

“Ukrainian Environmental NGOs After Chernobyl Catastrophe: Trends and Issues”

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ABSTRACT

This paper will look into the development of the civil environmental movement in Ukraine in the course of democratization processes after the break-up of the USSR. In particular, it searches for answers to the following questions: how environmental degradation after Chernobyl influenced the development of the environmental movement as a whole, and its individual non-governmental organizations (NGOs), in particular; how environmental NGOs emerged, what role they played and how they developed throughout the years, following the Chernobyl catastrophe and the break-up of the Soviet Union.

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The delay in publicly announcing the aftermath of the catastrophe, and the ignorance on the side of party and state leadership had far-reaching consequences not only for the population's health, but also for further political development in Ukraine, which in 1991 became a sovereign state. Even after attaining sovereignty, Chernobyl was no less of a “social catalyst”, on the contrary – the newly achieved free space that had not existed under communist leadership, could now be used for communication and mobilization. The perception of and engagement with ecological problems were some of the defining catalysts and a driving force for the erosion of the state-controlled monopoly on politics through the mobilization of citizens' movements in the former Soviet Union at the beginning of Perestroika (Cf. Sahm 1999, Arndt 2008). The accident in the nuclear power plant at Chernobyl resulted in a previously unknown sensitization and mobilization of large groups, particularly in the badly affected republic of Ukraine. “Environmental degradation increases social resistance and intensifies development of social movements.”¹ In turn, these social movements, as the agents of change, later had an impact on the development of the society and the environment.

“Right after the accident and in the first post-Chernobyl years, mass consciousness was ‘congested’ with Chernobyl hysteria – everything that was happening to people or around them, was interpreted as the consequence of Chernobyl. As time went by, starting from the second decade after Chernobyl, the poignancy of the tragedy has declined; first and foremost as a result of economic hardships, deterioration of well-being, unemployment and other challenges of

the transition period...Gradual decrease of the importance of the Chernobyl as an issue was a result of not so much successful disaster management, but of actualization of other social problems^{mii} It is academically curious to examine how this tendency reflected in the activities and development of environmental civil action in Ukraine.

This paper will look into the development of the post-Chernobyl civil environmental movement in Ukraine. In particular, it searches for answers to the following questions: how environmental degradation after Chernobyl influenced the development of the environmental movement as a whole, and its individual non-governmental organizations (NGOs), in particular; how environmental NGOsⁱⁱⁱ emerged, what role they played and how they developed throughout the years, following the Chernobyl catastrophe and the break-up of the Soviet Union.

Post-Chernobyl Society: Socio-Political Context for Environmental Movement

Symbolically, “Chernobyl became identified with the duplicity and failure, indeed the complete bankruptcy, of the Soviet system as a whole. It also served to mobilize large masses of people against that system.”^{iv} The main factors, influencing the development of civil society as a whole, and the Ukrainian environmental movement, in particular, could be as following:

- (a) forceful change of population lifestyle, which resulted from Chernobyl catastrophe,
- (b) increasing dissatisfaction of the population with the social arrangements;
- (c) political novelties in the form of mass political protest, glasnost and newly emerging political system.

According to Smelser, structural tension or contradictions emerge as a result of the societal conflict of interests; therefore social movements are created when there is some level of dissatisfaction with the social arrangement. He points out that this dissatisfaction results from: objective events or situations, which may forcefully change population's lifestyle or forming standards, according to which people appraise events or situations.^v The ‘forceful change of population's lifestyle’ occurred due to deterioration of health and quality of life, increased radiation risks as well as very low level of social awareness of how to manage daily life under the new circumstances. As a result of the catastrophe, people faced physical and psychological challenges of adjusting to a new environment, such as birth defects, cancer, radiation sickness as well as post-traumatic stress disorders. Socioeconomic conditions have also worsened due to stagnation, increasing poverty, wild economic liberalization and failures of the state financial

system. All these changes required mental and physical readiness to deal with them. As Yanytsky points out, 'in a post-totalitarian society environmental disquietude of the population, high concentration of the population in the environmentally risky area and even obvious threat to the population's health and lifestyle play a role, yet not a critical one, in the emergence of the environmental movements.'^{vi} Despite such a critical perspective on the role of these factors on the environmental movement formation, many NGO leaders, when describing the first steps of the environmental movement, emphasized that the fear of dissemination of the nuclear energy and their willingness to protect themselves and the younger generation from future environmental catastrophes were the major motives in the public self-organization around the environmental issues.

