

SIGNS OF ALIENATION: INSIGHTS FROM THE SAKHALIN SURVEY/INTERVIEWS¹

Anna Vassilieva
Monterey Institute of International Studies

I wish to share with you some insights that we gained from our survey in Sakhalin and from our interviews and other meetings during our trip to Sakhalin in August 1998.

In the project with the University of Hokkaido, our task was to evaluate the capability of local NGOs to influence, if not stop, the oil and gas development in Sakhalin. I very clearly felt fear or anxiety on the part of our Japanese partners about the environmental consequences of the offshore development projects. It asked myself why they wanted us to talk to people and NGOs and write a paper on what would be the role of NGOs and what would be their response to our questions. So, in trying to work on the paper we separated two: What would be the role of NGOs in shaping or influencing public opinion in terms of oil and gas development-- whether NGOs would be able to have enough impact on the decision making so that oil and gas development would not present such a dangerous threat to the environment not only of Sakhalin but also of Hokkaido? What do people in Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk think about the intervention of foreigners in the economy? Those were the two main issues of our research.

Pessimism or Optimism?

When we received the questionnaires I read them all very thoroughly. Being a Russian, I am supposed to be pessimist, but my impression of the responses was that the respondents did not want foreigners there, that they did not want gas and oil development there. The level of basic literacy also struck me. I am not speaking of environmental literacy, but just basic grammar, spelling literacy of the university students who were among the respondents. It was very difficult for me to observe this kind of responses that were just totally out of my realm of expectations. Professor Akaha's interpretation of the responses was quite different. He thought the respondents wanted the offshore oil and gas development. So, we counted the number of favorable and unfavorable responses on this question. Indeed, when we counted the responses, they seemed to be fairly positive. When we looked at the statistics, we could say that the largest group of respondents did want foreigners to develop oil and gas in Sakhalin. But as a native speaker, I was struck by the weariness of the respondents regarding this business development. Many respondents, including young people, seemed quite suspicious of foreigners. For me, that was one of the most unexpected findings. How conservative and suspicious those young people were! And, of course, it made me think, "Why is that?" When I was growing up in eastern Siberia, the attitudes were very different. So, the issue for our study was how to explain this kind of attitude among the young people?

We also asked ourselves, "Why do women object so strongly to the offshore projects? Why do people in general know so little about them?" Russians are well known as the most well read people. We always took pride in knowing world literature so well and enjoying discussions, political discussions. You could hear debate in any kitchen in any part of the Soviet Union. There was generally a very high level of awareness of what was happening. When we were in Sakhalin, we would ask our drivers, people in the street, and people at schools where we would go and interview, "What do you think about oil and gas development in the offshore areas

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of Sakhalin?" Many of them would say, "What?" We would explain what it was and at best their answer was, "I don't really care." Very often their answer was, "We don't really know what it is." I could understand their indifference and lack of knowledge about the oil and gas projects if they were an entirely Russian enterprise. Lack of desire to share details could very well be a spontaneous expression of the Russian national character. But knowing that those were Americans or Japanese or Germans who were involved in the development projects, I was puzzled why they were not spending time to explain the projects to the population--not to the government, not to the administration of the region but to the local population. What is there that is positive for the citizens of Sakhalin? Why should the citizens support it? For me, it was very strange to find so much ignorance and indifference. It was not the typical Russian response. Lack of detail, lack of explanation of the project was very obvious in other responses that we received.

Alienation of the Sakhalin People

In order to understand why the people responded the way they did, we need to go through a couple of stages. First, you are all very much aware of the legacy of Yeltsin's democratic revolution and the mood that people had by the time Yeltsin resigned from his office. I am not going to talk about the economic characteristics of the period; I am sure that my colleagues, specialists in economics, have done that already. Let me just mention a few words regarding the social scene and offer some psychological observations and conclusions to which we came.

Provincial life in Russia, as perhaps some of you know, is very different from life in Moscow or St. Petersburg. It sounds really profound but you really need to be there to understand what a tremendous difference there is. The Russian saying, "God is far above and the Tsar is far away" seems quite apt in reflecting the realities of provincial life. One legacy of Yeltsin's democratic revolution that we noticed in Sakhalin was the almost complete alienation of the local population from the central government (Moscow). During the Soviet period, the government managed, through fear and through all kinds of other different means, to keep the population together. Of course, the very affordable prices for airplane tickets helped because people could go back and forth and observe what was happening in the rest of the country. Now, what we see is that the Sakhalin people are basically stuck on their island because of the economic reforms.

