

Cloudy Forecast for the Climate

RUSSIA'S CLIMATE POLICY IN A TIME OF WAR

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How will the war in Ukraine affect Russia's climate politics? Our research [demonstrates](#) that authoritarian regimes are not necessarily weak on climate policy. In fact, they may actively participate in negotiations on international climate agreements and develop robust climate policies at home. However, the Russian government's approach to climate change has been limited by the importance of energy exports to economic growth and hostility toward domestic climate activists, two tendencies that the current war has exacerbated.

Many observers have focused on the worldwide impact that Russia's war is likely to have on energy and climate policies, especially in Europe and the United States. The war's indirect and external effects on global efforts to address climate change are difficult to predict, as the upheaval in energy markets may lead to more rapid [decarbonization](#) or to countries relying on high carbon alternatives in the name of energy security. But for Russia's own climate policies, we argue that the war is likely to have a decidedly negative effect on the country's internal efforts to combat climate change for some time to come. Russia's war, in any case, will likely serve as a critical juncture for energy and climate policy globally.

Ambivalent Climate Policies

Moscow's progress on [developing](#) an ambitious climate policy was ambivalent even before the war. In recent years, the Russian government has made some progress in acknowledging the reality of climate change and pledging to address it. Russia ratified the Paris Climate Agreement and, in advance of the 26th Conference of Parties (COP) of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in Glasgow in 2021, the

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government updated its 2030 target to a 30 percent reduction of CO2 emissions below 1990 levels, a modest improvement over its previous target of 25-30 percent. However, given the 1990 baseline prior to the post-Soviet industrial collapse, the target [represents](#) an unambitious goal that Russia “will likely achieve... without the need for any additional climate policies.” President Vladimir Putin [set](#) 2060 as the target year for Russia to become carbon neutral, which is a modest goal compared to [many](#) countries targeting 2050, but it is at least a commitment.

The Russian government also recently produced some significant pieces of legislation and long-term plans related to climate change. In December 2019, it [announced](#) the National Action Plan for Adaptation to Climate Change. A bill on limiting and reporting greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions was also [passed](#) but represented a weak effort. In the midst of the acknowledgment that climate change presents a serious challenge to the country, [rhetoric](#) about the pluses and minuses of climate change remains prevalent. For example, the National Action Plan [outlined](#) measures to mitigate climate change damage and to “use the advantages” of warmer temperatures, such as greater access to Arctic waterways, expansion of agriculturally viable land, a possible increase in the “productivity” of boreal forests, and lower heating costs.

How might the war shift Russia’s climate policy from this equivocal baseline? Below we consider three sets of factors related to 1) Russia’s participation in the global governance of climate issues, 2) the opportunities and challenges facing Russian climate activists, and 3) the effects of sanctions on the Russian energy industry. In addition to these internal developments, we conclude with a few thoughts on the ambivalent external effects of these developments on other countries’ climate and energy policies.

Broken Global Engagement Spells Policy Bleakness

Russia’s war in Ukraine has disrupted international cooperation on a host of issues, including climate, even as it has instigated rapid change. On June 1, 2022, U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres captured this dynamic, [stating](#): “The sense of urgency in the debate on climate has, of course, suffered with the war in Ukraine. ... But I think this war has demonstrated one thing: How fragile is the world in its dependence on fossil fuels.” In the wake of its invasion of Ukraine, Russia’s participation in global governance efforts on climate and environment has been called into question domestically and by other countries.

Very early on, at least one of Russia’s climate representatives came out in opposition to the war. At a February 2022 IPCC meeting, Oleg Anisimov [said](#), “First of all, let me thank Ukraine and present an apology on behalf of all Russians who were not able to prevent this conflict. All of those who know what is happening fail to find any justification for this attack against Ukraine.” Some high-profile figures engaged in energy policy left the country, [including](#) Anatoly Chubais, the presidential envoy on sustainable development.

