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Russia's stance on climate change

Powerless towards nature, paranoid towards policy, pragmatic towards profit





Introduction

Russia is frequently portrayed as a nation that does not take climate change seriously, particularly in Europe. This is due in large part to its virtual 'monomania' when it comes to fossil fuels and its lacklustre efforts under the Paris Agreement. This paper tests this perception through an analysis of official Russian documents, with a particular focus on the country's approach to climate change in the Arctic region and the green energy transition, including the mining of critical minerals and metals.

Cooperation with Russia is currently impossible because of its illegal invasion of Ukraine. It remains imperative, however, to monitor Russia's actions on climate change closely, regardless of geopolitical dynamics. An analysis of official documents and strategies is among the few remaining tools that can keep us up to date on Russian activities.

Continuous monitoring of Russia's stance will ensure that opportunities to reintegrate the country into international climate efforts can be seized as soon as the geopolitical circumstances change. Our analysis shows that, despite the war and international isolation, Russia does show some interest in addressing climate-related challenges and maintaining at least the appearance of international compliance. The increasing politicisation of climate change, however, driven by Russia and other major global players, could lead to a long-term international fragmentation of climate policy, divergent tracks in technological development and the weaponisation of supply chains for critical

minerals essential to the green energy transition. If Europe pursues a long-term strategy of complete decoupling from Russia, aligned with the US strategy of decoupling from China, the result will be closer alignment between these countries, which could spell the end of international cooperation on climate change and the energy transition.

Such cooperation is urgently needed. Global climate models predict an ice-free Arctic summer some time between 2030 and 2050. Without an Arctic treaty, the High North could shift from a region of natural stability to a contested area of strategic rivalry between major powers, including the United States, Russia and China. Currently, the Arctic states control a 200-mile economic zone, but if the Arctic is legally defined as an 'ordinary sea', control would shrink to 12 miles of territorial waters. At the same time, access to the Arctic's abundant natural resources, currently covered by ice, will be unlocked. These factors could accelerate militarisation and increase the risk of direct military confrontation. The green energy transition has intensified competition between geopolitical actors for control of critical minerals and metals, not only in the Arctic but globally.

The growing dependence on mining, coupled with state actors' increasing propensity to exploit instability and weaponise supply chains, makes resource-rich countries with weak governance vulnerable to exploitation and instability.

The quotations from the official documents of the Russian Federation have been translated from the original Russian by the author.



Russia's position on climate change

Russia's climate policy has historically been reactive rather than proactive, with minimal effort to align with international partners. The country's climate change legislation has been driven largely by compliance with international agreements. For example, Russia's ratification of the Kyoto Protocol in 2004 is seen by many experts as a quid pro quo for the EU's agreement to Russia's accession to the World Trade Organization. The lack of ambition in Russia's climate change policy is due primarily to the importance of fossil fuel energy and the country's socio-economic challenges. For the past five decades fossil fuel reserves have been seen as crucial for economic growth, poverty alleviation, rebuilding the Russian military and addressing social issues.

Russia's position on climate change is somewhat ambiguous. At the 2017 international forum 'The Arctic: Territory of Dialogue', President Vladimir Putin suggested that climate change could prove beneficial in the Arctic, as it would serve to support the development of the liquefied natural gas industry and increase cargo turnover along Russia's Northern Sea Route. In the country's 2023 National Action Plan for the Second Phase of Adaptation to Climate Change until 2025, the section entitled 'Climate change and its consequences on the territory of the Russian Federation' presents a somewhat contradictory view of the national benefits and negative consequences of climate change. In addition to negative impacts such as floods and forest fires, potential benefits are highlighted, including reduced energy consumption due to a shorter heating season, more sustainable infrastructure as a result of thawing permafrost and expansion of the crop production zone.

