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Elena Agarkova is studying management of natural resources and the relationship between Siberia's natural riches and its people. Previously, Elena was a Legal Fellow at the University of Washington's School of Law, at the Berman Environmental Law Clinic. She has clerked for Honorable Cynthia M. Rufe of the federal district court in Philadelphia, and has practiced commercial litigation at the New York office of Milbank, Tweed, Hadley & McCloy LLP. Elena was born in Moscow, Russia, and has volunteered for environmental non-profits in the Lake Baikal region of Siberia. She graduated from Georgetown University Law Center in 2001, and has received a bachelor's degree in political science from Barnard College.

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The Crane-Rogers Foundation
4545 42nd St. NW, Ste 311
Washington, D.C. 20016

Tel: 202-364-4068

Fax: 202-364-0498

E-mail: icwa@icwa.org

Web: www.icwa.org

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Anti-mill protesters holding up signs with information about Baikal and its unique flora and fauna. Photo courtesy of Elisabeth Kruger.

The Baikal Movement

By Elena Agarkova

Sometimes they don't see each other for months, even years. Some of them know each other only from email exchanges, having never met in person. They have physicists, journalists, businessmen, biologists, and computer programmers among them. They range from students to retirees. Some of them work on Baikal problems all the time. Others join in "when thunder strikes"; when yet another Russian oil company tries to build a pipeline along Baikal shores; when Putin changes the law protecting Lake Baikal for the benefit of one polluter; when Baikal is in grave danger; when they hear an urgent call to action.

They organize demonstrations, draft appeal letters to banks and the Russian government, study effects of industrial pollution on Baikal, sue the Russian prime minister and companies in court, write articles exposing greed, corruption, and stupidity of local officials and federal bureaucrats, Russian oligarchs and their foreign counterparts.

The Baikal Movement, as they call them-

selves now, is a peculiar phenomenon. A collection of unlikely bedfellows, people who would not meet or interact with each other in their regular life, who often disagree strongly on political and social issues. Yet in this informal group they try to put aside their beliefs and personal ambitions for the sake of their common fight.

They don't have official leaders. When some participants try to take that role, they risk a backlash from those who cherish the movement's loose structure. No official membership lists exist. Anyone can come to their meetings, just as anyone can join their email distribution list. They argue and fight. They stop speaking to each other. Some of them may be certifiably crazy. That is one of the drawbacks of open meetings — they do attract some loonies, from old communists to Siberian separatists. Some get too tired of dealing with the chaotic nature of the movement and attempt to bring more order into it, usually with only temporary success. Others simply leave. But the movement lives on. Every week, some of them meet at the offices of Baikal Environmental Wave. Every day, they send each

other news of the latest assaults on Baikal and try to figure out ways to fight them off.

They put their reputations on the line, subject themselves to ridicule. Some have run-ins with police. Some have been to jail. What brings these people, so different and unlike each other, together?

For many of them protecting Baikal is not a matter of civic duty or a question of "strategic water resources" for future generations. They do use these arguments in slogans and public letters, but deep down inside they seem to be motivated by very simple, very powerful emotions.

They love Baikal. These people believe that their fate and the fate of this enormous lake are intertwined. In the deep blue crescent that nature carved in the middle of Siberia they feel divinity, at its purest and most beautiful. In Baikal's pure waters they see a reflection of their conscience.

When I asked Gala Sibiryakova, whose last name literally means "Siberian," to explain what the move-

ment means to her and how she became a part of it, she wrote an entire article in response. Gala was born in Listvyanka, a small village nearby Irkutsk, on the shore of Baikal. She has a degree in international affairs and has tried to live in Germany, where she has relatives. It didn't take. "I was like a tree without its roots." She returned home.

In 2005-2006 Gala, like many other movement participants, devoted all of her free time to fighting the oil pipeline that the Russian state monopoly, Transneft, tried to illegally build along the northern shore of Baikal. They won, but the emotional toll of the victory, from accusations of being a paid agent of the West to blank uncomprehending stares from friends ("What are you, an activist?"), caused Gala to move from Irkutsk to Olkhon.

She thought the move to the biggest island on Baikal would be temporary, but four years later she still lives there with her family, running a hotel she built together with her husband. Currently seven months pregnant, she remains extremely active in the movement, managing the email list, coming up with ideas for "best environmental poster" competitions and like, monitoring media for Baikal-related news.

