The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
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Even Putin Is Now Worried About Climate Change

Russia has dropped its doubts about joining the Paris accords.

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September 24, 2019



Kremlin.ru

After years of procrastination, Russia, the world's fourth-biggest greenhouse gas emitter, has officially joined the Paris climate agreement, which it signed in 2016. It shows that President Vladimir Putin's views of climate change are evolving and he wants his government to do more.

Putin was never a fully-fledged climate change denier. Rather, he once didn't take it seriously enough. Addressing a climate conference in 2003, Putin started by joking that Russia could perhaps use slightly warmer weather so people spend less on fur coats and grain harvests would increase. He went on to say, though, that certain areas of Russia are hit increasingly often with extreme weather phenomena and that "possibly global climate change" could result in major damage.

Whatever else the Russian president is, however, he's not someone who ignores hard data, and these haven't been in short supply. In its most recent annual climate report, the national weather service said the average temperature in Russia has been increasing by 0.47 degrees Celsius every 10 years between 1976 and 2018 — 150% faster than globally. Putin cited that surprising statistic several times this year, most recently in July. "Increasing production and the consumption of energy in traditional ways inevitably means new risks and further climate change," Putin said.

At the same time, Putin the pragmatist has been worried about Russia's inability to shake its fuel dependence. With the European Union, Russia's biggest fuel export market, intent on sharply lowering emissions, this dependence is a brake on economic growth. A paper published last year by the Russian economist Igor Makarov and two collaborators from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology estimated that if all countries perform according to their goals set under the Paris accord, Russia's growth will slow by 0.2 percentage points to 0.3 percentage points a year.

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Meanwhile, Russian officials have been dragging their feet on the ratification of the Paris accord. Putin's special representative for the environment, Sergei Ivanov, said earlier this year Russia should only do so once it has reliable data on how much carbon dioxide its forests absorb. The government planned to obtain the data by 2020. This was, most likely, just a pretext: Many in Russia, including in the influential fossil-fuel industry, have been arguing that U.S. President Donald Trump had the best interests of U.S. industry in mind when he pulled his country out of the accord.

Putin appears to have rejected these arguments. On Monday, the same day as the United Nations climate summit, Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev signed a government resolution that, according to the Russian government's website, obviates the need for parliamentary ratification. It means that as of today, Russia is bound by the agreement.

Given how little the Paris accord actually requires countries to do (they're allowed to determine their own contributions based on the goal of keeping global warming to 1.5 degrees by the end of this century), Russia doesn't really have to worry about implementation costs. When it signed the agreement, it promised to keep greenhouse gas emissions to 75% of the 1990 level. That target is easy to meet, after the collapse of Soviet industry in the 1990s. Indeed, on CO_2 emissions, Russia is doing better than Germany, not to mention the three bigger emitters — China, India and the U.S.

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That doesn't mean, however, that Russia is doing its bit for the climate today. According to the Climate Action Tracker, a research project backed by the German environment ministry, Russia is one of the world's laggards. Merely joining the Paris accord as a symbolic step won't change it; after all, only two major nations — the U.S. and Turkey — haven't done so yet.

Putin’s decision to stop dithering and join the accord, however, is likely more than a symbolic step: It's a signal of the Kremlin's growing seriousness about the threat. As such, it doesn’t augur well for industry lobbyists, who have objected to the introduction of emissions pricing. Before the end of this year, the Russian parliament expects to see a government draft of a new emissions law, and it’s likely to hold some unpleasant surprises for the energy industry, especially for coal-burning power plants. Russia certainly has room to improve when it comes to emissions reduction. According to the consulting firm Enerdata, it has the second most energy-intensive economy in the world — after neighboring Ukraine.

The Russian government is about to try a climate-related set of goals to reduce the country’s fossil fuel dependence and improve the economy’s energy efficiency. Whether these intentions will lead to a drop in Russian emissions, or simply end up creating another tax on industry, is impossible to predict. But at least the evolution of Putin’s views on climate appears to be going in the right direction.

This article first appeared in Bloomberg.

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