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Poberezhskaya, Marianna

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Russian Climate Change Policy: Increasing Ambitions

By Marianna Poberezhskaya (Nottingham Trent University)

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Abstract

For decades, Russia has been criticized for its modest climate change reduction commitments and ambiguous national and international climate policy. Over the last few years, the situation has started to change, with Russia establishing a legal framework for its climate policy and initiating a number of ‘pilot’ climate projects throughout the country. While the motivation behind those initiatives is debatable, more important is whether they will translate into intentional Greenhouse Gas (GHG) emissions reductions.

Introduction

Russian climatologists are adamant about Russia’s geographical vulnerability to climate change and the fact that the temperature rise is greater here than the global average (http://www.meteorf.ru/upload/pdf_download/doklad_klimat2020.pdf). In June 2021, during the ‘direct line’ (a Q&A session with the president), Vladimir Putin echoed these concerns by adding that, while there are some positives in climatic change for Russia, there are also ‘significant’ negative consequences, including the desertification of agricultural lands and the melting of permafrost, which would lead to ‘very serious social, economic consequences’ (<http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/65973>). Later that month, Putin stated in a speech at the international economic forum that due to Russia’s place and role in the world, regardless of which climate projects are implemented, the initiatives adopted in the country over the next decades will be of utmost importance to the world’s efforts to mitigate climate change. He then highlighted the importance of Russia’s natural gas reserves (‘the cleanest hydrocarbon’, which cannot be ignored during the transition), its established nuclear energy sector and the evolving renewable energy sources (RES) industry (<https://regnum.ru/news/economy/3288882.html>). Finally, in October 2021 Putin’s statement that Russia will become carbon neutral by 2060 made national and international headlines (<https://www.reuters.com/business/environment/russia-striving-be-carbon-neutral-no-later-than-2060-says-putin-2021-10-13/>). Due to its importance in the global fossil fuel market and its questionable historical record of climate change decisions (or, indeed, the lack of them), Russia has been persistently scrutinized and criticized (e.g., Henry & McIntosh Sundstrom 2012), and as recently as 2020, Russia’s climate targets were proclaimed ‘critically insufficient’ (<https://climateactiontracker.org/countries/russian-federation/>). However, over the last year, a number of changes have been observed at the national level, which,

although perhaps not critical enough, nevertheless represent an important development.

National Policy Progress

Despite Russia’s regular participation in global climate politics, its national climate policy has been consistently criticized for being mere ‘window dressing’ (e.g., Kokorin & Korppoo 2013) and for lacking political will. Indeed, Russia’s first climate-related document was accepted only in 2009 (the Climate Doctrine), which (while it was an important discursive step) did not have any restrictive powers. The next notable move was taken in 2013, when the president signed decree N752 ‘on the reduction of GHG emissions; however, it did not lead to any practical economic changes. For example, Russia’s GHG emissions dropped by 32.9% in the 1990–2019 period (without LULUCF) (https://unfccc.int/sites/default/files/resource/sbi2021_11_adv_0.pdf); this impressive reduction is traditionally attributed not only to the collapse of the USSR but also to intentional and unintentional economic restructuring and an introduction of energy efficiency technologies (Makarov et al. 2021). Hence, the 2013 decree did not require any actual reductions for the emissions to stay within 75% of 1990 levels.

Several years later, Russia’s national climate policy saw a substantial increase in the official documentation. In 2019, resolution N1228 ‘on the adoption of the Paris agreement’ was published. That same year, Russia’s climate vulnerability was acknowledged at the state level in Governmental Executive Order N3183-r ‘on adopting a national plan of events of the first stage of climate change adaptation to 2022’. In addition to the above-mentioned increased risk of natural disasters and the melting of permafrost, the plan highlights the threat to public health, the agricultural sector, the increased possibility of forest fires, the loss of biodiversity and the surge in expenditures on air conditioners during warm seasons. Noting significant variability in climate change impacts across the country, the plan suggests the involve-

ment of a wide range of official institutions starting with the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment, Rosgidromet, and finishing with the Security Council and the Ministry of Transport. The plan also mentions ‘possible positive consequences’, including a decrease in energy use during the hot season, improved access via the Northern Sea Route, expansion of agricultural lands, an increase in efficiency of animal husbandry (if ‘a number of additional conditions are met, and certain measures are taken’), and the increased productivity of boreal forests. While not completely unexpected (the notion of the potential positive consequences of climate change for Russia has been a long-debated concept), this passage does make the adaptation plan somewhat weaker and detracts attention from its political significance. In 2021, the plan was followed by the Ministry of Economic Development of the Russian Federation’s Order N267, containing ‘methodological recommendations and indicators on adaptation to climate change’.