She said that she asked herself the question "What is the Baikal Movement?" more than once. "At different times various journalists, sociologists and even political scientists attempted to understand and analyze its actions, successes and failures. It's a paradox, but people who call themselves Baikal Movement participants cannot give an equivocal definition of the movement. Attempts to study the organization's structure ended in criticism, allegations of utter incompetence and ridicule of their results by the very object of study, the movement's members. In all these studies the quote most on point stated that at the present moment no one can say for sure what Baikal Movement is.

To Gala, the main reason that stumps researchers and police alike is that "the Baikal movement is not an artificially created organization with clearly designated structure and goals. The movement is a natural human activity, historically and socially determined. This is unpaid activity, which always confused our enemies, who unsuccessfully try





At the recent anti-mill event, young volunteers from the Great Baikal Trail helped children from a local orphanage draw pictures of Baikal. Photo courtesy of Elisabeth Kruger.

to discover our source of financing. Because people are not in anyone's pay, no one can really control them. Everyone considers themselves independent. Because of this, initiatives and actions of some participants sometimes may shock others."

Gala laughingly remembered a stranger who in 2006 approached her after noticing her Baikal movement pin. "Apparently this man often dealt with people who've served in military 'hot spots.' He said, 'Ah, I know your people! They came to me once and asked for dynamite. Said they want to blow up this damn pipeline.' But I've never heard about any such plans from any of the Baikal movement participants I know."

She acknowledged that this would be an extreme case, but people in the movement have always made statements and performed actions of which others did not know. "It's understandable. It's impossible to control people who act according to their beliefs and on their own dime, or to make them play by someone else's rules."

You may not have guessed from your first impression of this polite, articulate, small woman that she is a fire-cracker herself. I've heard stories about her fighting with local Irkutsk police during the 2006 anti-pipeline protests that made me exclaim, "Who, Gala?! That Gala?"

She recollected a remark someone made about those

times. "We had a feeling that you [in a plural sense] will go to the end." She may not have been willing to throw herself "under a bulldozer," but she was sure she did not want to see Baikal covered in oil. She gave that fight all she had, from time to money. Her daughter, a young teenager at the time, had to endure comments from schoolmates who saw her mom on TV, demonstrating in front of the local government. Gala had to deal with phone calls from schoolmates' parents, her own relatives, and even people she considered her friends. "People would tell me, you have to think about your daughter. We'd be sitting with her at home, eating bread with ketchup, and I'd wonder, maybe I am really not right? And my daughter said to me, just win already. It's like we've already been through so much, she did not want it to be for nothing."

Some called her a fanatic. A friend of hers gave Gala some money and made her sign a promise that she will not spend it on fliers. She did buy some food with the money, but spent most of it to pay the phone bill. Calls abroad, to Baikal movement's international partners and to journalists, have racked up to the point where the phone company threatened to cut off their service.

Many unexpected allies lent a hand. After some Baikal movement activists took over Transneft's office in a peaceful stunt, the local judge who tried them asked whether they had tape recorders. "No? Then I want to say, well done!" He gave them a minimal fine and told police to



Members of the Baikal movement putting up flags and posters at a recent anti-mill demonstration.

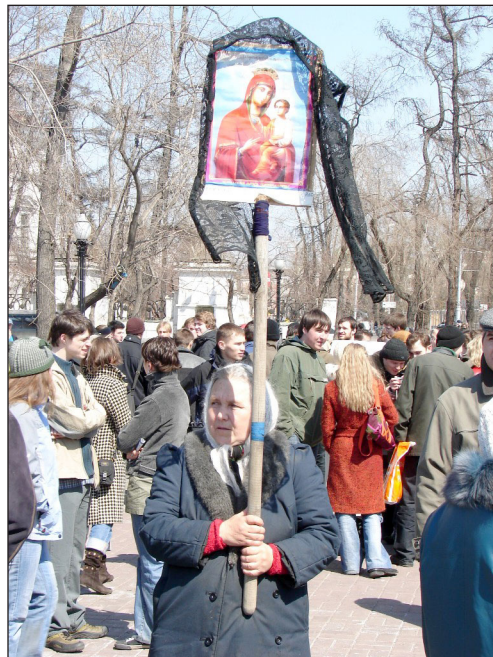
drive the boys to the rail station to make sure they didn't miss the last train home.

The broad base of support the movement had among locals helped enormously. "People wondered how we always knew Transneft's plans. They had no idea that the company's own higher-ups would call us the second they left a meeting and tell us what was going on." Gala even used the local administration's printers to make anti-pipeline fliers. Not personally — the employees printed the fliers and she carried them out, thousands at a time. "This was during re-election time, so they put one official flier at the top. I ran into the then-governor a couple of times in the building, when I was carrying a huge stack of them. He glanced at the top page, nodded, and went on his way."

