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Russia's Change in Tone on Climate Is Unlikely to Spark Rapid Green Transition

The world's fourth-largest emitter of greenhouse gases is still in the bargaining stage of decarbonization, experts told The Moscow Times.

By Felix Light

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Russia's economy is dependent on fossil fuels. **Sergei Savostyanov / TASS**

When the Russian delegation touches down in Glasgow for the Cop26 climate summit this weekend, it will be representing a country with an increasingly split personality on environmental issues.

Though still the world's fourth-largest emitter of greenhouse gases, the Russia that will be on show in Scotland is one that has abandoned its previous refusal to engage on climate change, and recently pledged to achieve net zero emissions by 2060.

“The Russian establishment really does take a strong interest in climate now,” said Vasily Yablokov, head of Greenpeace Russia’s climate and energy program.

“Before, the approach was to ignore and deny. Now, we have a sort of pained acceptance of reality.”

But even with unprecedented Kremlin interest in reducing emissions and a Russian public dismayed by a tangibly warming climate and its attendant natural disasters, serious questions remain about how Russia can decarbonize an economy and society profoundly dependent on fossil fuels.

Related article: Russia Aiming for Carbon Neutrality by 2060, Putin Says

Russia’s recent turnaround on climate, including an October commitment to achieving carbon neutrality — emitting less greenhouse gas than it removes from the atmosphere — by 2060 and lowering its emissions below those of the European Union by 2050, has been seen by environmentalists as a significant, if limited, breakthrough.

“We have been making real progress,” said Greenpeace’s Yablokov. “In one year, we’ve managed to get from denialism to something like acceptance.”

Much of the change in attitude has been driven by shifts at the very top of Russian politics.

President Vladimir Putin, who as recently as December 2019 publicly cast doubt on anthropogenic climate change, has more recently begun to champion the topic, speaking at length about the need for a green transition in his address to the Valdai Club think tank in Sochi this week.

While Putin — who has left Russia only once since the start of the pandemic — is not attending the Glasgow summit, he is expected to address it by videolink, in a sign of the new seriousness with which he takes climate questions.

It has been widely reported in Russian media that Putin’s apparent personal journey on climate has been driven by lobbying by members of his inner circle.

In particular, figures including the head of state-owned Sberbank, German Gref, and the former chief of state nanotechnology firm Rusnano, Anatoly Chubais, are seen as champions of a rapid Russian energy transition, in part out of fear that Russia’s dependence on fossil fuel exports leaves it vulnerable to shifts in global energy markets.

The looming threat of the European Union’s carbon tariffs, set to come into effect in 2026, only bolsters the business case for climate action.

With carbon-intensive Russian commodities giants like Gazprom and NorNickel heavily dependent on European markets, the prospect of climate tariffs has deepened a sense of economic urgency in Moscow.

“Today, the rift within the government on climate is primarily about timelines,” said Alexei Kokorin, head of the World Wildlife Fund Russia’s climate and energy program.

“There are those who hope that the real crunch for the oil and gas industry won’t come until at least the 2030s. People like Gref and Chubais, who are more alive to the investment climate, can see that things are changing very rapidly, and that the energy transition is already upon us.”

According to a Russian government climate advisor who spoke to The Moscow Times on condition of anonymity, the last twelve months have seen a decisive shift in the Kremlin toward those urging rapid action on climate.

“There is a faction that wants to move much more slowly with the green transition,” said the adviser.

“But they’re losing. Things are only going to get faster now.”

Forest fires and warm winters

Parallel to internal Kremlin politics, Russia’s green awakening is being underpinned by an evolution in public opinion, say pollsters.

Though climate has never been a top-flight political issue in Russia, historically large forest fires in Siberia, catastrophic flooding on the Black Sea coast and melting permafrost in the Arctic have popularized the climate issue while also building a growing consensus for policy action.

For a Kremlin fastidious about staying on the right side of public opinion, the drumbeat of weather disasters has underlined the need to take climate change seriously.

“In the last year or so, climate has really started to surge as an issue of concern, even if people still don't believe in a future without fossil fuels,” said Alexei Levinson, head of Socio-Cultural Research at the Levada Center, an independent polling firm.

“People increasingly make connections between individual natural catastrophes and the broader issue of climate change, but are unsure about how to combat it."

While Russian environmental activism has traditionally focussed on industrial pollution, in recent years, a crescendo of summer heat waves and warm, often snowless winters have hammered home the reality of a changed climate.

“For Russians, cold winters are part of the national cultural brand,” said Levinson.

“The warm winters we’ve been having regularly come up in focus groups. A lot of people are very upset by them.”

Polling commissioned by Greenpeace and shared with the Moscow Times showed a mixed picture.

Even though a majority of Russians support reducing emissions, only 14% identified climate change as the main environmental issue facing the country, with far more concerned about water and air pollution.

Little meaningful action

However, experts stress that Russia's belated awakening to climate as a political issue cannot be equated with meaningful action.

Under Russia's 2060 net zero plan published at the start of October, emissions are set to continue rising until at least 2030, an allowance that has been criticized by environmentalists.

Few believe that Russia will deepen these commitments at COP26.

"Russia's position on climate is still quite a cautious one," said Irina Pominova, head of the climate and green energy department at the Center for Strategic Research, a think tank linked to the Russian government.

"A lot of progress has been made, but there are unlikely to be any new pledges made at Glasgow other than those already announced."

Russia's current plans also assume large increases in carbon absorption by its forests, which have in recent years been devastated by record-breaking, climate change-induced fires that could see Russia's woodland begin to emit more carbon than it absorbs.

The Moscow Times previously reported scientists' fears that Russia's forest carbon absorption statistics may be substantial overestimates, aimed at artificially minimizing the country's overall environmental impact for political purposes.

In reality, say experts, an emissions policy based on increasing forest absorption would require massive investment in protecting and expanding Russia's 800 million hectares of forest land, the most of any country.

At present, such investment is largely absent.

"As a nation, we're still in the bargaining stage of accepting climate change," said Greenpeace's Yablokov.

The chances of meaningful climate action from Russian business is still more remote, he added.

Although a string of Russian commodities giants have been keen to exhibit their green credentials, supporting projects like renewable electricity for Norilsk, itself already one of the world's most polluted cities, Yablokov said these projects amount to little more than PR-oriented "greenwashing," rather than a wholesale reimagining of carbon-heavy business models.

For many Russian environmentalists, this reluctance to grapple with the realities of decarbonizing the largest country in the world means the political progress of recent months will not necessarily bear fruit in terms of climate policy.

"A genuine net zero for Russia is possible, but it's fantastically difficult," said the WWF's Kokorin.

“At this point, it really remains a dream.”

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