In terms of addressing the climate change–security nexus, Russia's focus is on its economic model. In those terms it sees itself as particularly vulnerable to what it perceives as an attempt by the international community to securitise climate change and discriminate against Russia in the global energy market. References to this view can be found in the Energy Strategy and the Energy Security Doctrine (analysed in the following section) and is also reflected in its stance at the United Nations General Assembly. While Russia stressed the importance of climate issues during the 75th session of the UN

General Assembly in 2020, it opposed the linking of these issues with peace, security, human rights and migration as an 'artificial grouping'. In 2021, Russia used its Security Council veto to prevent adoption of a resolution that would have recognised climate change as a threat to international peace and security.

Russia's NDC under the Paris Agreement

The [Climate Action Tracker](#) rates Russia's climate goals, policies and funding, as well as its updated nationally determined contribution (NDC) target for November 2020 as 'critically insufficient' and not in line with the Paris Agreement's 1.5°C temperature limit. If all countries took a similar approach, global warming would exceed 4°C.

The main indicator of the weakness of Russia's climate policy are its unambitious emission reduction targets. The 2020 Presidential Decree on the Reduction of Greenhouse Gas Emissions sets a target of reducing emissions to 70% of 1990 levels by 2030. The NDC under the Paris Agreement reflects this target. After the collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s and Russia's de-industrialisation, however, GHG emissions fell to 69% of 1990 levels by 1997. Looking at total emissions minus net absorption by forests and other ecosystems, this would actually allow emissions to increase from current levels. Internationally, Russia, like many forest-rich countries, has pushed for maximum recognition of its forests' absorptive capacity to reduce its emissions commitments. In September 2022, Russia set a net-zero emissions target for 2060, based on the assumption that forests will absorb twice as much carbon dioxide. There is no transparent information to support this increase or to demonstrate that it is based on a technical approach to removing carbon dioxide. Based on this assumption, other emissions need only to be halved to reach net zero. This reduces the motivation to reduce emissions in sectors such as Russia's high-emitting energy industry, and ignores the high levels of illegal logging and other deforestation activities, as well as the effects of recent large wildfires in Siberian forests. Overall, Russia's NDC is more about somehow merely complying with international environmental agreements than setting an ambitious national climate policy.



National Security Strategy, 2015 and 2021

The 2015 National Security Strategy for the first time recognises climate change as a threat to national security. However, it does not do so as a primary and fundamental threat to state security; it appears last among eight groups of 'main threats to state and public security', such as corruption and terrorism, and is mentioned only indirectly. The threats are 'natural disasters, accidents and catastrophes', linked to 'global climate change', but also to the 'deterioration of [...] infrastructure facilities' and fires. Apart from that, climate change is mentioned only twice more in the whole strategy, once under the objective of eliminating environmental damage 'in the context of increasing economic activity and global climate changes', and once together with the scarcity of fresh water, which is becoming more acute in a complex global demographic situation of environmental problems, food security and epidemics.

The 2021 strategy instead mentions 'climate change' eight times, while 'climate change adaptation' has found its way into the security strategy's terminology. It recognises that the 'intensive growth of production and consumption in the world is accompanied by an increase in the anthropogenic burden on the environment [...] which entails a significant change in the conditions of life on Earth'. Nevertheless, climate change is mostly addressed indirectly as 'natural and man-made emergencies, including as a result of climate change', along with forest fires, floods and dangerous infectious diseases, similar to the 2015 strategy. More generally, the Security Strategy frames climate change within a broader discourse of protectionist measures and economic competition. The claim is that global concerns about climate change and environmental protection are being used as a 'pretext' to restrict Russian companies' access to export markets, to limit Russia's industrial growth, to gain control over transport routes and to prevent Russia from developing the Arctic.

Climate change is listed among other national strategic priorities, with an emphasis on 'sustainable development of the Russian economy on a new technological basis', rational use of natural resources, and the impact of climate change on infrastructure. The goals of 'ensuring environmental

safety and rational use of natural resources' are based mainly on technological improvements.

Among the 32 'foreign policy objectives', climate change is listed as the twenty-seventh, very broad objective of 'developing cooperation with foreign states in the field of environmental protection and climate change mitigation'.

The global green transition is linked directly to the 'increasing competition for access to natural resources [as] one of the factors contributing to international tensions and conflicts between states' under the section on 'environmental security and rational environmental management'.

