



RUSSIAN ENVIRONMENTALISM DURING THE WAR

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Environmental NGOs in Russia Navigate Repression, Climate Change, and Ethnonationalism Amid the Ukraine Crisis: An Introduction to the Special Issue

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Environmental non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Russia have undergone significant transformations in recent years, particularly since the passage of the “foreign agent” law in 2012. This legislation has greatly restricted the political opportunities for these organizations to participate in environmental policymaking. The situation has further deteriorated since the start of the war on Ukraine on February 24, 2022, which has fueled repression against NGOs. In this issue, the contributing authors explore three key aspects of this transformation: the evolution of expert NGOs; the changes within grassroots NGOs; and the impact on Russia’s climate policy and the opportunities for NGOs to engage in this policy realm. Through their analysis, they shed light on the challenges facing environmental NGOs in Russia today.

In my article, I analyze the changing dynamics of the environmental NGO community in Russia, reflecting on the complex interplay between state control, international collaboration, and grassroots activism. The study seeks to shed light on the evolving strategies of these NGOs amid increased political repression and the ongoing conflict in Ukraine. By understanding the challenges and opportunities confronted by these organizations, the reader can gain insights into the resilience and adaptability of civil society in the face of adversity. The findings contribute to the broader literature on the role of NGOs in environmental advocacy and provide valuable lessons for those who study civil societies under authoritarian regimes.

Maria Chiara Franceschelli explores the complex interplay between environmentalism, center-periphery relations, and ethnonationalism in Russia during both peacetime and wartime. By examining the connections and tensions between these movements, the reader can gain a deeper understanding of the societal and political forces at play in Russia and the impact they have had on both the environment and social cohesion. With the ongoing conflict in Ukraine having cast these divisions into sharper relief, it is essential to critically analyze the dynamics of environmental mobilizations and their role in shaping broader societal narratives in Russia.

The third article focuses primarily on Russia’s climate policy rather than on climate activism. Angelina Davydova argues that the climate agenda in Russia is undergoing significant changes and facing challenges due to the ongoing war in Ukraine. Political priorities have shifted, with the government trying to instrumentalize the international climate agenda and build a non-Western climate bloc with the countries of the Global South. Domestically, political attention focuses largely on adaptation measures, while in the area of mitigation, Russia is prioritizing nuclear, large hydropower, and natural gas as energy solutions. Davydova finds that expert and civil society actions related to climate change are overshadowed by the war and that real civil society actors are struggling to play a significant role in shaping climate measures in the country.

About the Special Editor

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Resilient Green Warriors: How Russian Environmental NGOs Battle Repression and Adapt Amid the Ukraine Crisis

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DOI: 10.3929/ethz-b-000664416

Abstract

This article examines the current situation facing environmental NGOs in Russia, examining the increasing repression to which they are subject. It also describes the many techniques these groups employ to navigate this repression.

The environmental NGO community in Russia comprises independent NGOs, pro-state organizations, and grassroots movements (Henry 2010). In this paper, my analysis is limited to the independent NGOs, which possess knowledge regarding the state of the environment and share networks with international environmental NGOs and foundations. These are the NGOs that were independent of the Russian state and businesses. Although they tried to diversify their funding sources, international grants represented the primary source of funding for these NGOs. These NGOs were dedicated to addressing environmental issues at the local, national, and global levels. In the early 2000s, they actively engaged with the regional and federal authorities, as well as with corporations, participating in discussions on environmental legislation. Moreover, they played a significant role in the development and execution of environmental programs and projects. The Russian branches of such esteemed international environmental organizations as Greenpeace, the WWF, and Bellona can be regarded as the leading voices within this faction of the environmental community (Tysiachniouk et al. 2023).

Repressions against NGOs started in 2012 and have increased dramatically since the full-scale war against Ukraine began in February 2022. The introduction of the laws on foreign agents, on undesirable organizations, and restricting interactions with foreign NGOs have had a significant impact on these NGOs, limiting their funding and resulting in many being labeled as “foreign agents” (Tulaeva et al. 2017). The war in Ukraine has seen a further increase in government control, including in the form of laws censoring criticism of the army.

In the face of this governmental pressure, the environmental movement has shown resilience and adaptability. Its members have adapted by giving up international funding, changing their names, and working informally in Russia or in exile. As repressive measures have increased, however, many of these adaptation strategies have stopped working, disabling the environmental movement and causing its fragmentation.

This study aims to explore how the movement has transformed during the war and how the political context has influenced NGO operations and activities. The study was conducted in 2022–2023 using a qualitative methodology involving semi-structured interviews (N=47) and participant observation.

Repression of Environmental NGOs

In line with the increasingly repressive government policies introduced since the invasion of Ukraine in 2022, existing laws targeting independent NGOs have also been enforced more strictly. In particular, amendments were introduced in 2022 that strengthened the Foreign Agent Law (Federal Law No. 121-FZ of July 20, 2012) and the Undesirable Organizations Law (Federal Law No. 129-FZ of May 23, 2015). Notably, the Law on Control over the Activities of Persons Under Foreign Influence came into force in December 2022, with several amendments made in 2023. This law led to the creation of a single register maintained by the Ministry of Justice that listed various entities, such as NGOs, media outlets, unregistered groups, and individuals. Interestingly, it is no longer necessary for an organization to receive foreign funding to be labeled as a “foreign agent”; anyone can be classified as an individual under foreign influence.

