

# Sceptical diplomacy: Should heads of state bother to talk climate change science with Putin?

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## Summary

This policy brief illustrates how the Russian top leadership discusses climate change and responds to interventions and efforts made by other countries' leaders and high-level diplomats on the topic of climate change. The policy brief presents one data set examining the distribution of the Kremlin's attention to the issue and one illustration of Russian participation in international science diplomacy, using the example of the IPCC. The aim is to make recommendations as to how diplomats and politicians can, in order to foster more fruitful diplomatic exchange, better utilize the flexibility of climate change discourse within Russia and Russia/Soviet Union's longstanding contributions to international climate science.

In visits to Moscow or in meetings with Russia's President Putin abroad, foreign heads of state and other high-level visitors occasionally highlight climate change as a global challenge and vouch for the conclusions of decades international climate science cooperation (such as the assessment reports of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC)).

To take one illustration: In the northern coastal city of Arkhangelsk in spring 2017, President Vladimir Putin appeared on the stage with the presidents of Iceland and Finland and with ambassadors, academics, and civil society from all over the world listening aptly from a crowded conference hall at Russia's biannual flagship Arctic conference. The Finnish president used much of his stage time to underline the worrying effects of climate change for the Arctic. His comments dovetailed well with the most recent findings of National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA, USA) and National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA, USA), which identified the year 2017 as one of the warmest years on record, with especially rapid rates of warming in the Arctic.

By contrast, the Icelandic president chose a different diplomatic tack and eschewed the topic climate change almost entirely.

The magnitude and effects of climate change as detailed by the Finnish president were quickly countered by Putin with an 'opportunity framing' of climate change. While Putin did indeed describe global climate change as a 'fact', he shifted from talking about climate change as a threat to the Arctic to highlight the opportunities that a less ice-covered Arctic may bring. Putin noted that climate change 'supports our optimism' for the Arctic region, including transit along the Northern Sea Route and other economic goals for the region, rather than presenting a source of worry. Putin also raised uncertainty about the cause of climate change, arguing more specifically that the 'main question is not about stopping this process...it is impossible...it could be connected to some kind of global cycle on Earth or other planetary issues' (Kremlin. ru 2017a). This contrasts with the widespread political and scientific consensus that global climate change is driven by human activity.

Did the Finnish president achieve what he and his team had hoped by highlighting international climate science and political consensus? Is the only other alternative to mostly avoid the topic, as the Icelandic president did in this particular setting? This policy brief highlights how such diplomatic sallies are received in Moscow and provides some advice on how such interventions can be made more effective in conversation with Russia's top leadership. The brief first provides an illustration of high-level discussions of climate change, reviews what we know about climate debates in Russia and then presents and interprets some recent findings on top leadership's attitudes towards climate science (and its spokespersons in diplomacy) and Russian participation in international climate work.

**Climate debates in Russia**

Russia’s approach to climate change on the international level has long been a pragmatic one. Russia participates in and frequently supports the outcomes of international climate framework and negotiations, from Kyoto to Paris. Partially this is because Russia’s post-Soviet industrial decline have made carbon reductions from 1990s baselines, which were used in the Kyoto protocol, relatively easy to achieve. Growing attention to energy efficiency has also dovetailed well with occasional modernization campaigns. A key driver of these modernization and energy efficiency campaigns is to reduce domestic consumption of oil and gas to free more resources for financially rewarding export.

In terms of science institutions, the debate remains varied with both international consensus adhering research milieus and some strong academic scepticism. In Russia’s main governmental climate science institution, however, the message has become steading clearly. The Russian Federal Service for Hydrometeorology and Environmental Monitoring (Roshydromet) as early as 2005 was providing detailed reports about how climate change would affect Russia in the near term. In a 2009 assessment, Roshydromet confirmed the role of human activity in forcing climate change and further specified physical and socioeconomic impacts, later followed by a new report on impacts towards 2030. Russia has longstanding institutional investments in scientific disciplines relevant to understanding climate change. In a historical perspective, contributions of Soviet scientists were essential to understandings of the climate as a global system and to the construction of the multilateral architecture of international meteorology (Oldfield 2018).

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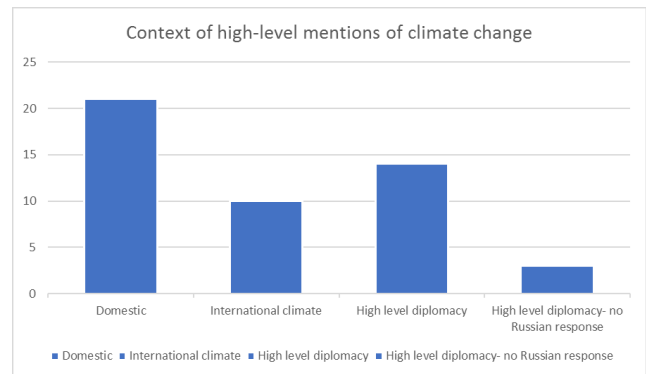
In public debate, one can find many different views on climate change. However, Tynkynnen and Tynkynnen (2018) note a resurgence in climate change scepticism with the return of Putin to the presidency in 2012. They argue it ties in with Russia’s reliance on energy for its economy and global status, as well as a concern that climate change mitigation measures are perceived by domestic policymakers as changing the national and international political/economic status quo in ways they do not wish them to change. This includes concern about and resistance towards ‘Western’ dominance and agenda-setting in international relations more generally.