There is a strategic focus on responding to the negative impacts of climate change rather than tackling the root causes and introducing mitigation measures. The strategy mentions 'mitigation' only once, referring to the effects of climate change rather than efforts to prevent it altogether. The areas for action, ranging from scientific support for policy to adaptation in specific climate-vulnerable sectors of the economy, seem rather conventional for a climate change action plan.

The 2023 Climate Doctrine

Russia's Climate Doctrine 2023 is an update of the 2009 version. While the 2009 Climate Doctrine acknowledges that 'modern science provides increasingly strong evidence that human economic activity, primarily associated with greenhouse gas emissions from the burning of fossil fuels, has a significant impact on the climate', the 2023 version omits direct links between the burning of fossil fuels and greenhouse gas emissions. Fossil fuels are mentioned, but primarily in the context of developing financial mechanisms, scientific research and technologies to improve fuel efficiency and reduce emissions within the fuel and energy complex. Despite recognising human-induced climate change and the issue of greenhouse gas emissions, the doctrine promotes 'technological neutrality' and emphasises the equivalence of emission reduction and absorption measures.

The Climate Doctrine recognises that climate change is 'one of the most serious challenges of the 21st century', which 'goes beyond scientific discussions' and is a 'complex interdisciplinary problem covering



environmental, economic and social aspects of sustainable development of the Russian Federation'. On the climate–security nexus, it agrees that climate change must be considered 'one of the key long-term security factors of the Russian Federation' and 'one of the priorities of the domestic and foreign policy of the Russian Federation'.

As well as identifying serious challenges such as heatwaves, droughts and melting permafrost, the report also highlights potential 'benefits' of climate change, as outlined above.

Climate change mitigation is mentioned 26 times, but always in the context of technological progress and scientific research. The strategy emphasises that the Russian Federation generally has a higher adaptation potential than many other states and regions of the world, due to its large territory, huge water resources and the relatively small part of the population living in the most climate-vulnerable areas. In practice, however, this may not be the case. [Experts in Russia have noted that local authorities are insufficiently prepared](#) to address the impacts of climate change.

The 2019 Energy Security Doctrine and the 2020 Energy Strategy

The 2019 Energy Security Doctrine identifies increasing international efforts to implement climate policy and transition to a green economy as major foreign policy challenges to Russia's energy security. It highlights 'discrimination against Russian fuel and energy complex organisations in global energy markets' through changes in international legal regulations 'under the pretext of implementing climate and environmental policies or diversifying energy import sources'. The doctrine states that while Russia supports international efforts to combat climate change and is willing to cooperate, it will do so only 'to the extent that such policies are in line with its national interests'. The doctrine also points out that Russia does not accept attempts to consider 'climate change and environmental protection [...] from a biased point of view, violating the interests of energy-producing states'.

Russia's 2020 Energy Strategy emphasises the need to reduce environmental impacts and adapt the energy sector to climate change. However, it also refers to what it calls 'the international campaign

against coal use under the pretext of implementing the environmental agenda' as a significant risk to the coal industry. The strategy's measures focus primarily on technological progress, such as improving the environmental profile of fuels, moving to best available technologies (BAT) and developing and deploying clean, low-carbon and resource-efficient technologies. They also include active participation in the development of international environmental legislation and the harmonisation of national standards with international standards.

The 2020 Strategy for Developing the Russian Arctic Zone and Ensuring National Security until 2035

Russia's Arctic Strategy is somewhat ambivalent in its dual focus. On one hand, it emphasises the importance of promoting bilateral and multilateral economic, scientific, technical and cultural cooperation with the Arctic states in accordance with international treaties and agreements, in particular concerning the effective development of natural resources and the preservation of the Arctic environment. On the other hand, it emphasises militarisation. The strategy raises the possibility of armed conflict and aims to ensure full combat and mobilisation readiness to meet any threat. The strategy is explicitly 'aimed at realising the sovereignty and national interests of the Russian Federation in the Arctic'.

