

# Report on the State of Civil Society **2022/2023**

Second edition

Climate change  
activism in the  
EU and Russia



The Civil Society Forum is a network of non-governmental organisations working across Wider Europe. Our vision is to build a civil society beyond borders across the entire continent. Established in 2011 as a bottom-up, non-partisan civic initiative, the Forum serves as a platform for joint activities, common positions, support, solidarity, and civic influence on policy- and decision-making at the (inter)governmental level. The Civil Society Forum aims to build bridges between civil societies, based on shared values of pluralistic democracy, rule of law, human rights, social and climate justice.

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### Climate change activism in the EU and Russia

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## Introduction

by Angelina Davydova and Delia Villagrassa | Written in September 2022

Climate change is the biggest challenge of our age. How far we are able to prevent its worst consequences will define whether our planet and the people on it will have a safe and viable future. In the meantime, implementing solutions that combat global warming generally will have a positive impact on much more than 'just' the atmosphere: cleaner solutions also benefit people by reducing air pollution, diversifying economies away from fossil fuel extraction, ensuring less expenditure on energy in efficient homes and other products, and creating a healthier, safer transport infrastructure. There are a wide array of societal actors involved in climate change – from industries producing new solutions to others lobbying to keep fossil fuel dependent economies, from politicians and scientists to journalists and civil society. Civil society organisations (CSOs) are vocal and active in attempting to stop climate change. It is therefore important to investigate how this sector of society has evolved and is faring today.

When scientists first raised the alarm about climate change CSOs were quick to engage on the issue. By the early '90s, an array of environmental NGOs was active on climate change in the EU and subsequently in Russia. Over time, more civil society groups joined the movement, recognising the links between climate change and areas such as biodiversity, agriculture, human health, energy, pollution challenges and global industrial production and transport. Climate change touches on every aspect of human endeavour and this realisation has led to a very broad alliance of civil society groups engaging with the issue. The younger generation has also mobilised to campaign against climate change, realising that their very future is at stake. In Europe and in Russia, the influence of climate legislation in different fields such as energy or transport has become an additional priority for many CSOs, helping to stop fossil fuel projects and supporting solutions such as encouraging energy efficiency and renewable energy sources.

This report looks at the development of civil society climate change activism in the EU and Russia in recent decades, how such activism has evolved and what its status is today. In the current political context, with Russia's war in Ukraine, the picture has changed dramatically again – particularly for Russian CSOs. Their room for expression and agency was already very limited but has been obliterated since the beginning of the conflict. In parallel, this war is also a climate war in that the Russian government may regret its failure to diversify away from extractive industries, in particular fossil fuel exports, as European and international sanctions on these exports start to impact the economy. At the same time, the EU realises that it might have been a good idea to invest in energy efficiency and domestic energy sources such as solar and wind much earlier and thus improve its energy security. For both regions, beyond the obvious economic benefits, such decisions would have been very helpful in combatting climate change. In Europe at least, progressive forces are finally calling for a faster and improved implementation of the Green Deal, supporting climate action that might also help to ease dependence on Russian imports. However, the Russian leadership is persisting with fossil fuels and is silencing any opposition.

Therefore, this report comes at a crucial moment. On the one hand it celebrates the achievements of CSOs in campaigning against climate change and on the other it showcases the ongoing dilemma of ensuring the participation of citizens in public discourse and decision-making. It is easy to silence CSOs, by branding them "foreign agents"; undermining the work of NGOs through administrative and financial hurdles; or simply by

putting activists behind bars on trumped up charges. These are all challenges faced by Russian colleagues on a daily basis. In the EU, CSOs face the challenge of ensuring that their campaigning is translated into actual policy by decision makers.

In this report, the authors highlight the emergence of the climate movement and show, through fascinating examples, the differing experiences of EU and Russian campaigners. The report demonstrates successful approaches but doesn't shy away from showing the failures and difficulties continuing to face climate movements.

The report has 3 sections:

The first section, **Climate Activism in the EU and Russia**, examines the history of the climate movement. It looks at the factors driving CSO interest in climate change as well as considering how circumstances and climate activism itself have changed over the past 30 years and what, ultimately, has been achieved?

The second section, the **Rise of Youth Activism in the EU and Russia**, analyses the origin and vision of climate youth activism and how it challenges traditional approaches while highlighting the opportunities and constraints of local activists.

The third section, **Civil Society Action and Policy Advocacy**, focuses on the challenges and achievements in lobbying for climate and energy policy making, including working with traditional and new media.

In considering these issues, the report shows that at this crucial stage in the fight against climate change every effort must be made to support those calling for positive change and a better future for the people and the planet. Civil society has been the key voice in campaigning for progress, for solutions, and against corporations and governments that, through sheer greed, are destroying the environment. Therefore, it is vital to understand how civil society has evolved and how it can develop and become more effective. For this to happen, democratic voices in Russia need to be seen, heard, and supported – particularly at this point in time. At the same time, civil society in the EU needs to accelerate campaigning to make the EU an actual leader on climate change rather than merely a talking shop.

