

At COP27, Russia acted as though it had not invaded Ukraine

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Russia urged international cooperation while ignoring its own role in making the climate crisis worse

Although the main topic at COP27 in Egypt was how richer nations could provide financial support for the poorer countries worst hit by climate change, Russia's war against Ukraine was on everyone's lips.

Many discussions focused on the negative impacts of the war on climate, energy and food.

Russia didn't officially comment on the war at COP27, beyond criticising war-related sanctions for damaging the country's low carbon technologies and green finance and restricting supply chains. Representatives from the Russian government and businesses said they saw the climate crisis as an area for international dialogue and cooperation.

A representative of the state-owned bank Sberbank said: "Cooperation around climate is absolutely necessary."

For years, Russia has shown minimal interest in the climate crisis, with the country's elites considering the topic irrelevant to a country with such a northerly location. That attitude has finally begun to shift in recent years – only to have its urgency overshadowed by the country's invasion of Ukraine.

"There were genuine attempts to engage Russia in climate cooperation before the war, especially by the EU, but Russia failed to commit to such opportunities," Anna Korppoo of the Oslo-based Fridtjof Nansen Institute, an independent environmental research body, told openDemocracy.

But climate cooperation now "is certainly unrealistic while the Putin administration continues its war in Ukraine," Korppoo has [written](#).

Russia's climate policies

Officially, Russia remains committed to the goals of the 2015 Paris Agreement – even though the country's domestic emissions reduction target for 2030 is rated "[highly insufficient](#)" and might even imply a rise in emissions.

Russia issued its first climate regulations in 2021, obliging large emitters to provide verified reports of their greenhouse gas emissions. Further environmental legislation is being developed and businesses often talk about emission reductions or carbon offsetting via reforestation projects or other nature-based solutions, while trying to emulate environment strategies used by their partners, investors and clients in other parts of the world.

At COP26 in Glasgow last year, Russia [pledged](#) to become carbon neutral by 2060 and to adopt a low-carbon development strategy. Yet there is no roadmap for achieving that pledge, and drafting one could prove challenging under current economic and political conditions.

In addition, environmental regulations have been [rolled back](#) since the war began. Vehicle emission standards have been [eased](#), and oil companies have demanded permission to increase [flaring gas](#) and to use [heavy fuel oil](#) in domestic settings as sanctions have slowed down exports. These moves suggest that Russia could postpone or even cancel some of its climate policies.

On the last night of the COP27 negotiations, the Russian delegation (alongside delegates from several other fossil fuel-producing countries) strongly objected to the wording “phasing out fossil fuel”, which they called “unacceptable”. “We cannot make the energy situation worse,” they said, referring to the energy crisis.

Russia’s delegates also wanted to change the wording on energy in general, in order to shift the main focus away from renewable energy technologies. They claimed to be supporting the so-called ‘technological neutrality’ principle, meaning each country can decide on its own which technologies or solutions to use to reduce emissions.

In the case of Russia, this means using the country’s forests and ecosystems – which Russian officials feel have been [underestimated in the global climate debate](#) – to absorb carbon, and also nuclear energy.

Russia’s state-owned nuclear energy corporation Rosatom also promoted nuclear as a global low-carbon solution. One of the most vocal Russian businesses at COP27 (alongside companies from the metals and fertilisers sectors), Rosatom also called for enhanced technological cooperation and the lifting of trade barriers.

The [final version](#) of the COP27 text seems to be the result of a compromise on this topic. It mentions the “transition towards low-emission energy systems” – in which “low-emission” most likely means nuclear.

Russia’s actions in Egypt suggest it still views the climate agenda as neutral ground for international cooperation, especially with regions outside the West.

“Current events have pushed environmental problems to the background... But these fundamental challenges have not disappeared, they have not gone away, they are only growing... The transition to carbon neutrality does not contradict Russian interests,” Vladimir Putin [told](#) a Moscow-based think tank last month.

He also made repeated references to neocolonialism and urged the creation of a multipolar world.

Russia is trying to boost its support from Global South countries not only by promoting multipolarity but by focusing on historic emissions, the responsibilities of the West, and the need for global cooperation on climate issues.

But Russian officials also keep saying, at COP27 and in general, that Russia and other non-Western countries should develop their own “sovereign” green agendas and not just follow Western understandings of what is ‘green’ and good for the climate.

Despite its best attempts, Russia couldn’t completely ignore the war in Ukraine. An official side event at COP27 was interrupted by a [protest by Ukrainian activists](#), who shouted that the country is “shooting and bombing people” in Ukraine, and Russia’s “climate pledges mean nothing” because it

“kills climate with the fossil-fuelled war”.

Russia also twice received a ‘Fossil of the Day’ anti-award, handed out by charities and NGOs to the countries “doing the most to achieve the least” in terms of progress on climate change. One was for using “fossil fuel money to fund the war in Ukraine”. The second was for using COP “to promote its nuclear power as a climate solution while being responsible for an additional 33 million tonnes of CO₂ caused by the war” and “saying that energy should not be part of the decision since these negotiations are about climate change and not energy”.

Several Russian environmental experts and activists critical of the government, who are currently living in Russia or abroad, also appeared at COP27.

What lies ahead?

When it comes to Russia’s domestic emissions over the next few years, what happened in the 1990s – when the country’s greenhouse emissions collapsed due to the economic downturn after the fall of the Soviet Union – might happen again.

A week before COP27, Igor Bashmakov, director of the Moscow-based think tank CENEF XXI (Center for Effective Energy Use), presented various possible scenarios for Russia’s future economic development, which included a number of challenges directly or indirectly connected to the war in Ukraine.

These possible scenarios included the world moving towards a carbon-free future with fossil fuel consumption expected to peak around 2030; Russia losing its major export markets due to war-related sanctions; other parts of the world (including Asia) introducing new requirements on carbon emissions when it comes to trade; Russia’s GDP and economy shrinking; and its population (which is [already shrinking](#)) declining further.

As a result, according to Bashmakov, Russia’s share of global GDP is expected to drop from 1.6% in 2021 to 0.7% by 2060. Ironically enough, such an economic slowdown would lead to a fall in the country’s fossil fuel emissions – though this would be “the costliest path possible to Russian decarbonisation”, he said.

“What is happening now is a war with the future of the Russian economy,” Bashmakov warned, in reference to the war in Ukraine and the sanctions imposed on Russia as a result.

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