

Analysis

Russia's Lackluster Record on Climate Change

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Abstract

Russian President Dmitry Medvedev has made speeches on climate change that sound similar to those of his Western counterparts. However, despite Medvedev's call to action, Russia has not been a leader on climate issues; in fact, it has taken either a passive stance or used the issue as leverage in global talks and failed to implement a serious domestic mitigation or adaptation program at home.

Eloquent Speeches

In prepared remarks before a meeting with several ministers and senior aides on February 18, 2010, President Dmitry Medvedev delivered a highly unusual speech on climate change for a senior Russian official. Just two months earlier, the Copenhagen climate talks had produced a document far less ambitious than had been hoped, and many observers had consigned the subject of climate change to the backburner of international politics. It seemed Russia would have done the same, since its leadership's attitude toward global warming had ranged from denying its existence to seeing it purely as a means of augmenting Russia's role in international affairs.

Yet Medvedev, in contrast both to his previous statements on the topic and those of his predecessor and the current prime minister, Vladimir Putin, outlined an approach to Russian climate change policy that sounded strikingly similar to those of Western European countries:

"[The disappointing outcome at Copenhagen] is not a reason to sit back now and do nothing, because we are responsible for the state of our planet... We need to decide today how to make the most effective use of what has been achieved... and outline the best ways for aiding less developed countries to fight climate threats. The new climate agreement represents a real chance for mass introduction [of] energy-efficient and low-emission technology... We are going to improve our energy efficiency and reduce our emissions regardless of whether or not there is an international agreement. This is in our own interest from both an economic and environmental point of view."

Medvedev went on to urge the assembled officials to create incentives for the private sector to play a role in addressing climate change and called for adapting the

government's Climate Doctrine, a framework for policy that he signed in late 2009, to current developments, making it a "living document" and not a "sacred cow." A month later, he repeated these ideas in a speech to the Security Council, a body consisting of Russia's most influential decision-makers.

In short, Medvedev asserted that climate change is real, that global warming threatens Russia's future, that Russia has a responsibility to address it both domestically and in international forums, that doing so can be economically beneficial, and that old policy-making patterns—a regulation-first approach to the economy and paper-tiger framework documents that become irrelevant soon after they are released—need to change if any progress is to be made. The speech is striking both because it is essentially the first time a Russian leader has made this argument coherently and because it is totally divorced from the reality of Russia's current approach to climate change, which can be charitably characterized as lackluster. Indeed, Medvedev has become known for making grand, forward-looking speeches, most of which seem fanciful and generally produce little substantive change.

This article demonstrates that scientific and economic data in fact support Medvedev's assertions. However, it also shows that Russia has either failed to live up to his stated goals or only begun the process of realizing them. Despite Medvedev's call to action, Russia has not been a leader on climate issues; in fact, it has taken either a passive stance or used the issue as leverage on other questions in global talks and failed to implement a serious domestic mitigation or adaptation program.

Russia and Climate Change

Russia has been and continues to be responsible for a large share of cumulative anthropogenic carbon emissions into the atmosphere. Today, Russia is the third largest emitter of carbon dioxide (CO₂), behind only the United States and China. Perhaps more importantly, before the economic crisis hit, Russia's per capita emissions

¹ This article draws on material from a chapter co-written (with Georgi Safonov) by the author in Anders Åslund, Sergei Guriev and Andrew Kutchins (eds.), *Russia after the Global Economic Crisis* (Washington: Peterson Institute for International Economics and the Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2010, forthcoming).

were growing and were projected to approach the US level by 2030. Russia's third rank is all the more striking given that its emissions dropped by 40% in 1990–98 following the dramatic decline in energy consumption and industrial production precipitated by the economic contraction of the early post-Soviet period. By 2007, emissions had reached only 66% of 1990 levels.

Russia is not only a major contributor to global warming; it is also especially vulnerable to its effects. Temperatures in Russia are rising faster than the world average. In 2008 the Russian Federal Service for Hydrometeorology and Environmental Monitoring (Rosgidromet) issued an extensive report that demonstrated that winter temperatures increased by 2 to 3 degrees Celsius in Siberia over the past 120 to 150 years, while the average global temperature rose in that period by only 0.7 degrees. Rosgidromet's calculations demonstrate that Russia will experience global warming to a significantly greater extent than most other countries.