In 2022, several environmental NGOs were designated as foreign agents, including the Arkhangelsk-based unregistered group Movement “42,” Friends of the Baltic, Sakhalin Environmental Watch, Center for Conservation and Study of Salmon Species and their Habitats, and the Altai Indigenous NGO Tuba Kalyk. The reasons for their inclusion on the register remain unclear, but it is speculated that it may be due to their anti-war statements or participation in rallies following the invasion, as well as potential foreign funding (Russian Social-Ecological Union, 2022).

The following year, three additional environmental NGOs were added to the register of foreign agents. These included WWF-Russia, Omsk Civil Association (involved in efforts to prevent deforestation), and Kedr-

Media, which provided the public with extensive information about the environmental situation in Russia.

Furthermore, in 2023, five international NGOs were deemed undesirable in Russia. Chief among them was the Norwegian environmental foundation Bellona, which was accused of undermining the Russian economy, discrediting government policies, and destabilizing the socio-political situation in the country. Greenpeace International and WWF International were also added to the list. This hurt the Russian environmental movement in the regions, as these international NGOs had historically provided significant financial and expert support to regional groups. The final two INGOs were Altai Project, which focused on preservation wildlife efforts and opposition to the construction of the Power of Siberia-2 gas pipeline and the development of the Kara-Kul cobalt deposit in the Altai Republic, and the Russian branch of the U.S. NGO Wild Salmon Center.

These legislative developments limited political opportunities for environmental NGOs, jeopardized their funding from international foundations, and broke off collaborations between transborder NGO networks. In response to the repressive measures, NGOs in Russia terminated or limited their repertoire of collective actions as part of their adaptation to a changing context (see Figure 1).

Consequences and Adaptations to the New Reality

NGOs avoid geopolitical statements. Many NGOs had to shift away from engaging in political statements and criticism of the state. A representative of WWF-Russia explained that following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, “It was immediately decided that we would not make any statements. Our position is that we are outside of politics, our goal is to preserve nature, and we do not make political statements. Although, of course, it is clear that we do not approve of all this. But, you see, we are caught between two fires: global networks and Russian authorities. If we had made this statement, we would have caused the immediate closure of WWF in Russia. Who benefits from this? We need to preserve the organization, to preserve the people” (representative of WWF-Russia, March 2022). As we now know, however, this caution did not save WWF: after WWF-International was listed as an undesirable organization in 2023, the Russian branch was forced to cut ties with WWF-International, abandon the panda logo, cut staff, and reduce operations to a minimum. Its current name is Fund for Nature.

NGO-state interactions change. Being listed as a “foreign agent” affected expert work in public councils under the state agencies. “All government agencies openly say that, sorry, we cannot work with you any-

more... because you are a foreign agent. We were banned” (representative of NGO “Silver Taiga,” September 2022).

Cooperation between the authorities and the largest environmental NGOs in Russia, Greenpeace and the WWF, continued for a short time after the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Greenpeace and WWF employees provided expert support to government authorities in preparing reports for international conventions, monitored the work of state agencies, participated in the discussion of government programs in the field of the environment, and implemented educational projects. “We worked with the Ministry of Natural Resources... There were personal contacts, so they continued to use our expertise. They even said publicly that they used our data for their decisions. They turned to us about any legislative decisions” (former representative of Greenpeace, June 2023). After Greenpeace and the WWF were recognized as undesirable organizations in 2023, this cooperation had to be scaled down to a few individuals from the former WWF and Greenpeace who continued working with state agencies.

Working with state agencies became challenging. As a Greenpeace activist in exile explained, “It used to be easier to put pressure on the state, because now the whole focus is on the war. Even some of our attempts at pressure are not relevant for them. All resources are directed toward war” (Greenpeace activist in exile, July 2023). In some cases, cooperation with the government provides financial support for environmental initiatives that might otherwise not be implemented. NGOs to have benefitted from this are Dront in the Nizhny Novgorod region and the all-Russian movement “EKA.” In some cases, environmental NGOs receive state funding, although this may limit their ability to criticize state policies. Consequently, this cooperation can resemble the co-optation of environmental NGOs by the state.

Self-censorship. NGOs now resort to discreet conversations and implicit agreements with government authorities instead of engaging in public discussions. This shift is due to self-censorship and the challenges posed by the ongoing war. A Greenpeace activist in exile revealed, “After the war began, self-censorship emerged within the organization. It became impossible to express our stance openly. We started censoring ourselves to protect ourselves” (Greenpeace activist in exile, July, September 2023). Even this did not protect Greenpeace: it was forced to close down after being listed as an undesirable organization. However, self-censorship has been an effective strategy for some NGOs operating in Russia.

NGOs operating informally. Some environmental activists have chosen not to create new NGOs since their organizations have been forcibly shut down or labeled as foreign agents, preferring to continue their environmental work as non-registered groups. Despite

its informal status, however, Movement “42” was listed as a foreign agent. Since then, its activists have worked as volunteers-individuals for the group, which does not operate under any recognizable name.

