THE RUSSIAN DEBATE ON CLIMATE DOCTRINE

33

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- The Russian Cabinet discussed the draft climate doctrine in April 2009 under the leadership of Prime Minister Vladimir Putin. As the costs and benefits of both climate change and domestic mitigation measures have been raised, the doctrine could mark a change of the Russian government's approach to the issue. However, these positive developments in the country must be encouraged by international recognition.

- The recognition that some mitigation measures can have a positive impact on the Russian economy is significant as this goes against the traditional line of argumentation used during the Kyoto ratification debate.

- The main emerging trend in science is the recognition – against traditional views – that climate change is taking place and that it is human-induced as well as dangerous. The potential threats posed by climate change have, for the first time, hit the headlines in Russia on a wider scale. However, the traditionally sceptical views on climate change still co-exist in the debate alongside the 'official truth'.

- The active role of Russia in climate politics and policies, the international recognition of Russian forests as carbon sinks, and the issue of the Russian surplus allowances appear to be linked to the perceived Russian contribution in the international arena and, thus, to national pride.

- Due to the declarational nature of the doctrine, the domestic policies and measures debate revolves around the concrete action plan called for by Putin. The debate has mostly ignored concrete domestic mitigation measures so far, and focused instead on adaptation.

- The debate around the doctrine provides a good starting point for the Russian government to form its negotiation position for Copenhagen as the issue gained high-level attention, but a significant amount of work on the action plan lies ahead. The emerging national pride issues, especially concerning Russian forests as carbon sinks and the fate of the Russian surplus allowances, are likely to be raised in the Copenhagen negotiations.

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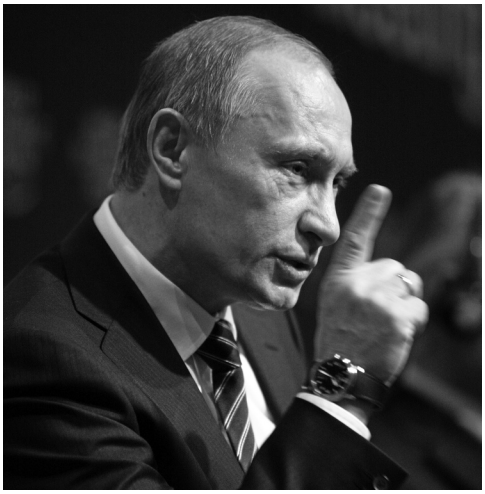

Photo: World Economic Forum

The Russian Cabinet discussed a draft 'climate doctrine' on 23 April 2009. The document, opened for comments 28 May 2009, is a political declaration on the approach to climate change. The debate around the doctrine was largely based on the scientific report published by the Hydrometeorological Service of Russia (Roshydromet) in February 2009. This document recognizes climate change as a human-induced phenomenon and acknowledges the main characteristics of the changes expected.[1]

The Minister of Natural Resources, Yuri Trutnev, who presented the document to the Cabinet, argued that implementing the doctrine based on efficiency improvements would be good for the Russian economy, rather than an additional cost. According to Trutnev, the potential impact of unchecked climate change on the Russian economy could be a 2–5% reduction in GDP. By 2050, the annual costs of extreme weather events could rise to 60 billion roubles (some 1.4 billion euros).[2] During the Cabinet debate, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin called for a concrete action plan to be developed.

A climate doctrine was already called for in December 2007 in order to decide on the commitment Russia can accept in the Copenhagen climate negotiations.[3] Even though the doctrine text itself first remained unpublished, it ignited a debate on the future of Russian climate politics. For instance, the Russian media has, for the first time, reported on the negative impacts of climate change expected in the Russian territory.

This paper mainly aims at analyzing the issues and arguments which were raised in the Russian domestic debate around the climate doctrine, who raised them and what the implications might be for the Copenhagen climate negotiations. The main storylines emerging from the debate – economic, scientific, national pride, and domestic policies and measures – are analyzed and some of them compared to the arguments used prior to the debate on the climate doctrine. The purpose of the storylines is to provide frameworks for various arguments occurring in the Russian debate. The study is based on the discussion in the Russian press during April and May 2009.

The economic storyline

The emerging economic storyline consists of four elements; the costs of climate change, the benefits from some mitigation policies, the calculation of the national costs and benefits, and Joint Implementation (JI), a Kyoto mechanism under which industrialized countries are allowed to offset their emissions by investing in projects reducing emissions in some transition economies.

The costs of climate change hit the Russian headlines for the first time during the doctrine debate, and with striking figures. The loss of some 2–5% of GDP if climate change is not accounted for in economic planning, as well as the expected annual loss of 60 billion roubles due to extreme weather events, paint a powerful picture for the public. Previously, it was the benefits of climate change, such as the melting of the sea ice in the Arctic and the shorter heating season, which dominated the debate.