Because of the lack of the social aspect of economic reforms, the city of Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk looked to us as though it had been bombed two days before we came. We literally walked by buildings where huge signs read, "Don't walk by this building because the balcony may fall on your head." Indeed a roof or parts of a roof looked like they could just fall anytime. In a briefing by researchers at the University of Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk, we were told that over 90 percent of the buildings downtown needed restoration, some of them in absolutely catastrophic condition, but that there was no money. They said the people expected nothing from the central government there. This is the first aspect of alienation. We were there during the fall 1998 ruble crisis. You can all imagine how dramatic the time was for Russia and there in Sakhalin people would say, "So what? Who is the new prime minister? Who cares? It has nothing to do with us." There was this feeling of a little country within a country.

On the other hand, in our survey there were only two or three respondents who mentioned the possibility of Sakhalin actually being integrated with the Pacific economy and with the world community. When we talked to people, there was very little desire or intention that they should be somehow separated from Moscow. They wanted very much to remain part of Russia. So, there was this striking contrast between the political alienation and complete neglect by the

central government on the one hand and, on the other hand, this lack of interest in joining the Pacific community. So, we observed the need to bridge the gap between the central authorities and the provinces as part of the effort to build—I cannot say restore—civil society in Sakhalin. It is a very important for the central authorities to decide how to deal with that need.

The second issue that came out very clearly in our questionnaire survey was the alienation of the people with local authorities. Running through all of the questionnaires was a complete mistrust in the ability of local authorities to properly spend the funds gained from the oil and gas development. In the survey or in the interviews we conducted there were no direct accusations of corruption. People stopped shy of accusing the administration of corruption. But they would say, “We don’t know where the funds will go.” Some people talked about some social fund established with monies that would come from the oil companies that worked there. The only concrete example of such social funding that we were given was the \$100,000 that was supposedly spent for a computer lab at the University of Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk. When we asked if it was possible to use those computers, we were told “No.” They said the computers were purchased but were not functioning and that one needed special permission to enter the computer room. So, the idea turned into a kind of deceit that really did not affect positively the attitude of the local population. I mention this computer project as a failure because it exemplifies a case of lack of transparency in the funding process involving the local authorities and foreign oil companies. Greater transparency would certainly improve the situation. Apart from this example, we noticed this lack of trust in the ability of their local authorities honestly and openly to deal with the funds throughout the responses to our survey

What does this alienation mean? People know law traditionally does not work in Russia that the legal system does not function the way it functions in any normal civil society. So, we see the people on the island who do not feel any closeness to the central government. They do not have any trust, any closeness to their local elected authorities. The legal system does not work.

The Constrained Role of NGOs

So, where are the NGOs? Where do their activities fall in Sakhalin? Can NGOs change anything? From what we saw and from what we heard from in the discussions we had with the people in Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk, including those work for NGOs and those who just assess the NGOs’ activities, we must conclude that we cannot expect much of NGOs. They are treated much suspicion. Traditionally, in the Soviet Union, there could be no organizations without government sponsorship. The suspicion comes from there. When NGOs got permission to operate in post-Soviet Russia, they did not have the necessary funds to perform their functions. So, the model was borrowed from the West, and Russian NGOs were funded by the West. And so there has been a lot of Western involvement in terms of funds. People who know how NGOs function in Russia know how much “disagreement,” to put it softly, there is between local NGOs as they struggle for funds from the West. They won’t share information with each other; they won’t come together in major projects because Western funding is so important that the Russian NGOs want to claim their authority for this or another piece of information that they have, this or another analysis that they offer. That is a major problem within NGOs themselves.