While forgoing official legal recognition limits their areas of operation and funding opportunities, it also allows these groups to evade close government scrutiny (to some extent and for a certain period). Acting as private individuals, activists rely on informal networks and personal connections with other environmental NGOs and government agencies. Their established status as highly knowledgeable environmental experts enables them to sustain their environmental work even after the closure of their organizations. One representative of the Cola Center NGO explained, “We are members of public councils... relying on personal connections for now... Only because I know the council’s secretary. That’s the only reason we’re still able to continue” (representative of Cola Center NGO, February 2022). In some instances, established connections with regional authorities have enabled an NGO designated as a foreign agent to continue operating in a particular region or even get its foreign agent status removed. One NGO expert revealed, “The regional government supported us, leading to a multi-year program working with protected natural areas and rare species” (NGO expert, February 2022).

Engaging in less political activities. NGOs have been engaging in less sensitive environmental issues to avoid potential backlash. They may decline projects that involve topics such as nuclear energy and forest mapping, which can be deemed politically sensitive. Earth Concerns Everyone, for instance, simply advocates an environmentally friendly lifestyle and recycling, as well as sometimes asking their followers to sign petitions to preserve a specially protected natural area from construction threats.

Forming new alliances. In 2023, the Reserve Alliance (Zapovednyi Al’ians) was formed to fight the destruction of specially protected areas. It consists of 48 environmental NGOs that monitor legislation on specially protected areas, with their natural, historical, and cultural complexes. They issue petitions to legislators—and even once to the Prosecutor General—concerning the illegal clear-cutting of forests in the planned Maksimyarvi nature reserve in the Republic of Karelia.

Reregistering NGOs under new names. Following forced closures, some NGOs have established new organizations with different names to continue their work. For example, Friends of the Baltic created a new entity to engage in state-sponsored projects, while the staff of the Russian branch of Greenpeace formed “The Earth Concerns Everyone (informal group),” which focuses on promoting environmentally friendly life-

styles, fighting unnecessary consumption, and advocating for recycling. For its part, WWF-Russia severed its ties with WWF-International and abandoned its iconic panda logo. These reformed affiliations aim to resume their crucial activities, including participating in public councils, driving environmental education, advocating for the protection of natural areas through petitions, and conducting research.

Kedr-Media, which received “foreign agent” status in 2023 for distributing information provided by foreign agents and analyzing the impact of the war on the environment, officially closed in January 2024 to protect its journalists from various threats. A new entity, Smola-Media, was soon formed; the latter is successfully issuing environmental news while avoiding politically sensitive topics.

Defending the rights of environmental activists and NGOs. The Socio-Ecological Union has launched an Environmental Crisis Group dedicated to publicizing information about the persecution of environmental activists and providing help to them. They collect money for lawyers, participate in lawsuits, and organize letters to those who are in prison, driven by the belief that resistance is not futile and that some activists have been able to successfully defend themselves and their rights. “There are examples when activists managed to defend themselves and defend their rights. And even win a stalking case. Therefore, our slogan in recent years has been: ‘Resistance is not useless’” (representative of the Socio-Ecological Union, March 2023).

Involvement on a global scale has diminished. Russian NGOs strive to work on the global environmental agenda: “The goal of any effective and truly working environmental organization is not only to preserve nature ‘here and now,’ but also to seek and try in every possible way to achieve a balance between human activity and nature at both the national and global levels” (The Earth Concerns Everyone, October 2023). However, NGO participation at the global level declined dramatically following the outbreak of war in Ukraine. Operations of the Arctic Council were suspended and resumed only in May 2023, when the Russian chairmanship was transferred to Norway. Russian environmental NGO observers and Indigenous groups have not participated in the Arctic Council since the war began, while it was primarily Russian climate activists in exile who participated in COP27 and COP28. Transnational NGO networks with U.S. and European partners have sometimes been shattered by boycotts of Russian actors due to the war. In parallel, a Russian law enacted in 2023 prohibits the involvement of Russian NGOs with NGOs from unfriendly countries.

Working from exile. Interaction with international environmental NGOs and activists in exile is primarily

informal, relying on social connections and social capital cultivated in the past. Despite the difficulties they face, individual environmental NGOs and their activists demonstrate resilience and determination as they continue to advocate for environmental causes. In some NGOs, one group of activists are in Russia and the other contributes to projects online from exile. In certain cases, exiled environmentalists have shifted their attention to Russia's war in Ukraine. Before the war, Eco-Defence, a prominent organization with members scattered across the EU, campaigned against environmentally harmful projects in Russia. In 2022–2023, however, it collaborated with German environmental NGOs to monitor compliance with EU sanctions on companies engaging in illegal trade with Russia. Through their expertise in supply chain analysis, Eco-Defence identifies German companies violating sanctions by trading with Russia and shares this information with EU Parliament members to prompt action. Additionally, the Ukraine War Environmental Consequences Work Group, consisting of activists in exile from Russia and Ukrainian experts, is focusing on assessing the war's impacts on ecosystems, soil, and the Kakhovka dam.