Notably, the strategy mentions the goal of cooperating with other Arctic states to ensure 'the rights of a coastal state in the Arctic region as set out in international instruments, including those relating to the exploration and development of the resources of the continental shelf and the delimitation of its external boundaries'. In 2001, Russia submitted a claim to the United Nations Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf (CLCS) to prove that the submarine Lomonosov Ridge is part of the Siberian continental plate. Under the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, a nation can extend its seabed rights if it can prove that certain seabed features constitute extensions of its continental shelf. This extension of rights allows said nation to exploit minerals and other materials on the seabed. In 2023, the CLCS approved most of Russia's continental shelf claims. However, there is some overlap with the claims of Canada and Denmark/Greenland, which also submitted claims



long after Russia. If these are also recognised, international law requires that the boundaries be negotiated.

The 2024 Strategy for the Development of the Mineral Resource Base until 2050 and the 2023 Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation

Russia does not appear to be pursuing a policy of decoupling its economy and domestic energy system from fossil fuels. At the same time, it is engaged in a strategic expansion of its influence in Africa, especially through the private military company Wagner. Africa holds about 30% of the world's mineral reserves. The marginalisation of African countries in global forums and their experience of harmful Western intervention is to Russia's advantage, which it seeks to exploit by presenting itself as an 'anti-colonial' ally against neo-colonialism. This narrative is highlighted in Russia's 2023 Foreign Policy Concept, which predicts the end of the 'unbalanced model of world development, which for centuries ensured the superior economic growth of colonial powers by appropriating the resources of dependent territories and states in Asia, Africa and the Western Hemisphere'. Examples of the success of this narrative can be observed in Burkina Faso, where disillusionment with French politics has created a power vacuum that Russia filled with military personnel in 2023, or in Niger, where the withdrawal of US troops removed a former key ally, to be replaced with Russian troops in 2024. Russia is also trying to influence local mining legislation in West Africa with the aim of establishing a monopoly. In the context of Russia's current partial isolation and sanctions, the strategy is twofold. Economically, it is possible to circumvent banking sanctions by trading in precious commodities such as gold and diamonds, which Russia is actively doing. It de-dollarised its National Wealth Fund in 2021 in favour of gold and the yuan. Geopolitically, the aim is to secure access to Africa's critical minerals in order to exploit them and limit other countries' access to them. This seems to indicate recognition that the energy market is changing and a desire to adapt strategies to these changes.

Russia's Strategy for the Development of the Mineral Resource Base until 2050 has outlined all the natural resources considered important for the Russian economy, divided into three groups

according to the degree of supply potential. The first group includes currently mined or extracted natural resources with sufficient reserves to meet Russia's needs until 2035 'under any scenario of national economic development', such as copper, cobalt and natural gas.

The production levels of the second group are insufficient to meet national needs until 2035 and require new methods to identify large deposits. The group includes natural resources such as oil, gold, silver, diamonds and zinc. Africa has 40% of the world's gold and significant diamond reserves, while Burkina Faso, where Russia began a military presence in 2023, is Africa's second largest zinc producer.

The third group consists of natural resources for which Russia is dependent on imports, such as uranium, lithium, bauxite, graphite, titanium, beryllium and rare earth metals. The aforementioned Niger has the highest-grade uranium ores on the African continent. Russia has considerable uranium reserves, yet the majority of these ores are of inferior quality, as outlined in the Russian Federation's 2022 State Report on the State and Use of Mineral Resources. Russia's state nuclear corporation, Rosatom, won the rights to develop lithium in Mali in 2024. In Guinea, the country with the world's largest bauxite reserves, the Russian aluminium company Rusal is involved in bauxite mining and operates several local companies. During Lavrov's visit to Guinea in June, he and his Guinean counterpart pledged to step up bilateral cooperation.

Ukraine holds about 5% of the world's total mineral resources. This includes lithium, a key mineral for clean energy technologies, beryllium, 20% of the world's graphite resources and the largest titanium reserves in Europe. This is likely to have played a role in Russia's invasion, particularly in light of the European Union's strategic partnership with Ukraine on critical raw materials, launched seven months before the invasion. Deposits of 22 of the 30 minerals listed as critical for the EU are concentrated on the territory of Ukraine. The Russian invasion has disrupted extraction and supply.