The second part of the economic story is the realization dawning on the Russian administration

that the impact of some mitigation policies could be beneficial to the economy. This is logical, as improving energy efficiency tends to generate savings and improve the international competitiveness of export products. The previous Russian views referred to the growing emission trends and their inevitable nature in tandem with the growing economy.[4] During the doctrine debate, it was argued – not without logic – that the Russian government is now developing a nationally efficient economic strategy which is also used as a basis for internal and external policies, rather than solely as a climate policy.[5]

The third part of the economic story considers the costs and benefits of mitigation as the government needs to estimate which of the costs of limitation exceed the costs of the impact of climate change.[6] Various voices advised the government to also take into account the potential incomes from the Kyoto mechanisms.[7] Fears of losing these potential revenues were also expressed.[8] The doctrine was criticized for failing to firstly clarify the economic and other national interests related to the issue, and for then starting to formulate policy – prior to presenting the document overseas.[9]

The fourth part of the economic story focuses on Joint Implementation, which was brought up in the debate on various occasions. The doctrine was criticized for not bringing a solution to the issue of project approvals.[10] This is understandable as many companies have their projects frozen by the slow Russian administrative procedure, which has thus far failed to approve a single project. The Russian Union for Industrialists and Entrepreneurs reported sending a letter to the vice-prime minister, Igor Shuvalov, to gain a faster review of the JI projects which, they claim, would bring an investment of 200–300 billion USD to the members of the Union. The opportunity to push the Ministry of Economic Development, which is the agency responsible for the issue of JI approvals, was taken during the debate.[11] The economic crisis was also brought up to support JI as these investments could help companies, while incurring no costs for the government.[12] It is significant that the Kyoto mechanisms are the only issue which the private sector is commenting on.

The economic storyline boils down to calculating the total impact of climate change and the costs and benefits related to climate policies, and it is encouraging that the positive impacts of mitigation have also been recognized.

The scientific storyline

The main train of thought behind the scientific storyline is the recognition – against the traditional views – that climate change is taking place and that it is human-induced and dangerous. The potentially harmful impacts also made an unprecedented appearance in the Russian headlines on a wider scale.[13]

But the traditional views are still being presented in the debate. It was argued for instance that nobody has so far proved that the climate really is changing[14], and even that the climate prognosis provided by the doctrine is as utopian as the claims by the Soviet leader Khrushchev that the next generation will live in communism.[15] Even Trutnev himself argued that as our current understanding of the climate is limited, it still cannot be established whether the impact of human activity on the climate is substantial, and that the discussion on the impact of human activity and natural cycles on climate would continue.[16] According to Bedritsky of Roshydromet, one should not think that climate change will be only positive or negative for Russia. Roshydromet also recognizes that climate change is not yet recognized as a real issue by many.[17] Greenpeace criticizes the doctrine for not adequately recognizing several negative impacts, such as further effects on agriculture and damage to infrastructure lying on permafrost.18

It seems clear that the scientific storyline still includes elements of climate scepticism regardless of the official declarations by the Cabinet.

The national pride storyline

The debate on the Russian participation in international climate politics is characterized by a focus on the so-called national pride issues linked to the perceived Russian contributions in the international arena and their recognition by others: the Russian active participation in international climate politics thus far, the internationally undermined merits of the Russian forest sinks, and the Russian surplus allowances as an asset.

Photo: Gastro-en

Putin argued that Russia is already actively participating in the international debate on climate and fulfilling its international commitments. He said that without Russia the Kyoto Protocol would not have entered into force, and therefore the country has a role to play in the international arena.[19] Other stakeholders also support the view that practical measures have been underway for a long time.[20] Trutnev goes on to argue that in order for the post-Kyoto pact to be efficient, all large countries with dynamic growing economies must participate, and that the climate can be preserved either together or not at all.[21]

The Russian participation in the international effort to combat climate change seems to be somewhat over-emphasized in the Russian debate, given the passive nature of Russia in the international negotiations in the past as well as the loose target the country was allocated in Kyoto, permitting it to ignore domestic policies and measures thus far. Only one analyst accuses the government of using the doctrine as an international PR campaign as the document was presented in the US during the week of its publication. He argues that it seems to be defending Russia's long-term passive approach to international climate policy.[22]

Another major issue linked to national pride is the role of the Russian forests as carbon sinks. Trutnev argued that the Kyoto Protocol failed to take the Russian forest sinks fully into account.[23] This is because countries which had already cut their forests and were replanting them got a better deal than those which had preserved their forests like Russia. Trutnev announced that this issue would be reopened under the post-Kyoto agreement. This argumentation is linked to the idea of Russia being an environmental donor due to the forest carbon sinks which are absorbing the emissions of other countries.[24] Some in Russia even argue that undermining the Russian carbon sinks under the Kyoto Protocol has been a deliberate action by other governments with the help of politically driven pseudo-scientific studies.[25] Given the generous carbon sinks allowance Russia tactically negotiated under Article 3.4 of the Kyoto Protocol, these arguments are difficult to comprehend outside Russia, but they should not be ignored.