In November 2020, a new Presidential Decree N666 ‘on reduction of greenhouse emissions’ was published, which suggested a 30% cut of emissions over the 1990 level and ordered the creation of a ‘strategy for the socio-economic development of the Russian Federation with a low level of greenhouse gas emissions until 2050’. Another notable Decree (N76) was signed in February 2021 on ‘measures to implement the state scientific and technical policy in the field of environmental development of the Russian Federation and climate change’, including the federal program aimed at creating advanced scientific solutions to assure the country’s sustainable socioeconomic development with low levels of GHG emissions. The decree also expressed support for climate change-related research and academic studies. However, it was in the summer of 2021 that the most significant piece of climate legislation in the country was adopted—Federal Law N296 on ‘restricting GHG emissions’. The law introduces the mandatory disclosure of information on GHG emissions by companies that emit the equivalent of 150,000 tons of CO₂ a year, with reporting required starting from January 1, 2023; those that emit 50,000 or more tons need to disclose starting January 1, 2025. The law also introduces the legal framework for carbon trading and climate projects.

While climate change is still taking a backstage (if it appears at all) in Russia’s international relations and the legal measures presented are not without their limitations, it is still important to look at the evolution of the national discourse and whether it will eventually start translating into real GHG emissions reductions.

Economic Changes

As in many countries throughout the world, economic prosperity in modern Russia still takes priority over envi-

ronmental concerns. Thus, Russia’s climate policy has been criticized not only for its lack of international and national commitments but also for the overall incompatibility of its economic system with a sound climate change mitigation policy. Russia is still struggling with the carbon intensity of its economy, and its GDP relies heavily on the export of fossil fuels. Hence, it would require a strong political will to turn toward a more sustainable economic model with low levels of GHG emissions. There are, however, some initiatives emerging from the energy sector, especially from the larger corporations that trade internationally and understand the importance of engaging with the climate discourse.

It is also speculated that a major external ‘push’ is heading Russia’s way in the form of the EU Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM), which aims to ‘put a carbon price on imports of a targeted selection of products [...] This will ensure that European emission reductions contribute to a global emissions decline, instead of pushing carbon-intensive production outside’. The initial phase of the CBAM includes five sectors: cement, electricity production, aluminum, iron and steel, and fertilizer. From 2023 until 2025, importers will be asked only to declare their emissions, and from 2026 onwards, they will need to pay ‘financial adjustments’ where required. It is stated that the mechanism will expand in the future by adding more sectors to the list and/or considering the whole production process (e.g., the carbon intensity of electricity used during the manufacturing stage) of the imported products, which might further affect Russia’s exports and imports. If Russian companies do not take the mechanism seriously, they may end up with substantial economic losses. Furthermore, it is likely that individual corporate efforts might not be enough; as Mel’nikov and Daneeva (2021) point out, to maintain strong connections with the European market, Russia needs a solid national decarbonization strategy.

Overall, it is apparent that in the long run, Russia would benefit both economically and politically from assuming a more comprehensive ‘green’ approach to its economic development. As Makarov et al. (2021) note in their report on Russia’s ‘green turn’: if Russia ignores the advancement of green technology, it will repeat the history of the USSR’s falling behind in its technological innovations back in the 1970s–80s. Furthermore, the authors argue that environmental protection in general, and a wide-ranging climate policy in particular, should be important components of Russia’s national approach and even its global mission, bringing not only important economic but also political benefits to the country. In contrast, dismissing the problem of climate change would put Russia on the periphery of global governance.

Regional Developments

In 2020, Sakhalin Oblast (a region in the Russian Far East) set an ambitious goal to reach carbon neutrality by 2025. The decision was based on data from the inventory of GHG emissions conducted in 2015–2018. The methods to achieve this neutrality include an already existing program on improving energy efficiency, the gasification of the housing and communal sector (moving away from coal-fired boilers), the electrification of transport, the development of ‘green’ energy sources (which, according to Sakhalin’s official website, includes not only RES but also hydrogen), and the encouragement of the use of green technologies and the production of goods with a low carbon footprint. Carbon neutrality plans also rely on the absorbing capacity of the region’s forests, which cover 68% of the region. More importantly, the region will become a testing ground for carbon trade, and if successful, the ‘experiment’ can be extrapolated to other regions and eventually to the whole country. Hence, regional companies will host or invest in various climate projects to lower their GHG emissions or to receive credits. Sakhalin’s ‘climate experiment’ overall, and its carbon trading attempts in particular, will help Russia test the water with the EU and its CBAM. For example, Russian companies can see if their GHG emissions reduction efforts will be considered by the EU.

In 2021, similar ideas were discussed in the Altai region, which is located in southwestern Siberia. Climatologists, local officials and environmentalists suggest that Altai can also be an important ‘pilot’ climate project with a high potential to test various ideas about how to lower and/or absorb GHG emissions. Unlike Sakhalin, the Altai region is not host to any gas or oil industries, but it is an agricultural region. Agriculture is another sector in Russia that requires drastic improvements in more sustainable/low-emissions approaches. Last, the Altai region is home to the first climate afforestation project in Russia, which was carried out under the Kyoto Protocol requirements and has been officially acknowledged by the UNFCCC.

