

Russian Environmental Politics: Reading Between the Lines—New Climate, New Strategy: Betting on the Revival of Mammoths over the End of Fossil Fuels

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Explorations



Members of Russian delegation from left: Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov, Russian Presidential climate envoy Ruslan Edelgeriev, head of Russia's Chechen Republic Ramzan Kadyrov and Russian Central Bank Governor Elvira Nabiullina speak to each other as they wait to attend an official welcome ceremony prior to the talks between Emirati President Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan and Russian President Vladimir Putin at Qasr Al Watan, Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates, Wednesday, Dec. 6, 2023. (Sergei Savostyanov, Sputnik, Kremlin Pool Photo via AP)

Members of the Russian delegation at COP28 in Dubai. From left to right: Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov, Russian Presidential Climate Envoy Ruslan Edelgeriev, head of Russia's Chechen Republic Ramzan Kadyrov, and Russian Central Bank Governor Elvira Nabiullina speak to each other as they wait to attend an official welcome ceremony prior to the talks between Emirati President Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan and Russian President Vladimir Putin at Qasr Al Watan, Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates, 6 December 2023. © picture alliance; ASSOCIATED PRESS; Sergei Savostyanov. All rights reserved.

by Vita Lacis

On 26 October 2023, Vladimir Putin signed a revised version of the Climate Doctrine of the Russian Federation—a high-profile document that determines the climate policies of the state on all levels, from international to municipal. Although only an updated version of the previous Climate Doctrine, released in 2009, the Doctrine illuminates the pathway to “decarbonization” Russia has chosen. Quite symbolically, this plan—forged by the country that is currently waging a war of conquest against neighboring Ukraine—does not entail the phaseout of fossil fuels. What are the political and economic motivations behind the new Doctrine?

Ahead of the 2023 UN Climate Change Conference in Dubai (COP28), the Russian state decided to signal to the “outer” world that they haven’t forgotten their responsibility to tackle climate change and intend to fulfill their obligations. The Russian Ministry of Economic Development prepared and the president signed an updated version of the country’s Climate Doctrine. This document is a road map for all lower-level climate laws, measures, and policies in Russia (federal, regional, and sectorial). It sets the following focus areas: climate monitoring, climate projects, adaptation measures, energy efficiency, and the development of renewable energy sources, and it provides a baseline for potential “green-diplomacy” efforts. With the doctrine’s time in force amounting to decades, its legacy will remain influential for a very long time, provided that the current political regime stays in power.

What can the Doctrine tell us about the direction of Russia’s climate policy, and the signals it sends to the Global South and its potential allies in the Global North? There is a certain irony in the timing of the Doctrine’s release. The Dubai summit will be remembered as an event of back-door oil deals and intense lobbying from oil-rich nations and fossil-fuel companies—a place where Russian officials and businesspeople feel quite at home. In 2023, the state-owned Abu Dhabi National Oil Company alone sought or closed deals with international companies from 20 countries potentially worth 100 billion dollars, all present at COP. According to the leaked reports, the company’s talking points “were included in every brief throughout the lead up to COP28, pre-COP, and even during

COP28 itself.” This is a place where the Russian Doctrine fits right in: a literally smoke-filled room where record oil deals are closed in the name of the climate crisis.

Reading between the Lines

The glaring omission compared to the version from 2009—as some Russian climate experts note—is that there is not a single mention of fossil fuels in the updated Doctrine. While there are several paragraphs that mention the “anthropogenic character” of climate change, the necessity for decarbonization, and “low-carbon development,” none of them explicitly focus on fossil fuels as the main driver of the climate crisis. Since the Russian economy still heavily relies on the excess profits from oil, gas, and coal exports, it is not a stretch to assume that this omission was a conscious one.

Even more striking than this omission is what Russia sets as their nationally determined contributions (NDC) to the global fight against climate change: by 2030, Russia’s net-emissions should be 54 percent of the emissions in 1990, which equals 1673 million tonnes of CO₂. Igor Makarov, head of the School of World Economy at the Higher School of Economics in Moscow, notes that this means keeping emissions roughly at the same level as in 2021. This is hardly surprising to anyone who follows Russian climate politics, but on an international level, such an unambitious goal from the world’s fourth biggest carbon emitter might become a reason for rightful pushback from the UN institutions, activist groups, and those most vulnerable to climate change.