Conclusion

Environmental NGOs have been forced to extensively modify their strategies and adapt to increased restrictions. It has become incredibly challenging to establish collaborations with influential international environmental

organizations and foundations. Some NGOs have recognized the importance of working with state agencies and have made this a priority. However, caution needs to be exercised, as NGOs are compelled to limit their criticism of government authorities. NGOs are striving to find a balance between advocating for global environmental values and aligning with the national political agenda. By collaborating with government authorities, NGOs can contribute to the development and implementation of environmental programs. To avoid involvement in political matters and sensitive environmental issues, these organizations choose not to make political statements and align themselves with the state's environmental agenda. The importance of informal channels of communication has grown, facilitating connections with the international environmental community through environmentalists in exile. NGOs that have been labeled as "foreign agents" often undergo restructuring, change their names, or operate in informal capacities to continue their environmental activism without a formal organizational structure. Exiled activists primarily drive the involvement of NGOs in global environmental issues. Consequently, the overall environmental NGO community has become fragmented, with operations taking place partly within Russia and partly from exile.

Please see overleaf for Information about the Author and References.

Figure 1: Repressive Laws, Opportunities for Activism, and NGO Adaptations.



Designed by Alexandra Orlova

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ANALYSIS

From Environmentalism to Ethnonationalism: Center-Periphery Relations in Pre-War and Wartime Russia

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DOI: 10.3929/ethz-b-000664416

Abstract

Russia has long hosted a wide range of environmental mobilizations, both contentious and non-contentious. This piece looks at pre-war and wartime environmental mobilizations in Russia. It unveils how environmental conflicts over the last decade anticipated internal conflicts of center-periphery relations, which have only been exacerbated with the full-scale invasion of Ukraine and Russia’s wartime policies.

Russia claims a lively history of environmental mobilizations, which dates back to Soviet times. Sociologist Oleg Yanitsky documented the blossoming of the various branches of the Soviet-era environmental movement. He defined it as “one of the most stable, professionalized and scientifically oriented social movements created and maintained by the Russian intelligentsia” (1999), stressing the crucial role of scientists and professionals in promoting ecological thinking in lieu of the Soviet rhetoric of the “conquest of nature.” After the fall of the Soviet Union, the rapidly changing socio-economic context of post-Soviet Russia produced an “anti-environmentalist bias” (Yanitsky 1999). This was due

mainly to Russia’s drift toward reckless, profit-oriented resource exploitation, which in turn was exacerbated by a fatal tandem: the pairing of the maintenance of Soviet-era resource-consuming and environmentally dangerous industrial systems with the abrupt introduction of a market economy and the privatization of state assets.

Vladimir Putin’s rise to power added another piece to this dreadful puzzle: the progressive erosion of civil society initiatives’ room for maneuver. The Kremlin’s endeavor was gradual but steady. In pre-war times, the “NGO Law” of 2006, the “Foreign Agent Law” of 2012, and the Law “on Undesirable Organizations” of 2015 played a crucial role in the suppression of civil society ini-

tiatives, as the Kremlin sought to limit what it perceived as foreign interference in internal affairs. Such policies were paralleled by frequent intimidation and political persecution of activists and politically active individuals on behalf of the authorities: raids, searches, and detentions all aimed to discourage these groups from engaging in collective action. These efforts altered considerably the “governance generating networks” (Tysiachniouk et al. 2018)—that is, the infrastructure for transnational cooperation on policy and standards among non-governmental actors. In most cases, Russian environmental groups found themselves excluded from the global arena and had to adapt their collective action frames and strategies accordingly (Tysiachniouk et al. 2018). The result was a more inward-looking environmental action that focused on local communities and contextual infrastructure. In response, environmental groups have picked peculiar strategies and narratives and showed different inclinations depending on the focus of their action.

In a context that is hardly conducive to collective action, compliance and cooperation with state authorities have often been the tactics of choice. Environmentalists have often engaged in service provision and bottom-up development of ecologically oriented infrastructure (Selivanova and Franceschelli 2023) instead of advocating for institutions to fix infrastructural shortcomings. This type of mobilization is framed as “apolitical.” It rejects open confrontation or direct conflict with the state authorities and employs volunteer work to make up for the lack of ecological infrastructure. Mobilized citizens often present themselves as experts and professionals rather than activists. They prioritize consultancy over contention to gain authority and influence over decision-makers. Opting out of contention allows environmental groups to maximize grassroots participation and minimize the risk of political repression. This strategy has proven to be largely effective: it has increased the popularity of grassroots environmental groups and granted them access to institutional decision-making (Selivanova and Franceschelli 2023). Movements such as Separate Collection (RazDelniy Sbor), EKA, and No More Waste (Musora Bol’she Net) have engaged in volunteer service provision in the field of waste sorting and recycling for more than a decade, and have regularly worked as consultants for multiple state institutions on environmental issues and ecological infrastructure, gaining considerable influence on policymaking. In a way, Russian environmentalism has preserved its ties with professionalism, one of its most prominent characteristics since the Soviet era.

After Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, the work of non-contentious environmental groups remained substantially

unchanged. They preserved their institutional alliances and continued to work toward their goals. Given their strategic rejection of political stances and their adaptive tactics to a regime that has become increasingly harsh, the invasion of Ukraine did not represent a watershed moment.

However, contentious environmentalism is also present in Russia. Over the last decade, contention was channeled into environmentalism along two main lines: regional protests against extractivist projects and climate protests—with a large predominance of the first over the second.

