

Russia can ill-afford climate cavalierism

di Anthony Giddens

Following this summer's extreme weather events, will Russia's leaders take global warming more seriously?

Will the heat-wave and drought that have created so much havoc in Russia cause the leadership in that country to take climate change more seriously? The answer is important not only for Russia itself but for the world community. Russia is the third biggest emitter of greenhouse gases globally, behind only China and the United States. Until recently the Russian attitude to the threats posed by climate change was cavalier to say the least. At an international climate change conference in 2003, then President Putin said of global warming that 'We Russians will spend less on fur coats'. Russia endorsed the Kyoto Protocol but as a somewhat cynical act of Realpolitik on the part of all concerned. The United States had refused to sign up and world leaders were desperate to reach the target number of signatories without which the whole endeavour would have fallen apart. As an element of the deal, Russia was put on track to gain membership of the WTO and also allocated a large number of credits for emissions reductions made, even though these resulted wholly from the closing down of antiquated industrial enterprises that had become uncompetitive after 1989.

Many in the Russian leadership believed that climate change would on balance be beneficial for Russia. It would open up the mineral wealth of the Arctic as the ice melts, create new shipping routes along the country's Northern coasts, and allow an extension of agriculture into currently infertile areas. Taking concrete action to reduce emissions, on the other hand, would hamper Russia's economic growth. The disasters of this summer should have brought home the naivete of these views. No-one can say with certainty if they were directly influenced by climate change. Yet they are a stark warning of what lies ahead if global warming is not held in check. Russia is highly vulnerable to the rising frequency and intensity of extreme weather that uncontrolled climate change will bring in its wake. This year the country has lost some 25% of its grain production. Flooding will be a major problem in the future for coastal cities such as St Petersburg, as will changes in the flow of rivers, storms, melting ice and many other hazards.

In fact, Russia's leaders started to change their tone even before the events of this summer. A climate plan was endorsed by the government in 2009, even if it has little to offer in the way of practical proposals. President Medvedev announced in the run-up to the climate change meetings in Copenhagen that Russia would accept a target of reducing its carbon emissions by 15-20% over 1990 levels, later elevated to 20-25%. Critics have pointed out that even the higher figures would mean that Russian carbon emissions actually increase, because these targets will be reached in any case because of the collapse of Russian heavy industry. Yet they do mark a positive and potentially encouraging shift of emphasis from the past. Medvedev has stressed the importance of achieving greater energy efficiency, a key issue in Russia given the profligate way in which energy is used.

Taking steps to reduce carbon emissions, and collaborating with other nations and with the international community to do so could actually stimulate Russian economic development rather than inhibit it. This is not only because of the damage that unregulated climate change will unleash on the country and hence on its economic prospects. Responding actively to climate change and

more generally to problems of sustainability can be a major vehicle for the economic modernisation the leadership seeks. Countries which bring up the rear in terms of investment in low-carbon technologies and low-carbon life-styles are likely to become progressively less competitive economically in the future. Vanguard states, such as Germany, Portugal, China, South Korea – and significantly, several of the leading oil and gas producing countries in the Middle East – are already investing heavily in these areas. Russia risks being left even further behind than at present if it does not start to make the shift now.

Most discussion of climate change policy world-wide until recently was carried on in terms of costs. More recently much greater emphasis has been placed upon opportunities, and rightly so, given the considerations just mentioned. Where there are significant costs, Russia should be able to engage the active help of other nations and international organisations. The emissions permits Russia holds could be put to good use to provide funding for an active turn towards more environmentally responsible policies. In July, after years of inaction, the government endorsed fifteen clean energy projects, to start to make use of its carbon credits. The rest of the world has a major interest in limiting the damage likely to result from the effects of global warming upon Russia's frozen peat bogs. As they melt they will release vast amounts of methane into the air – and methane is a greenhouse gas many times more potent than CO₂. Serious outside investment could come Russia's way to help develop ways of limiting this process.

Can a country that has found it very difficult to break away from its reliance on oil and gas revenues, and to modernise other industrial sectors, feasibly make the kind of transition I am talking about? It will be extremely testing, and support from other countries will be essential. The sense of emergency may soon fade when the temperature drops again. Yet it is actually in Russia's national and strategic interests, not contrary to them, to treat climate change with due seriousness. If Russia's leaders can take this point fully on board, and communicate it successfully to the public, the sense of fatalism in the face of disaster coupled to bureaucratic stasis that so often inhibit innovation in the country can be challenged.

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