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Review: Environmental Justice and Sustainability in the Former Soviet Union

Julian Agyeman and Yelena Ogneva-Himmelberger (Eds.)

Reviewed by Peter C. Little
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Agyeman, Julian and Ogneva-Himmelberger, Yelena (Eds.). *Environmental Justice and Sustainability in the Former Soviet Union*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2009. 320pp. ISBN 9780262512336. US\$25, paper.

The central questions grounding *Environmental Justice and Sustainability in the Former Soviet Union* are 1) To what extent are increased popular environmental awareness and associated activism driving public policy and planning in the former Soviet republics, and 2) Are there emergent, separate brown (environmental justice) and green (environmentally sustainable development) agendas or are these joining together in a single just sustainability or human security agenda (p.4). This is one of the first books addressing these questions to make sense of environmental justice and sustainability struggles unfolding in countries of the former Soviet Union (FSU), which is now a post-Soviet geopolitical landscape made up of fifteen republics.

The book unpacks the laws, politics, and economics germane to this region of the world that in turn exacerbate struggles for "just sustainability," a term Agyeman helped coin in an earlier publication (Agyeman, Bullard, and Evans (Eds), *Just Sustainabilities: Development in an Unequal World*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003). It begins with an introduction that provides a brief history of the environmental movement in Russia, the diversity of the movement and tactics of civic engagement, the rise of non-governmental organizations supporting movement agendas, and the common interest among activists to connect sustainability, public health, and environmental justice. The majority of the contributing authors to the book contend there "is the emergence of at least a justice-informed environmental discourse in the former Soviet Union, if not a full-fledged environmental justice or a just sustainability/human security agenda" (p.9).

The remaining chapters explore a diversity topics and issues germane to civic struggles in countries of the FSU. Brian Donahoe explores the critical role of the contemporary and unstable Russian legal system and therefore the regulatory system for understanding environmental protection and indigenous peoples' rights. Donahoe exposes the fact that the enforcement of laws are weak and ineffective largely because, as he puts it "these laws are only very general framework laws. The actual details of their implementation are supposed to be hammered out at the regional level. As a result, they are inconsistently interpreted and unevenly enforced" (p.25). He does a good job of also explaining the chronic uneasiness with democracy in Russia, noting that the Putin-Medvedev administration has made at least some judicial reforms that dovetail with the goals of environmental activists.

Other chapters look at the ways in which sustainable development has been incorporated into Russia's nation-building program as a response to economic crisis and because of strategic pressure from actors engaged in the Russian environmental movement (2); indigenous protest on Sakhalin Island (3) and in subarctic Russia (8) to protect natural resources, culture, and identity (3); petro-capital resistance in Azerbaijan (4) and Kazakhstan (7), and pipeline resistance in Russia's Tanka National Park (5); the meshing of culture and nationalism to inform environmental action in Latvia (6); and environmental justice and sustainability activism in Estonia (9) and Tajikistan (10).

The book concludes with the thought that environmental justice and sustainability movements in the former Soviet Union vary "according to the complex of sociocultural, socioeconomic, political, ethnic, and nationalistic factors that currently define, and are reshaping, the republics" (p.280). This book does an excellent job of exposing this variation, as well as the boundary-crossing human security interests that bring diverse activists and stakeholders together in their shared struggle for a better life. The book will excite scholars and activist interested in environmental justice, sustainability, environmental social science, and post-Soviet studies.

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