Despite the belief, widely held across its society, that, given its cold temperatures, Russia could benefit from global warming, climate change is, according to the World Bank, a "major threat to Russia" and will have significant negative effects—economic and social—there, not to mention the potentially devastating impacts on its ecosystem. Already Russia is experiencing more floods, windstorms, heat waves, forest fires, and melting of permafrost. In Yakutsk, collapsing ground caused by permafrost melt has damaged the structural integrity of several large apartment buildings, a power station, and a runway at the local airport. The total number of structures damaged as a result of uneven foundation subsidence increased by 61% there in the 1990s compared with the previous decade. Extreme events, snowmelt, and warmer temperatures have precipitated significant tree loss and degradation. And such phenomena are only going to become more common with rising temperatures. Areas of discontinuous permafrost (which covers over 60% of Russia's territory) are particularly at risk; melting will have social and economic effects because of the large amount of oil and gas infrastructure in these areas—93% of natural gas and 75% of oil production occurs in permafrost zones.

Indeed, climate change poses a direct threat to the energy sector, which plays a crucial role in the economy. Most of the extraction and other structures were built on pile foundations using permafrost soils as a base, and therefore their stability is dependent on that permafrost not melting. Already over 7,400 accidents related to melting of permafrost and soil degradation in West Siberia were reported in 2007, while up to \$1.8

billion is spent annually on accidents and upkeep of pipelines. Overall, according to Minister of Natural Resources Yuri Trutnev, climate change could cause up to 5% reduction in GDP, while the cost of dealing with extreme weather events will amount to around \$2 billion annually. Public health could also suffer, since permafrost melt poses a risk to the integrity of the water supply and sewer engineering systems. Permafrost weakening on Novaya Zemlya, where several radioactive waste storage sites are located, could have particularly dire consequences.

Global warming could entail some potential upsides for Russia. In the energy sector, offshore production and transport will likely benefit due to reductions in sea ice, which will lengthen the navigation season in the Arctic, although it is unclear whether these benefits will outweigh the costs to the sector from permafrost melt. Some claim that warmer temperatures will also benefit Russian agriculture. However, studies based on highly detailed models suggest that global warming will have a net zero effect on the sector. Moreover, Russian agriculture is highly inefficient and suffers from low productivity, making it unlikely to be able to take advantage of any potential gains.

Russia's Role in International Climate Policy

Despite both Russia's central role in causing, and thus potentially abating, global warming and its vulnerability to rising temperatures, Moscow has often assumed a passive role in the construction of the international climate regime and scrupulously avoided commitments that would force it to take steps to reduce emissions. Its major contribution—ratification of the Kyoto Protocol when its signature was needed for the treaty to take effect—was driven largely by political factors and has required no meaningful changes in its policies.

Russia has also "contributed" to international efforts to control emissions through the wrenching economic contraction, and resulting drop in emissions, it experienced in the 1990s. For example, were it not for Russia's drop in emissions in that period, the quantitative target of reducing the emissions of Annex I Parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), which Russia ratified in 1995, to 1990 levels by 2000 would have been impossible.

The Kyoto Protocol to the UNFCCC, which was initially adopted in December 1997 but entered into force only in February 2005 after Moscow ratified it, provides legally binding commitments for developed countries and some transition economies, including Russia,

to modulate emissions to an agreed-upon level by 2012 relative to the baseline of their 1990 emissions. Russia only agreed not to exceed 1990 levels, rather than reducing its emissions below that baseline. As a result of the post-Soviet emissions drop, without any additional efforts Russian emissions will not return to 1990 levels before at least 2020. In December 2009, Russia was 40% below the baseline.

Therefore, Moscow's participation in Kyoto required it to make no additional efforts to meet its obligations. Further, Russia stood to gain billions of dollars through the various flexibility mechanisms, such as trading of carbon credits, outlined in the Protocol. Nonetheless, Russia withheld its approval for seven years.

The Protocol could not have come into force unless at least 55 countries representing at least 55% of global carbon emissions ratified it. When the first round of commitments was announced, enough countries were willing to ratify the treaty but their emissions did not add up to the share of global carbon output required for enactment. Once the United States declared that it would not join, Russia's participation was necessary to meet that goal. In other words, because of its contribution to global warming as the third-largest emitter, Russia's eventual decision to participate in Kyoto proved crucial in bringing the treaty into force.

While Russia's decision to ratify the Protocol is often cited as a demonstration of its productive role in contributing to international efforts to control global warming, Moscow's motives were far less altruistic. Indeed, it is widely believed that Putin agreed to sign the Kyoto Protocol in return for the European Union's granting of certain concessions in its negotiations with Russia on its bilateral World Trade Organization (WTO) accession protocol—in effect giving its blessing to Russia's membership.

Since 2008 the international community has been negotiating a follow-on agreement to the Kyoto Protocol that should provide a longer-term framework for international efforts to combat climate change. Russia's behavior in this period made it clear that its participation in Kyoto had not transformed it into a leader in the international effort to address climate change. In its submission to the UNFCCC prior to the Poznan Conference of Parties (COP) in December 2008, Russia declared the goal of a 25 to 40% reduction from 1990 levels by 2020 “unreasonable” and asserted that legally binding commitments must be interpreted as “non-enforceable, non-punitive as well as flexible.”

