many respondents were concerned, however, that expanded international ties would also mean that their natural resources might be depleted, foreigners might exploit their economy, their environment might worsen, and corruption and other political problems might result.

Sixth, about a quarter of our respondents participated in some organized civic activity. Not surprisingly, NGO members were the most active participants in non-occupational groups. A fair number of media people and Oblast and city personnel also participated in activities outside of their occupations. Teachers, business people, students, professors, and scientists were the least likely to participate in such groups.

Seventh, nearly half of the groups and organizations in which some of our respondents participate had some international contacts. We should note that most NGOs in Russia were supported by foreign sources of funding and that this made Russian NGOs with international ties "suspect" in the eyes of many Russians.

Eighth, Sakhalin citizens' participation in organized civic activities appeared to strengthen the people's concern about the environmental consequences of the oil and gas development projects. There was a wide gap between their expectations of benefits on the one hand and what they had actually observed so far on the other.

Ninth, women were generally more skeptical than men about the impact of the Sakhalin projects, be it on citizens in general, on their personal welfare, or on the international status of Sakhalin. We should note that women were among the most vulnerable groups in Russia today.

Finally, the apparent indifference and skepticism among the younger respondents require some discussion. There appeared to be widespread ignorance among the students regarding political, economic, and environmental issues in general and, specifically, about the oil and gas developments of interest to us in this study. Young people seemed to be quite passive when it comes to organized civic activity. Even environmental problems, about which they expressed concern, did not seem to mobilize them into action. The tendency among many Russians to ascribe ill intent upon their "enemies" presented itself in this instance as a strong negative attitude toward those who they believed would benefit from the oil and gas developments at the expense of others, particularly the ordinary citizens in Sakhalin. The younger respondents also shared the sense that Russia had declined and continued to decline, politically and economically. While they did not point to any specific problems in their responses to our survey, they were highly critical and suspicious of all authorities, foreign or domestic, and were equally resentful of the presence of foreign businesses in their community.

Conclusions

Anticipation and apprehension coexist among the Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk citizens who responded to our survey. This ambivalence is reminiscent of the oft-cited character of the Russian people, which is variously described as “dualism,” “divergence,” and “dichotomy.”

Anxiety and apprehension are also due to the sheer lack of information among Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk citizens about the Sakhalin energy projects. Clearly the federation government and the regional authorities must better inform their citizens, about the benefits and costs of the projects. Only a well-informed citizenry can provide the necessary support for the sustained development of Sakhalin’s economy.

In terms of Sakhalin’s place in Russia, we note that virtually no one in our sample suggested that the island should become an independent entity, economically, much less politically. Most of our respondents apparently do not consider Asia-Pacific to be an economic cradle of future Sakhalin.

It is equally clear that the international community must pay particular attention to the sensitivity with which many Sakhalin citizens view internationally associated development projects. Cultivation of positive attitudes would require greater effort on the part of the international community to address the immediate concerns of the island citizens.

The sensitivity that our respondents exhibit toward international interaction represents, in our view, the continuing saga of the search for national identity among Russian intellectuals. In the search for national identity, intellectuals in the Russian Far East are divided between those who look for their future in closer ties with the West (Europe and the United States), those who seek closer association with Asia, and those who seek answers to their problems in their own national space.

The Sakhalin energy projects are the biggest development projects that this island has undertaken in recent decades. The mixture of anticipation and apprehension among the Sakhalin citizens is only natural. How they respond to the presence of foreign participants in these projects will have a far-reaching impact on the Sakhalin citizens’ views of their future relations with the international community.

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