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Hazy Forecast for Russia's Global Green Agenda

By Roland Oliphant

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Giant fish made of plastic bottles are on exhibit at a Rio de Janeiro beach as part of the environmental summit. **Ueslei Marcelino**

President Vladimir Putin has apparently pulled out of the global sustainable-development summit in Rio de Janeiro that starts Thursday, dealing a further blow to the credibility of the summit.

Instead, Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev will lead the delegation to the Rio Plus 20 Earth Summit, the Foreign Ministry announced Tuesday.

Details of Russia's plans for the event are sketchy, but it is possible that proposals will be made to include an environmental impact factor as part of a standard metric of global economic growth.

Up to 3,000 delegates from 190 countries are gathering for the conference on sustainable

development and green economy, the third such gathering since the first summit was held in Rio in 1992.

It paved the way for a number of measures, including a global treaty to protect biodiversity and the 1997 Kyoto Protocol, the first worldwide effort to tackle greenhouse-gas emissions. The protocol is due to expire this year.

In May, it was announced that Putin had told Brazilian President Dilma Rousseff that he would attend the summit to help hammer out agreements in several key environmental areas, including food and energy security, sustainable development and protection of the world's oceans.

Putin is the latest in a series of national leaders to abandon the event. U.S. President Barack Obama has yet to confirm his attendance, and British Prime Minister David Cameron and German Chancellor Angela Merkel have decided not to go.

On Tuesday, Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez announced he too would be staying home.

Like recent climate summits in Copenhagen in 2010 and Durban in 2011, the talks are likely to be badly split by differences between booming developing economies — including Russia, China and India — which will resist taking on new commitments, and developed countries in Europe and North America, which may argue that the BRICS' newfound economic clout comes with increased responsibility.

A draft text approved late Tuesday drew immediate flak from environmentalists and some diplomats as being so full of compromises that it is practically meaningless.

"Telling that nobody in that room adopting the text was happy. That's how weak it is. And they all knew. Disappointing," EU Commissioner Connie Hedegaard tweeted from the event. "Too much 'take note' and 'reaffirm' and too little 'decide' and 'commit.' Big task now for UN nations to follow up."

The mood was further dampened thanks to comments by Putin, who questioned the motives behind environmental legislation on Tuesday.

In an article for the Mexican newspaper El Universal, he attacked the hypocrisy of unidentified countries that decry protectionism while "devising ever more sophisticated ways to protect their own economies, disguising protectionist measures as environmental or technical restrictions."

The news came as environmentalists attacked Russia's emerging stance at the Rio Plus 20 summit, which now includes opposition to a document on protecting the world's oceans.

Greenpeace activists in Rio on Monday night said they had moved to a "war footing" after Russia joined forces with the United States, Canada and Venezuela to block a text on a governance structure for the high seas.

Kumi Naidoo, Greenpeace International's executive director, told the Guardian that the draft document was so weak that the group felt it had no choice but to launch a wave of protests.

Meanwhile, Russo-Norwegian environmental group Bellona has vowed to put contamination around the Mayak nuclear plant in the Chelyabinsk region, the epicenter of Russia's nuclear industry, on the agenda.

Several oil-producing countries insisted on the removal of a clause on ending subsidies that keep domestic fossil-fuel prices down, despite a huge social media campaign on the eve of the summit pushing for just such a measure.

The world spends between $600 billion and $1 trillion on fossil-fuel subsidies per year, according to various estimates.

The International Energy Agency says phasing out subsidies by 2020 could shave 5 percent off energy demand and 6 percent off global carbon emissions.

Russia spent $39.3 billion on fossil-fuel subsidies in 2010, according to IEA estimates. About 60 percent of its natural gas production is consumed at artificially cheap rates by domestic users.

The government is trying to wean the country off this dependence, and domestic tariffs are due to rise starting July 1. But totally eliminating subsidies for gasoline and natural gas would be viewed in the Kremlin as politically impossible because of the impact it would have on people's quality of life.

Russia's position on a range of summit topics has remained opaque, with few public statements on what the delegation would be seeking.

Natural Resources and Environment Minister Sergei Donskoi said in an interview with Rossiiskaya Gazeta last week that the Russians would submit a "new concept for sustainable development in the Russian Federation."

But Donskoi did not elaborate on what that concept might contain, and experts who have been consulted say even they do not know what position the Russian delegation will present. Donskoi is also not going to Rio and instead is expected at the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum.

Russia's delegation to the environmental summit will be formally headed by Medvedev, but the chief negotiator is Alexander Budrinsky, the presidential special representative for climate issues.

Neither his office nor the Natural Resources and Environment Ministry responded to repeated requests to explain the Russian negotiating position at Rio or its wider green priorities.

"We still don't know what Russia is putting on the table because the official position has not been discussed," said Yevgeny Schwartz of WWF Russia, whose organization was invited to submit materials and recommendations to the delegation.

Schwartz said he had consulted with other experts and found that they, too, were in the dark.

"There was no public discussion led by either the presidential administration or the Natural Resources and Environment Ministry or anyone else," he said.

“It’s pretty clear that Russian politicians think the G20 is important because Putin is here, but they don’t think much of Rio; the priority is in Mexico, not in Brazil,” Vladimir Slivyak, an activist from the Eco Defense environmental movement, said.

Sources close to the discussions told The Moscow Times that the Russian delegation may back a proposal to replace GDP as the basic indicator of economic growth with a mechanism that takes into account environmental damage.

There are various ways of going about this, including the much-discussed option of “environmental services,” that is, calculating the economic value that ecosystems contribute to economies, for example by preventing flooding or helping to pollinate crops.

A simpler option, which is more likely to be adopted, is thought to be the World Bank’s Adjusted Net Savings index, based on GDP minus consumption of fossil fuels and pollution released.

“That would be important for Russia, because if you use the Adjusted Net Savings rather than GDP, Russia has negative growth,” said Schwartz.

Another position Russia might push is an extension beyond Europe of the Espoo Conventions, which oblige European governments to notify and consult each other on projects that could have a cross-border environmental impact. Then-President Dmitry Medvedev signed on to the accord last year. The Espoo Convention could be of particular benefit to Russia if it were applied to countries like China.

“Cross-border impact, for example between China and Russia, is a great problem, so it would be in Russia’s interest to extend the convention beyond Europe,” Schwartz said.

The tagline for the Rio Conference is “Green Economy,” and elements of the Russian establishment have embraced the buzzword so much that a series of lectures at the St. Petersburg Economic Forum will be devoted to the issue. Donskoi will join a panel discussing Russia’s “Green Agenda.”

Slivyak, however, dismissed Donskoi’s talk of “sustainable development” as well-meaning but empty. “How can they talk about sustainable development when they can’t even implement a single law on energy efficiency properly?” he asked.

“No one is going to take proclamations about sustainable development seriously,” he said. “It is just another document issued by the Russian government that everyone will ignore.”

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