How can NGOs that behave this way influence the local population? I am afraid there is very little hope if they have to operate in the kinds of conditions, which we observed in our encounter with a local environmental NGO. In our first meeting with its representatives, they said that they had been told not to let Professor Akaha and me go to the first major meeting of our research project in Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk, a meeting with government authorities. I was

puzzled and asked why. I was told that it was because the two of us were tasked in our project to track the public opinion and the regional administration knew we were going to work with local NGOs. So, the administration talked to the NGO people for them to give us some kind of an entertainment program so that we would not go to our meeting with the administration and raise the issue of social awareness. That was the kind of introduction we received to our activities in Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk. When we went to the meeting, the representatives of the administration told us that they did not encourage NGOs to come there because they basically did not want to hear what the NGOs had to say.

Again and again, we go back to the issue of traditional Russian mentality, that is, the lack of respect for opinions that are not officially sanctioned. Local NGOs are not established firmly enough for their opinion to be taken seriously in the society where supposedly a multitude of opinions can be expressed freely and discussed on an equal basis. Because they are NGOs or they are foreign-sponsored or -funded, they are viewed by the people of Sakhalin with suspicion. People just do not understand what NGOs do. They do not understand what is voluntary work. They ask, "Why would these young people do something in relation to the Sakhalin oil and gas project?" So, young NGO members are not directly called "spies", but it is very easy to judge. There is a very fine threshold between being called a specialist, a professional and someone who is paid by the West to either spy or do something for the West.

The first gap I mentioned was that between the people of Sakhalin and the central government; the second gap was between the Sakhalin citizens and the local government; and the third gap was between the citizens of Sakhalin and NGOs. There is a fourth gap, and that is the gap between the citizens of Sakhalin and the Americans who work there.

While in Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk, we were driven by bus to what is called the "American Village," only a few minutes' drive in a nice area in the suburbs of the city. Let me remind you again of the half-destroyed buildings we saw in the city. We also saw just awful looking buildings in small villages that we visited; they looked like they were of WWII vintage. We were then brought to this very nice area. We were told that there used to be huge orchards there but they were cut down to build the "American Village." There were about 15 of us in the group. I was the only American citizen (of Russian origin); the rest were all Japanese. I had my American passport with me. As we were getting off the bus, a military vehicle--at least it looked like a military vehicle to me--carrying men, very muscular, very strong-looking men, with guns, came to us. One of the gun-carrying men said in broken English that we were not supposed to come close to the place. Of course, we all had our cameras; we were a good Japanese group. The young Russian said, "No, no! No pictures." I said, in Russian, "We would like just to look at this place. Can we just walk by the houses just to familiarize ourselves?" He got very upset with me because he found out I spoke Russian. Perhaps he thought I was an interpreter. What else could a woman be doing in a group like that? So he told me, "No, no, no way. You should get permission in the Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk Mayor's Office in order to come here." I said, "This is the 'American Village.' Right?" "Right," he said. I said, "Here is my American passport. Could you please allow me to go look how my compatriots live in Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk?" "No," he said, "There is no exception. You should go and get a written permission from the Mayor's Office." As we got back on the bus and the bus slowly turned around, we got a glimpse of the village. There were lovely cottages, like typical suburban areas in the United States.

So, what can be the attitude of the people who have to struggle for their daily survival, who live in dilapidated dwellings in the city or in villages, often without electricity or hot water? They often do not have enough money to feed their children. And here we have this American Village that is erected very nicely, painted blue, pink, and green--very lovely cottages. And for

whom? They cannot feel alienated. They cannot avoid mistrust. “So, that’s where the money goes,” they would say. I know that it would be much harder to attract American specialists to come to Sakhalin if they were to live in the ordinary apartments along with ordinary Russian citizens. But perhaps some sacrifices could be made.

Recommendations

Turning to recommendations, we need to look at the areas that seem to be the most neglected in the Russian social sphere. We all know about problems in Russian orphanages, for example. Why won’t some Americans start some projects in orphanages? Those Americans who work there with the oil and gas projects should organize some projects that would have tangible results for the local people, to demonstrate to the local people that Americans are not there just to reap profits, that they do not come to Sakhalin to make the local people poorer, they do not come there to give them AIDS, to bring drugs. They must show a human face. And, in order to show a human face that would be appreciated and understood by the Russians, of course, the foreign businessmen that work there need to learn a little bit about Russian history, culture, and national mentality. They need to learn about Russia not only intellectually but also perhaps they need to sacrifice some comfort and change some of their ways of behavior in order to accommodate the costs.