This lack of truthful information about the environmental conditions as a whole and consequences of Chernobyl accident, in particular, created a sense of resentment and stimulated individual and collective action, aimed at gaining access to information about Chernobyl consequences for humans and the environment as well as putting pressure on the officials to be more transparent and comprehensive in their communication with citizens to solve local environmental problems.

At the time of 'perestroika' new standards of transparency ("glasnost") were introduced and had a significant impact on the grassroots civil action. According to Solchanyk, the first calls for the formation of a mass public organization to promote perestroika that reached a wide audience was made by Pavlychko at an ecological meeting in Kiev organized by several "informal groups" in 1988. Later, in 1990, "Rukh" dropped the term perestroika from its official name.^{vii} In 1991, Zelenyi Svit was the first to conduct independent investigation of the Chernobyl accident. This report provided legal assessment of the causes, context and consequences of Chernobyl catastrophe. Glasnost policy of the Soviet leadership created space for intensive public discussions and campaigns on environmental matters. This new experience of public discourse was the key mechanism for formation of the 'green networks' and structural differentiation of the movement.^{viii}

The Soviet authorities employed their traditional methods to blanket Chernobyl in an official interpretation that was at best a gross distortion, at worst a dangerous myth...The government issued orders that the public should be persuaded that Chernobyl was just a minor accident.^{ix} In his testament, G. Medvedev points out that 'lies were everywhere...The creators of Chernobyl

were laying down a thick web of lies upon the radioactive earth, assuring people that it was clean, healthy and habitable...Pseudoscientists were issuing pseudoscientific reports proving that resettlement was out of the question.”^x

The changes in the political arena could not go unnoticed for the environmental movement. ‘Mass political protest reproduced mass environmental movement, which also quickly politicized.’^{xi} Green slogans were very popular in the aftermath of Chernobyl; therefore many democratic leaders were using them to promote their political activities. Strong independence movement, political novelty of the ‘green’ ideology and emergence of a new multi-party system were important factors in ideological and institutional development of the environmental movement.

Human Capital

The break-up of the Soviet Union released an army of unemployed professionals from the previously state-funded research institutions and other spheres. These intellectuals constituted a major milieu for emerging social movements. Many of them became a critical human resource for the environmental NGOs and became a core group for their sustainable institutional development in the future. In the mid-80s, in addition to ‘state-run’ associations for environmental protection, student brigades were created across the country as an effort to protect environment in order to improve environmental violations monitoring. Stegny^{xii} believes that the experience of volunteering in such brigades helped build the leadership and the skills, necessary for creating first environmental NGOs. “Intellectual potential, collected in the Soviet society, required social action.”^{xiii} This social action took form of mass protests, new political movements and a wave of grassroots actions.

Post-Chernobyl Environmental Media

As a result of some liberalization in the area of access to environmental information, as well as in response to Chernobyl catastrophe and its consequences, a number of new periodicals were founded in the post-Chernobyl years. Among the first ‘purely’ environmental media was “Chernobyl Bulletin”, founded in 1988 in response to the drastic reevaluation of values and increased social demand for environmental information. The official restriction on publication of Chernobyl-related materials was lifted in May 1989.^{xiv} The two most significant bursts in the emergence of the environmental media occurred in 1990, as a result of the democratic

processes, and in 1994-1995 – due to the flow of international donor funding for such projects. Although, this helped increase societal awareness of the environmental issues, some of the media were not sustainable, and the majority ceased to exist after 12-18 months of publishing.

