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Moscow after the smoke > A change of thinking is needed

At best, Russia's modernization needs to be ecological. At the very least, the Kremlin should factor the likelihood of a climate catastrophe into its development plans and invest in environmental management and protection.

As the unprecedented heat wave and wildfires that had afflicted the central regions of Russia for several weeks during the summer of 2010 became part of history documented in a special entry in Wikipedia, expectations rose for a policy change in Moscow. Recent statements by Russia's authorities, including President Medvedev and his aide on climate policies, Alexander Bedritsky, show that Moscow recognizes the harmful effects of climate change. Previously, Russia's position was ambivalent, ranging from deep scepticism of the idea of human-induced climate change to anticipating the gains from possible global warming for Russia's agriculture, tourism and economy. Moscow also sees climate change more as a foreign policy issue and a part of the global political agenda, rather than an immediate factor in the country's social and economic development.

The heat wave of summer 2010, as well as the unusually cold winter preceding it, demonstrate that climate change poses multiple challenges for Russia regardless of whether its origins are anthropogenic or not, and whether the trend is towards cooling or warming of the climate. It also goes to show that besides regarding climate change largely in terms of international bargaining about CO_2 emission reductions, Moscow should invest heavily in adaptation mechanisms and policies at home.

Since 2008, the Russian government has taken several measures to respond to the effects of climate change, including the adoption of the Climate Doctrine, and an overhaul of Russia's energy efficiency policy. However, these efforts are unlikely to be sufficient to improve Russia's preparedness to respond in a timely and effective manner to rapid climate fluctuations. As such, they are largely bureaucratic, generally top-down, and do not effectively involve business and society at large.

Meanwhile, Russia's infrastructure continues to degrade irrespective of the pace of climate change. The problem is exacerbated by the fact the federal government has been cutting investments in local and municipal maintenance services, while shedding responsibilities for environmental protection at the same time.

The forest fires are a case in point. According to experts, the disastrous forest fires would have been less destructive if the peat bogs which sustained the fire and facilitated its spread over a large area had been adequately treated in recent years. It is indeed telling that the main casualty of the heat wave of 2010 was Russia's forests. The forests and their CO_2 absorption capacity have been one of the main assets used by Moscow in climate talks to boost Russia's international standing. At the same time, the new forest legislation adopted in 2007 brought the environmental management of Russian forest resources to a standstill, shifting responsibility from the federal government and removing several important environmental requirements for private developers.

More than bureaucratic manoeuvring, Russia needs a change of thinking when it comes to adaptation to climate change and modernization of the country's economy. It is important for Moscow to realize that mitigating climate change and adapting to its various effects is directly linked to the goals of modernization. Up to now, environmental and climate disasters have not been considered when the government has devised ambitious plans for the decades ahead.

What the Russian authorities need to understand is that the value of natural resources has to include non-market goods and services. According to a UNDP report, the economic value of services rendered by Russian natural ecosystems to the prevention of global climate change

is estimated at USD 50–150 billion a year. This is clearly comparable to the traditional indicators of forest value such as the price of timber. The government should seize its role in creating new markets for environmental goods and services, which would be entirely in line with the declared intention to diversify the economy and minimize state expenditures.

Russia needs to invest in climate risk management and adaptation measures. While climate change is not the most pressing of Russia's concerns, it impacts the country because of the size of its territory and the desperate state of its infrastructure. A change of thinking is needed in order to see to it that the likely costs of climate disasters as well as the benefits of environmental resources are factored into Russia's development and modernization programmes.

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