**New findings on high-level policy attention to climate science**

So, how does this mix of public climate scepticism, pragmatic international cooperation, and the growing concern of Russia’s public science institutions about the effects of climate change play out in high-level diplomacy? A small study of all hits triggered by the search word ‘climate change’ (in various declinations/forms) on the Kremlin’s website in the period 2014-2017 gives us some insight.

In all, there were 53 hits in this delimited period on the kremlin.ru presidential website, 48 of which included some substantial reference to questions of climate change. These articles fell into four main categories: 1) domestic (national issues), 2) international (preparations for international processes, like the UNFCCC negotiations), 3) high-level

diplomacy where climate change was discussed by both Russian and international politicians/diplomats, and 4) high-level diplomacy, in which climate change is brought up by a visiting head of state/high-level diplomat but the topic is not picked up on by the Russian counterpart.



Listed here in order of magnitude of coverage, we first see a great many articles were coded as ‘domestic’. This includes references to the warming Arctic and the opportunities presented along the Northern Sea Route, activities to promote awareness of climate change and environmental change (like the Kremlin observing Earth Hour), summaries of Russia’s domestic climate change mitigation and adaptation issues, planning sessions around infrastructure in Siberia (which is affected by melting permafrost), and domestic meetings with research actors and intergovernmental working groups on climate change and environment convened by the Kremlin.

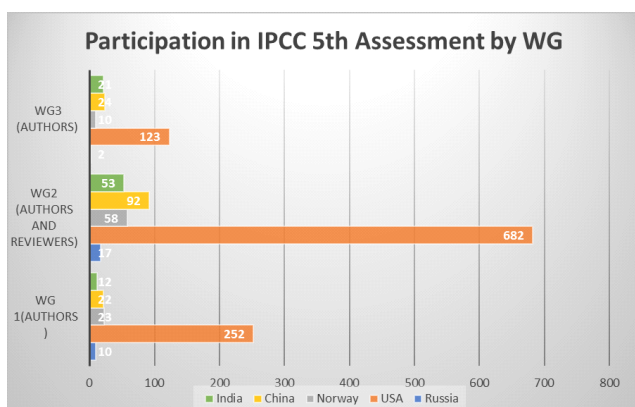
Next, the ‘International Climate’ category includes coverage of the activities of Russian actors in international climate work, including selection of special representatives to UNFCCC (U.N. Framework Convention on Climate Change) negotiations and creation of an intergovernmental committee within to work on Russia’s climate and environment policies for international negotiations. In one such instance of preparation for negotiations in Bonn, Putin encouraged then Minister of Natural Resources Donskoy to confirm in front of the other cabinet members that the trend is warming, rather than cooling, stating ‘everyone asks, are we having warming or cooling? As soon as its colder everyone says global cooling. It gets hot, global warming.’ To which Donskoy replied ‘The statistics do not suggest any other finding [than global warming]...Global warming is happening...today Russia, thanks to your decree, is realizing a complex plan to reduce greenhouse gases. We believe that all developed and developing countries should do this...We believe that all countries should take legally binding obligations...to transition to a low-carbon economy’ (Kremlin 2015a). This is an example of the delivery of an international consensus-style statement delivered at a meeting of Russia’s top politicians.

‘High-level’ includes coverage of high level encounters where Russia responded to or proactively brought up climate change issues. This includes meetings in which Russia participated that had climate change on the agenda (for example at the G-20), meetings with other head of state in which climate was reciprocally discussed (Obama/Xi Jinping in 2015) and key international speeches (such as Putin at the top-level climate

meetings in Paris in 2015). In contrast to Putin's remarks at in Arkhangelsk in 2017 reviewed at the start of this policy brief, Putin noted that climate change has become one of the most serious threats facing humankind' and highlighted Russia's reduction accomplishments in energy efficiency, modernization and the importance of the vast Russian taiga in the global carbon balance (Kremlin 2015b). Putin also brought up during a 2017 meeting with BRICS leaders that Russia was fulfilling its international climate obligations and seeking to develop a 'low-emissions development strategy' (Kremlin 2017b). Several interventions at this high-level from the Russian side also bring up the value of Russia's vast boreal forests in a global carbon balance perspective. This may be an attempt to mirror the status and resources Brazil has acquired as managers of the world's most significant tropical forests with their enormous carbon absorption capacity.