The Russian Orthodox priests apparently received a warning from above not to participate in anti-pipeline protests, but they found other ways to express themselves. When the demonstration began, one of them started ringing church bells. And some of the men and women protesting on the streets of Irkutsk in 2006 carried huge icons draped in black. "It's obvious that they did not

bring these icons from home," said Gala.

Even the Irkutsk police sympathized. They did not arrest Gala and the other protestors during some of the picketing actions, choosing to turn a blind eye. "Their head lieutenant was yelling at them to take us in, and they'd say to each other, 'I don't want to arrest her, she's pretty...' They actually took some people from the sides, just regular passerby's. These policemen asked us what we were picketing about, and when the lieutenant was not close, said, 'You're right to be making noise!'"



One of the old women who brought icons to the protests in 2006. Photo courtesy of Gala Sibiryakova.

She received a lot of public exposure for an intensely private person. Her cousin, a local prosecutor, would be in one news segment on TV, and Gala would appear in the next. "My relatives did not know who to be proud of and who to be ashamed of."

Gala also did not expect to end up in the newspaper list "Siberians of the Year" when their fight against the Transneft pipeline culminated in a loud victory. Faced with intense public pressure at home and abroad, thousands of demonstrators in Irkutsk and cities all over Russia, then-president Putin moved

the pipeline away from Baikal. Many of the Baikal movement participants returned to their regular lives. That's normal, since most people who join the movement get most active in moments of extreme danger to Baikal. Gala mentioned this as the reason for calling the movement after the lake, even though many of its participants, especially those in the Baikal region, began to work on problems that don't immediately concern Baikal, like cutting of trees in Irkutsk or human rights issues. "But Baikal, which many of those in the movement consider sacred, remains the main unifying factor for the movement."

The Baikal movement has its roots in the opposition to the Baikalsk pulp and paper mill, when leading Siberian scientists and writers implored the Soviet government not to build a hazardous factory on the shores of "Russia's Galapagos." By signing their names on pieces of paper that dared criticize an official decision of the Communist Party, these men and women became the first Baikal activists, the first dissenters to risk their jobs because they believed that this lake must be protected at all cost.

The next phase came in late 1980s, the era of Gorbachev's *glasnost*, or openness, and *perestroika*. Eventually the process Gorbachev set in motion would destroy the Soviet Union, but in 1987 most people could not even dare imagine such a future. Most, including Communist bureaucrats, did not know how to interpret statements from above about needing to develop "new thinking," "reformism," and "consensus-building." For decades, they, along with everyone else, followed the decisions made by the party elite. Now the game had changed, and they had yet to figure out the rules. One of the questions before them was: how much freedom did they have to give to the people?

But the people began to take matters into their own hands. When the government announced plans to build a waste pipeline from the Baikalsk pulp and paper mill to Irkut, a river that flows into Angara right in the middle of Irkutsk, the people of Irkutsk rebelled. They took *glasnost* seriously, and they had things to express.

The idea of the waste pipeline dated back to 1964. Initially it appeared out of sheer desperation — the mill was about to start operations without any waste



Getting kids involved in fun interactive activities is a good way to make parents explain to them the meaning of the pulp mill and other industries for Baikal. Photo courtesy of Elisabeth Kruger.

treatment system. Luckily, the idea got shelved until years later, when someone remembered a Party decree on "Measures regarding protection and rational use of Lake Baikal's natural resources," which specified that by 1988 BPPM waste waters must be diverted into Irkut.

The party leaders did not take into consideration the fact that Irkut is a source of clean mountain water, which after joining with the Angara brings drinking water to several cities downstream. They also did not care that the polluted Irkut-Angara stream would end in the landlocked Bratsk reservoir, which thousands of people use for water and recreation. The pipeline would go over a highly seismic mountain area. An earthquake could send tons of toxic waste from the pipeline straight into Baikal.

The Movement to Protect Baikal became a natural expression of people's anger over these plans.

Scientists and painters joined forces, gathering signatures against the Party's decision. Looking back at the events of that time, I am struck by how much they resemble the present. Just like now, official media called these activists "extremists." Just like today, local police arrested them and the local administration did everything possible to prevent public gatherings. Just like now, the protesters said that those in power did not take the people's voice into consideration. Back then the actions of these brave souls got labeled as unlawful, harmful, and "anti-party." Today they get accused of being foreign agents, working to destroy Russia's economy. In both situations officials evoke the basic principle of "if you are not with us, you are against us." But amazingly, it seems that during the



"Add your hand to protecting Baikal!" Photo courtesy of Elisabeth Kruger.

last years of the Soviet Union its media was freer than the supposedly independent media of today.