Climate protests arrived in Russia around 2018, with the spread of climate justice movements around the globe, especially in Europe and Latin America (Civil Society Forum 2022). Russian climate activists set up local branches of transnational climate movements, such as Fridays for Future and Climate Action Network. They carried out advocacy and awareness campaigns and held public demonstrations to encourage policymakers to tackle the climate catastrophe with ad-hoc policy change. Activists translated materials into Russian and introduced new vocabulary—such as “climate justice” and “ecocide”—into the public debate while trying to connect global questions with local demands (Fridays for Future 2023). However, due to the difficulties that the restrictive Russian legislation posed to the establishment of transnational alliances, as well as the fact that these movements’ claims were often perceived as abstract and far from Russians’ everyday life, Russian climate movements remained minor and had low uptake among civil society at large. The surge of the COVID-19 global pandemic worsened the situation by making it impossible to carry out pickets and demonstrations, the main collective action repertoire on which climate activists had relied. After the launch of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, many prominent figures of the Russian climate movement protested against the war, often facing harsh repercussions for doing so (Andreoni 2022).

The other line of contentious environmentalism, regional protests against extractivist projects, has had great resonance over the last few years. The protests against the construction of a landfill in Shies, Arkhangelsk oblast; against the construction of a new highway in the age-old Khimki forest, Moscow region; and against limestone mining in Kushtau, Bashkortostan, have each marked significant milestones in Russia’s recent contentious environmentalism.

On the landscape of Russian environmental mobilizations, the Shies protests stand out, demonstrating extraordinary salience and a distinctive character. They enjoyed notable success, with the landfill project being canceled by court ruling, and attracted extraor-

dinary nationwide solidarity. But most importantly, the Shies protests can impart considerable insights into the dynamics underpinning contemporary Russian society and internal conflicts in pre-war and wartime Russia.

In the summer of 2018, hunters from the town of Urdoma, in the Arkhangelsk region and close to the border with the Komi Republic, noticed intense logging activity close to the Shies railroad juncture. They soon found out that workers from Moscow were erecting a construction site for an “Ekotekhnopark.” Despite its fancy name, the project was neither particularly ecological nor high-tech: it consisted of a massive landfill that would have hosted municipal solid waste (TKO) exclusively from Moscow. As the capital was struggling with a major garbage crisis (Solovyova 2018), the authorities had decided to outsource the solution to peripheral regions.

Locals immediately took action and showed an impressive organizational capacity, granting the cause great resonance. They coordinated efficiently among different towns, villages, and cities across Arkhangelsk oblast’ and the Komi Republic. A number of different actors flowed into broader coalitions: from initiative groups and civil society organizations to politicians (such as the Komi regional deputy of the Communist Party Oleg Mikhailov, who has been at the forefront of the protests in Syktyvkar since day one and who enjoys warm popular support), and from international NGOs like Greenpeace to state institutions (like the Federal agency for water resources, *Rosvodresursy*). Together, these actors organized public demonstrations and launched capillary awareness campaigns, until the Shies case made national headlines. In 2019–2020, many cities from around Russia rose in solidarity with the protestors from the Arkhangelsk region and the Komi Republic. In January 2020, following a two-year campaign and an intense court battle, the Arkhangelsk region’s arbitration court ruled that the construction at Shies was illegal and ordered its immediate cessation.

This success was due not only to locals’ remarkable organizational capacities, but also to their choice of a narrative that resonated with many Russians beyond the Far North. The Shies mobilization juxtaposed a corrupt central government to a pristine land filled with history and wildlife. While this may make it sound like the protests had a romantic impetus, the reality of locals’ daily life suggests otherwise. When asked about their motivations, the main agitators of the Stop Shies coalition reported very concrete implications. “We are a nation of hunters, gatherers, and fishermen,” said Svetlana Babenko, former municipal deputy and head of the Clean Urdoma initiative group that first launched the Shies protests. “Burying waste in our soil would harm the ecosystem, which is what we live on, quite

literally.” Shies is situated in proximity to groundwater that is interlinked with regional watercourses and ultimately feeds into the White Sea. The risk of polluting the broader region is therefore considerable. Contamination of rivers and soils would directly impact local communities’ livelihoods. She went on: “Everyone immediately understood it. People do not need sophisticated environmental literacy to realize that such a project is harmful to our territories.”

Ultimately, the threats posed by the Ekotekhnopark called into question the delicate issue of center–periphery relations in the Russian Federation. While official statements and calls to the institutions by Clean Urdoma and the civic coalition Stop Shies tended to frame their stance in terms of environmental integrity and ecosystem preservation, a richer narrative appeared in public protests, rallies, and demonstrations. Protestors consistently held Moscow accountable for its extractivist attitude toward the regions, especially those rich in natural resources (Gorbacheva 2023). People protested against the Kremlin “taking diamonds away and bringing shit in return,” accused it of “paying them back for oil, gas, and diamond with crap,” reiterated that “Pomor [a historical designation for the territory on the White Sea coast] is not a dump” and that “the North is not Moscow’s dump,” and indicated that “Putin should build [the landfill] at his place.” The Russian North was portrayed as an unfeigned land where people lived in harmony with forests and streams in a fragile yet strong ecosystem. Conversely, Moscow was framed as a corrupted tyrant, dirtying unspoiled lands and threatening indigenous communities for the sake of its own wellbeing. At the center of the conflict was an unfair hierarchy constructed by the administrative center: citizens and second-class citizens (*lyudi vtorogo sorta*).