The EU and Russia are neighbours. Civil society in both regions working in parallel and together to solve a global problem affecting all citizens also offers hope for the future - for an EU engaging with its neighbours constructively and a Russia that may one day have a democratic leadership. This new leadership might emerge from the very civil society explored in this report, which is planting, seed by seed, the hope for a climate-safe, better future. Civil society in the EU and Russia must work together to achieve this future in which we can all live well and in peace.

# Climate activism in the EU and Russia

by Felix Jaitner and Maria Turovets

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## Introduction

In recent years, climate and environmental issues have gained fresh attention both in the European Union and in Russia. Transnational movements like Fridays for Future (FFF) have succeeded in mobilising support across the region, especially among young people, creating new networks and forms of activism. At the same time, environmental and climate issues have triggered civic participation at local and municipal levels. In almost every European region, civic initiatives or groups have emerged in the past five years that campaign against environmental overexploitation and warn of the dangers of climate change. Campaigns for more ambitious climate targets and policies are becoming focal points for climate activism. The situation in Russia is different although there are some similar trends. Hegemonic discourse, examples of which can be found in formal Russian civic education, encourages small-scale activism, and discourages the politicisation of domestic issues, including environmental problems, on a national and international level. Moreover, even among social movements, politics is widely considered to be a 'dirty' issue that should be avoided. Thus, the link between everyday grassroots environmental movements which are often a response to a specific local problem, and rare displays of climate activism, which question the justice of the government's political and economic policies, is fragile and could easily be broken.

This chapter focuses on the rise of climate activism in both the EU and Russia before the invasion of Ukraine. The conflict and associated wartime censorship have split and scattered a significant part of the Russian climate movement. However, comparing pre-war Russian and EU activism is challenging as social conditions differ considerably. Russia and the EU are both large, heterogeneous entities, and the latter is a supranational political and economic union. The historical development of environmental movements in each EU member state differs, as do the political and socio-economic conditions. Even in Russia, the emergence of the climate movement often has regional and local characteristics. The heterogeneity and diversity of the climate movement will be considered in this chapter. Based on these considerations, we develop typologies of climate movements throughout the EU that necessarily neglect specific features in each country. For this purpose, key issues of the environmental and climate movement in Russia and the EU are presented. Finally, we compare the form of institutionalisation and selected social struggles because the outcomes of such processes strongly determine the success and influence of the climate movement in the respective countries.

## Defining climate activism in Russia and the EU

With some degree of generalisation, it is possible to distinguish differences between Russian and EU climate activism. We define the climate and environmental movement as an (informal) network that shares common values and collective identities and makes use of various forms of action and protest. However, in Russia, these are often concealed social networks, which are activated from time to time (della Porta & Diani 1999). Indeed, Russia would not be considered to have a climate movement following the COVID-19 pandemic if we use the narrow definition of the climate movement as a social movement with the primary political aim of challenging the existing fossil fuel-based economy (S1.7, S1.8). The emerging climate movement was initially hampered by self-isolation measures during the COVID-19 pandemic, then Russian legislation gradually became more repressive, and the cost of collective action became too high. Supporters of the movement



continued to have common values, but they could neither share their concerns nor develop their organisational skills in collective protests. The only available form of protest was the single protest action (S1.8), which might remind people about the climate crisis due to its coverage in Russian media but was not able to inspire collective political action.

Nevertheless, informal networks which share the common goal of preventing a climate crisis exist in both the EU and Russia. We propose using a broader definition of climate activism that includes nature conservation movements, anti-nuclear activism, and environmentalism which highlights climate change. For example, the conservation of forests, the struggle against the construction of nuclear power plants and incinerators, and extractive industries may become part of the climate movement when articulated appropriately. This wide definition encompasses both environmental movements demanding action concerning climate change while also confronting false solutions for the climate crisis such as the use of nuclear energy, waste incineration and hydroelectricity as alternatives for fossil fuels. When compared to the EU, where there are few obstacles to the freedom of assembly, the Russian informal network of climate change activists is less visible and more spread out among environmental movements and organisations.

However, climate activism in Russia is not as widespread as in the EU. Lack of information in the media and school curriculum, repressive laws that infringe on the freedom of assembly, hegemonic discourse discouraging criticism of domestic politics and policies, and other reasons, have hampered the development of Russian climate activism, its social bases and mobilisation resources (S1.11). For example, while a single FFF demonstration in Brussels on 31 January 2019 had close to 12,000 participants, the social networks of Climate Strike Russia barely have 6000 followers.<sup>1</sup>

Even though low participation is common both in Russia and Eastern Europe, in Russia abstaining from participation in political events and programmes challenging national or local politics is often encouraged by the authorities and hegemonic discourse (S1.5). For example, schoolteachers often initiate local environmental activism, but view demonstrations against climate change as a dangerous politicisation of the learning process and something to be avoided. However, the climate crisis is a problem requiring a commitment to universal values and international action and cannot be resolved at local and national levels alone.

