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Russia's "Green" Agenda in the Arctic Council: Words, Deeds, and Implications for the West¹

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Russia's AC Chairmanship and environmental agenda

On May 17, Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin approved the [concept](#) of Moscow's chairmanship of the Arctic Council (2021-2023) along with a detailed plan of events. One of the central elements of the document was an emphasis on the necessity to increase efforts in protection of the unique ecosystem and Arctic natural environment. In particular, "the protection of the Arctic environment, including climate change," was named as one of [four](#) high-priority goals during Russia's tenure as chair of the Arctic Council (AC). From his side, Minister for the Development of the Russian Far East and Arctic (*Minvostokrazvitia*) Alexei Chekunkov stressed his country's determination to "touch upon global climate change, [and] the use of renewable energy sources to reduce greenhouse gas emissions." This agenda has received massive support from Russia's expert community, including, among others, such conservative figures as Hero of the Soviet Union and

a member of the Federation Council [Artur Chilingarov](#).

Despite solid verbal support – as well as allocation of impressive financing through the ["Ecology" National Project](#) (2019-2024) – the discrepancy between official rhetoric and reality is quite striking. Given the real environmental state of affairs in the Russian Arctic and the Far East (both regions that fall under the purview of the *Minvostokrazvitia*), however, it seems rather doubtful that the declared ecological agenda for the Arctic will be realized as stated.

What is really happening in the Arctic and the Far East?

The main ecological challenges experienced by the macro-region can be conditionally divided into three large segments: industrial disasters; wildfires; and catastrophes of an undetected nature.

¹ This Policy Brief is a re-worked version of an article that was first published in [Eurasian Daily Monitor](#) (Jamestown Foundation) on 26 May 2021.

Industrial Disasters

The first group is perhaps best exemplified in a series of natural disasters that occurred in the past several years. Just days prior to Mushustin's and Chekunkov's remarks, an ecological catastrophe involving an oil spill occurred in the northern [Komi Republic](#) (which borders the Nenets Autonomous District) on May 11. As a result, parts of the Kolva River became heavily contaminated with oil from the Osha hydrocarbon deposit. Right from the start, the authorities' response to the ecological disaster was marked by a [lack of transparency](#) from local officials. According to the press service of the company involved, Lukoil-Komi, the incident resulted in "merely" four tons of oil products being spilled. However, the affected spill area stretches 12,700 square kilometers and, unofficially, the volume of spilled petroleum is estimated at 90 tons. Moreover, local environmental activists [accused](#) Lukoil and the republican authorities of concealing information regarding the spill, alleging that the incident may have started not on May 11, as stated, but as early as March, and that nothing was done to address the growing calamity during this entire time. This was corroborated by the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), which, based on satellite imagery, concluded that the first signs of uncontrolled seepage of petroleum into the surrounding environment date back to March. Local officials expressed doubt about the correctness of this information.

The Kolva River spill was not the only such case of ecological devastation affecting Russia's vulnerable Arctic and Far East regions since the start of the year. For instance, in late April, parts of the [Ob River](#) (Yamal Peninsula) were contaminated with more than 56 tons of spilled oil products. While an investigation was officially launched immediately, no further information has been revealed to date and the culprit, SiburTumenGas, has remained silent

on the matter. According to local [eco-activists](#), the aforementioned company was not the only party culpable for the damage. Rather, the environmental catastrophe was allowed to happen due to negligence – or more likely corruption – on the part of the Federal Service for Supervision of Natural Resources (*Rosprirodnadzor*), which, for some reason, chose to ignore mounting problems.

Another petroleum spill occurred on May 14, on the territory of the [Yamal Nenets Autonomous Okrug](#) (YNAO), resulting in massive contamination of the local environment. Reports also emerged, on May 17, of an oil leak in the Arctic town of [Dudinka](#), in Krasnoyarsk Krai, on the territory of the Taimyr Fuel Company, owned by metals mining giant Nornickel. It is worth mentioning that this is not the only ecological disaster involving Nornickel. The corporation was involved in another massive ecological catastrophe last year in [Norilsk](#) that resulted in a spill of approximately 21,000 tons of fuel and contamination of an area of 180,000 square meters in the Russian High North, becoming one of the worst ecological disasters in Russia's history.

