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Russian media take climate cue from skeptical Putin

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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-long Lake Baikal.

To many climate scientists, the worsening fires are a consequence of Siberia's getting hotter, the carbon unleashed from its burning forests and tundra only adding to man-made emissions of fossil fuel. Siberia's wildfire season has lengthened in recent years, and the 2015 blazes were among the biggest yet, caking the lake, the "Pearl of Siberia," in ash and scorching the surrounding permafrost.

But 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 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 U.N. 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 that 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 that Putin's skepticism 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 views date from the early 2000s, when his staff “did very, very extensive work trying to understand all sides of the climate debate,” said Andrey Illarionov, Putin’s senior economic adviser 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. His trip was to inspect the retreat of the polar ice cap, something that promises to make the Arctic Ocean and northern Siberia more accessible to exploration and production of the oil that Russia depends on for export earnings.

Marianna Poberezhskaya, author of the academic work “Communicating Climate Change in Russia,” characterizes media coverage in Russia as “climate silence,” broken only by the airing of official doubts about any human impact on global temperatures.

“Russian mass media repeat the same mistake that Western journalists used to make: the false balance, where the idea of the human effect on climate change is presented along with skeptics’ point of view,” she says.

Russian school teaching also appears to lag behind the rapidly expanding science on climate change. Randomly sampled geography textbooks make no mention of human impact on the climate, and one college-level text states that climate changes are caused mainly by solar activity, the movement of the planet’s crust and volcanoes.

“I see what they have abroad on the problem of climate change,” says Asya Korolkova, 15, who studies high school biology in Moscow. “People there talk about it a lot; you can feel it’s a serious problem. We don’t have that here.”

Environmentalists say that attitude is also reflected in Russia’s pledge for December’s global summit, one that received little media coverage at home. In suggesting a reduction in its emissions to “70 to 75 percent” of 1990 levels by 2030, Moscow is actually proposing an increase from 2012 levels. Russian emissions are currently far below the levels produced by obsolescent ex-Soviet smokestack industries in 1990.

Even that offer is hedged. Russia has said reaching the target will require generous accounting for the role Russia’s forests play in removing carbon dioxide from the atmosphere.

Some observers see signs of a slight softening in Moscow’s position in the face of a series of weather disasters, from drought and searing summer fires in 2010 to raging floods in Sochi on the Black Sea last year.

Natural resources minister Sergei Donskoy has said extreme weather could cut Russia's economic output by 1 to 2 percent every year for the next 15 years, adding that "this has to be taken into account when determining the policy and measures in the field of adaptation to climate change."

The business newspaper Kommersant, owned by wealthy businessman Alisher Usmanov, is, like some other Russian media, taking some interest in those economic consequences, though it also did not discuss the possibility that climate change might have contributed to the Siberian fires.

"I write about what needs to be done to change production and consumption practices — the human effect on the climate is a given for us," says Kommersant journalist Alexey Shapovalov.

But for all that, there is no sign of public pressure on authorities to do more, let alone of Putin relaxing Russia's hard line ahead of the Paris talks.

"This subject has failed to become a priority," says Konstantin Simonov, the founder of a nongovernmental oil and gas research fund who often appears on Russian media.

"Russia's attitude will most likely be something like this: Guys, you put economic pressure on us, introduced sanctions. Do you expect us to be holier than the pope about the issue you're pushing through and take a load of responsibilities?" The answer, Simonov says, will be: "No."