Environmental Movement: Dynamics of Development

The roots of the environmental civil action in Ukraine go back to the post-World War II times, when the first Ukrainian Association for Environmental Protection was established as a branch of the Nationwide Association for Environmental Protection in 1946. At start, the membership of this association comprised prominent intellectuals, but later more and more civil servants from different state bodies got involved. Since no public participation in environmental decision-making was appropriate at the time, the Association for Environmental Protection was supposed to contribute to the environmental public awareness campaigns and fight against poaching. Membership in such associations was very formal; and members were expected to pay small membership fees; this allowed to report about large membership and to deem the organization public and legitimate. However, the leadership of the organization was mostly ministry-assigned officials. The so-called ‘non-governmental associations’ were de facto acting under full governmental control. Such a format of a ‘civic association’ created a lack of population belief in civic action.

The fear of repeating Chernobyl catastrophe brought many people to openly manifest protest against construction of new nuclear stations. It is impossible to analyze official statistics about existing environmental NGOs because the Ministry of Justice, responsible for NGO registration, does not use classification on the basis of type of activity. Only regional classification exists for registered NGOs. On the basis of analysis of all NGO directories, issued by ISAR and Counterpart Creative Center, Stegnyy^{xv} offered the following statistics on the chronological creation of NGOs. A major portion (84%) of environmental NGOs, created before 2000 were established in the first post-Chernobyl decade (1986-1995). Among the first major environmental movements that were created were ‘Zelenyi Svit’ (Green World) (1987) and “Ecologiya and Svit’ (Environment and the World) (1988). Creation of two major political movements (later parties) resulted from the activities of Zelenyi Svit – People’s Movement (Narodny Rukh) and Green Party (Partiya Zelenyh). Zelenyi Svit as an association and the Green Party were functioning at different levels – at the grassroots and at the legislative levels.

As Andrusevich^{xvi} points out, at start the emerging post-Chernobyl environmental NGOs could be described as (a) small activist groups, whose activities were aimed at solving real problems at the local or regional levels and (b) NGOs, which aimed to reform public administration and environmental management. Later on, due to organizational restructuring and development, he suggests the following classification of organizations: policy organizations, think tanks and grassroots organizations.

Tuckman's model of group development could be used to describe the development stages of the community of the Ukrainian environmental NGOs:

Forming (tentatively 1985-1995) – ad hoc meetings and associations to address particular problems or promote particular interests. This stage is characterized by informal gatherings and grassroots activities, using available volunteer resources and high level of cooperation and interaction among the emerging groups. It was common to organize mass campaigns or protests against specific decisions or projects, such as ban on construction of a new atomic station. History of such protests and confrontation created a relatively hostile context in relations with the state stakeholders. Therefore, the movement as a whole and organizations in particular needed approaches, aimed at survival and self-maintenance. One of the experts emphasized that this was the time of reemergence of ad-hoc activist groups and organizations.

Storming (tentatively 1995-2003) – the so called 'new wave' of NGOs emerged in response to increasing flows of international technical aid flows, which would help organizations not only implement projects, but also build institutional capacities for the future. "The end products of the revival were not mass protests, but information, managerial skills and political technologies."^{xvii}

Relatively generous grant funding made NGOs attractive employers. On the one hand, this allowed retaining the brains in the organization; on the other – high salaries attracted individuals, whose personal goals and values could differ from organizational mission and goals. Some NGOs started to resemble consulting businesses rather than grassroots activist groups. Many NGOs listed a very wide spectrum of activities in order to tailor its organizational history to the requirements of the donor-funded projects. This allowed members of the organizations to gain experience of working with diverse projects; yet organizational long-term strategies lacked thematic focus.

