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Climate Policy Constraints: Yet Another Negative Reverberation of Russia's War in Ukraine?

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Abstract

Prior to Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the Russian government was taking modest but meaningful steps to develop its domestic climate policy, prompted in part by incentives and pressures from the international market. Since then, however, Russia's war in Ukraine has heightened obstacles to addressing climate change: it has reinforced the importance of fossil fuel exports, further stifled climate activism at home, and increased impediments to international cooperation. The war's longer-term impact on decarbonization remains uncertain.

The effects of climate change are being felt across Russia's diverse ecological regions. The year 2020 was the hottest on record in Russia, while Rosgidromet, the country's meteorological service, reported in 2018 that temperatures in Russia are rising 2.5 times faster than the global average (Rosgidromet 2018). In 2020, sea ice along the Northern Sea Route reached a record low; thawing permafrost in Russia's northern regions has caused methane to be released, as well as disease outbreaks (such as anthrax) and sinkholes.

Shortly before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the Russian government was at last planning some meaningful policy measures to reduce the country's greenhouse gas emissions, prompted in part by pressure from impending policy changes by the European Union. However, the self-induced crisis of the war and Russia's resulting political and economic isolation have disrupted these climate policy plans. While the role of oil and gas exports in the Russian economy is a significant factor shaping the country's climate policy, we argue that a far more multifaceted and complex set of interests shape the Russian government's approach to climate policy. Interests are shaped by short-term thinking about what is economically advantageous and by Russia's desire to regain its position as a great power internationally. These interests are promoted by and channeled through a narrow selectorate in the authoritarian system that establishes policy priorities for the country. Prior to Russia's war in Ukraine, several factors emerged that appeared to have the potential to facilitate a somewhat more ambitious climate policy. However, the war has exacerbated already unfavorable conditions, making it even less likely that the Russian government will make a serious effort to address climate change.

Climate Policy Prior to Russia's Invasion of Ukraine

In many ways, Russia's weak engagement with domestic climate policy is overdetermined, due to its economic

dependence on fossil fuel exports and significant overlap between political and economic elites in a regime in which a narrow range of actors make key decisions. Prior to 2022, however, Russia had gradually institutionalized some climate policy measures, notably when either the country's material interests or international reputational factors offered incentives for action. Official policy was modestly complemented by the efforts of some economic actors investing in efficiency, risk management, or reputational protection.

In 2021, the Russian government adopted a long-term strategy for diversifying economic development and reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 2050 (Government of Russia 2021). This low-carbon development strategy was more ambitious than observers had expected based on previous drafts. The preferred "intensive scenario" envisioned a reduction in net GHG emissions of 60% from the current level by 2050—a significant improvement over the business-as-usual scenario, which anticipated that emissions would continue to increase beyond 2050. The intensive strategy anticipated that Russia would achieve carbon neutrality by 2060 (Davydova 2021). The strategy also listed a variety of policy measures, ranging from promoting low-carbon technologies to developing green finance to constructing a system of public non-financial reporting. In July 2021, the Russian government also passed a law mandating greenhouse gas emissions reporting for some companies, a decision that was hailed by one government official as "the first step towards carbon regulation in Russia" (Reuters 2021a). Efforts to promote Russia's climate policy from below also advanced incrementally through the work of activists, NGOs, and some regional governments. Over the past ten years, a small grassroots climate movement has emerged in Russia, especially among youth. In addition, even major corporations in Russia's natural resource sector have faced pressure from

international partners, lenders, and shareholders to, at a minimum, disclose—and sometimes reduce or offset—their carbon emissions.

Prior to the war, international economic incentives were a major factor driving attention to climate policy. Importantly, the EU's forthcoming Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM)—initially set to launch in 2023, but now delayed until 2026—was projected to have a greater impact on Russia than on any other exporter to the EU (Reuters 2021b). The policy will impose a carbon price on EU imports from energy-intensive industries. Just prior to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, it was estimated that \$10 billion of Russian exports to the EU, including iron, steel, aluminum, and fertilizers, would be affected by CBAM (Petkova 2022).

Russia's War in Ukraine: Short-Term Disruption and Long-Term Shock

Russia's war in Ukraine has already had significant effects on climate policy and these continue to unfold. The war has pushed climate policy off the agenda while significantly increasing both the regime's authoritarianism and impediments to international cooperation. Many preexisting obstacles to developing climate policy have grown more entrenched since February 2022: the regime now relies even more heavily on natural resources for revenue; the selectorate for policy priorities is further narrowed and the space for constructive actors on climate has shrunk; and Russia's image of itself as a beleaguered and disrespected great power has come to dominate the political discourse.

Economic Sanctions and Changing Energy Markets

Fearing the economic effects of sanctions, the Russian government in March 2022 approved the Plan for the Development of the Economy under External Sanctions, which suspended or postponed a number of environmental standards and reporting requirements (Government Commission on Enhancing the Sustainability of the Russian Economy 2022). The government decided to delay the implementation of some environmental and climate regulations that could have been onerous to business under the conditions of economic sanctions (RSPP 2022). Regional experimentation with climate projects seems to have stalled, possibly due to the lack of pressure from multinational partners and investors. In addition, sanctions may make the EU's CBAM less capable of forcing changes to Russian industry through tariffs.

Due to the complicated dynamics of sanctions on the Russian economy, the significance of fossil fuels for the Russian economy has thus far only grown. A May 2023 document from the Russian Ministry of Finance indicates a more-than-20-percent increase in the ruble value of oil and gas exports in the federal budget (Minis-

try of Finance 2023). In 2022, oil and gas exports played an even more significant role in the Russian economy, in percentage terms, than they had before the war. At the same time, new energy projects involving Western partners are now less likely to move forward (International Energy Agency 2023), as the major multinational oil and gas companies, including BP, Shell, and Exxon, pulled their investments from Russia in the early weeks of the war (De Groot 2022; Wilson and Hume 2022).