The issue of transferring the Russian surplus emitting allowances under the next regime was not brought up explicitly in the doctrine debate. However, Trutnev stated that by not selling its surplus allowances, Russia had taken a responsible approach to climate policy even though this meant that the country would lose economic benefits.[26] This approach is again linked to the Russian 'donor' role in the international arena. Domestically, Russia is seen as 'over-performing' under the Kyoto Protocol, while the loose nature of the Russian commitment under the Protocol is often ignored.

The national pride-related issues are likely to emerge in the Copenhagen negotiations and their links to foreign policy make it difficult for the Russian government to compromise on them.

Domestic policies and measures storyline

The domestic policies and measures storyline focuses on Putin's call for a concrete action plan on

climate. He envisages such a plan as being based on domestic resource and energy saving technologies and standards, and an improvement in energy efficiency.[27] According to Trutnev, the Russian ministries and agencies are currently developing this doctrine further. Indeed, many stakeholders emphasize that further work is required in order to come up with something concrete. Greenpeace is cautious about the importance of the doctrine, as its usefulness depends on further work, and the organization reports sending the president a letter suggesting the establishment of a body responsible for the implementation of the doctrine.

The government was blamed for preparing the doctrine without the involvement of the domestic stakeholders, and indeed, the document was opened for comments late May.[28] Roshydromet is emphasizing the need for further research in order to better forecast the impacts of climate change and to adapt accordingly, which is indeed in line with the interests of the agency. Some stakeholders are also taking the opportunity to promote various forms of energy, mostly nuclear, but also renewables, in the framework of climate policy.[29] However, surprisingly little was said about the ongoing development of energy efficiency policies raised by Putin.

Social aspects were brought up by many, including Putin himself. According to him, a good environment is a right which Russian citizens are guaranteed in the constitution.[30] Poor people were argued to suffer the most because of climate change.[31] It was also claimed that without first solving the everyday problems of the Russian people, making climate change a priority does not seem topical.[32]

Adaptation emerged in the debate as the topic garnering the widest range of ideas and, as a consequence, a genuine exchange of views. Some interpret mitigation activities as international and adaptation as domestic tasks for the government.[33] Greenpeace argues that the approach to adaptation has been divided into increasing the resilience of the economy to the impacts of climate change, and to adapting to the impacts of climate change. The NGO suggests that the Russian government is more likely to go for the latter than the former. Also, according to WWF, the problem is the lack of practical adaptation measures.[34] Roshydromet argues that preventive measures against forest fires are needed in order not to lose the forest sinks.[35] A further need to adapt was also linked to political decision-making, which can limit climate change and thus reduce the need to adapt.[36] Some even argue that there is no need for adaptation as Russian society has got used to the continental climate.[37]

The domestic policies and measures debate remains very unclear to date, and it remains to be seen how concrete the action plan under development will be.

Implications for Copenhagen

The doctrine certainly provides a good starting point for further debate on the post-2012 commitment for Russia as the issue gained high-level attention. As the costs and benefits of both climate change and domestic mitigation measures have been raised, the doctrine could kick-start a new approach by the Russian government, perhaps even comparable to the Stern Review - depending on the work underway. However, these positive developments in Russia must be encouraged by international recognition as the main driver behind the government's interest in international climate policy is related to more general foreign policy goals.

The internal debate in Russia is still limited and dominated by a few stakeholders; the private sector is not involved beyond pushing for JI project approvals. Concern about the government preparing documents such as the doctrine without involving the civil society is justified and suggests that the public opinion has little impact on the direction of the Russian climate policy. However, the government opened the doctrine for comments at the end of May.

The fact that some mitigation policies are considered to have a positive impact on the economy may make an international commitment more acceptable. But most stakeholders agree that further significant work is required prior to establishing the Russian position, and express concern over the implementation of the doctrine. It is also a bad sign that the debate has ignored domestic mitigation measures almost completely thus far, while adaptation is emerging as a new interest area.

The discussion in Russia illustrates that the national pride issues, especially forest sinks and the Russian surplus allowances, are likely to be raised

in Copenhagen. It also seems clear that, based on the doctrine debate, climate scepticism has not disappeared from the Russian politics.

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