However, it would be limiting to confine the conflict at stake to a periphery-versus-center dynamic. The Shies mobilization also entailed a broader debate on Russia and “Russianness.” What is Russia? Is it Moscow, the Kremlin, with its soaring towers, its large avenues and fancy palaces, where wealth and power are concentrated? Or is it all the rest—the forest, the rivers, the coastlines, the mountains, and the steppes, where commons are distributed across community networks? Despite the reiterated focus on Pomorians’ and Northerners’ identity, it would be misleading to attribute to the Shies mobilization an ethnonationalist or separatist character. With Russian flags waving in every demonstration, as well as next to the Arkhangelsk’ region and Komi Republic flags outside the 24/7 watch at the Ekotekhnopark construction site (Zabolotnaya 2019), the Shies protests also entailed a broader questioning of the country’s identity, stemming from strong center–periphery inequality. Throughout the whole protest cycle, pro-

testors in Arkhangelsk and Komi, but also from different federal subjects, reportedly held signs saying “Let’s save Russia from garbage” and “Russia is not a dump,” thus taking the matter beyond the borders of Arkhangelsk and Komi, and cutting out any separatist stance. Rising against an unfair and extractivist model of federal governance, protestors not only held the federal and regional authorities accountable for unfair center–periphery relations, but also directly questioned their legitimacy as representatives of Russia and Russianness. The material conditions of regions suffering from the center’s extractivist attitude become symbolic devices to reclaim fairer territorial governance that puts people from the regions at the center of attention.

This formulation and conceptualization of the Shies case largely contributed to its popularity. Anyone who recognized the Kremlin’s extractivist attitude toward the Russian regions, their ecosystems, and their communities joined the protest, regardless of the thousands of kilometers separating the mobilized people from the territory in question. The Shies case was undoubtedly an environmental conflict: it not only advocated for territorial integrity, but also harshly questioned the Kremlin’s models of federal governance and resource manage-

ment. Hence, it gained the favor of those who recognized the same problems across Russia.

It also attracted harsh repression from the authorities. After the court sentence, many activists endured intimidation and political persecution (Activatica 2022c). With the launch of the full-scale invasion, many Shies activists engaged in anti-war protests and were charged with criminal offenses (Activatica 2023). Many of them left the country (Activatica 2022b). Anna Stepanova, who was at the Shies frontline, established a shelter for Ukrainian and Russian refugees and their pets (Activatica 2022a).

The Kremlin’s extractivist attitudes toward peripheral regions and ethnic republics emerged again two years later, in a much harsher guise, during the “partial mobilization” of September 2022, which was intended to sustain the so-called “special military operation”—the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Recruitment has been shown to be proportionally unequal among different federal subjects (Cancian 2022). As ethnic minorities were pushed to the front, the rights of indigenous people of the Russian Federation were severely challenged (Zmyvalova 2023). Ethnic republics like Buryatia (Jonutyte 2023), Bashkortostan, and Dagestan (Yeo 2022) were

Figure 1: The 24/7 Watch at the Shies Construction Site.



Designed by Alexandra Orlova

among the most affected, with higher casualty and emigration rates. Ethnonationalist movements like the Free Buryatia Foundation (freeburyatia.org) and the Bashkir Resistance Committee (Jansen 2022) rapidly emerged; these movements saw the attack on Ukraine and the racist criteria for military recruitment in Russia as having shared roots in the Kremlin's colonial attitude toward the nations.

The crucial issues exposed by environmental protests in recent years have become even more pressing in wartime Russia. First, there was considerable

overlap between environmental-peripheral mobilizations and anti-war protests—resulting in the harsh repression of activists. Second, while environmental protests mainly sparked a debate over environmental justice, federal governance, and ultimately Russian-ness, these tendencies have radicalized into the surge of ethnonationalist movements in response to the full-scale invasion, its colonial and imperialist roots, and the racist logic that underpins both the invasion of Ukraine and military recruitment among indigenous communities.

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ANALYSIS

The Climate Agenda in Russia since the Beginning of the War in Ukraine: Political Priorities, Expert and Civil Society Actions

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DOI: 10.3929/ethz-b-000664416

Abstract

Climate change remains a relevant political and economic issue for Russia despite the war in Ukraine and subsequent political and economic sanctions. On the international level, the country and some companies are trying to instrumentalize the topic, building a non-Western coalition on “green” issues, and promoting nuclear energy and nature-based solutions. On the domestic level, climate action is most noticeable in climate adaptation efforts, while fossil fuels continue to play the primary role in most energy scenarios until 2050. At present, real civil society actors play hardly any role in setting, realizing, or controlling climate measures in Russia.

Since the beginning of the full-scale war in Ukraine in February 2022, many concerns have been raised about the future of Russia’s environmental and climate action, as the country remains the largest in the world in terms of area and the fifth-largest emitter of greenhouse gases (behind China, the US, the EU, and India). At the same time, the country’s ecosystems (its forests, rivers, and steppes, but also its permafrost and Arctic ecosystems) play a vital role in the health of the planet. It therefore remains crucial to monitor what is happening in Russia, both in terms of the consequences of climate change and in terms of governance.