Following the invasion, some parliamentary representatives questioned Russia's continued participation in the Paris Agreement. Sergei Mironov, chair of the Federation Council and of the "A Just Russia" party, [suggested](#) withdrawing from Paris. Parliament member Georgy Arapov [argued](#) that Russia should reject environmental obligations that have "lost relevance," suggesting that Russia can protect its environment without international treaties. The Minister of Natural Resources, Alexander Kozlov, opposed withdrawal, emphasizing the country's significance to global climate policy, [stating](#), "The role of Russia in this process is huge. Our territory is 1/8 of the land, with more than 815 million hectares of forest cover. Russia, of course, is a global environmental donor." After some debate, the Duma decided against exiting the climate agreement.

Other varieties of climate cooperation have been suspended or called into question. The Umbrella Group, a coalition of non-EU developed countries operating under the Paris agreement, has [expelled](#) Russia. The Arctic Council, a key venue for cooperation on climate research, is not currently functioning as member states [refuse](#) to participate under Russia's current chairmanship. More broadly, in March 2022, the Ukrainian government [demanded](#) that Russia be excluded from a number of international environmental agreements, including the UNFCCC. International scientific cooperation also has been disrupted; the European Commission [decided](#) to "suspend the cooperation with Russian entities in research, science, and innovation," including through the Horizon Europe program. Russian scientists have begun to [lose access](#) to equipment and data necessary for continued climate monitoring.

Russia's participation has been halted in other global governance institutions that provide mechanisms that could incentivize more effective climate policies. For instance, Russia's expulsion from the Council of Europe has been widely discussed as a devastating break in its engagement with democratic and human rights mechanisms, but it also has implications for climate policy pressure. Recent litigation by activists in member states' domestic courts is working its way to the European Court of Human Rights (EctHR), which could require Council of Europe member states to take policy measures to prevent climate change harm to humans, including [halting](#) all further oil exploration. These decisions could have serious implications for any Council of Europe oil-producing states – of which Russia was by far the largest until its exit from the organization in March.

Increased Kremlin Repression Makes it More Difficult for Activists

Russia's lackluster and reluctant historical engagement with global climate action is [arguably](#) due in part to its resistance to engaging civil society actors. As we [show](#) in our research, climate activism has never been easy in Russia. As with many other areas of civic engagement the government considers threatening, climate activists have suffered from repressive legislation like the foreign agent and undesirable organization laws and from a lack of state receptivity to policy dialogue. During the 2021 UNFCCC meeting in Glasgow, the well-known Russian environmentalist Yevgeniya Chirikova, who has been

in exile since 2015, [noted](#) that “the authorities, unfortunately, continue to view climate action as de facto subversive” and that “activities to develop energy-saving technologies and reduce material consumption are seen as a ‘threat to the economic security’ of the country.”

Since the war began, these pressures have only increased, as they have for all forms of activism that could be seen as disagreeing with the government. With nearly all independent journalism and social media platforms restricted or fully blocked, and any critical statements about Russia’s role in the war criminally punishable, organizing becomes more dangerous, if not impossible. Like [many other](#) civil society activists, Arshak Makichyan, Russia’s most well-known youth climate activist, first [protested](#) the war and then left the country after being detained by the police. In an interview, Makichyan [described](#) how “It’s extremely difficult and dangerous to be an activist in Russia.” Prosecutors have [threatened](#) Makichyan with the loss of his Russian citizenship, which would leave him stateless.

Despite increasing state repression, many environmental NGOs and activists who have been actively working on climate change issued statements following the invasion. Greenpeace Russia [issued](#) a call for peace, and Vladimir Slivyak of Ecodefense [supported](#) sanctions against the country. The Council of the Russian Socioecological Union (RSEU), the largest national network of environmentalists, [issued](#) a statement expressing concern about “events in Ukraine,” stating: “War is the worst thing that can happen to people and to nature. Any military action takes human lives and has a profound negative impact on the environment.”

At the same time, international cooperation on climate change has become more difficult for activists as well, given the challenge of sharing financial resources and information. For example, the Norwegian environmental organization Bellona, which had been active in Russia for 30 years, [withdrew](#) from the country. WWF Russia [issued](#) a plea for financial support “in these difficult times” when they cannot easily access funding.