With only about 10–15 percent of additional text, the Doctrine is quite similar to the 2009 version, so it makes sense to focus on the updated parts. To begin with, the new text introduces the notions of “technological neutrality” and “scientific validity,” which are repeatedly invoked in the part of the Doctrine that covers Russia’s measures against climate change. These concepts are supposed to ensure the “use of all available technologies” to curb emissions (a thinly veiled reference to nuclear energy and hydropower, which are traditionally strong in Russia), as well as the recognition of the equivalence of measures to reduce and those to capture carbon emissions. Carbon capture and removal technologies have attracted a lot of criticism. However, most notably, at the moment, they don’t exist on any significant scale—neither in Russia nor anywhere else in the world. This is not addressed in the Doctrine, which doesn’t specify the intended approaches to carbon capture beyond “increasing the ecosystem’s absorbing capacity.”

With solar- and wind-powered renewables comprising less than one percent of Russia’s energy production and their share not expected to grow to more than 10 percent

by 2050, according to the Russian Ministry of Energy, it's abundantly clear that the Russian state is banking on fossil fuels along with other, "technologically neutral energy sources."

Nuclear energy—the other part of the "technologically neutral" formula—is currently experiencing a period of a rapid growth and expansion: Rosatom, a highly influential state-run Russian nuclear corporation, remains relatively unaffected by sanctions (and there probably won't be any serious crackdown for the time being, with France, Finland, the Czech Republic, Bulgaria, Slovakia, and Hungary depending on their supplies of nuclear fuel and/or technologies). This is due to the fact that Russia dominates the supply of enriched uranium worldwide, with as much as 27.7 percent of nuclear fuel being produced in the federation. Even the wealthiest countries do not have the capacity to replace enriched uranium from Russia with raw materials and supplies from other sources—while option of retiring existing reactors is not being seriously considered.

On top of that, Rosatom is actively working toward expanding its nuclear projects abroad—from Bolivia to Mali and from Egypt to Bangladesh. In the last four years, the company has seen a more than twofold growth in its overseas revenues. With its huge infrastructure projects, which not only include the nuclear plants and their maintenance but also, for example, correspondent medical centers for the local population, Russia is offering countries in the Global South something that can be perceived as energy independence on comparably advantageous terms. In Bangladesh, for instance, the US nuclear-power company Westinghouse Electric Company LLC offered its services to the state but could not compete with Rosatom's offer. The latter promised to finance up to 90 percent of the project at stake with debt repayment on minimum interest rates spread out over decades. Add to that the general unwillingness of many Global South governments to deal with US and European companies due to centuries of colonialism, and the picture becomes clear: the majority of the countries in the Global South see economic benefit in working with Russia over the US or EU.



Rooppur Nuclear Power Plant, Bangladesh, constructed by Rosatom. Photo by Mahmudur Rahman. Public domain.

Another of the many worrying signs pointing toward the Russian government's unwillingness to act upon climate change, is that the Doctrine gives priority to climate monitoring and adaptation measures over mitigation and prevention. While not listing any specific adaptation measures, the text emphasizes that such measures should be region-specific and consider "economic, social, and other relevant factors," including the potential benefits of climate change in certain regions.

The Doctrine provides a whole paragraph on the positive consequences of climate change, such as the opening of the Northern Sea Route, a longer period of vegetation in Central Russia, less need for fuel for heating, and, finally, "facilitated access to and development of the Arctic shelves"—which have vast offshore oil and gas deposits. It hardly seems as if the Russian government has any intention to stop or even lower fossil-fuel production. Their emphasis on the positive consequences of climate change becomes even more absurd in the light of the Doctrine's preceding paragraphs, which state that climate change is "the most intense" on Russian territory and that its "primarily negative" effects include "growing risks for the population's health (increase in morbidity and mortality)." With its focus on adaptation measures and making the most out of the few opportunities that present themselves, the Doctrine shows Russia's true colors.



A bridge in the Altai Mountains, which turned “woozy” because of the melting permafrost. © 2021 Alexey Litvinov. All rights reserved.

Compared to the previous version, the 2023 Doctrine places more emphasis on security issues associated with climate change and the indirect consequences of climate change, such as the economic ramifications of the energy transition, climate migration, and reputational risks. Unfortunately, this aspect follows a larger global trend, in which climate change and the “green” economy increasingly merge with matters of “national security,” often at the cost of international cooperation in the fight against climate change.

