

Skepticism to Acceptance: How Putin's Views on Climate Change Evolved Over the Years

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Russia is the world's fourth-largest greenhouse gas emitter and is warming faster than the rest of the planet. **Nail Fattakhov / TASS**

Climate change is a serious global problem that has been caused in large part by human economic activity, President Vladimir Putin [said](#) in his Direct Line phone-in with Russians Wednesday.

The statement marks a major change in the Russian president's rhetoric on climate change.

During his two decades in power, Putin has gone from joking about the climate crisis to gradually accepting responsibility for responding to climate change as its effects have become more pronounced in Russia, the world's fourth-largest greenhouse gas emitter which is warming faster than the rest of the planet.

Here's a look at how Putin's opinions on climate change have evolved over the years:

“Maybe climate change is not so bad in such a cold country as ours? 2–3 degrees wouldn’t hurt – we’ll spend less on fur coats, and the grain harvest would go up,” Putin famously [said](#) in 2003 when asked whether Russia would sign the Kyoto Protocol.

At the time, data that predicted catastrophic climate consequences for Russia and other northern countries was already available.

In a 2015 address to the UN, Putin had changed his tone, [acknowledging](#) that climate change is “one of the gravest challenges humanity is facing” and promising by 2030 to cut Russia’s emissions by 70–75%, compared with 1990 levels.

Critics have [said](#) Putin embraced the 2015 Paris Climate Agreement because it used 1990 — the year before the Soviet Union disbanded and triggered one of the most devastating economic collapses in modern history — as the reference year for measuring reductions in carbon emissions.

Compared with 1990, Russia has already cut greenhouse gases by about 25%, a reduction no other major country can currently match.

In 2017, Putin [said](#) volcanic eruptions are responsible for more greenhouse gas emissions than human economic activity.

A year later, he said climate change was caused by “changes of global character, cosmic changes, some invisible moves in the galaxy.”

In the IPCC’s 2018 report, UN climatologists again [ruled out](#) theories that volcanic and cosmic changes are responsible for the climate crisis.

In later years, Putin shifted from outright denial of human-caused climate change to expressing skepticism toward proposed solutions like renewable energy.

“Blind faith in simple, attractive but inefficient solutions leads to problems,” Putin [said](#) at a 2019 industry conference, referring to the UN’s recommendations to start transitioning away from fossil fuels.

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"Wind-powered generation is good, but are birds being taken into account in this case? How many birds are dying? They [wind turbines] shake, causing worms to come out of the soil. This is not a joke," he continued. "Of course, you can't deny the opportunity to wear animal skins or move into caves, for those who want to."

By 2020, Putin had begun to acknowledge humanity’s role in environmental disasters.

“Humans are still not protected by natural catastrophes, most of which have been caused by anthropogenic interferences,” Putin [said](#) during a Valdai Club plenary in October. Human exploitation of natural resources created “critical tension which we can see in the case of climate change,” he said, a problem that “requires real actions and way more attention.”

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At a U.S.-led climate summit this year, Putin [said](#) it is crucial to make the global energy sector more efficient and to create carbon capture and hydrogen fuel production systems. Cutting methane emissions plays a major role because its atmosphere warming potential is 25 times higher than that of carbon dioxide, Putin said without mentioning the gas, oil and coal industries, which are [responsible](#) for nearly doubling CO2 levels in the atmosphere.

At Wednesday's Direct Line event, an anonymous question asked Putin "What's happening with the climate? Why has nature gone mad?" in reference to a recent cascade of extreme weather events across the country.

"Many people, not without reason, think that climate change is linked, most of all, to human activity, to emissions of pollutants into the atmosphere, primarily CO2," Putin answered.

"The tragedy isn't that the climate in different regions of the Earth changes periodically, but that some believe that when the climate changes in certain regions and on the entire planet, it will come to a certain dangerous point... and if humanity adds to that, then irreversible processes may kick in which will make our planet look like Venus, where the surface temperature is around 500 degrees Celsius."

Putin noted that this theory could be wrong and underlined that humans can hardly affect the universe itself, against which they are nearly powerless. Yet "we must minimize the impact we have," he said.

He went on to discuss the direct threats of climate change to Russia such as melting permafrost, desertification and damage to agriculture. He also mentioned the government's latest plans aimed at preparing sectors of Russian economy for the "inevitable" consequences of climate change.

Despite acknowledging these consequences, Putin didn't discuss specific policies aimed at cutting fossil fuel production or strengthening renewable energy. He also said Russia is currently doing more to fight climate change than the EU.

Russia is meanwhile [increasing](#) its fossil fuel production and remains the only one of the world's top [seven](#) carbon-emitters to have not yet presented a more ambitious climate policy ahead of COP26, as the Paris Agreement requires.

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