Wildfires

The second set of challenges pertains to wildfires – another peril threatening to endanger Arctic ecosystem well beyond Russia itself. Both 2019 and 2020 were marked by a series of [wildfires](#) that significantly impacted Russia's Siberia and High North, giving rise to huge ecological costs to the entire Arctic region well beyond Russia's territory. Though a natural phenomena, these wildfires are made worse by inadequate state resources and a lack of policies to combat them. In 2019 alone, Irkutsk, Krasnoyarsk, and Sakha Republic experienced out-of-control fires that affected areas exceeding the territory of Greece. The WWF argued that the Russian authorities demonstrated complete unpreparedness and lack of strategy. Though the

government has spent large amounts of money on various ecological programs, these wildfires demonstrated the [ineffectiveness](#) of those projects and the wastefulness of state expenditures. Coupled with global warming, wildfires could accelerate the process of melting permafrost and dramatically increase the probability of further ecological disasters in the Arctic.

Catastrophes of an undetected nature

The third category of issues relates to ecological incidents whose nature remains unknown (or unreported to the general public). One such event occurred in September–October 2020, in the [Kamchatka area](#) of the Russian Far East. Recovered marine species in the waters off the coast of the peninsula were found with traces of chemical burns. Initial reports stated that seawater samples revealed traces of phenol, but Russian officials subsequently contended that the incident was likely caused by a specific sort of seaweed. [Local ecologists](#) rejected such claims, pointing out that a large military polygon, which stockpiles up to 300 tons of toxic materials, is situated next to the location where the poisoned wildlife was discovered. Incidentally, they also noted that the authorities came late with their justification, since dead sea animals began to be observed much earlier than initially declared.

Conclusion: what does this mean for the West?

With the main ecological challenges in mind, three essential aspects need to be underscored.

First, even if Russian political leadership is truly determined to dramatically change the state of affairs in the Arctic and High North (in terms of ecological situation) – which is quite dubious – this

will be highly problematic from an [economic point of view](#). Local infrastructure in all major Russian municipal centers located in the Russian polar regions (zone of permafrost), such as Vorkuta, Tiksi, Yakutsk, Magadan, Igarka, Anadyr, and Novy Urengoy, are ticking time bombs. These cities, by and large, all rely on Soviet-era infrastructure and require serious renovation as well as complete (and unbiased) assessments/inspections of their local critical infrastructure (especially oil, natural gas, and nuclear facilities). The prospect for such modernization seems highly unlikely: according to one study, widescale permafrost thaws across Russia could cost more than \$80 billion in infrastructural damages—financial expenditures that Moscow can ill afford at present. Thus, climate change, worsened by amplifying environmental problems, is likely to generate similar ecological incidents.

Second, given the influence of military circles in Russia's political architecture and their role in continued militarization of the Arctic region – accompanied by rapid growth of [military infrastructure](#) and [military exercises](#) – incidents involving environmental damage from military activities must not be ruled out.

Third, it is important to understand that the ecological damage incurred by the Russian Arctic and Far East is not episodic: it is of a long-running, systemic nature, with roots in the pre-1991 period. Moreover, while environmental catastrophes occur in many countries, Russia (and the Soviet Union before it) have a lengthy and notorious track record of covering up and/or diminishing the real scale of the damage. In 2019 alone, out of [17,000 accidents](#) in Russia's fuel-energy sector, more than 10,500 involved oil facilities, the majority of which are located in the High North. This means that, on average, an accident took place every thirty minutes. Only a handful of catastrophes ever

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become public knowledge, however, with most of them concealed by authorities.

Despite this questionable environmental legacy, Russia is now consciously trying to attract the other Arctic Council members to sign on to its “green” agenda for the circumpolar region. Moscow believes that if it can play a leadership role on ecology, this will aid its larger goal of convincing other Arctic states to accept Russia’s expansive geographic and security claims in the north. The other Arctic Council members must be conscious of this stratagem.