

Medvedev's Climate Moment

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August 26, 2010



The wildfires and heat wave that recently ravaged central Russia brought climate change to the forefront of the country's domestic agenda. While Russian leaders have often played down the threat of higher temperatures on the country, the severe impact of the fires — which caused more than 50 deaths and destroyed more than a third of Russia's wheat crop — offers an opportunity to rethink policies and devote urgent attention to becoming a global leader in climate change — as Russia modernizes its economy.

Climate change has long been seen by Russian leaders as someone else's problem. Not too long ago, then-President Vladimir Putin said Russia would simply have “fewer fur coats and a longer wheat growing season.” And only a few months before last year's climate summit in Copenhagen, President Dmitry Medvedev warned that “we will not cut our development potential” to reach a new global deal.

Last December, there were new hopes of a turnaround when Russia adopted its first climate doctrine. However, Moscow has maintained its “wait and see” approach to international climate negotiations. There is no indication of a shift toward a more proactive strategy or sign that there are any aspirations to assume a leadership role in this growing transnational

challenge.

Waiting for others to take the lead is a mistake. Russia is the world's third-largest emitter of carbon dioxide, and only a handful of economies are more energy intensive. Not only is Russia a major source of greenhouse gases, it may also turn out to be one of the most vulnerable countries to the effects of climate change. A recent report by the Federal Service for Hydrometeorology and Environmental Monitoring revealed that the country's average temperature rose faster than the global average over the past century — almost twice as fast for the country overall and nearly three times faster in parts of Siberia during the winter. Russia is suddenly finding itself on the front line of climate repercussions.

Medvedev now has a chance to step up his rhetoric in favor of a more active approach — if not leadership — in climate talks. And he suddenly seems to get the message. “Unfortunately, what is happening now in our central regions is evidence of this global climate change because we never in our history faced such weather conditions in the past,” Medvedev said in response to the recent fires. “This means that we need to change the way we work — to change the methods that we used in the past.”

Russia must do two things to show the world that it is getting serious about fighting climate change. First, it needs to move toward more daring emission targets. As a follow-up to the Copenhagen summit, Russia submitted a plan in February to reduce emissions by 15 to 25 percent from 1990 levels by 2020. This target is hardly inspiring. At the end of 2009, Russia's emissions were already about 40 percent below the mark in 1990 because of the painful economic collapse during Boris Yeltsin's presidency and the more recent recession.

Many critics argue that the 20 percent reduction target would mean that emissions could actually accelerate during the next decade compared with the years of rapid economic growth from 2000 to 2007. This is often referred to as “success without really trying” or “compliance without implementing vigorous environmental measures.” Medvedev should set Russia's target at 30 percent — at the minimum — to dispel such doubts about Russia's dedication to combating climate change.

Second, it is time to end the disconnect between Russia's energy efficiency agenda and targets for carbon emission reductions. In 2008, Medvedev signed a decree aiming to improve Russia's energy efficiency by 40 percent by 2020. Meeting this objective could undoubtedly help Russia reach more ambitious emission reduction targets — possibly more than 30 percent according to some studies. The government, however, has shied away from presenting a clear assessment of the climate-related repercussions of its energy efficiency program.

Russian officials are more comfortable referring to energy efficiency than emission targets as this leaves more room for maneuvering, particularly when officials are inclined to advocate overly optimistic economic growth. But, for Russia to be a true climate leader, it must show a commitment to both economic development and absolute reductions in carbon emissions.

As life in Moscow returns to normal, Russia has a unique opening to advance its newly proclaimed commitment to economic modernization. By setting ambitious emission reduction targets, Russia can boost investor confidence by proving its commitment to a broader agenda that both improves energy efficiency and enhances economic modernization.

As energy efficiency gains could be achieved by rapid economic growth and restructuring alone, potential investors in renewable energy would feel more confident if Russia establishes meaningful emission targets.

By committing to absolute levels of carbon reduction and taking action to meet more ambitious targets, Russia can take its rightful place as a global leader in climate protection and modernize its economy at the same time.

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Original url: <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2010/08/26/medvedevs-climate-moment-a941>