The major wave of funding for environmental projects ended with Bush's radical cut of technical aid for these issues in 2001, when Bush administration decided to shift focus in the technical aid. Despite the fact that donors were looking for more professional organizations, who could manage and implement grants, many so called 'one –day' organizations appeared in order to 'digest' the donor funding flows. At the same time, other more strategically oriented organizations started building their institutional capacities as well as more advanced management structure in order to become more professionalized. Yanytskyi offers the following explanation to such a trend: "after giving up some of the activists to the political career, political movement preferred to stay professional." ^{xviii}

Tensions within the environmental community increased due to the highly competitive 'grant' market. Many NGOs preferred to act unilaterally to sharing grant resources in network projects. A number of attempts were made to create umbrella network organizations or structures, but most failed due to lack of clear joint goals, internal disagreements and financial competition. In such a competitive context, some organizations reached out to state agencies, businesses and political parties; new not sustainable organizations appear in order to 'digest the grant money'; there were cases of corruption in the non-governmental and donor sectors. This hampered development of a strong unified environmental movement.

The internal discord was particularly visible in the case of Chernobyl organizations, some of which resembled pocket GONGOs and received preferential treatment in the form of state funding and privileges. "The government was hoping to create 'the fifth column' in Chernobyl NGO movement by creating 'Association of Chernobyl organizations.' It consisted of many small foundations, associations, unions, which have only a couple of members. There were approximately 180 such organizations in Ukraine. Many of them get tones of humanitarian aid and sell it, are settled in nice offices and busy with doing their own business. They are very distant from the real problems of 3.5 million people, who suffered from Chernobyl. It is obvious that these people are following instructions from the top, which is aimed at undermining social protection system of Chernobyl sufferers." ^{xix}

The level of social connections between such NGOs as well as their relations with other stakeholders, including the state, is the inherent characteristics of a social movement. According to Oberschall^{xx} fast mobilization is impossible if an organization is created by individual members. It is only possible if well-organized associations of individuals, who are ready to act,

are involved. In the storming stage, there were a number of environmental organizations that did not have sufficient potential for fast mobilization.

Norming and Performing (tentatively 2004-now) – many experts consider this period the times of professionalization and bureaucratization. Others call it the period of ‘westernization’ because there were more and more working contacts with organizations in the West, a lot of training programs on NGO management were funded and delivered to the activists by them, some organizations started applying western management styles and approaches to running their NGOs.

In a survey of environmental activists, conducted by Stegny^{xxi} in 1995, more than half of respondents noted the informal character of their organizations; while in the 2005 survey this number dropped almost twofold. Many ‘old’ post-Chernobyl organizations, created in the forming stage, established cooperation with donors or budget institutions; and this allowed them to have long-term steady funding. At the same time, more ad-hoc informal groups, focused on particular local issues, emerged. For instance, many of such groups gathered around fighting environmentally destructive construction boom on the territories of public parks and gardens. In an interview, one of the experts noted that more youth and student associations initiate environmental projects.

This dynamics had a positive influence on the environmental movement as a whole. In the evolutionary process, many organizations chose to focus on a particular issue and find their own niche as opposed to the previously accepted ‘wide spectrum’ approach. This resulted in nurturing high level of professionalism of the members and employees, slightly decreased competition for grants and, therefore, created more opportunities for uniting efforts around particular issues or campaigns and doing national network projects and intensifying information exchange among organizations.

Despite some positive dynamics in the development of environmental movement in Ukraine, the ‘performing’ stage is still in its initial start. The following issues have impeded progress of the movement and its transition to the ‘performing’ stage. Among the major issues, which prevent organizations and movement, as a whole to transit to the ‘performing’ stage are defragmentation, lack of focus and politicization of environmental activities. The example of Zeleny Svit is very illustrative of these trends.

Defragmentation, Lack of Focus and Consistency – ‘Zeleny Svit’ Association became an important platform for democratic discussion on matters of wide spectrum, ranging from environmental problems to political ideas. This was certainly a groundbreaking experience for many activists, yet it lacked thematic focus, professional approach and organizational consistency. This was also true of many individual organizations. Under such circumstances, many demanding resolutions on various issues were produced. However, such an inconsistency and extremely wide spectrum of documents produced and issues touched threatened the reputation of the association from within as well as the perception of the association by external stakeholders. “Ukrainian civil society has a lot of problems in achieving public credibility and support due to its elusive adherence to important values.”^{xxii} According to the Ukraine Civicus Index Report, the majority of population sees the role of civil society in protecting the environment as insignificant, limited or moderate; and only 25% of respondents consider it as significant^{xxiii}. As Yanitskiy points out “goals and values, at the end of the day, determine the organizational structure of the movement.”^{xxiv} Therefore, the vague goals and dispersed values were reflected in a high degree of internal disintegration and lack of coordination within the movement.