Lack of climate crisis coverage may also affect climate activism (S1.11). The consequences of climate change are obvious in many places in Russia but the current crisis cannot be understood as a global problem without a universal perspective and an awareness of universal climate trends.

## An emerging climate movement in East and West

The increasing politicisation of climate and environmental issues in the countries of Western and Northern Europe is closely related to the rise of student protest movements in the late 1960s and the so-called new social movements. In contrast to existing labour movements, new social movements addressed social cleavages such as gender, race, or environmental exploitation. Against this background, climate and environmental issues were framed differently. The conservative, traditional environmentalist approach which

focused on the preservation of natural landscapes was replaced by a critique of capitalist society (with a particular focus on economic growth) and the consumerist mode of living. Two events reinforced this new kind of environmentalism in Europe. First, the publication of the report 'Limits to Growth' by the Club of Rome highlighted the ecological impact of industrialisation, resource consumption and economic growth. Second, industrial accidents such as the Seveso disaster in 1976, the first major ecological catastrophe in the Italian industrial age, were vivid examples of these outcomes. Therefore, issues such as urban and industrial pollution, traffic, energy relations, and the use of nuclear energy all became focal points for climate and environmental activism.

During the 1970s in the USSR the proceedings of the Club of Rome could only be freely discussed by dissidents in private or in journals secretly printed abroad, and some articles in these publications did indeed examine issues such as global warming (Osipov 1971). Environmental issues may be among the most acceptable grievances in unfree societies, where raising political demands can be formally and informally restricted, as was the case in the former Soviet Union.

The conflict over the use of nuclear energy played a "catalytic role" in the mobilisation of civic initiatives in West Germany. According to the environmental sociologist Karl-Werner Brand, the ecological movement became "the culturally integrating core" of the new social movements (Brand 1999). The conflict over the use of nuclear energy had a similar mobilising effect in other European countries. In response to the 'oil shock' of 1973, the Italian government proposed to diversify energy supplies with a plan to build twenty nuclear power plants. However, this spurred a nationwide protest movement (Standish 2009). In some countries, the anti-nuclear movement succeeded in preventing the commissioning of nuclear power plants. For example, in Ireland, plans for the Carnsore Point nuclear power plant were already quite advanced when the project was scrapped in 1970 in the aftermath of large public protests. Similarly, the authorities in Austria did not commission the completed Zwentendorf nuclear power plant in 1978, following a referendum on the issue.

For much of the '80s in the USSR, environmental concerns could be only expressed in grievances sent to authorities and newspapers. However, the end of that decade and the early '90s, saw the emergence of independent environmental movements, such as Druzhina. By 1986 Druzhina had united environmental activists from more than one hundred organisations, in the form of nature conservation brigades. During Perestroika many other environmental movements, such as Khraniteli Radugi (Rainbow Keepers), and autonomous organisations emerged, but any real continuity was disrupted by the structural crises engulfing the Russian economy (Yanitsky 2012). Later, several attempts were made to create a national environmental association and Green Party, but they did not succeed (ibid.).

In the first two decades of this century, the main activities of grassroots environmental movements involved struggles against mining and construction projects, recycling, and protests against nuclear energy (S1.5). More recently, almost all anti-nuclear NGOs in Russia were among the first such organisations to be declared "foreign agents" (Zhilin 2022).

<sup>1</sup> Fridays for Future Russia, Instagram, <https://www.instagram.com/fridaysforfuture.russia>, accessed 15 November 2022.



### The continuing struggle over nuclear energy

The struggle against nuclear energy, which gained momentum in the mid-1980s, has remained a focal point for mobilisation throughout Europe. In 1985 the Danish parliament voted in favour of phasing out nuclear energy. Two years later, three national referendums on nuclear power were held in Italy. As a result, four operating nuclear power plants were shut down and the construction of new ones stopped (Standish 2009). In Germany, “the nuclear energy issue has remained the centrepiece of environmental protest” (Rucht & Rose 2007). While protests in the ‘80s were mainly directed against the construction and operation of nuclear power stations and nuclear reprocessing plants, the focus shifted towards the transport and disposal of nuclear waste in the following decade (ibid.).

The strength and longevity of environmental activism in Germany can be explained by the decentralised but solid organisational infrastructure uniting local civic initiatives, NGOs, and associations. Therefore, the movement does not depend on a single or a few major organisations. This has allowed the movement to remain largely independent from party politics. Although the Green Party was strongly rooted in the movement, its electoral defeat in the first national parliamentary elections in 1990 had a limited impact on the movement and did not lead to a decrease in protest activity (ibid.).