In June 2009, President Medvedev announced Russia's post-Kyoto proposed target as 10 to 15% be-

low the 1990 baseline. It would be a stretch to call this ambitious: It translates to an effective 30 to 35% emissions *increase* from the 2007 level and implies an *acceleration* in annual emissions growth. Although Medvedev upped his pledge in December 2009 to a 20 to 25% drop, this still is not as ambitious as it could be; independent studies have shown that at least a 30% reduction is possible. According to the Russian scholar Georgi Safonov, his own goal of a 40% decline in energy intensity by 2020 would necessitate a greater decrease in emissions below the 1990 baseline than he seems willing to commit to in the context of the climate talks.

Its track record at recent multilateral meetings demonstrates that Russia has largely been a passive player in international climate policy. At meetings of the parties to the UNFCCC and other climate-related gatherings such as the Major Economies Forum (MEF), Russia is notable for its silence; its negotiators are not active participants, let alone leaders, in the talks and take little initiative. Its attitude was neatly summed up by one of the government's lead climate experts: “The solution to climate change negotiations lies between the US and China.” In other words, Russia is content to sit on the sidelines until the other players come to an agreement and then decide whether to participate.

On the one hand, this may be a deliberate strategy: While the other major emitters debate and look for compromise, Russia has complete freedom of maneuver. It can agree on a strict emissions reduction target or disagree with it; agree on financing adaptation needs of least developed countries or object to them; accept flexibility mechanisms or continue avoiding their use. On the other hand, pure bureaucratic and political factors might be at play: Without a strong signal from the political leadership that an ambitious treaty is a priority, working-level officials will be highly unlikely to take the initiative on their own. As the Russian saying goes, initiative is punishable.

Russia's behavior at the 15th COP (COP-15), which was held in December 2009 in Copenhagen, represented a slight, but nonetheless important, departure from this trend. The goal of the Copenhagen meeting was to reach a legally binding agreement on further greenhouse gas emissions cuts, create an arrangement to finance adaptation and mitigation in developing countries, and delineate mechanisms for international cooperation in emissions reductions, among other issues. Given its contribution to global warming and status as a Kyoto signatory, Russia's position at the COP-15 was important. Further, if it were to have demanded to be compensated for the massive amount of carbon credits

it had accumulated under Kyoto, Moscow could have torpedoed an agreement or at least made a functioning carbon market impossible.

What changed at Copenhagen was the Russian leadership's engagement with the issue. Medvedev not only attended but also created an entry in his video blog on the subject and made a major speech at the conference. In his address, he said that "Russia is ready to play the most active part in all of this processes [sic]. We recognize our share of the responsibility and this is the guideline in our efforts." Such rhetoric represents a departure from his predecessor; indeed, it is hard to imagine the current prime minister giving such a speech.

Russia did end up signing the so-called Copenhagen Accord at the COP-15, but, as per the pattern described above, it played no significant role in formulating it. There was one breakthrough at Copenhagen: Russia agreed to provide funding for the Copenhagen Green Climate Fund, which will finance adaptation and mitigation activities in least developed countries. Russia had previously refused to participate in any such assistance projects.

On February 1, 2010, Russia submitted its plans for reducing greenhouse gas emissions as the Copenhagen Accord requires. Strangely, its submission appears to have been a step backwards: Russia committed to a 15 to 25% reduction from the 1990 baseline, as opposed to the 20 to 25% that Medvedev had proclaimed less than two months earlier. The commitment was conditioned on the participation of all major emitters in a legally binding agreement and on Russia's forest sinks being taken into account in calculations of its overall emissions. This latter demand has become a top priority for Russian international climate policy. On average, Russian forests absorb about 300 million tons of CO₂ per annum. However, Russia supports allowing countries not to account for emissions from forest management until this sector becomes a net source of emissions and favors accounting approaches that would allow for "hiding" expected increased emissions from growth in the forestry sector. In other words, commercial motives seem to be at work in addition to other factors.

Despite the increased engagement in Copenhagen, Russia's relatively unambitious submission shows that it largely remains a passive actor on climate issues. Further, it underscores that Russia's climate policy continues to be based on the view that the drop in emissions that resulted from the post-Soviet economic contraction represents a "contribution" to global efforts to control climate change. The wrenching social impact of economic contraction, and thus the "contribution," is considered a

"sacrifice" made by the Russian people in the fight against global warming. As a result, Russian policymakers consider that their country is entitled to avoid an affirmative stance on emissions reductions, which they consider a threat to economic growth.