Ironically, Russia's Foreign Policy Concept calls for 'strengthening cooperation with allies and partners to counter the politicisation of international environmental and climate action', especially when



it comes to 'unfair competition, interference in the internal affairs of states and limiting the sovereignty of states over their natural resources'.

Conclusion

The Russian economy's strong focus on fossil fuels shows a clear lack of interest in implementing CO2 emission reductions effectively. Despite the growing strategic importance of measures to respond to the adverse effects of climate change, such as floods and forest fires, climate change is not presented as a significant threat to national, human and environmental security. Russia is not well prepared to prevent loss of life and destruction from natural disasters and extreme weather events. Russia's climate discourse largely ignores mitigation strategies and the underlying causes of climate change in order to avoid challenging the fossil fuel-dependent economic model. Instead, adaptation policies dominate, with a strong focus on technological progress and the absorption of greenhouse gases by forests.

Russia's ambivalent attitude towards climate change, between risk and opportunity, is characteristic of most of its climate-related documents. Despite the recognition of climate change as a serious challenge and its consequences as a threat to state and public security, the view of climate change as an 'opportunity' is repeatedly emphasised, while at the same time international efforts to mitigate climate change, such as the low-carbon energy transition and protection of the Arctic marine environment, are seen as a threat to Russia's economy and indeed as an attempt by other nations to undermine Russia.

The ambiguity in Russia's domestic discourse and actions complicates the framing of climate change as a man-made threat to national, environmental and human security. In light of the global trend toward the securitisation of climate change, this ambiguity is likely to sustain or even intensify Russia's obstructionist stance in international climate cooperation. Russia's ongoing efforts to keep climate security off the UN Security Council's agenda and its resistance to phasing out fossil fuels at COP28 in Dubai reflect this approach.

But it would be naive to assume – and with uncertain consequences – that Russia does not take climate change seriously and will eventually be left behind.

Just because the country hasn't committed itself domestically to adapting its infrastructure to the energy transition doesn't mean it doesn't understand global trends and how to use them to its geopolitical advantage. Russia's growing military and diplomatic footprint in Africa, with a particular focus on the mining of critical minerals and metals essential to the green energy transition, suggests otherwise. Russia appears to be well aware that the energy market is changing and is trying to adapt its long-term strategies to these changes, as reflected in its National Security Strategy discussed above. The fact that the Arctic states' control over the current 200-mile Exclusive Economic Zone of the Arctic will shrink with the transformation of this area into an 'ordinary sea' is not addressed constructively in the documents on a possible future cooperation model. Instead, the documents emphasise Russia's goal of realising its sovereignty and national interests in the Arctic. It is indicative of a long-term strategy that, as early as 2001, Russia applied to the relevant UN commission for recognition of the extension of its continental shelf far into the Arctic in order to obtain exclusive rights to extract resources, when the future decline of Arctic sea ice will mean the loss of the surrounding countries' exclusive economic zone.

Despite criticising other countries for securitising climate change and rejecting the climate–security nexus in international forums, Russia's long-term strategy appears to be heavily focused on the geopoliticisation of climate change. This is evident when, in its National Security Strategy, Russia directly links the green transition to competition over natural resources as a source of international tension and conflict, while simultaneously seeking to secure exclusive access to these resources.

How can the European Union respond to this Russian climate strategy?

Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine makes coordination with Russia impossible at the moment. Returning to the status quo ante is not an option. At the same time, the challenges of climate change will persist even in the absence of direct conflict. Therefore, the EU needs to be prepared to include Russia in its efforts to address climate change, with all the necessary precautions and caveats, should the situation in Ukraine allow it.



