Russian Environmental Politics: Reading Between the Lines—The Wounds of War, and What We Must Know

3 April 2024

Explorations

Ruined houses in Borodianka, Ukraine, as a result of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, 6 April 2022. © misu on **Adobe Stock**. All rights reserved.

by Vita Lacis

On the morning of 24 February 2022, I woke up to pictures and videos of Russian tanks rolling into Ukrainian cities and Russian planes dropping bombs on Ukrainian residential areas, which look so painfully familiar to anyone who spent most of their life in an identical *khrushchevka* somewhere in the Murmansk region, Khabarovsk, or Moscow. Dumbfounded and petrified, I went to the office of the independent environmental journal in Moscow, where I was an editor at the time. The sinking feeling of how meaningless all my work of the last two years had seemingly become was overwhelming. Now that our country was waging war on its neighbor, what's the point of writing an analysis of the latest decarbonization laws or reporting on air pollution in coal-powered Siberian cities?

Just a day before, we published a long read about the many ways war damages, destroys, and disrupts natural environments, and how it creates open wounds on the Earth's surface as deep as the ones made by it on the human psyche. The level of destruction brought by twenty-first-century warfare leaves behind traces that would be felt even several decades after the war's end, we wrote, only to see our warnings turn into prophecies right before our own eyes.

Anti-war stickers in Moscow, March–April 2022. The one on the left says, "They wage the war; we pay for it. [Sign] a petition against the war." The one on the right says, "Just remember that we are the majority. No to war." © The author. All rights reserved.

It's hard to describe the atmosphere of these first days and weeks: the air felt thick with existential dread and profound surrealism, like a nightmare you fight to wake up from only to find out that there is nothing to wake up to. But it also created a sense of urgency and readiness to do whatever it takes to stop the war. This is what brought people in Russia to the streets that very evening, and the next one, and the one after it; this is what keeps alive the acts of resistance now—by activists and "ordinary" people, **schoolchildren** and their **teachers**, **students** and **professors**, **housewives** and **pensioners**, **factory workers**, and **bartenders**. This is what brought me first to the protests, then to the Moscow streets in the middle of the night, putting anti-war leaflets on the walls while trying to avoid the omnipresent cameras and occasional police patrols, and, finally, to writing this blog—driven by the deep conviction that things *can* and *will* be different, that there is no inevitability in the destruction and death brought by the Russian state on millions of Ukrainian people.

Just as Putin's war is not a foregone conclusion, neither is Russia's role as one of the world's biggest fossil-fuel suppliers, upholding and reinforcing the environmentally destructive status quo. Any potential change, however, first demands an analysis of Russia's current condition. This is becoming increasingly difficult due to Russia closing access to previously open information: data on **oil production** and on **registered private properties** is no longer available, and the state's Open Data Portal was **closed altogether**. Additionally, the Russian government is **ramping up** the number of criminal cases against treason and espionage that are usually associated with data "leaks." The main suspects in these are **scientists**, **journalists**, or people who work for **the military-industrial complex**. The majority of these people has nothing to do with actual espionage and doesn't even have access to classified information. At the same time that there is a drive to distance oneself from anything that is Russian—from oil and gas to knowledge production and culture—all across the social spectrum around the globe, the rising level of secrecy and governmental repression makes it much harder to understand what is happening in Russia.

What We See, and What We Cannot See

So, how exactly do these developments influence the environmental sciences and humanities? First of all, a lack of information leads to a lack of expertise. With the

Russian government driving so many leading academics to emigrate and leaving them unable to access their field directly, the perspective on events in Russia inevitably gets distorted. A few louder voices usually offer only the most sweeping and speculative interpretations and substitute thorough study and reporting with either rekindled Kremlinology or essentialist approaches not preoccupied with the analysis of causes and effects, tendencies, and mechanisms. This means that even with renewed interest in Russian affairs, we are stuck with several self-referential explanations: propaganda, colonialism, and totalitarianism. While these characteristics might be true in themselves, they are not always bringing us closer to understanding how society, government, and research function in Russia and how they have transformed in reaction to the war. Both wartime-secrecy measures and international isolation further complicate the efforts to fight climate change and multiple other environmental crises we face on a planetary scale. Russian environmental, climate, and energy policies are increasingly becoming a black box, being judged by the outgoing signals—official statements and documents, TV propaganda, public polling, and hearsay.