### The shift from activism to lobbying

Unlike Italy or Germany, mobilisation against nuclear energy has never evolved into a key issue in France although many citizens’ initiatives and environmental organisations did emerge at the same time. By the end of the 1970s, the French anti-nuclear movement was rather fragmented, and even the Chernobyl disaster did not alter that situation (Fillieule 2007). The same can be said for the UK. The growth of North Sea gas production meant the country’s nuclear power programme was quietly shelved. The shift to oil and gas extraction did not fuel a new wave of environmental activism even though fossil energy production is a central cause of global warming. In the face of the waning protest movement, environmental NGOs which had emerged in the previous decade increasingly focused their efforts on conducting or funding research into ecological issues and lobbying (Rootes 2007). By 1991 the British branch of Friends of the Earth had six times the number of members or supporting donors than a decade prior, while those of Greenpeace grew tenfold. Indeed, by 1995 Greenpeace had over 200,000 donor supporters, employed 106 employees and received an income of over 7 million pounds (ibid.).

Whereas in previous decades the environmental movement had acted mainly in opposition to established institutions, in most European countries the period from the 1980s to the mid-1990s was characterised by institutionalisation and professionalisation. Thus, the movement became ideologically less diverse and contradictory. This was particularly the case concerning interactions between the state and industry, which became much more about seeking consensus. The social conditions for activism also changed fundamentally during this time. The end of the Cold War gave NGOs much greater freedom of action in terms of politics at the international level. An important moment for the European climate movement was the UN Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 as it laid the foundation for the climate conferences that followed. Subsequently, together with the internationalisation of the ecological debate, a new framework emerged which moved away from problems stemming from pollution towards issues around planetary boundaries and the resilience of ecosystems.

## Snapshot 1 The Russian-European anti-nuclear movement

For decades the struggle against nuclear energy was a focal point for environmental and climate activism in a variety of European countries. In fact, protests against the use of nuclear energy and the storage of nuclear waste constituted a field of common action among European and Russian climate movements. In particular, the export of spent fuel rods from nuclear power plants in the EU to Russia for reprocessing purposes often prompted joint action and protests over the past three decades.

Two pieces of legislation – “On Environmental Protection” (Art. 48 and Art. 51) and Article 31 of the Federal Law “On Handling Radioactive Waste” – prohibit the import of nuclear waste from abroad for storage, treatment, neutralisation, or final disposal in Russia. However, this does not include the import of spent fuel for interim storage and/or reprocessing. Russia imported spent fuel from abroad if it came from Soviet- or Russian-designed reactors. From 1996 to 2009, depleted uranium from Western European companies was sold to Russia, re-enriched there, and re-exported. By 2009 alone, a total of 155,000 metric tonnes of depleted uranium hexafluoride had been transported to Russia and re-enriched, including 20,000 metric tonnes of nuclear fuel from the Urenco company in Germany.<sup>2</sup> Uranium hexafluoride left over after the second enrichment was then enriched for Russian power plants.

After protests in Germany and Russia, this business model was discontinued. Previously, Russian environmentalists had documented thousands of uranium barrels being stored in the open air at extreme temperatures, rusting and at risk of leaking. In addition, the international NGO network ‘Decommission’ expressed suspicions that nuclear waste generated in the process of reprocessing was not being returned to the respective countries. In Germany, the export deals received public attention because the storage of nuclear waste was the last remaining issue regarding the use of nuclear energy that had the potential for broad mobilisation.

Meanwhile, this business model has now resumed. According to contracts with the Russian nuclear corporation Rosatom, about 12,000 tonnes of uranium hexafluoride from German nuclear power plants are to go to Russia by 2022, although the transport of radioactive waste from Germany to foreign countries is prohibited by law. From the perspective of Urenco, the German licensing authorities, and the German government, however, this is not waste, but a valuable material, since new products can theoretically be made from the depleted uranium such as fuel for nuclear power plants. Consequently, Rosatom considers the market for fuel reprocessing and storage, as well as nuclear waste management, to be “the most dynamic segment” of the nuclear cycle end market, with an annual growth rate of 6% until 2030.

Environmental organisations such as Greenpeace Russia or Ecodefense have been co-operating with initiatives by Germany, such as SofA Münster, to prevent the further transport of nuclear waste from Germany to Russia.

<sup>2</sup> Uranium hexafluoride is formed in the process of uranium enrichment. It is a radioactive, highly toxic substance.

The politicisation of climate and environmental issues across Europe and the pressure from social movements forced states to respond, leading to the implementation of environmental policies and regulations or the creation of state institutions such as ministries and associations that explicitly deal with climate and environmental issues. Most notably in Scandinavia and Central Europe, governments reacted to the demands of the climate movement with a shift towards environmental policy measures. In 1968, Sweden was the first country to adopt comprehensive environmental protection legislation. Further evidence of the country's commitment to environmentalism came four years later when Stockholm hosted the first UN Conference on the Environment (Thörn & Svenberg 2017).