In a similar vein, the Doctrine outlines the need for “independence in assessments and conclusions about the current and expected impacts of climate change” and the “ability to provide for [its] own technological needs” when it comes to climate solutions, strengthening the discourse of “sovereign science” adopted after the start of the Russian war on Ukraine in 2022. Here, the country’s growing isolation is presented as a desired outcome. This is not surprising in a world where economic fragmentation and political confrontation have become a new obsession. For Russia this angle is of prime importance, as it tries to present the economic pushback it has received from the EU and other states since the invasion, as an act of aggression. In the Doctrine, Russia alludes to that with its criticism of the EU’s Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM), a recently introduced

carbon tariff on carbon-intensive products. The phrasing “undue discrimination in the adoption of climate-change measures affecting international trade” was clearly meant as a criticism of the CBAM and similar measures.

When it actually comes to climate action, the text places emphasis on economic and regulatory mechanisms and stimuli. This implies that climate change can only be made visible and addressed through markets and as a market—a good representation of the Russian Ministry of Economic Development’s trademark neoliberal and technocratic approach. It is in this vein that the Doctrine introduces “climate projects,” represented as a “beacon” of Russian climate policies since the start of the war. However, this beacon is nothing more than carbon offsets under a slightly different name. And carbon offsets don’t really drive down emissions. But we already know this is not the goal of the Russian Climate Doctrine.

Climate Action with Russian Characteristics

It’s also interesting to take a look at how, and by whom, the Russian Climate Doctrine was presented at COP28. The children of Chechnya’s strongman, Ramzan Kadyrov, were a part of the Russian delegation at the summit, making their first international public appearance. They even addressed the Palestinian delegation, emphasizing the urgency of social and humanitarian action as part of climate-action programs. This is a perfect example of the outward-facing side of Russian climate policy, something Russian climate expert Angelina Davydova calls “green diplomacy.” The goal is to restore Russia’s legitimacy at the international level and make a plea to the Global South for what Russia advertises as a “more just” multipolar world order with a more just green transition.

The message of “sovereignty” that Russia espouses proves to be quite popular, especially among countries that suffered European colonialism. By arguing that the goals of the Paris Agreement could be reached in different ways—without “sacrificing” economic growth and prosperity or phasing out fossil fuels—Russia has found a way to adapt this message to climate policy. Of course, this fresh anti-colonial vigor is only one side of the coin, as Russian leadership continues to seek ways to recover severed economic ties—including the supply of fossil fuels—to Europe (the aforementioned colonial actors) by supporting far-right political parties, who happen to be the most hostile to the Global South.

Pleistocene Park Pavilion at COP28

<https://vimeo.com/921932529>



A promo video for the Russian pavilion at the COP28 in Dubai, 2024, which showcases its main highlight, the Pleistocene Park. While looking very futuristic and glossy, the video doesn't touch upon the climate crisis, only demonstrating to us the (im)possible solution to it—reviving mammoths—as though it has already been achieved.

But what became the main attraction Russia presented in Dubai was the Pleistocene Park pavilion, advertising an ambitious geoengineering experiment of the same name initiated by Russian scientist Sergey Zimov almost 30 years ago in Yakutia. The idea behind it is that by bringing large animals to the tundra, its ecosystem can be transformed into a grassland, or mammoth steppe. This transformed biome will allegedly bind methane stored in permafrost and increase the absorbing capacity of the area.

One of the project's key promoters at COP28 was the Russian coal tycoon Andrey Melnichenko, who acts as a cultural ambassador for the Russian Climate Doctrine and formulated the sum and substance of Russia's climate program. "Each carbon molecule is the same," he said in an article ahead of the summit, implying there is no need to focus on reducing fossil-fuel emissions when one can simply increase the amount of emissions that can be absorbed. The fact that the soil and water can only store so much carbon, while the energy transition is confirmed by IPCC to be the most integral part of the path to zero emissions is conveniently omitted.

Both the new Climate Doctrine and the Russian performance at COP28 demonstrate that the Russian government has no intention to quit fossil fuels, definitely not now, and certainly not by 2030 or 2060. At best, Russia's approach to climate change can be characterized as market-driven, opportunistic compliance with international goals on

climate action. It's directed by big business interests and hardly takes into account the interests and livelihoods of those most affected. It is "climate realism" at its worst: the cynical anticipation of a militarized survival of the fittest without any aspiration to work together on a global solution to combat the climate crisis.

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Read the previous article in this ongoing series here.

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