

Adaptation to Climate Change in Repressive Regimes: Authoritarian Environmentalism in Russia

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At the beginning of the year, the Russian government published the ‘National Action Plan for the First Phase of Adaptation to Climate Change for the Period up to 2022’. It recognised that climate change has a growing impact on the state’s socio-economic development, living conditions, and human health. The Action Plan declares the Russian government’s intentions to mitigate the effects of climate change on the population, environment, and economy, and introduces ‘a state system of measures’ to be implemented by the federal and regional authorities. Some media has hailed the Kremlin’s new policy as a milestone in joining the international community in recognising the threats of climate change. However, the Action Plan should primarily be seen as an example of authoritarian environmentalism: the government reserves itself an exclusive right to implement climate policy, neglecting the role of civil society. It thereby aims to bolster the state’s geo-economic interests and suppress environmentalist organisations and activists, while flaunting international climate change agreements.

Geo-economic interests over the environment

Countering the effects of climate change fundamentally entails reducing greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, but the extraction of natural resources, notably oil, coal, and gas, is crucial to the Russian economy. While the Action Plan recognises that Russia’s global warming rate is 2.5 times higher than the world average, acknowledges the threats associated with that and pledges to introduce policy changes, there have been few indications of the government’s intentions to reduce its reliance on fossil fuels. On the contrary, President Vladimir Putin has expressed doubts about the argument that climate change is caused by human activity and has been openly critical of renewable energy sources. According to Energy Minister Alexander Novak, the share of renewable energy in the state’s energy balance would only rise to 4% by 2035.

Russia is the world's fourth-largest emitter of greenhouse gas (after China, the US, and India), which owes much to the increased coal production by 35% since 2008. In the Arctic region, Russia has continued to build coal ports. For instance, the Lavna terminal in Kola Bay, which is to be completed in 2022, is expected to have the capacity of handling 18 million tons of coal annually. Even though Russia joined the Paris Agreement in September 2019, the energy sector's decarbonisation is not part of its latest policy. In the 2020 'Russian Energy Strategy for the Period up to 2035', the Paris Agreement is only mentioned once in passing, while the country's coal production is set to continue to grow, aiming to increase Russia's share in the global coal market.

Not least importantly, the Action Plan is quite candid about the link between climate change and Russia's geo-economic interests. It explicitly emphasises the positive outcomes of climate change, namely that it 'creates new opportunities for the state's economy', and indicates the Kremlin's intentions to use those advantages. A warming climate provides major new possibilities to boost the Russian economy by facilitating conditions for the use of the Arctic seas and by enabling better access to the continental shelf. In March, President Putin signed a decree 'On the Basics of State Policy of the Russian Federation in the Arctic for the Period until 2035', revealing an ambitious plan for the region. It includes constructing railways, seaports, upgrading airports, and building Arctic vessels in order to facilitate the exploitation of natural resources and increase the production of oil, gas, liquified natural gas, and chemical products.

Suppression of environmentalists

Significantly, the Action Plan exhibits a top-down policy approach and fails to acknowledge the role of civil society in addressing the issues arising from climate change. Russia's 'state system of measures' includes the suppression of environmentalist organisations and activists. This is consistent with the government's policy of restricting civil society's activities by enforcement of the 2012 federal law 'On Amendments to Certain Legislative Acts of the Russian Federation Regarding the Regulation of the Activities of Non-Commercial Organisations Performing the Functions of a Foreign Agent', otherwise known as the 'foreign agent' law. The law enables the government to declare nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) and, as of December 2019, also individuals that receive funding from abroad and engage in political activities as 'foreign agents', forcing them to suspend or cease their work.

Since the enactment of the law, Russian authorities have used it to suppress dozens of environmental organisations, such as Baikal Environmental Wave, Planet of Hopes, Northern Nature Conservation Coalition, Dront Environmental Centre, and Gebler Ecological Society, for their attempts to influence the state's environmental policy. Environmental activists have also faced harassment, threats, and physical attacks, as a result of which some have been forced to flee the country and seek asylum abroad. Numerous international institutions and organisations, including the European Union, the OSCE, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and Bellona, have repeatedly expressed their concerns about the 'foreign agent' law's severe repercussions for environmental activism and urged the Russian government to abolish it.

Suppression of civil society not only violates human rights treaties, such as the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), but also refutes international climate change agreements. Failure to acknowledge civil society as an actor in the process of adaptation to climate change contradicts the Paris

Agreement, which explicitly '[w]elcomes the efforts of all non-Party stakeholders to address and respond to climate change, including those of civil society (...)' (art. 133). Civil society, including environmental NGOs, played a key role in crafting the Paris Agreement itself and then compelled governments to sign it. The United Nations has stated on multiple occasions that partnerships between the governments and civil society are essential to achieving the goals of the climate change agreements.

Conclusion

Vast oil and gas reserves hidden in the melting Arctic will continue to drive Russia's rapid development of the extractive industry in the North in the pursuit of national economic interests. It goes without saying that Russia is not the only state placing geo-economic interests above environmental concerns. China, the world's largest producer of coal, increased both production and consumption of coal in 2019. Prioritising national interests, the US has exited the Paris Agreement altogether, and due to US resistance on climate-related commitments, the Arctic Council ministerial meeting held in Rovaniemi in May 2019 failed to agree on a joint declaration. Even in Canada, where total GHG emissions have not gone up over the last two decades, the development of oil sands industry contributed significantly to a 23% increase of GHG emission levels from gas and oil production between 2000 and 2018. However, it remains essential that civil society in general and environmental NGOs and activists in particular are allowed to contribute to a system of checks and balances, ensuring state accountability in environmental governance.

The increasing expansion of oil, gas, and coal infrastructure in the Russian Arctic will likely result in a clampdown on more environmental organisations and activists. Such policy, rooted in what can be labelled as authoritarian environmentalism, grossly undermines the role of civil society in addressing environmental and climate change issues, and it contradicts Russia's international commitments.