Climate Policy at Home

Russia does not have a discrete climate change policy, but instead the government considers policies and measures in the energy sector, industry, municipal heat supply, forestry, and other areas as having side benefits in terms of greenhouse gas emission reduction. The secondary impacts of other policies and measures are as close as Russia gets to a "climate policy."

That said, on the eve of his departure for Copenhagen in December 2009, President Medvedev took a major step forward in climate policy and signed the Russian Climate Doctrine. The Doctrine marks the first attempt at institutionalizing climate change policy. Among other steps, it acknowledges the harmful effects of climate change, states the need to take into account climate-related consequences in economic, social and other policies, and outlines measures for adaptation—which could address the potential damage from permafrost melting, infrastructure collapse, South-to-North spread of infectious diseases— and mitigation.

However, the Doctrine is an inadequate framework for policymaking. It does not establish concrete goals for mitigation and adaptation, mechanisms for such activities, or a framework for international cooperation. Further, the document places much more emphasis on adaptation than mitigation. Kristin Jørgensen of the Bellona Foundation called the doctrine a "call to take cover." The doctrine is to a significant degree window dressing, creating the appearance that the Russian government really cares about climate change while not outlining a program that would amount to a serious attempt to address it. That said, at the meeting of the Security Council in March 2010, Medvedev issued a presidential instruction to the Government to "approve a package of measures for implementing" the Doctrine by October 1, 2010, including "drafting the necessary laws and regulations." Time will tell whether the Cabinet takes his request seriously.

Politics of Climate Change Policy

As this review demonstrates, climate policy has not been a major priority for the Russian government. Russia has shown no inclination to lead in international climate talks nor has it taken major steps in the domestic context to mitigate climate change or address its impact.

This stance could be the result of the elite's continuing skepticism about the anthropogenic nature of climate change and the negative impact global warming will have on Russia. In 2003, then-President Putin famously quipped, "For a northern country like Russia, it won't be that bad if it gets two or three degrees warmer," since "we would spend less on fur coats" and "our grain production would increase." More recent statements, such as Federation Council Speaker Sergei Mironov's comment that the "impact of greenhouse-gas emissions on the climate has not been studied sufficiently," and therefore the Kyoto Protocol has little meaning, indicate that similar views persist, even if the top leadership has changed its tune. (Mironov also claimed that a process of global cooling was taking place, and cited the paintings of the Dutch Masters, which featured bright landscapes, as evidence.)

Climate skepticism is in fact rife throughout Russian society, even in certain quarters of the scientific community. Indeed, in the weeks leading up to the COP-15, and while it was taking place, these skeptics were particularly vocal. In early November 2009, Russia's state-owned Channel 1 aired a documentary called "The

History of Deception: Global Warming," which purported to demonstrate that the link between human activity and climate change was fabricated by a media conspiracy. The bulk of the mid-December issue of the respected *Kommersant-Vlast*' political magazine was devoted to climate skepticism, with one article alleging that efforts to address climate change are in fact a cover for funneling money to a cottage industry of scientists, green-tech firms, and corrupt developing countries. The week before the COP-15, the Russian Academy of Sciences Institute of Oceanography issued a report claiming that human activity is not a major factor in climate change, while the director of the research institute of the Ministry of Energy attributed global warming to the slowing of the Earth's rotation.

Perhaps as a result of this drumbeat of pseudoscience, only 40% of Russians consider climate change a serious issue, as opposed to 70% of Turks. There is also a chronic ignorance of environmental problems in the country. The lack of public pressure and the dominance of climate change skepticism have attached no political costs to keeping climate change a low priority issue for the Kremlin.

About the Author

Samuel Charap is a fellow in the National Security and International Policy Program at the Center for American Progress.

Recommended Reading

- Anisimov, Oleg, ed., *Osnovnye prirodnye i sotsial'no-ekonomicheskie posledstviia izmeneniia klimata v raionakh rasprostraneniia mnogoletnemerzlykh porod: prognoz na osnove sinteza nabludenii i modelirovaniia* [The Main Environmental and Socio-Economic Consequences of Climate Change in Regions with Widespread Permafrost: A Prognosis Based on a Synthesis of Observation and Modeling] (evaluation report, Greenpeace Russia, November 2009), www.greenpeace.org.
- Climate Doctrine of the Russian Federation, <http://eng.kremlin.ru>
- Cline, William R., *Global Warming and Agriculture: Impact Estimates by Country* (Washington: Petersen Institute for International Economics, 2007), 59.
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- UNFCCC, Quantified Economy-Wide Emissions Targets for 2020 for Annex I Parties, <http://unfccc.int>.
- World Bank, *Adapting to Climate Change in Europe and Central Asia* (Washington, June 2009), www.worldbank.org.
- World Wildlife Foundation Russia, *Climate Change Impacts in the Russian Arctic: Searching for Ways for Adaptation*, 2009, www.wwf.ru.