A well-known Irkutsk ornithologist, Anatoly Sosunov, became one of the main leaders of the Movement to Protect Baikal. He pushed for keeping Baikal free from industrial development of any kind, for “environmental safety” and active citizen participation in politics. He took Dostoyevsky’s phrase, “Beauty will save the world,” and turned it into a question to everyone concerned with Baikal’s fate: “Will we save beauty?” Sosunov’s activism ended up costing him his career. He went from being a Komsomol leader, a scientist with a steady job, to a street-cleaner. In those days these kinds of jobs became a provenance of political “dissidents,” nonconformists who did not agree with the Party line. Some of the Soviet Union’s most famous musicians, poets, and philosophers worked as coal-heavers, elevator-operators and yard-cleaners, to avoid being jailed for “vagrancy.” For some these jobs provided a way to comply with the law that required universal employment (even if you could not find a job in your profession); for others they offered a certain respite from the watchful eye of the government. Some did not have a choice. Years later articles about that era would call them the “Yard-Cleaners’ Generation.”

Sosunov and his compatriots did something really brave and unusual. One Saturday morning they began collecting signatures against the pipeline into Irkut at one of Irkutsk’s most populous areas, its railroad station. This was an unheard-of type of civic action in the Soviet Union. Hundreds of people went by on their way to trains that would take them to their summer homes, and hundreds stopped to sign the petitions. Irkutsk police knew they were against this, but had no idea whether they could stop it or not. Was this allowed as part of *perestroika* and *glasnost*’ or did it cross the line? One of the men who came there with his young daughter told me that he said, in half-jest, that they will be arrested and go to jail. “She said, ‘I can’t go to jail, I have to go to school!’”

The local Party Secretary showed up in his Volga, a car many Communist officials used, and asked Sosunov to “accompany” him to his office for “a chat.” Sosunov refused. The Secretary could not do anything else to put a stop to the signature gathering. The police, struck by indecision, did not arrest anyone. The activists continued to gather signatures. Every Saturday they came to the main shopping mall in the center of the city. Soon they had more than 100-thousand names. To get an understanding of the significance of this number, keep

in mind that back then people signed not just their name, but all of the official information from their passports, including the passport number, their date of birth, and their address. Afraid that the lists would get lost or taken by police, the movement’s activists kept these pieces of paper in different places, some at their work, some at home.

Starting in June 1987, Anatoly Sosunov remained under overt police surveillance for his participation in organizing mass civic protests against pollution of Baikal and Irkut. On November 22 of 1987 he spearheaded another historical event. More than 5,000 inhabitants of Irkutsk came out for a public protest against the planned pipeline into Irkut, despite freezing weather. Writers, teachers, workers, doctors, scientists brought their small children. All of a sudden the protest turned into a march. Sosunov became the one to lead the march along the streets of Irkutsk. Speaking on the banks of the Angara river, he summed up everyone’s euphoria: “For the first time in 70 years a free demonstration took place in Irkutsk,” and, quoting Chekhov, congratulated everyone for “squeezing the serf out of ourselves.”

This demonstration became a “first” not only for Irkutsk, but for the entire country. Until then the only kinds of protests and rallies held in the Soviet Union have been the ones organized by the Party. Even though construction crews had already begun clearing swaths of forest to the west of the mill, the Soviet government backed down and canceled its plans for the Irkut pipeline.

Sosunov briefly served as a people’s deputy in the local Soviet, after having been elected as a representative of one of the city districts. Unfortunately, the people’s victories did not last long, and the new times have not lived up to the enthusiastic expectations of late 1980s. As the Soviet system fell apart, Sosunov returned to less glamorous work, as a security guard in a kindergarten. He remains



What will their Baikal look like in 20 years? Photo courtesy of Elisabeth Kruger.



