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Activist crusades against toxic waste in Russia

Anastasia Ustinova, Chronicle Foreign Service
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(04-19) 04:00 PDT Moscow - --

The residents of Chapaevsk, a city in Central Russia, say the lakes near local chemical factories are dead from toxic waste, no longer freeze and contaminate the town's water supply.

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John Antonelli

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In the western Russian city of Dzerdjinsk, the mortality rate of children and adolescents is 50 percent higher than the national average because of pollution from chemical plants. The city is one of the world's 10 most-polluted places, according to the Blacksmith Institute, a consulting firm in New York.

Such environmental disasters are well-known thanks to Olga Speranskaya, a petite, 46-year-old physicist who is the driving force behind a nongovernmental group that works to identify, reduce and safely store chemical stockpiles in Russia and the republics of the former Soviet Union. For her tireless work, she is being honored with the Goldman Environmental Prize.

Many of the former Soviet republics house outdated and highly poisonous chemicals that were used during the agricultural boom years after World War II.

"Our aim is to clean the country of toxic waste," Speranskaya told The Chronicle in a recent interview in Moscow. "The major part of what we do is under government jurisdiction and that's why explaining and showing them ways to resolve the pressing environmental problems is our ultimate goal."

For more than a decade, Speranskaya, the head of Moscow's Center for Environment and Sustainable Development, or Eco-Accord, has fought lax environmental regulations, local bureaucracies and corporations.

"Obviously, some people don't like what she does," said Islam Mustafayev, chairman of the ecological group Ruzgar in Baku, Azerbaijan. "Local government or private companies try to disrupt her projects."

Mustafayev says environmental organizations in Russia and former Soviet republics often have difficulty obtaining government permits to collect water and soil samples or gain access to contaminated areas.

Speranskaya's career as an activist began in the early 1990s after the Financial Times published her essay on the environmental implications of the collapse of the Soviet

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Union.

Her essay noted that the postwar agricultural boom produced stockpiles throughout the Soviet Union of dangerous chemicals known as Persistent Organic Pollutants, which were used to boost fruit and vegetable production. Left unguarded, the toxins can cause birth defects, respiratory problems, cancer and behavioral disorders among other health problems.

In 1999, Speranskaya's Eco-Accord joined a worldwide effort to curb production and use of hazardous chemicals through a global treaty called the Stockholm Convention. The accord has been ratified by at least 128 nations and the majority of former Soviet states.

Then-President Vladimir Putin signed the convention in 2002, but the Russian Federation has yet to ratify it. Bureaucratic delays and lack of resources have left Russia with few regulations to oversee thousands of chemical and energy plants, Eco-Accord says.

"Until the government realizes its importance, it's not going to ratify it," said Olga Ponizova, program coordinator at Eco-Accord.

Meanwhile, Speranskaya continues her efforts with local governments to find and store pesticides and rewrite lenient environmental regulations. As a result, Eco-Accord is mapping out contaminated areas, conducting public health research and coordinating cleanups with dozens of local groups and governments in Eastern Europe, the Caucasus region and Central Asia.

In the Azerbaijani city of Sumgait near the Caspian Sea, for example, Eco-Accord is attempting to decontaminate one of the most polluted cities of the former Soviet Union. Sumgait was once the industrial hub of chemical and heavy metal production, employing hundreds of thousands of workers.




Ten years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, at least 70 percent of the population suffered from chemical-related illness due to stockpiles of chlorine, DDT and other chemicals, health officials said.

Currently, Eco-Accord is working with nongovernmental organizations to stage public-awareness campaigns in schools and on television, conduct research and cleanup programs and advise legislators how to write laws to safeguard the environment.

"Speranskaya is one of the most professional, disciplined and dedicated people I've ever worked with," said Mustafayev. "She created a potent network of NGOs that has helped transform the region."

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