The last two years of war have witnessed the following developments:

1. Russia has stayed in the Paris Agreement and continues to participate in all international climate-related processes at the UN level.
2. Russia is trying to develop climate cooperation with the countries of the Global South and build a non-Western climate bloc that would define its own, “sovereign” climate priorities
3. As part of what it says is climate-friendly action, Russia is trying to promote nuclear technologies worldwide, mostly to the countries of the Global South
4. Domestically, most attention is paid to climate risks and climate adaptation
5. Nuclear, large hydropower, and natural gas are seen as low-carbon (or at least transition) climate solutions, so in terms of climate mitigation Russia is planning to stay on this track, with some modest development of new renewable energy sources (including wind and solar) and energy-efficiency improvements
6. Russian companies, as well as resource companies (e.g. minerals, fertilizers, etc.), are still interested in the low-carbon agenda and try to position themselves as climate-aware, climate-friendly, and promoting nature-based solutions at the domestic and international levels.
7. Within Russia, there are continuing discussions about introducing a price on carbon, but more to supply the federal budget than for genuine environmental motives. These attempts are being criticized and opposed by the business community.
8. Most international NGOs working on the climate agenda in Russia have been declared “undesirable” and have had to stop their activities in the country. At the moment, professional critical analysis and advocacy work on climate-related issues by civil society institutions is hardly possible in the country. Some

smaller environmental NGOs do integrate climate-related topics into their programs on air, water, forest protection, or environmental education.

Drivers of Climate Action within and outside the Country

For many years, Russia's political and economic elites viewed climate issues as something marginal and peripheral. However, the growing global importance of "climate" issues, including on the foreign policy agenda, was gradually perceived in Russia as well. During the 2009 United Nations Climate Summit in Copenhagen, where the adoption of the so-called Copenhagen Accord was anticipated (although it would in fact be accepted only in Paris in 2015, thus becoming the "Paris Agreement"), Dmitry Medvedev, who was at that time the President of the Russian Federation, approved the Climate Doctrine (President of Russia 2009).

In September 2019, the Russian Federation joined the Paris Agreement. At the same time, the threat of CBAM (Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanisms) emerged in the European Union. CBAMs are border payments on goods produced outside the EU in countries lacking carbon regulation systems or a "price on carbon."

A combination of the global growth in importance of the climate agenda, along with the plans to introduce CBAMs and similar border adjustment mechanisms, were the main external driving factors behind any climate action (or even talks about it) in Russia before February 2022. The internal driving factors were noticeable climate risks and damages, the need for climate adaptation, and growing environmental awareness (and interest in environmental and climate topics) among the general public.

Since the beginning of the full-scale war, both external motivations have become less relevant. As has been seen during the last two UN climate conferences, COP27 in 2022 and COP28 in 2023, Russia is now trying to develop climate cooperation with the countries of the Global South, while at the nation-state level there is much discussion of creating a domestic, "sovereign," non-Western green and climate agenda.

For the Russian business sector, EU plans to introduce CBAMs have also become less relevant. Still, recent estimates by Russia's Ministry of Economics and the Central Bank show that these could still have an indirect impact on Russian exports via their influence on third countries, including those with which Russia has active economic and trade ties. Moreover, Russian businesses are still interested in positioning themselves and their activities as "climate-friendly." They continue to talk about emissions reduction and nature-based solutions, albeit now mostly to partners outside the West,

while discussions about introducing a price on carbon in Russia (mostly to fill the Russian federal government's coffers, but also potentially to allow Russian companies to account for their emissions-reduction efforts and payments for CO₂ emissions in global markets) were ongoing as of February 2024.

Recent Climate-Related Legislation in Russia and Further Plans to Regulate Greenhouse Gas Emissions

In October 2023, Russian president Vladimir Putin signed a new Climate Doctrine (President of Russia 2023). The document, which is an updated version of the doctrine from 2009, confirms the acknowledgment of human-induced climate change and Russia's goal of reaching net zero by 2060, but fails to mention a phase-out of fossil fuels as part of this. Instead, the main decarbonization measures appear to be energy efficiency; further development and use of natural gas, hydropower, and nuclear energy; and some modest development of new renewable energy sources.

The first version of the Climate Doctrine in Russia was signed in December 2009 (President of Russia 2009) by then-president Dmitry Medvedev during the COP in Copenhagen, where the new climate agreement was expected to be adopted. Back then, it was a sign that Russia officially acknowledged climate change and its threats and announced plans for climate mitigation and adaptation measures, while also demonstrating a willingness to cooperate on climate-related issues internationally. Although the doctrine was a framework document, it established a basis for all further climate regulation in the fifth-largest emitter of greenhouse gases in the world, where politicians and sometimes also scientists often expressed climate skepticism or climate denialism (as some of them still do). On the international level, ever since the annexation of Crimea and subsequent international sanctions, Russian officials have tried to maintain and even develop cooperation on climate-related issues, saying that climate remains a topic on which all countries should cooperate, and the largest country in the world cannot be excluded. This was noticeable even during COP27 in Egypt and COP28 in Dubai.