'High-level- no Russian response' indicates an entry in the archives in which a high-level politician brings up the topic of climate change science and politics, but Putin does not address these concerns or pick up on the topic in his own remarks and replies. Actors whose climate change science interventions fell on deaf ears include former U.N. General Secretary Ban Ki-Moon, India's Modi, French President Macron or former President Park of Korea. How such diplomatic interventions can possibly be made more effective is discussed in the conclusion.

Turning briefly to science diplomacy to fill out the diplomatic picture, it is important to note that Russia's international engagement on climate change science and politics is not a novel one. As discussed above, Soviet and Russian milieus have long been engaged in the international work relating to climate, from the early days of the World Meteorological Organization (WMO) to the climate-focused work of the IPCC. One scholars, Professor Yuriy Izrael, was so central to these processes that the 5th edition of the Working Group (WG) 2 IPCC was dedicated to his memory.



Note: WG2 does not distinguish between authors and reviewers in their list of participants, so both reviewers and authors were included in the data for this graph.

However, as we see in the graph above, Russian actors are outstripped by many other countries in levels of participation in this international science assessment process. While number of participants cannot tell us everything about

influence or quality of input to the IPCC process, what this chart does show is that the Russian public and policymaking actors have simply less points of contact to individuals who can speak on behalf of IPCC conclusions or testify to the robustness of the process as compared to other countries.

### Recommendations

Diplomatic actors would be well-served to understand the flexibility of the climate debate in Russia. This flexibility includes the range of positions from Putin's statements on sun cycles at the Arctic conference in 2017, through Donskoy's supportive summary of the international climate science consensus for cabinet members, to Putin's statements on Russia's work towards a low-carbon economy at the BRICS conference in 2016 (a statement that makes little sense without a background acceptance of the role of carbon emissions in forcing climate change). As with the debates around Russia's accession to the Kyoto Protocol in 2004, what we see is that a high-level is a kind of causal agnosticism about climate change that has not needed to be resolved as a) the incentives for participation in international climate negotiations have remained fairly consistent and fairly low-cost to Russia politically and economically and b) scepticism towards the international climate change science consensus remains a useful and popular resource in marking foreign policy or intellectual independence for domestic audiences.

Against this backdrop, diplomatic actors may want to consider different approaches.

1) International climate science, such as the IPCC or Arctic Climate Impact Assessment reports, have not been received in Russia as completely objective or rigorous sources of knowledge, but rather seen as possibly reflecting one or another global power's own agenda. The highly important but outsized contribution of U.S. science milieus in the process has not likely mitigated this concern. Therefore, in addition to highlighting international climate consensus and findings in and of itself, diplomats may also wish to familiarize themselves with and highlight Russian and Soviet scientists' longstanding contributions to this international work.

2) Furthermore, given the relatively few actors involved in these IPCC processes from Russia, diplomats may wish to highlight or applaud those Russian milieus who do participate to build stature for these actors in national contexts as well. This may further facilitate these actors' own capacities to serve as ambassadors for IPCC reports and similar.

3) While the Arctic climate is changing so rapidly that many scientists describe the Arctic as undergoing a 'state change', even the most ardent of climate change mitigation advocates needs to recognize that these changes present both risks and opportunities for different populations and different actors in the Arctic to varying degrees. In Russia's policy circles, in which the term 'Arctic' calls to mind the very high Arctic/offshore/Arctic Ocean rather than a broader northern context, these changes, such as sea ice retraction, seem largely viewed with an opportunity lens. It is worth noting, however, that in policy documents relating to land-areas in

the Arctic and Siberia and at the city-level in these regions, there is widespread concern about what melting permafrost will do to infrastructure and livelihoods (for more on this, see Orttung, 2017). Land-based climate impacts, rather than the costs and benefits of reduced sea ice, is a point around which Russian and international views likely converge. Diplomats should be aware of how to turn the conversation in this direction.

4) Interestingly, visiting heads of state as recorded in the Kremlin.ru documents did not bring up the economic benefits and opportunities that many expect to see from a transition to a green economy. These opportunity-focused discourses about green millionaires have been important in shifting reluctance to engage in decarbonization elsewhere and perhaps should be woven into encounters with Russia's top leadership, given the tendency to look for opportunity in climate change rather than only risks.

5) A note of caution: Russia's forests do indeed have important carbon absorption functions and are one of the world's great largely undisturbed biomes. Russian actors have long been seeking ways in which the 'ecosystemic services' performed by these forests could be a source of carbon reduction offsets, thereby reducing emissions reductions commitments, or a source of actual income. This is in keeping with a broader policy and business discourse on the functions of intact ecosystems and how to monetize them. However, when it comes specifically to international climate politics, it is important to keep in mind that whether developed countries should be eligible for such offsets is still a contentious and unresolved issue at the international level in the UNFCCC framework.

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