

Siberia burns as the globe warms but Moscow still plays it cool

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WILDFIRES crackled across Siberia this summer, turning skies ochre and sending up enough smoke from burning pines to blot out satellite views of the 400-mile Lake Baikal.

To many climate scientists, the worsening fires are a consequence of Siberia getting hotter, the carbon unleashed from its burning forests and tundra only adding to man-made fossil fuel emissions.

Siberia's wildfire season has lengthened in recent years and the blazes were among the biggest yet, layering the lake, the "Pearl of Siberia", in ash and scorching the surrounding permafrost.

However, the Russian public heard little mention of climate change, because media coverage across state-controlled television stations and print media all but ignored it.

On national TV, the villains were locals who routinely but carelessly burn off tall grasses every year, and the sometimes incompetent crews struggling to put the fires out.

While western media have examined the role of rising temperatures and drought in this year's record wildfires in North America, Russian media continue to pay little attention to an issue that animates so much of the rest of the world.

The indifference reflects widespread public doubt that human activities play a significant role in global warming, a tone set by President Vladimir Putin, who has offered only vague and modest pledges of emissions cuts ahead of December's UN climate summit in Paris.

Russia's official view appears to have changed little since 2003, when Putin told an international climate conference that warmer temperatures would mean Russians "spend less on fur coats" while "agricultural specialists say our grain production will increase, and thank God for that".

The president believes that "there is no global warming, that this is a fraud to restrain the industrial development of several countries, including Russia," says Stanislav Belkovsky, a political analyst and critic of Putin. "That is why this subject is not topical for the majority of the Russian mass media and society in general."

And with Russian media focused on the economic squeeze at home and events in Ukraine and Syria abroad, the absence of a robust media conversation on climate change means his scepticism goes largely unchallenged.

“It is difficult to spend editorial resources on things that are now a low priority in the midst of the economic crisis,” says Galina Timchenko, former editor-in-chief of the successful news site Lenta.ru. Timchenko now runs Meduza, a popular site that covers Russian news but devotes little space to climate issues. “Unfortunately climate change is not very interesting to the public,” she says.

Putin’s scepticism dates from the early 2000s, when his staff “did very, very extensive work trying to understand all sides of the climate debate”, said Andrey Illarionov, a senior economic adviser to Putin at the time and now a senior fellow at the Cato Institute in Washington.

“We found that, while climate change does exist, it is cyclical, and the anthropogenic role is very limited,” he said.

“It became clear that the climate is a complicated system and that, so far, the evidence presented for the need to ‘fight’ global warming was rather unfounded.”

That opinion endures.

During a trip to the Arctic in 2010, Putin acknowledged that “the climate is changing”, but restated his doubt that human activity was the cause.