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National



20/09/2007 | [Moscow News, 36 2007](#)

Russia Home to Some of World's Dirtiest Cities

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Norilsk and Dzerzhinsk - as well as two cities in the former USSR - are among the 10 most polluted cities in the world, a controversial report by the New York-based Blacksmith Institute has found.

In a nation still suffering from a Soviet legacy of putting environmental issues on the back burner, the report hit home the hardest. Both are closed cities. But while Norilsk - the remote Siberian home of Russia's metallurgic giant Norilsk Nickel - made visible efforts to work together with the non-profit organization, the city of Dzerzhinsk - which holds the Guinness Book of World Records award for the planet's dirtiest town - lashed out at the findings, suggesting a smear campaign was behind it.

Dzerzhinsk holds the number seven spot in the Blacksmith report. The institute described the central Russian chemical manufacturing site as a place where "the chemicals have turned the

water into a white sludge containing dioxins and high levels of phenol." Citing figures from the city's environmental agency, it said that nearly 300,000 tons of chemical waste were "improperly disposed between 1930 and 1998." The average age for males in the city, according to Greenpeace, is just 42, compared to the national average of 59.

In a city where the rain is so dirty that it reportedly ate holes in people's clothes decades ago, these findings would hardly be surprising. But critics of the report rushed to point out that Blacksmith did not send a specialist to assess the environmental situation in the city.

City officials have said that Blacksmith, which also noted Dzerzhinsk in its 2006 report, has not sent any researchers for two years. "It's another attempt by pseudo-environmentalists to smear the reputation of the city," Mayor Viktor Portnov was quoted by Kommersant as saying. He went on to suggest that the report was prepared by "those who are not interested in development in Russia, and in particular, the Nizhny Novgorod region" particularly in wake of what officials described as an investment boom in the area.

But representatives at Blacksmith blamed lack of cooperation from city officials for the inability to assess the city personally. "Basically the reason no one from our institute has been to Dzerzhinsk is simply because they will not let us in," Blacksmith spokeswoman Meredith Block told The Moscow News. "I can guarantee you that our commitment to improve the lives of people there is evident in the fact that over the last two years we have funded several water treatment projects, we actually installed water filters."

Vladimir Kuznetsov, a special representative of Blacksmith working in Moscow, described how while Norilsk Nickel went out of its way to arrange meetings with government and medical officials in Norilsk, they got no cooperation from Dzerzhinsk officials.

"The authorities have taken a very unconstructive stance," he told The Moscow News. "While Norilsk is a formally closed city and we cannot hold continuous projects there, Dzerzhinsk is a place where step-by-step measures can improve the situation. We had projects in Dzerzhinsk for years - water filters, an environmental plan..."

Meanwhile, after spending two days in Norilsk, Kuznetsov says that "getting them off the list is a matter of time."

Officials at Norilsk Nickel say that they were not initially contacted by Blacksmith when the institute prepared its first report in 2006. "After the first rating we openly challenged [Blacksmith Institute head Richard] Fuller and suggested a representative come to Norilsk and see for himself," Norilsk Nickel spokeswoman Yelena Kovalyova told The Moscow News. "Kuznetsov came to Norilsk in July."

While Kovalyova said the company and the city still have a lot of environmental problems to deal with, she noted that considerable progress had already been made by her company, citing a 36 billion ruble (\$1.4 billion) project to renew the equipment - much of which was built during the 1930s, when no one was really thinking about ecology - by 2015. According to Blacksmith, sulphur dioxides and heavy metals pollute the air as byproducts of the town's metal mining industry. Residents are particularly prone to lung cancer, respiratory illnesses and birth defects. But Kuznetsov described the regional hospital as the most well-equipped and up to date that he's seen across the country, adding that the subsidies to the hospital from Norilsk Nickel were "underestimated."

"These two cities are completely different in terms of their composition," says Alexei Kiselyov, a coordinator for Greenpeace's toxic substances division in Moscow. "If Dzerzhinsk is chemicals then Norilsk is colored metals. We know Dzerzhinsk quite well. "While Norilsk is literally owned by one company, "the factories in Dzerzhinsk are

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breaking up into several parts, they're getting lots of different owners."

Where Dzerzhinsk is concerned, according to Kiselyov, despite "dirty water, dirty earth and a huge number of waste dumps" the situation has gotten remarkably better in the last two decades. Still, Kiselyov, who visited Dzerzhinsk two weeks ago, has said that a "whiff of the air there is enough to send investors running."

He remained skeptical, however, of Blacksmith's methods. "It was hard in the past to get to the dangerous sites in Dzerzhinsk" he told The Moscow News, "but now they've got paved roads leading right up to them. So I don't understand where exactly they weren't allowed to go..."

Unsurprisingly, the report also lists Chernobyl, in the Ukraine, at the ninth spot, while Sumgayit, Azerbaijan - the site of numerous chemical factories - holds the number one spot.

Other culprits on the list were in China, India, Peru and Zambia. "Where the situation in Russia is concerned they've got it about right," Kiselyov said of the report. "But I don't understand their methodology. What does it matter - 2nd place or 7th place - how do you determine it?"

By Anna Arutunyan

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