EU do's and don'ts

Do's

- **Strengthen and maintain strong carbon regulation:** The EU should uphold strict criteria for carbon regulation, use scientifically sound methods to calculate forest carbon absorption and reject non-additional carbon credits from Russia without clear, verifiable emission reductions. By setting a high bar for carbon market participation, the EU might pressure Russia into developing a credible, transparent carbon regulation system aligned with global standards. Russia's interest in at least appearing compliant with international climate agreements should not be overlooked.
- **Keep research and development channels open:** Despite Russia's restrictive policies and legal risks limiting international collaboration for its scientists, maintaining channels for climate-related research is crucial for climate diplomacy. The EU should remain open to academic coordination, particularly on Arctic issues, where Russia has shown great interest in scientific exchange. Given Russia's lack of preparedness, disaster prevention and mitigation could also offer an important entry point for reintegration of Russia's scientific community.
- **Leverage Arctic coordination for climate dialogue:** The EU should engage Russia in climate diplomacy by offering concessions in exchange for concrete climate commitments. The Arctic is undergoing rapid climate changes and is a critical biotope that must be protected, so coordination is crucial. Russia's Arctic strategy highlights its openness to scientific and technical cooperation. The EU could incentivise this by offering energy deals, investment in Arctic infrastructure, and improved shipping via the Northern Sea Route, using these opportunities to promote environmental protection.
- **Promote green hydrogen and renewable energy markets:** Russia's vast water resources and wind power potential theoretically position it well to produce significant amounts of green hydrogen, meeting future energy market demands. However, political interest in developing renewable energy is currently low, and progress stalled further after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, when foreign companies exited the sector. In the long term, the EU should be prepared to engage Russia in discussions about its future role in the global energy market, offering opportunities to diversify energy exports and the domestic economy. Partnerships in research, development and market creation for green hydrogen, once they become geopolitically feasible, could shift Russia's energy policy towards sustainability and counter the narrative that the energy transition is somehow aimed against it.

Don'ts

- **Fail to offer countries outside Europe any credible alternative:** The EU should resist pressuring African and Latin American countries to choose between aligning with Russia or the West and reject this outdated Cold War dichotomy. Instead, it should offer integrated packages combining anti-corruption efforts, economic investment and energy and climate cooperation. Russia's success in portraying itself as an anti-colonial ally, built on Europe's unresolved colonial past, needs to be addressed, for example, through symbolic and financial reparations for colonial exploitation. The global climate crisis offers an opportunity for just solutions via financial support for climate-related loss and decarbonisation and mitigating CBAM impacts. Improving Europe's standing in formerly colonised countries requires engaging with them on an equal footing and correcting past and present colonial and neo-colonial dynamics.
- **Contribute to further geopoliticisation of climate change:** If the EU does not align with US geopolitical strategies, which increasingly position green technology dominance as competition with non-aligned countries, Russia will have less of a basis on which to peddle the narrative that climate policy is 'anti-Russian'. The EU should emphasise collaborative, inclusive approaches to green energy development that potentially include Russia as a partner rather than an adversary to take the wind out of Russia's geopoliticisation of climate change.

FES ROCPE in Vienna

Established in 2016, the FES Regional Office for Cooperation and Peace in Europe (FES ROCPE) addresses today's profound challenges to European security. It also works closely with the OSCE on integrating young voices in European security debates and the interface between security and environment.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 was a watershed moment for security in Europe and has rendered obsolete previous visions of European order. A new Cold War or even more unstable relations between Russia and the West are the probable outcome of this war, creating an environment of confrontation and containment in Europe. At the same time, planetary challenges such as climate change or pandemics continue to threaten peace and security and require cooperative approaches.

In these uncertain times, FES ROCPE continues to develop new ideas under the aegis of solution-oriented policymaking, together with experts, politicians and policy planners from Eastern Europe, Russia, the EU and the US. The aim is to tackle interconnected security challenges, contribute to conflict resolution and strengthen the idea of common and indivisible security in Europe in the spirit of the Paris Charter (1990) and the Istanbul Charter (1999). It is our belief that organisations such as the FES have a responsibility to come up with new ideas and to introduce them into the political process in Europe.

Our activities include:

- » regional and international workshops aimed at developing new concepts on stabilising the security situation in Europe, dealing with conflicts and achieving lasting peace in Europe;
- » maintaining a regional network of young professionals working on de-escalation, cooperation and peace in Europe;
- » regular public opinion polling on security matters;
- » cooperation with the OSCE in the three dimensions of security: the politico-military, the economic and environmental, and the human.

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