

Environmental Agenda in Russia Since the Beginning of the War

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Abstract The full-scale war in Ukraine, started by Russia in late February 2022, has both direct and indirect environmental and climate impact. The direct impact usually implies destruction of ecosystems and wildlife, chemical pollution, pollution from the use of warfare and infrastructure destruction. Yet, indirect consequences might have a less obvious effect. From the re-shaping of the global energy, metal, food and fertilizers markets to changes in countries' environmental and climate policies and actions, the war in Ukraine provokes change in global and national environmental and climate governance, priorities and policies in Russia and environmental activism in the country.

Keywords Climate Policy. Climate Action. Environmental Policy. Environmental Activism. Climate Activism. War in Ukraine. Russia.

Summary 1 Global Environmental and Climate Effects of the War in Ukraine. – 2 Changes in Russia's Environmental and Climate Agenda. – 3 Environmental Activism in Russia Since the Beginning of the War in Ukraine.



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1 Global Environmental and Climate Effects of the War in Ukraine

In the months following the invasion, it seemed that climate issues globally were becoming less important for the international community and national governments, and less international finance was allocated on climate-related programs. The threat emerged of a slow-down in decarbonization (Brushan 2022).

The current situation, however, demonstrates that such fears were to a certain extent exaggerated. There is increasing talk of the interconnectivity between the war in Ukraine, climate change, issues of energy and food security, the destruction of ecosystems, and a reduction in biodiversity (World Economic Forum 2022).

Some consequences of the war on the climate agenda can already be identified (Davydova 2023).

Firstly, the global energy markets are transforming: many countries have changed their oil and gas suppliers, and are hurriedly building infrastructure for liquefied natural gas, relaunching coal stations, considering extending the lifespan of nuclear power stations (or building new ones), and investing in new fossil fuel projects.

The medium- and long-term trends, meanwhile, remain unchanged: the significance and share of renewable energy sources continue to grow (IEA 2022). Investment in this sector is increasing, as it is its role in the provision of energy security, and technologies are becoming cheaper and more effective.

Secondly, the war is restructuring global food and fertilizer markets. A whole range of countries are planning to expand grain production and the sourcing of raw materials for fertilizer production, which represents a threat to ecosystems and biodiversity (Simonov 2022).

Thirdly, reductions in the supplies of metals from Ukraine, along with partial sanctions and limits on supplies from Russia, are transforming global metallurgy (KU Leuven 2022). Some of the changes impact the extraction of metals required for global decarbonization and the energy transition, including steel, aluminum, lithium, nickel, copper, and rare earth metals.

Many more spheres linked to climate and biodiversity issues are also going through a process of transformation. Russian timber suppliers redirected a lot of export to other markets (primarily to China) due to sanctions, and this had both a consequence in the increased burden on forests in other regions of the world and a consequence in form of less sustainable forestry practices in Russia itself.

2 Changes in Russia's Environmental and Climate Agenda

The war started by Russia also affects Russia's domestic environmental and climate policies, actions, and attitudes.

For many years, elites in Russia have treated environmental and climate issues as somewhat marginal. For them, 'green agenda' was similar to the 'charity' agenda - both issues should have been addressed when the basic demands of socio-economic development, extraction and export of resources, and personal enrichment of the elite groups had been taken care of.

The trend towards the growing importance of 'green' and climate agenda in the world, included in the foreign policy agenda, has gradually become recognized in Russia as well. In 2009, during the United Nation Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen, Dmitry Medvedev, then President of Russia, approved the Climate Doctrine (Climate Doctrine of the Russian Federation 2009).

In September 2019, Russia joins the Paris Agreement. At the same time, the threat of carbon border regulation which would make Russian exports more expensive, was becoming increasingly real due to the new European Green Deal package (and the so-called Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism to be introduced), and it stimulated further debates and actions in Russia in the field of climate legislation and green policy in general. A lot of this remained just the lip service and did not go beyond political statements, declarations and promises.

At the United Nations climate talks, Russian delegates for years claimed too little recognition of the climate role of the Russian forests - and in general, a significant underestimation of Russian ecosystems' role in "saving the world's climate". With the carbon border regulation in sight, these statements intensified.

But the approach to the assessment of Russian natural capital and its use has remained (and remains) extremely instrumental. Often the essence of these statements comes down to the fact that the forests and other ecosystems of the Russian Federation already perform all their functions - so there can be no further demands for Russia towards an ambitious climate policy.

Especially since the beginning of the war in Ukraine, Russia has been trying to instrumentalize its 'green' potential as a bargaining chip in international negotiations calling up for building up further dialogue and international cooperation on neutral 'environmental' topics. An example of this are Russia's recent statements at the latest United Nations Climate Conference in Sharm el-Sheikh in November 2022 (Davydova 2022).

