

Outcomes of European technical assistance for the governance of water resources and biodiversity in the Region of Pskov: empowered actors, missed opportunities and selective sustainability

¹Anton Shkaruba, ²Viktar Kireyeu, ³Olga Likhacheva

¹Central European University, Budapest, Hungary

²Erda RTE, Rijswijk, the Netherlands

³Pskov State University, Pskov, Russia

The paper explores the impact and sustainability of environmental assistance coming to Russia from Europe, including EU and member states foundations. The geographical scope of the study was limited to Pskovskaya Oblast' (the Region of Pskov), and it encompassed all the assistance projects awarded in 1991-2016 and involving beneficiaries from Pskovskaya Oblast'. Pskovskaya Oblast' borders Estonia and Latvia, and therefore it was eligible to EU cross-border cooperation programs. Potentially Pskovskaya Oblast' was an important and promising target for EU investments in environmental infrastructure (both physical and institutional), however it does not feature in the international environmental policy and environmental assistance literature as yet. Another purpose of this inquiry is that the international aid literature is mostly based on the studies from the global South, while Russia's aid incentive structure and economic and policy landscapes are very different.

The total estimated amount allocated from 1991 to 2016 to environmental assistance projects involving the beneficiaries from Pskovskaya Oblast' was EUR 55,900,000. Grant sizes greatly varied and were quite high in general: 10 grants were over 1,000,000 EUR, 8 grants from 500,000 to 1,000,000, 3 grants from 100,000 to 500,000, 5 grants from 50,000 to 100,000, 5 grants below 50,000 EUR. The biggest grant of EUR 27,400,000 came from the NDEP. The estimated share of Pskovskaya Oblast'-based beneficiaries was c.a. EUR 31,769,000; most of it came from the NDEP-funded project. Due to the nature of this action (improvement of waste water treatment and water supply in the city of Pskov), the main recipient was Gorvodokanal" (Water Supply Company of the City of Pskov). Most of the environmental assistance addresses the issues of water management and biodiversity. While each of the sectors received 9 grants, it is noteworthy that 5 of biodiversity-related actions targeted aquatic or wetland ecosystems. Likewise, out of 7 educational and awareness-raising projects, 4 had water or aquatic ecosystems as the main topic.

Our interviewees suggest that the most sustainable projects had to do with the development of physical (e.g. water treatment facilities) and, to some extent, the institutional infrastructure (e.g. management plans integrated to regulatory frameworks). Sustainability of environmental or ecosystem management plans was recognised, as a serious problem on its own, as their further implementation is usually lacking the financial backup, and, in particular, because budgets for their revisions and upgrades were not normally available. Other types of activities, even such iconic ones as the Pskov Model Forest, discontinued after the end of project funding, with their outputs inevitably degrading or getting out-of-dated (e.g. management plans or tourist guides without sound sustainability planning, biodiversity inventories etc.).

As long as most of European environmental assistance projects in Pskovskaya Oblast' can be classified as "the direct subsidisation of specific measures designed to reduce transboundary environmental threats" (Darst, 2001), their impact on environmental governance in this region was fairly limited. Nevertheless, the importance of many projects was quite high on the national (federal) level. For instance, the series of projects addressing water management of transboundary water bodies were the first of its kind in Russia, and they set a model for other parts of the country.

Likewise, the Pskov Model Forest had a great impact over the development of forest policies and management practices in whole Russia.

Due to the nature of the funded actions, the most frequently beneficiaries were governmental offices and agencies from various administrative levels, and government-owned companies and organisations. Non-governmental actors were rather marginally involved (especially in terms of the total funding received), as NGOs apparently were recognised fit as main partners only in a relatively narrow range of projects. Although the rationale is clear and very well justifiable, this pragmatic approach also reminds of the discourse on disadvantaged of “betrayed” civil society of Russia by Western donors (Henderson, 2002; Tynkkynen, 2008).

In a long-term perspective, the most important impact of European assistance on environmental governance in Pskovskaya Oblast', apparently had to do with the promotion of international institutional regimes and, subsequently, with emerging institutions of multilevel environmental governance. Such institutions range from private governance arrangement, such as FSC certification of forest management (e.g. the Pskov Model Forest was developing capacity for certification compliance) to the governance by the state, such as promotion of Ramsar sites. As some studies from the broader region of Eastern Europe demonstrate (Otto, Shkaruba, & Kireyeu, 2011; Shkaruba, Kireyeu, 2013), multilevel governance arrangements often play a pivotal role in ensuring environmental compliance in the situations when national compliance mechanisms fail to do so.