Still, political responses varied from country to country, and this in turn had an impact on the institutionalisation of climate and environmental issues. In West Germany, Austria, and Scandinavia, green parties became part of the system and were able to bring the concerns of the climate movement into the mainstream political debate. In the Southern European countries and the UK, green parties were not able to exert the same level of influence on a national level, although they were successful on the regional level (Pincett 1993; Graham-Leigh 2013).

Another common trend was the creation of new, and the professionalisation of already existing, environmental organisations. In order to provide a differentiated scientific underpinning for climate advocacy, ecological research institutes were established providing specific scientific expertise. Newspapers like TAZ in Germany, which covered environmental protests closely, were important in establishing a counter narrative to climate scepticism.

Against this background, politics increasingly made use of the expertise of climate activists. The campaigning methods of the climate movement involve both cooperation and conflict such as lobbying and public protest (Brunnengräber 2021). Well-known representatives of climate NGOs have been increasingly involved in government delegations at climate negotiations. Governments and international organisations can thus draw on their expertise and NGOs receive information about the official progress of negotiations.

Environmental issues were significant parts of the democratic agenda in the former USSR and in the early Russian Federation. By the end of the 1980s the start of Perestroika and the rise of national movements meant environmental demands became part of the political discourse. However, the emergence of mass ecological movements during the early 1990s was followed by decline. Deteriorating economic conditions forced grassroots movements into greater professionalisation. Former students in environmental associations had to become breadwinners, and thus either quit the movements or create NGOs competing for western grants (Yanitsky 2012). During the early 1990s, the political establishment in Russia was relatively open to cooperation with environmental movements and NGOs, and they had public support. Furthermore, journalists, writers, and politicians gave their backing to environmental protests. The end of the '90s saw the deinstitutionalisation of environmental policy and the establishment of an imperfect market economy.<sup>3</sup> This was followed by the centralisation and amalgamation of business and bureaucracy while the environmental movement faced trends of decentralisation and

3 Yanitsky (2012) states that some of the signs of this process were that a position of Environmental Adviser to the President of the Russian Federation was abolished, the Federal Ministry of Environment was liquidated, the functions of the parliamentary commission and the state Forestry Service were restricted, and the public ecological councils affiliated to the governors were dismantled.

localisation. Environmentalists struggled to create a national institution able to unite and voice local initiatives. Several attempts to create an independent Russian Green Party failed, and the political initiatives of environmental activists were mostly confined to the liberal party Yabloko, which had a limited number, if any, of votes in the parliament (Yanitsky 2012). Thus, since the beginning of the new millennium environmental and climate activism in Russia has gone backwards - from campaigning to collective action and street protests. Moreover, any environmental advocacy has been hampered by national climate politics where domestic interests have trumped international goals on carbon emission reduction. On 5 November 2004, the Russian Federation ratified the Kyoto Protocol and initiated public discussions of the issue. However, advocacy work by organisations like WWF-Russia provided a stronger incentive for the ratification of the Kyoto Protocol than any demands from social movements. The Russian Climate Doctrine was issued in 2009 and became the basis for the formation and implementation of Russian climate policy, underscoring the priority of national interests in the development and implementation of climate policy (Zhavoronkova & Agafonov 2022).<sup>4</sup> The Climate Doctrine was followed by the Comprehensive Plan for the Implementation of the Climate Doctrine which lasted until 2020 and was mainly devoted to mitigation measures and adaptation to climate change. A national greenhouse emissions target was set at 75% of the 1990 level by 2020, which was easy to achieve because of the decline in industrial production after the collapse of the USSR. Between 1990 and 1998, GDP dropped by more than 40%. Subsequently, GDP grew significantly, surpassing the 1990 level in 2007, but plateaued in 2010, and in 2021 remained 30.3% lower than in 1990 (Makarov 2022).

In 2016, Russia signed the Paris Agreement, ratifying it three years later. A government decree on climate change aimed at adaptation in the period up to 2022 was also signed in 2019. At the national level, Russia has adopted and is developing strategic documents on tackling climate change, measures are in place to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, and a nationally determined contribution (NDC) for the reduction of emissions to 70% of 1990 level has been set, to be achieved by 2030.<sup>5</sup> However, targets for the production and consumption of electricity from renewable energy sources (except for hydropower plants with an installed capacity of more than 25 MW) were fixed at 4.5% by 2024 (The Climate Strategy of Russia 2021). Experts noted that carbon-intensive industries were strongly opposed to the strengthening of Russian climate ambitions. They believe that this outweighed positive national and international factors such as improved regulation in the housing and utilities sector and accession to the Paris Agreement (ibid.).

However, the proposals for Russia to achieve carbon neutrality by 2060 were not completely clear. According to some experts, Russia relied on meeting climate obligations through forest carbon absorption but data on this method is far from complete and covers just 15–20% of the country's forest resources. Russian scientists and politicians have pushed for the introduction of a new forest accounting methodology that would increase the absorption rate and thereby elevate Russia's record in this respect (Davydova 2021b).

