

CLIMATE NEUTRALITY THE RUSSIAN WAY

To achieve climate neutrality, Russia reforms as little as possible but uses big words.

Russia takes steps to do what is good for its economy while showing how great it is for everyone else.

Russia is positioning to be the rule-maker, not letting anyone else dictate terms.

For a long time, the Russian leadership considered climate change insignificant and questioned the human factor as its cause. At a press conference in late 2019, Russian President Vladimir Putin stated that no one knew the real cause of climate change. This convenient position is no longer tenable, as climate issues are increasingly at the heart of international politics. Russia wants to influence the global climate debate, which requires a clearly defined climate policy. Ranking fourth in the world in terms of carbon dioxide emissions inevitably puts Russia in an uncomfortable position. At the same time, Russia is increasingly experiencing the effects of climate change in the Arctic – for example, in May 2021, temperatures on the Barents Sea coast were anomalously higher than in some parts of the Mediterranean.

According to Russia, climate neutrality is a policy imposed by the West. The most important thing for Russia is to avoid new international climate commitments that would force it to fundamentally change its oil- and gas-based economic model, as this could weaken the political regime and pave the way for social unrest. In 2020, 30% of Russia's declared state budget revenues came from fossil fuels, including \$40 billion from the sale of gas to Europe. Therefore, Russia's development hangs on these revenues. Another thing to bear in mind is that the Russian leadership does not see climate change as an existential threat to humanity nor to its security but rather as one important issue to be addressed among many others. Russian confrontation with the West culminated in December 2021 when Russia vetoed the UN climate and security resolution, claiming it to be a Western attempt to politicize climate policy.

The most important thing for Russia is to avoid changes in its oil- and gas-based economic model.

This stance does not mean that Russia is not interested in more climate-friendly solutions, such as green technology, investment in cleaner energy or scientific cooperation with Western countries, in the Arctic, to name a few. In this way, Russia can present itself to the West as being cooperative and, simultaneously, finance projects for which it lacks funds from the state budget. However, the Russian leadership is still arrogant and sceptical about renewable energy. For example, during the Russian Energy Week in October 2021, the Russian head of state questioned the reliability of renewable energy sources.

Over the past year, Russia has approved climate and environmental programmes, development plans, projects and laws aimed at, among other things, measuring carbon emissions, supporting climate research, and encouraging the reduction of CO₂ emissions. This push is because the entire topic has been out of focus in Russia until recently, and it has become necessary to define the basic principles of the policy approach. For example, at the November 2021 COP 26 UN Climate Change Conference Russia committed to achieving carbon neutrality by 2060, similar to Chinese commitments. At the same time, Russia's strategy in the Arctic, adopted in October 2020, remains in force, with a stated intention of increasing Russian oil production by 66% by 2035 compared to 2018. In other words, parallel to transitioning to a more climate-friendly economy, Russia will continue to export fossil fuels in the same volumes.

Regarding climate policy, the Russian president has pointed out the need to continue using and exporting natural gas, which Russia claims will also ensure Europe's energy security. Vladimir Putin has also argued that nuclear energy has a smaller carbon footprint than solar energy. This "greening" of natural gas and nuclear energy is directly related to Russia's own economic and export interests. In addition, the Russian leader has referred to forests as an important tool for reducing the carbon footprint. At the Saint Petersburg Economic Forum in 2021, Putin stated that Russia's forests could absorb several billion tons of CO₂ a year, with Deputy Prime Minister Viktoria Abramchenko later specifying this to be 2.5 billion tons. As Russia's annual carbon emissions are about 1.7 billion tons, the president sought to send the message that the carbon problem will be solved and "eliminated" by Russian nature.

Russian researchers will have to prove that Russian forests can fully neutralise the country's carbon emissions.

Russia does not want to accept terms dictated by the West nor international organisations regarding standards, reporting or climate goals. That is why Russia is critical of, for example, the European Union's Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism, viewing it as a threat to its trade and economy. Russia wants to independently develop its own methodology for calculating CO₂ emissions and gain international recognition for its proposals. This will likely force Russian researchers to focus efforts among others on proving that Russian forests can fully neutralise the country's carbon emissions. Paradoxically, this



Climate activists demonstrating against the establishment of the fund for climate and environmental protection in Germany. The fund was to be supported by Nord Stream 2 and is perceived as an example of "greenwashing".

Source: Odd Andersen / AFP

must be done in a situation where forest fires in Siberia are becoming more widespread and lasting longer, causing the release of carbon dioxide and methane and contributing to global warming.

In January 2021, a climate discussion with experts from the Baltic Sea region was secretly affiliated with Yevgeny Prigozhin, one of Russia's best-known curators of influence campaigns.

Russia is willing to mobilise other countries to jointly oppose Western measures, including initiatives of the European Union. This is both an economic battle and part of an ideological opposition to the West. Russia is looking for allies from both the developing world and among major industrialised countries such as China and India. Even Western countries have disagreements on means to achieve climate neutrality. Among the EU member states, for example, there are differing opinions on how green nuclear energy is. Russia can deepen such rifts through public and covert influence operations.

Russia is also able to create or exploit tensions within Western countries. In January 2021, the Mecklenburg-Vorpommern state parliament in Germany voted in favour of setting up a climate and environmental fund in which Nord Stream 2 was to invest 20 million euros, further committing to continue to support its activities with 60 million euros. One of the reasons for setting up the fund was to circumvent possible US sanctions. German environmental activists saw this as an example of greenwashing.

Climate issues are attractive to Western interlocutors - Russia can use this to shape debates without the audience initially understanding or realising that Russia is abusing the topic to exert influence in other policy areas. The initial discussion on environmental topics creates a trusting and friendly atmosphere and provides Russia with contacts that it can later exploit for other foreign policy purposes. In January 2021, a climate discussion was held virtually with environmental experts from the Baltic Sea region. However, what was not publicised was the event's organisers' affiliation with AFRIC (Association for Free Research and International Cooperation), a shadow organisation run by Yevgeny Prigozhin, one of Russia's best-known curators of influence campaigns in the West.

In our assessment, Russia is using Western countries' interest in climate issues to steer debates in a way that benefits Russia. To this end, it uses both overt as well as covert influence operations. Russia's concept of climate neutrality is based on natural gas, nuclear energy and forests. This concept is also lobbied internationally. At the same time, Russia considers it important to develop an "independent" system for measuring its carbon footprint and obtain recognition from other countries and organisations. Having its own system would allow Russia to statistically demonstrate a reduction in carbon emissions while effectively continuing with its current economic model.