Another region that is worth closer examination in the near future is the Murmansk Oblast located in Northwest Russia, almost completely above the Arctic Circle. In June 2021, RUSNANO (Russian innovation development institute) signed an agreement with the region’s government to initiate another ‘pilot’ climate project—a ‘Carbon Free Zone’. In addition to the usual set of promises to invest in RES and green technologies, this project has a particular emphasis on ‘green’ hydrogen fuel (generated with wind farms), which will not only be used domestically but will also be an export commodity to trade with the EU.

Finally, in 2021, the Ministry of Science and Higher Education proposed creating a ‘network of carbon mon-

itoring sites’, or ‘carbon polygons’. The official definition of the polygons suggests that they are ‘territories with a unique ecosystem, created to implement measures to control GHG emissions with the participation of universities and scientific organizations’ (<https://minobrnauki.gov.ru/action/poligony/>). At the time of writing, it has been proposed that polygons should be located in the Chechen Republic, Kaliningrad Oblast, Krasnodar Krai, Sakhalin Oblast, Novosibirsk Oblast, Sverdlovsk Oblast and Tyumen Oblast. In August 2021, the latter became home to the first opened carbon polygon.

Similarly, it is too early to state whether any of these initiatives will have a substantial impact on Russia’s carbon footprint. However, it is important that they now exist and cover a diverse range of federal subjects throughout Russia; therefore, intentionally or unintentionally, they are prone to involve an increasing number of actors and institutions in the national climate change agenda. Thus, at the very least, they will be advancing climate change awareness.

Conclusion

For years, Russia has shown relatively low levels of climate change awareness and concern (Poberezhskaya 2016). Even when people’s livelihoods have been directly endangered by the negative consequences of climate change, there has been skepticism about the anthropogenic link (Graybill 2013). An opinion poll published by the UNDP and the University of Oxford in 2021 showed some positive dynamics, with 65% of respondents in Russia stating their belief in the climate change crisis (this is slightly above the average among the 50 countries surveyed). However, only 49% of those surveyed agreed that ‘we should do everything necessary’ to combat the climate problem, which once again puts Russia at the bottom of the list (<https://www.undp.org/publications/peoples-climate-vote>). A year earlier, an opinion poll conducted by IPSOS (<https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/ct/news/documents/2020-04/earth-day-2020-ipsos.pdf>) showed that Russians are the least likely among the surveyed countries to make a link between climate change and the state’s responsibility. This is not just a problem of climate change knowledge but a product of a range of other social, economic and political issues. Of course, it does not help that some degree of climate skepticism keeps reappearing in the official discourse. For example, in May 2021, a document from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs offered support for climate mitigation steps but also advocated for assisting research studies that look into ‘alternative’ viewpoints on climate change origins. One can hope that, as we see more advancements in the climate policy legal framework in Russia and as climate projects drop the word ‘pilot’ from their titles and become more rou-

tine, we will start witnessing the purposeful reduction of GHG emissions and greater climate change aware-

ness and concern, which, hopefully, may become more prominent across Russia.

About the Author

Dr. Marianna Poberezhskaya is an Associate Professor at the Department of Social and Political Sciences, Nottingham Trent University.

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ANALYSIS

Challenges of Forest Fires in Russia

By Daiju Narita (University of Tokyo), Tuyara Gavriyeva (North-Eastern Federal University, Yakutsk), and Aleksandr Isaev (Institute for Biological Problems of the Cryolithozone, Siberian Branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences)

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Abstract

Forest fires in Russia have increased in scale in recent years. While climatic conditions do influence the incidence of fires, their increase also reflects socioeconomic changes and policy failures associated with the forest management system in Russia, such as the overemphasis on privatized forestry and the misallocation of forest protection budgets disfavoring the sparsely populated and forest-rich eastern regions.

Introduction

Large-scale events of wildfires in Siberia in recent years have promoted worldwide interest in the situations of wildfires in Russia. They have broad implications not only for Russia domestically but also for global air quality and climate. Some scientific studies have indicated that climate change could increase the occurrence of Siberian wildfires in the future through the effects of warmer and drier climate conditions, northward shifts in vegetation patterns, and permafrost thawing (reviewed by Leskinen et al., 2020). The threat of enhanced wild-

fires as a climate-related long-term risk also seems to be gradually recognized at the level of the national government. As the latest development, in August 2021, President Vladimir Putin stated that there was a connection between climate change and large-scale wildfires in Siberia in the summer of that year (Tass 2021).

Wildfires themselves may occur and spread outside of tree-covered forest areas, but the national patterns and trends of fires mirror the status of forests in Russia and their public management system. Natural drivers, including climatic conditions, do influence the inci-