As a result, this distortion prevents us from understanding how events and changes in Russia influence the rest of the world. The existing expertise on contemporary Russia is extremely polarized: the Russian state is either built for failure and completely ineffective (this characteristic is usually reserved for economic, environmental, and science-and-technology affairs) or—on the contrary—omnipotent and ubiquitous (usually reserved for propaganda and secret services). Sanctions, economic development, energy policy, and attitudes toward the war—suddenly, all of these highly important matters become undecipherable. As a result of these factors, climate and environmental policies, events, and approaches are deemed of secondary significance and don't receive the attention they should. This is utterly baffling considering just how important these developments are for the future of humankind and the planet.

Life in Russia hasn't stopped with the invasion, catering only to the criminal war effort. Climate and environmental affairs are still very much at the center of the government's policies and business strategies. Just recently, a new climate doctrine **was signed** by the president. Within two years, we've seen an enclosure of data on weather and climate, air quality, and forest clearings; the suspension and relaxation of technical and ecological regulations for manufacturing and construction; and the curtailment of the state-funded program on air-quality improvement. The Russian government banned all prominent environmental organizations in the country while working to develop "green" diplomacy tactics at the international level. They also introduced carbon-management

laws as well as the national plan for climate adaptation and mitigation, which both involve hundreds of different measures, from monitoring to massive infrastructural changes.

Moreover, a variety of new research and development programs have been started in the Russian Arctic. At the same time, in the southern part of the country, climate change-induced blackouts ignited one of the largest **public protests** since the start of the war. European green-energy projects in Russia have been suspended. And the Russian **nuclear industry's involvement** in multiple projects across the world only grew. These and many other developments have consequences far beyond Russian borders. They also go along with the continuing ecocide in Ukraine, from the constant threat of nuclear disaster in the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant and the Kakhovka Dam blowout to the enormous soil damage from machinery, mines, and heavy metals.

Russia is the world's fourth-biggest CO_2 emitter, carries on ever-expanding ecosystem destruction, and takes on an increasingly aggressive and imperialistic foreign policy aimed at turning itself into a "beacon of hope" for the most reactionary political forces in the world. Without thoroughly documenting and analyzing Russia's environmental, climate, and energy policies, we can't address the massive challenges that come with them.

What Is to Be Done

Reading through this text, you might start to wonder what exactly would change if we were able to fill in the gaps and circumvent Russia's secrecy, if we were able to learn more about environmental policies, changes, and struggles inside Russia. We already know the most important thing: the Russian state is destructive and authoritarian, and so are its environmental policies. Global interconnectedness brought to us in the past 40 years means that environmental protests in a far-off Russian town can reverberate around to affect German university students, businesspeople in Brazil, or Mauritanian fishermen. Only by untangling this knot of subtle fibers that keep our world together can we find effective ways to express our solidarity with the most affected and bring about meaningful changes.

In the 1960s, many West German students were preoccupied with a similar problem, appalled by US aggression against Vietnam. They were wondering how they could express their solidarity with Vietnamese peasants thousands of kilometers away. In the context of these debates, Herbert Marcuse proposed a distinction between "solidarity of interests"

and “solidarity of sentiment.” If solidarity of interest relied on finding concrete links between the material conditions of the people in Germany and Vietnam, solidarity of sentiment necessitated no such thing—people could be moved by someone’s struggle just because they cared for their fellow human beings. Marcuse believed that the solidarity of sentiment could provide a leap of identification that would help the student movement find new, revolutionary politics. His optimistic outlook was very much in the spirit of the times, with worldwide emancipation looming large on the horizon of political thought and action.

We, however, live in a very different epoch. The Ukrainians’ fight against Russian imperialism brought people from all over the world to the streets in a massive wave of solidarity of sentiment. However, lacking a shared vision of a better future for everyone, a movement of liberation not only for the Ukrainians but for the oppressed people everywhere, this strong feeling gradually withered away, exhausting itself in the gesture. Only by bridging the widening gap between *here* and *there*, *us* and *them*, the climate crisis and the crisis of government can we see how and where exactly we can apply our feelings of injustice and our desire for change.

Just like two years ago, I am writing an article about war, people, and nature. Just like two years ago, I know that things can and should be different. It’s not hope yet, but it might be soil where hope can grow. I don’t claim to have all-encompassing expertise in the matters I briefly outlined—a lifetime wouldn’t be enough to gain this. However, over the next few months, with the help of activists, journalists, and scientists who have stayed in Russia and continue their work there, I will in the forthcoming posts try to present a comprehensive picture of new developments in Russian climate and environmental policies and their impact on the rest of the world.

In the next article: Russia might have dodged the hardest economic damage of European and American sanctions, but at what cost? One of the first effects of the war was the increasing irrelevance of environmental protection measures. Read it **here**.

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