4 Climate Doctrine of the Russian Federation, <https://www.climate-laws.org/geographies/russia/policies/climate-doctrine-of-the-russian-federation> (full text in Russian and unofficial translation to English), accessed 29 September 2022.

5 Decree of the President of Russian Federation of 14 November 2020 No. 666 on reducing greenhouse gas emissions', <https://policy.asiapacificenergy.org/node/4395> (full text in Russian), accessed 7 February 2023.

The “Strategy of Socio-Economic Development of the Russian Federation with Low Greenhouse Gas Emissions until 2050” (implying reaching net zero by 2060) and the federal law “On limiting greenhouse gas emissions” adopted in 2021 have formed a legislative framework for carbon reporting for large emitters as well as an opportunity to realise voluntary emission reduction projects.<sup>6</sup> However, more ambitious forms of carbon regulation, including the introduction of carbon pricing have been rejected, mainly due to heavy lobbying by industrial concerns.

In order to test more ambitious carbon regulation schemes, an experiment was launched in the Sakhalin region in September 2022 with the goal of achieving carbon neutrality by 2026. The plan obliges the largest emitters to participate in a cap-and-trade system whereby companies are allocated quotas for greenhouse gas emissions and can trade their emission reduction units with each other. However, many companies working in the region have been exempted from participating in the experiment. Also, most of the decarbonisation efforts have been concentrated on switching from coal to natural gas in domestic energy generation, developing hydrogen production, launching transportation systems that also run on hydrogen, introducing sustainable forestry management practices, and developing some renewable energy in the region (mostly wind power). Moreover, experts have expressed scepticism concerning the implementation of this experiment pointing to the fact that the regional economy is heavily dependent on fossil fuels (Safronov 2021). The implementation of the experiment was postponed from March to September 2022.<sup>7</sup>

The above documents have formed part of Russia’s national climate strategy which is viewed as being highly pragmatic and mostly formal (Lo 2021). The goals of this approach mainly involved limiting the growth of importing fossil fuels but not an expansion of renewable energy sources, which would necessitate restructuring the economy. As with the Kyoto Protocol, Moscow’s agenda for the Paris Agreement has little to do with pursuing environmental goals, such as taking measures to slow global warming, improving air quality, or preserving the permafrost. According to Lo (2021), the priority is rather to ensure that the pursuit of global climate targets does not interfere with Russian national interests, as articulated by the ruling elite. Indeed, ratifying the Paris Agreement could also be evaluated as part of a ‘green diplomacy’ strategy towards the West (Safronov 2021) while Russia’s own climate goals remain unambitious. With a few exceptions, the Russian media has remained quiet on this issue (Davydova 2021b).

Western sanctions after the Russian invasion of Ukraine meant many governmental environmental programmes, such as Clean Air, were postponed (Mamedov 2022). At the same time, protectionist measures were implemented, such as a sharp decrease in the number of mandatory requirements for development projects. Environmental standards suffered from the liberalisation of industry regulation and the introduction of moratoriums on environmental inspections (ibid.). ‘Green’ certification was also impacted by the sanctions, which prevented the export of ‘green electricity’ to the EU. According to analysts, the war has also removed any external market for the Russian programme of decarbonisation (ibid.).

<sup>6</sup> Federal Law No. 296-FZ, on limiting greenhouse gas emissions, <https://climate-laws.org/geographies/russia/laws/federal-law-no-296-fz-on-limiting-greenhouse-gas-emissions>

<sup>7</sup> Kruchkova, E., 2022, “Sakhalin experiment postponed for six months” (in Russian), *Kommersant*, 16 April, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/5217466>, accessed 29 September 2022.

At the same time, Russian public awareness of climate change remains lower than the world average, although not dramatically so. Many people expect the state to take action on climate change and won’t do anything on an individual level. According to data from the polling company, IPSOS (2022), 29% of Russians had actively worried about climate change over the previous two to three weeks, while the average percentage of concerned people in the world is 48%. Half of Russians were worried about the domestic impact of climate change, which is one of the lowest rates in the world.<sup>8</sup> A Levada Centre survey in 2020 found that 34% of respondents listed climate change or global warming as the most dangerous global threats to humanity. However, it was a multiple-choice question and only 7% of the respondents thought that climate change affected them or their families. Interestingly, the percentage decreased to 7% in 2020 from 10% in 2010. Meanwhile, 41% of Russians felt that ordinary citizens had to act to combat climate change and secure the future for subsequent generations, while the global rate is 70%.<sup>9</sup> Taking into account both the high price of action in the Russian public space and comparatively low awareness of the immediate impact of climate change, there is a limited likelihood that public pressure will influence state measures on this issue.

In general, three types of climate activism have been discerned among Russian practitioners (S1.5): advocacy, educational activism, and politicised street protesting.