In its domestic climate policy, since the start of the war, Russia has remained formally a party to all international climate agreements (including the Paris Agreement), and continues to declare the

importance of the climate agenda in the country and globally. However, the official Russian Federation now sees the main interest and prospects for climate cooperation with the 'non-Western' countries, primarily the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa), but also the Gulf countries, and countries of Southeast Asia and Africa (Davydova 2022).

Russia is also trying to instrumentalize neocolonial rhetoric, claiming the importance of building a multipolar world, creating its own, sovereign 'green' and climate agenda, which would not be influenced by the Western countries (Davydova 2023). Another target is to enhance climate and environmental cooperation with countries in the global South, particularly focusing on technology transfer matters. In this regard, Russia is primarily interested in exporting its nuclear technologies and further technologies related to natural resources extraction.

Meanwhile, within the country, additional legislation regarding environment and climate is being developed and adopted. Political statements have emphasized the importance of Environmental Social Governance (ESG), and companies have made commitments to uphold ESG principles.

However, it is difficult to observe significant actions being taken in the field of emission reduction or the financing of climate adaptation programs (Kuzmina 2022). So far, announced climate goals, including those set out in the *Long-Term Low Emissions Development Strategy to 2050*, among them – achieving carbon neutrality by 2060 –, remain only on paper. Overall, Russia's climate goals have always been characterized by international experts as "critically insufficient" (Climate Action Tracker 2022).

Development of an action plan for the implementation of the Long-Term Low Emissions Development Strategy has been pushed back to 2023, and will probably be pushed further. A number of other legislative acts and standards in the field of environmental protection have been shifted in time, canceled or put on pause, business representatives continue to demand the further abolition of environmental requirements in difficult social and economic conditions, access to international 'green' technology and finance in Russia is significantly complicated. Now the country is trying to look at opportunities to access non-Western sources of 'green' financing, including in the Arab world and Southeast Asia.

Among the measures already implemented to soften the environmental legislation there are the postponement of the new requirements to create automatic emissions control systems for the most polluting enterprises, the postponement of the experiment on introducing emission permits for polluting industries, the exemption of enterprises from scheduled environmental inspections, and further easement of environmental standards for vehicles in the country.

In March 2022, the Russian government approved the Plan for Economic Development under Sanctions Pressure (2022), which aimed at adapting the country's economy to sanctions - including the area of environmental protection.

Nature protected areas so far have been hit the hardest - there are a lot of ongoing attempts to ease their protection status to allow infrastructure construction, also without environmental impact assessment.

Such attempts provoke active criticism by the environmental community and civil society - some legislation reforms in the area of natural protection have been stopped or withdrawn, but the attempts continue. The main reason for these changes is the need to build new infrastructure, mainly tourist infrastructure - with sanctions restrictions due to the war in Ukraine, domestic tourism continues to grow, and investors are increasingly interested in developing new construction, also close to nature protected areas.

3 Environmental Activism in Russia Since the Beginning of the War in Ukraine

Before the beginning of the war in Ukraine, environmental activism has been on the rise across various regions in Russia (Davydova 2021). Since then, political restrictions, repression and persecution of any kind of protests have further increased.

In 2022, 177 new cases of pressure on more than 186 environmental activists and 19 organizations in 25 regions of Russia have been recorded. As a result, criminal cases against 16 activists were initiated, 9 of them received sentences (7 received real terms in a colony, 1 a suspended sentence, 1 restriction of freedom). At least 161 administrative cases were initiated against the activists (Russian Socio-Ecological Union 2023).

Throughout 2022, the State put significant pressure on environmental organizations, recognizing them as foreign agents. During 2022, 5 Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO) were added to the register of foreign agents, 3 of them have decided to shut down. In March 2023, World Wildlife Fund (WWF)-Russia was recognized as a foreign agent (*The Moscow Times* 2023). In April, the international organization Bellona Foundation, which was previously active in Russia, was designated as an 'undesirable' organization in the country (Bellona Foundation 2023). As a result, any form of cooperation with it the organization can potentially lead to criminal prosecution.

In 2022, Russia revoked the citizenship of Arshak Makichyan, a prominent climate activist associated with Fridays for Future Russia. The decision to strip him of citizenship was reportedly based on

his anti-war stance and public criticism of climate and environmental policies within the country (*The Moscow Times* 2022).

Still, Russian activists continue to engage in environmental protests. According to the Russian Socio-Ecological Union (2023), the main topics for environmental protests in Russia at the moment are the topics of access to environmental information (including civil air quality monitoring systems that continue to appear in many regions of Russia), air and water pollution, parks and 'green' areas in cities and urban areas, as well as waste management, including plans to build incinerator plants across the country and plans to expand improperly working landfills.

At the same time, many environmental and climate activists have made the decision to leave Russia and are currently residing in Georgia, Armenia, Turkey, Germany, Montenegro, the Baltic countries, and other regions worldwide. Despite their physical relocation, they strive to maintain contact with the activists and experts remaining in Russia.

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