At this point, the most significant—and uncertain—way in which Russia's war impacts efforts to address global climate change is its disruption of global energy markets, particularly European ones. European consumption of Russian oil and gas has already dwindled, giving additional impetus to the transition to renewable energy, including nuclear energy, in some places and prompting a search for other sources of fossil fuels or a return to domestic coal in others. In the long run, the rupture between Russia and European states on energy is likely to accelerate the green transition (European Commission 2022). Frans Timmermans, the EU commissioner responsible for the European Green Deal, stated that the war is “helping us understand that we need to move quicker in terms of renewable energy” (Petrequin 2023).

For the first year of the war, Russia successfully made up for the shortfall in its fossil fuel export volumes to the European market—occasioned by the EU price cap on Russian oil and gas (imposed in December 2022) and the ban on Russian refined oil imports (which went into effect on February 5, 2023)—by diverting oil exports to non-Western countries. Initially, these exports went primarily to India, China, and Turkey, but in 2023 those markets have increasingly been replaced by Egypt and other Global South markets, as well as “unknown destinations” (Centre for Research on Energy and Clean Air 2023; Adolfsen et al. 2023). These alternative export destinations notwithstanding, Russian oil and gas revenues may be starting to decline, as the price cap has pushed prices down and there is a growing “glut” of Russian oil products on the market that are struggling to find purchasers (Centre for Research on Energy and Clean Air 2023; Horton and Palumbo 2023).

International Climate Diplomacy

The international context for climate policy has been destabilized by the war in Ukraine. Global leaders have expressed determination to prevent the war from undermining international efforts to address climate change. In June 2022, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres captured this dynamic, stating: “The sense of urgency in the debate on climate has, of course, suffered with the war in Ukraine. ... But I think this war has demonstrated one thing: How fragile is the world in its dependence on

fossil fuels” (Ritter 2022). The Umbrella Group, a coalition of non-EU developed countries operating under the Paris agreement, expelled Russia (Farand and Lo 2022). The Arctic Council, a key venue for cooperation on climate research, suspended operations as member states refused to participate under Russia’s chairmanship, which ended in May 2023 (US Department of State 2022). In March 2022, the Ukrainian government demanded that Russia be excluded from a number of international environmental agreements, including the UNFCCC (Government of Ukraine 2022). International scientific cooperation has likewise been disrupted, and Russian scientists have begun to lose access to the equipment and data necessary for continued climate monitoring (Doose, Vorbrugg, and Davydova 2022).

While Russia has never been a leader in global climate negotiations, the country has been further marginalized by Western powers at UNFCCC meetings, although it continues to work closely with such states as China, India, and South Africa (RBC 2022; Finmarket 2022). Since 2015, in the wake of Russia’s annexation of Crimea, the Russian delegation has used climate talks to pursue the lifting of sanctions. It has done so, in part, by arguing that “artificial restrictions” such as sanctions are impeding the technology transfer necessary to achieve the country’s climate goals, rhetoric that has only intensified since Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine (Russian Federation Delegation 2022). At the same time, government discourse pointing to Russia’s need for “environmental sovereignty” is becoming more widespread (Gryzlov 2022).

Russian Climate Activism

Despite facing increasing state repression, many environmental NGOs and climate activists issued anti-war statements following the invasion. Greenpeace Russia issued a call for peace (Greenpeace Russia 2022), while Vladimir Sliviyak of Ecodefense supported sanctions against the country (Democracy Now 2022). At the same time, the anti-activist repression that had started

in 2011 increased dramatically. Many climate activists, particularly younger activists, left the country. Arshak Makhichyan, Russia’s most prominent youth climate activist, was stripped of his citizenship in October 2022 (Novaya Gazeta Europe 2023). The WWF was labeled a foreign agent in March 2023, and the Ministry of Justice deemed Greenpeace an “undesirable organization” in May 2023 (The Moscow Times 2023; Meduza 2023; Zerkalo 2022). Despite this unfavorable climate, digital activism remains possible. The Russian Socio-Ecological Union maintains an active stream of press releases on climate science and policy (RSEU 2023a), as well as monitoring pressure on Russian environmental activists (RSEU 2023b).

Internationally, Russia remains a target of international climate activism. Criticism of the country’s weak climate policy and its war intermingled at COP 27 in Sharm-el-Sheik. The Climate Action Network denounced the Russian delegation for lobbying for nuclear power while putting Ukrainian nuclear power plants at risk, for using fossil fuel revenues to finance the war in Ukraine, and for causing almost 34 million tons of GHG emissions as a result of the war (Climate Action Network 2022). In addition, Russian activists in exile continue to place pressure on the regime. In September 2022, a group of plaintiffs—including Ekozashita, the Moscow Helsinki Group, and 18 individuals—initiated a lawsuit at Russia’s Supreme Court over what they see as Russia’s failures to meet its pledge to the 2015 Paris climate agreement (Lebedev 2022).

When we take all of these developments into account, it is clear that in addition to the human devastation directly caused by Russia’s war of aggression in Ukraine, another casualty of the war (at least in the short term) is any hope of Russia developing constructive climate change mitigation policies. Paradoxically, though, as many have observed, the war is likely to result in many Western industrial states—particularly in Europe, but also, to some extent, in North America—hastening their transitions to low-carbon economies.

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