## Activism and Advocacy in Russia

Expert climate activism developed after the dissolution of mass environmental movements in Russia. Western grants gave many specialists the opportunity to keep their professions but created a shift to nature protection (S1.5). In the era of technocratic governments during the period from 2000 to 2010, legitimisation through expertise was widespread (S1.5). This meant that top federal officials supported their decisions with expert opinions. That kind of legitimacy diminished after the authoritarian backslide and especially after the implementation of the law on “foreign agents”. This law was directed against NGOs which were funded from abroad and accused of “pursuing political activities”. However, in many cases the terms “political activities” and “funding from abroad” were defined arbitrarily. Lawyers for NGOs claim that by adopting this law and simultaneously increasing NGO funding, the state divided NGOs into two camps: loyal ones which had state support and repressed ‘disloyal’ NGOs whose activities have subsequently been restricted through formal and informal means (Kanevskaya, Olenichev & Chernyaeva 2018). The law seems to institutionalise a bias against professionalised NGOs, a phenomenon which has been noted by earlier studies (see Henry 2010).

Educational activism is mostly concentrated in secondary schools and universities and is confined to small actions such as recycling events. Hegemonic discourse embodied in the formal civic education program encourages small, local initiatives and builds national identity, but discourages any vision of global citizenship (Zimenkova 2015). In civic education courses young Russian citizens “are not called upon to reflect on the powers at large or on their own ideas, power, and powerlessness with respect to global issues” (Zimenkova

<sup>8</sup> “Earth Day 2022: Public opinion on climate change: GB and the world”, *Ipsos Global Advisor*, April 2022, <https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/ct/news/documents/2022-04/ipsos-earth-day-2022-global-advisor-survey-report-great-britain.pdf>, accessed 29 September 2022.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.



## Snapshot 2 Climate activism of Russian indigenous organisations

Despite the fact that the indigenous organisations of the Russian North were among the first to experience and suffer from the consequences of climate change, especially in the Arctic regions, programmes of mitigation and adaptation to climate change have not been priorities in 2022. Activists claim that the challenge of indigenous people's self-governance in Russia has not been resolved, so they cannot pay significant attention to the climate crises while their communities are struggling to survive. Survival problems include lobbying for fishing quotas for indigenous people and opposing mining companies taking away their lands.

In the previous decade, indigenous communities in Russia experienced a climate crisis not only through gradual environmental changes but also due to several disasters associated with climate change such as mass deer mortality because of the thick ice crust in Arctic regions and the return of anthrax. In the same decade, indigenous organisations took part in UN climate programmes. However, the activists evaluated their climate activism as less dangerous when compared with activism for the rights of indigenous people. The activists consider their expertise, advocacy and educational climate programmes to be successful. For example, after the oil spill by Nornickel corporation in Taimyr in May 2020, due to permafrost deterioration, an agreement between Nornickel and the Taimir indigenous people was signed.<sup>10</sup> Activists also mention an international media campaign against Nornickel, when the corporation violated the rights of indigenous people due to its extraction projects.<sup>11</sup> However, as of 2022, they believe that the climate crisis can only be resolved through international politics.

In the face of state repression, indigenous communities have experienced a loss of activists and the dissolution of environmental NGOs. For example, Saami indigenous organisations have divided into those supporting Russian ac-

tions in Ukraine and those in exile.<sup>12</sup> The communities lack the activists who previously provided them with information and mobilised for collective action because many of them had to flee the country due to political persecution over their anti-war views.

After the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the state denounced some environmental organisations, including small indigenous NGOs, as hostile "foreign agents".

Opportunities to influence government policy and to obtain state support have shrunk so much that some environmental NGOs have had to close down. Many independent activists with international contacts were forced to flee Russia. At the same time, social, environmental, and labour standards have been deteriorating and extractive companies are being given carte blanche by the government through a discourse of international hostility towards Russia.<sup>13</sup> Respondents referring to activists in indigenous communities claim extracting companies have increased their pressure on the communities, while the communities have lost educated activists who were able to monitor the activities of mining companies.

"Partial" conscription in Russia was announced in late September 2022 and this also affected the indigenous peoples. We lack a quantitative assessment of the impact of this policy on indigenous peoples. However, anecdotal evidence suggests that more Saami people were mobilised in villages with equal populations of Saami and Russians.<sup>14</sup> At the same time, reports on the Telegram channel of the Karel people claimed that some individuals in Sheltozero in the Karel region fled to the forests to avoid conscription.<sup>15</sup> It is hard to verify this information, but it shows how some people are confronting the authoritarian state using their knowledge of the local environment.

10 "Nornickel Increases Support for Indigenous Peoples of Taimyr" (in Russian), *Noril'skiy Nickel Inc.*, 10 September 2021, <https://www.nornickel.ru/news-and-media/press-releases-and-news/nornikel-uvlichivaet-podderzhku-korennykh-narodov-taymyra/>, accessed 10 September 2022.