Ninety percent of the text of the new doctrine is copied from the previous one, however there are also a few new points. Among them is a target of net zero emissions by 2060 (something that has previously been mentioned in the Long-Term Low Carbon Development Strategy of Russia, adopted in October 2021, shortly before COP26, and in Putin's official speeches).

The new doctrine also acknowledges human influence on climate and the negative consequences of climate change and sees climate measures (including energy efficiency and the development of renewable energy) as

a factor in the technological modernization of the economy. Still, the doctrine confirms Russia's plans to pursue emissions reduction primarily through nuclear and natural gas development, as well as its reliance on further increasing forest sequestration (a point also made in the Low Carbon Development Strategy), which many experts consider unrealistic, especially in view of increases in forest fires and unsustainable forest management practices.

According to the Long-Term Low Carbon Development Strategy of Russia and further energy sector strategic development plans, the use of coal in electricity generation is due to decrease by half, while natural gas use will increase by 17% and nuclear energy by 71% from 2020 to 2050. The share of new renewable energy (excluding hydropower) is projected to grow from the current 1% to around 20% by 2050.

If the new version of the doctrine can be seen as a new foundational document for climate legislation in the country, further attempts to introduce a carbon price have continued in early 2024. Since 2021, Russia has obliged large carbon emitters to report on their carbon emissions (and verify these reports), but also allowed companies to do so-called "climate projects"—emissions reduction or carbon sequestration—and give or sell the results thereof to other companies or organizations. At the time, that legislation was meant to help companies deal with the planned CBAMs in the EU, allowing them to account for emissions reduction within Russia. As CBAMs and trade with the EU became less relevant, there was no further progress in this direction for several years (except for further instructions to companies on carbon reporting or rules of "climate projects"). In early 2024, however, discussions about further carbon regulation (including introducing some form of a price on carbon) resumed. According to the Ministry of Economic Development, the main motivation is to help companies account for their emissions-reduction efforts to their trade partners and investments in non-Western countries, which may in turn be influenced by measures similar to the CBAMs in Western companies. Another potential motivation for the price on carbon in particular, as pointed out by some representatives of Russian business, is to raise revenue to fill the federal budget's coffers, enabling it to pursue several goals (including continuing the war in Ukraine).

About the Author

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Since 2021, Sakhalin oblast in the Russian Far East has been trying to carry out a "climate experiment" with the aim of reaching net-zero emissions by the end of 2025. The original ideas proposed for this effort included the development of wind and wave power, hydrogen transportation, and sustainable forestry, all with the support of international climate finance, including multilateral climate finance. At the moment, however, it looks like the experiment is mostly taking the form of switching from coal to natural gas; nevertheless, it is something to be followed.

The Role of Civil Society in Climate Action

Given the increasing political pressure and repression, real civil society hardly plays a role in defining, critically analyzing, and carrying out the climate agenda in Russia, even in comparison to the situation before the beginning of the full-scale war in Ukraine. All major international actors (Greenpeace, the WWF, Bellona, etc.) have been classified as "undesirable" and their work has essentially been banned in the country. Criticism from independent environmentalists and experts is often perceived by the authorities as threatening, enemy-like, and unacceptable. Many climate and environmental experts have also left Russia.

Nevertheless, many independent experts or employees of regional environmental organizations and initiatives continue to analyze the country's climate agenda, monitor potentially dangerous changes in environmental and climate legislation, and try to work with the public on climate issues. Several regional NGOs and civil society initiatives are also still trying to include educational and awareness-raising programs on climate change, including adaptation and mitigation, in their work, including their projects on water or air pollution, waste management, and sustainable forestry.

Finally, civil society actors close to the state (government-organized non-governmental organizations, or GONGOs, as well as others that occupy pro-state positions) are trying to appropriate and instrumentalize the climate agenda in the country. Their work in the climate sector is mostly built around regional climate adaptation programs and hardly ever around mitigation or further emissions-reduction efforts, since they do not challenge the claim that natural gas, large hydropower, and nuclear power (all state-approved solutions to climate change) should play a leading role in Russia's climate efforts.

Please see overleaf for Further Reading.

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ABOUT THE RUSSIAN ANALYTICAL DIGEST

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The Russian Analytical Digest is a bi-weekly internet publication jointly produced by the Research Centre for East European Studies [Forschungsstelle Osteuropa] at the University of Bremen (www.forschungsstelle.uni-bremen.de), the Center for Security Studies (CSS) at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology Zurich (ETH Zurich), the Center for Eastern European Studies at the University of Zurich (<http://www.cees.uzh.ch>), the Institute for European, Russian and Eurasian Studies at The George Washington University (<https://ieres.elliott.gwu.edu>), and the German Association for East European Studies (DGO). The Digest draws on contributions to the German-language *Russland-Analysen* (www.laender-analysen.de/russland), and the CSS analytical network on Russia and Eurasia (www.css.ethz.ch/en/publications/rad.html). The Russian Analytical Digest covers political, economic, and social developments in Russia and its regions, and looks at Russia's role in international relations.

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Responsible editor for this issue: Maria Tysiachniouk

Language editing: Ellen Powell

Layout: Marin Dziallas, Cengiz Kibaroglu, Matthias Neumann, Michael Clemens

ISSN 1863-0421 © 2024 by Forschungsstelle Osteuropa an der Universität Bremen, Bremen and Center for Security Studies, Zürich

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