Energy Industry Hurdles and Damaging Alternatives

Sanctions on Russia’s economy in response to the war have created significant difficulties for Russia’s energy industry. Multinational energy companies have left Russia, meaning that many joint extractive projects are unlikely to proceed. Thane Gustafson, an expert on Russian energy and climate, [argues](#) that sanctions will deprive Russian energy companies of the foreign investment and technologies necessary to develop new, more challenging oil and gas fields and to drill offshore in the Arctic. The EU has [announced](#) a series of plans to reduce its dependence on Russian energy sources, and Russia has simultaneously [cut](#) gas supplies to some EU countries. While sanctions may reduce fossil fuel consumption, Russia also may [find](#) alternative customers in India and China. And thus far, the war-related sanctions have produced a [boom](#) in fossil-fuel income for Russia.

Sanctions may have other unintended consequences, however. As [we](#) and [others](#) have argued, the small improvements Russia has made to its environmental strategies to this point can be explained significantly by external pressures and incentives, such as import requirements of European markets. If Russia pivots from Western countries as targets for its oil and gas exports towards less carbon-stringent destinations like China and India (as [incomplete](#) as that pivot may be), it may have even fewer short-term material incentives to reduce its GHG emissions. As Angelina Davydova has [pointed out](#), corporate withdrawals from Russia in response to the war have also put much investment in renewable energy in Russia on hold.

Prompted by pressure from economic sanctions, Russian businesses have begun to ask for respite from environmental regulations. *Izvestia* [reported](#) that Russian businesses, including [Lukoil](#), have been asking the government to postpone the implementation of the country's greenhouse gas reduction strategy. Shortly after the invasion began, in early March 2022, the Russian Union of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs (RSPP) [requested](#) that the Russian government postpone the start of the Sakhalin regional pilot project for capping carbon emissions from this September to September 2023. The much-hailed program was to introduce gas emission quotas in the region from 2024 and serve as a case study for other areas. *Kommersant* reported that the Ministry of Energy [formulated](#) a plan to support the energy sector. Among many elements, the plan acknowledged that the current crisis means that the industry is not expected to meet the country's decarbonization plans.

For its part, RSEU released a statement in May on the effects of the domestic policies meant to alleviate sanctions pressures, such as de-bureaucratization and simplified licensing procedures across sectors. It [cautioned](#): "The trend of de-decolonization and restriction on the rights of citizens to participate in environmental protection in the country has emerged and is becoming more and more aggressive." It went on to say that some of the government's [efforts](#) have "a direct negative impact on ensuring the environmental security of the country and regions and the ability of citizens to exercise the right to a healthy environment." It notes that the reduced levels of state environmental reviews have created problems in construction, disposal of waste (including hazardous waste), drinking water sources, land use and zoning, and delays in current and planned ecological projects.

Conclusion

While the risks to Russia's domestic progress on addressing climate change are evident, more difficult to assess is the effect of Russia's war in Ukraine on climate policy in other countries. Sanctions against Russia's energy exports may speed up some countries' decarbonization efforts but slow them down for others. The disruption to global energy markets has reinvigorated debates about "energy security," which could mean less reliance on fossil fuels from Russia, but not necessarily fossil fuels overall, as some

European countries may seize the opportunity to accelerate decarbonization, while others will temporarily justify using other fossil fuels like replacement of existing natural gas with [imported LNG](#), or worse yet domestic [coal](#) despite its carbon intensity.

Climate change even appears to have become part of the information war between Russia and the West in recent weeks. The Russian Green Party critiqued the EU's decarbonization and sanctions policy simultaneously, [suggesting](#) that in the West, "some countries are trying to shift the fight for climate control to others or even just solve some of their problems at someone else's expense, hiding behind the climate threat." They argue that a shift in Europe from using Russian oil and gas to using dirtier fossil fuel sources from other parts of the world will lead to increased GHG emissions.

What is clear is that, in the Russian policy context, one of the casualties of the invasion of Ukraine is any prospect for climate action in the foreseeable future. This is a depressing turn of events, as there had appeared to be some potential for an improved policy just prior to the war, and the climate emergency in Russia and throughout the world is becoming ever-more urgent.