During one recent event that the Baikal movement organized on the banks of the Angara river on a sunny but still cold spring Saturday, passerby's stopped to sign petitions and letters to President Medvedev and to UNESCO, asking them to prevent re-opening of the Baikalsk Pulp and Paper Mill. Photos courtesy of Elisabeth Kruger.

active in the environmental movement even today, despite terrible health problems. Apparently, he caught a rare virus working with birds during his biology days, and sees almost no one. But he still works, creating vivid, colorful posters agitating against the Baikalsk mill that his friends help distribute. Vladimir Naumov, a local businessman who began his career as the first non-Communist deputy, freely elected by the people of Irkutsk, and who fought alongside Sosunov against the Irkut pipeline (less brazenly, as he admits himself), said to me: "He stayed in those times, in that fight. We said that we were fighting against the Soviet government, but he said that we were simply fighting for the real Soviet government."

In 1988 the East Siberian film studio made a movie about these events called "Around the Pipe. A Lesson in Democracy." In an interview with a local Irkutsk newspaper, the former chief editor of the studio, Tatyana Zyryanova, remembered that when they found out that the people of Irkutsk had been planning a 'free' demonstration against the pipeline into Irkut, a demonstration not organized by the Communist Party, but one where people came of their own free will, they wanted to film it. Earlier environmental activists came to the studio and told them

that construction workers would be clearing forest near Baikalsk in the next few days. The film crew went out to document the cutting of the forest and laying of the pipelines. As they prepared to film the demonstration, the studio's director called them into his office, to say that he received a prohibition "from above." But the crew convinced him to allow filming it as reserve stock, "for the archive." The director agreed, on condition that the car with the film studio's sign stood far away from the demonstration itself, and the camera operator did not have any identifying signs on his equipment.

Tatyana recalled that the demonstration took place on an exceptionally cold day, but despite this hundreds of people, more than 1,500, showed up. "Everything was real. There was such an uplifting spirit in the air! Such sincere civic feelings! People woke up, reached for truth and freedom. The column [of demonstrators] went through the entire city. Our film was later shown on the main TV channel." Listing several movies devoted to social problems from the 1980s, she mentioned that they fought to show every one of them on screen.

Despite warnings and prohibitions, they made these



An old Baikal movement poster, depicting a polluted south end of Baikal and stating, "It's us who will live here." Photo courtesy of Elisabeth Kruger.

films. Things have changed since then, and not for the best. The last demonstrations against the pulp mill that took place in February and March of this year received practically no coverage from official media. Many news sources downplayed the number of attendees, and some outright lied. One of the channels presented pictures from the anti-mill protests as photos of the pro-mill demonstration, organized by the local administration for the same day.

When a TV crew from one of the local channels came to the office of Baikal Wave several weeks ago, to do a story on the mill, they received a call from their supervisor. As you may guess, he told them that if they went ahead with the story, it would be their last broadcast. They did not film the show.

The Baikal movement does not give up, however. In the words of Gala, "the movement existed, exists, and will continue to exist." She, as many others who work alongside

her, believes that they don't need to exert any special efforts to keep the movement alive. "It's impossible to destroy it by getting rid of its most active participants. Others will immediately take their place," she wrote in her response to my question about the future of the movement. It's a natural expression of people's love for Baikal and their land. Vladimir Naumov likes to say, "Do what you must, and come what may."

They will keep fighting and disagreeing with each other. That is one of the natural processes in a movement open to all, a movement they see as a reflection of society. In response to criticism that some members of the movement are not the kind that others want to see, one Baikal movement activist likes to joke, "We don't have another people for you."

Some described attempts to govern or take charge of the movement as an attempt to hold water in a fist. Gala considered this lack of structure the secret behind the movement's success. "The secret is not in a clever organization or management, but in the opposite. In fact that there is no concrete structure because the movement is like a flow. And while it is alive, it is impossible to present it in a structured fashion or study it as a

static object."

These Siberians think that their opponents should stop wasting their time and money on spies and provocateurs, stop bothering activists' families or pressuring those they consider to be the movement's leaders. "Instead they should direct their efforts to changing social, environmental, and economic conditions in our region and the country. You can direct a flow only by changing exterior conditions. Different obstacles, like pressure on individual participants, are only temporary barriers, behind which more pressure builds up. No one, including those who create these obstacles, can predict where, when, how and with what force this pressure will break through," wrote Gala. "Steering a people's movement that is the Baikal movement, like directing a powerful flow, means that you have to take it into account. To put it simply, you have to be careful not to get washed away by it. But do our bosses have enough wisdom for that?" □

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CONTACT:

Phone: (202) 364-4068
 Fax: (202) 364-0498
 E-mail: icwa@icwa.org
 Website: www.icwa.org

STAFF:

Executive Director:
 Steven Butler

Program Assistant/
 Publications Manager:
 Ellen Kozak

Administrative Assistant/
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