Environmental movement had to address various internal collisions around the issue of who should be formal and informal leaders of the movement. This resulted in increasing competition for donor resources, and hampered the development of the unified environmental movement and joint projects.

Politicization -- Due to the lack of clarity in division of areas of responsibilities as well as the vagueness between politics and environmental activism in the work of Zelenyi Svit, as an association, and the Green Party, as a political party, both the movement and the party faced many strategic challenges and formed contradictory perceptions about their work and efficiency. Moreover, reputation of the green movement declined due to poor political performance of the Green Party and the lack of real progress in environmental matters at the times when the party was in Parliament. Moreover, general population often confused the activities of the political party and environmental movement as a whole^{xxv}. “In Ukraine, social movements were formed when political institutions of the socialist times were not receptive to the concept of independent political activity. This created positive conditions for development of such movements. However,

emergence of the new political institutions allowed to integrate social movements leaders into new state bodies; and later resulted in the loss of inherent political dynamics.”^{xxvi}

It should be noted, that after the Green Party got seats in the 1998 parliamentary elections, there was a strong stimulus to expand and register all-Ukrainian associations, such as VEL and Mama86. At the same time, Stegny^{xxvii} points out that environmental movement did not have sufficient influence in incorporating environmental issues into the political agenda and increasing electoral awareness of the general public on the matter. This reflects in the further development trend of the Green Party itself. After the 1998 success in the parliamentary elections, it continued to lose trust of its constituents. Despite increasing membership body (from 2000 members in 1991 to 82000 in 2007), the party's scores in parliamentary elections continued to drop (from 5.43% in 1998 to 0.4% in 2007). However it should be noted that the majority of environmental NGOs consciously and publically distanced themselves from the Green Party in the most recent elections.

Conclusion

The accident in the nuclear power plant in Chernobyl resulted in a previously unknown sensitization and mobilization of large groups after the decades of one party discipline and clandestine kitchen discussions about politics and society. Strong independence movement, political novelty of the 'green' ideology and emergence of a new multi-party system were important catalysts in ideological and institutional development of the environmental movement.

The main factors, influencing the development of civil society as a whole, and the Ukrainian environmental movement, in particular, are forceful change of population lifestyle, dissatisfaction of the population with the social arrangements and political novelties in the form of mass political protest, glasnost and newly emerging political system.

The 'forceful change of population's lifestyle' occurred due to deterioration of health and quality of life, and increased radiation risks. Socioeconomic conditions worsened due to stagnation, increasing poverty, wild economic liberalization and failures of the state financial system. All these changes required mental and physical readiness to deal with them.

The lack of truthful information about the environmental conditions as a whole and consequences of Chernobyl, in particular, created a sense of resentment and stimulated a lot of

individual and organized activities, aimed at gaining access to information about Chernobyl consequences for humans and the environment as well as putting pressure on the officials to be more transparent and comprehensive in their communication with citizens. This new experience of public discourse was the key mechanism for formation of the 'green networks' and structural differentiation of the movement.

The paper follows the development of environmental NGOs from the times of the one state-run Association for Environmental Protection to the hundreds of institutionalized organizations and structures and the history of the environmental organizations development into the forming, storming, norming and performing stages. Despite some positive dynamics in the development of environmental movement in Ukraine, the 'performing' stage is still in its initial start. The following issues have impeded enhancement of the movement and its transition to the 'performing' stage: defragmentation within the movement, lack of focus and politicization of environmental activities.

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ⁱⁱⁱ *The working definition of an 'environmental NGO', which will be used in this paper is as following: formal registered or inform association of citizens, which is non-profit and involved in environmental projects of various nature, such as education, public evaluation of projects, sustainable development, support to the network of environmental organizations.*

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