11 Nilsen, T., 2021, "Indigenous peoples call on Nornickel's global partners to demand environmental action", *The Barents Observer*, 11 March, <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/indigenous-peoples/2021/03/russian-indigenous-people-lose-out-electromobility-industry-hunts-metals>

12 Nilsen, T., 2022, "War protesting Sámi activist from Kola seeks asylum in Norway", *The Barents Observer*, 4 April, <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/life-and-public/2022/04/sami-activist-and-war-protester-kola-seeks-asylum-norway>, accessed 10 September 2022.

13 For example, at the federal level, a draft law 'On Amending Certain Legislative Acts of the Russian Federation to Improve the Procedures for Environmental Impact Assessment and Environmental Expertise' was introduced. It proposes that the sources of civic

environmental expertise are state-controlled public institutions, municipal authorities and only those citizens who are registered in the region where the activities under review are located. This draft law clears the way for environmental gerrymandering of the draft law, see <https://sozd.duma.gov.ru/bill/120074-8>; "Public environmental expertise may lose its independence!" (in Russian), *Greenpeace*, 31 May 2022, <https://greenpeace.ru/blogs/2022/05/31/obshhestvennaja-jekologicheskaja-jekspertiza-mozhet-poterjat-svoju-nezavisimost/>, accessed 29 September 2022.

14 "'Gone to the Taiga': How Indigenous Peoples Resist Mobilisation" (in Russian), *Activatica*, 7 October 2022, <https://activatica.org/content/1e5c6c51-bc7d-46f3-8079-9447ddd95bc3/uehali-v-tajgu-kak-korennye-narody-soprotivlyayutsya-mobilizacii>, accessed 23 October 2022.

15 Because of censorship in the media, Telegram channels and bloggers remain significant sources of information in Russia. This particular post appeared in the Telegram channel 'From Karelia with Freedom', <https://t.me/fromkareliawithfreedom/705>

2015). Thus, from the perspective of hegemonic discourse, legitimate methods of resolution of even global problems could most probably be found only in appealing to the national government and similar organisations.

Whereas in Europe climate activism developed from grassroots environmental protection initiatives, practitioners argue that the situation in Russia has seen a delay in the usual growth from local grassroots environmental activism to politicised climate activism (S1.5). Most grassroots environmental movements have a reactive agenda and do not move beyond local claims (S1.5; S1.8). They try to solve environmental problems when those issues impact the life of the local community, but most movements are not proactive. In general, they find it difficult to mobilise local communities to take part in protests, they avoid politics, and usually dissolve after winning or losing their specific campaign. However, there are a few exceptions to this rule such as when the organisation's candidates subsequently run for public office. For example, Oleg Mikhailov, who supported the grassroots movement against a huge landfill in Shies (Arkhangelsk region), which was mostly planned for household and building waste from Moscow, was elected as a deputy to the National Parliament from the Communist Party of Russian Federation in 2021 (S 1.5). However, this case could also be an illustration of official strategies of taming protests, in which the Communist Party is usually engaged (Reuter & Robertson 2015). At the same time, Oleg Mandrikin, an independent local popular politician, who participated in the Shies movement against the landfill, ran for the office of Arkhangelsk Regional Governor, but did not win and faced persecution based on flimsy evidence.<sup>16</sup> The Russian political system of the 2020s is almost certainly closed for popular grassroots activists, including those from environmental movements.

16 "Searches are taking place in the Severodvinsk offices of the politician Mandrykin" (in Russian), *MK Arkhangelsk*, 7 February 2022, <https://arh.mk.ru/politics/2022/02/07/v-severodvinskikh-ofisakh-politika-mandrykina-prokhodyat-obyski.html>, accessed 05 September 2022.

## Snapshot 3 Fridays for Future

Another powerful example of joint environmental climate action and protests both in Russia and the European Union is the movement Fridays for Future (FFF). In August 2018, the Swedish teenager Greta Thunberg began a three-week school strike calling for urgent action against climate change. The idea of a 'climate strike', quickly resonated in a number of countries, including Russia and many EU member states, but is now limited to Friday street protests. The movement's core demand is to meet the global carbon dioxide emissions reduction targets set at the Paris climate summit in 2015, which limit global warming to an increase of no more than 1.5 degrees. Furthermore, FFF activists demand of themselves, their immediate environment, and ultimately of the entire population, an environmentally friendly lifestyle and forms of consumption that are associated with considerable (voluntary) restrictions.

Demonstrations such as one in Brussels with 12,000 participants on 31 January 2019 made people sit up and take notice. Less than two months later, on 15 March, FFF organised its first Global Day of Protest. According to the organisers, 1,789,235 people worldwide took part in the protest, although that figure has been questioned. The movement's protest activities continued throughout 2019, leading to a strong politicisation of climate and environmental issues in the EU. Nearly every member state government and the EU Commission responded to the protests by adopting more stringent carbon dioxide reduction targets.

However, in Russia the FFF movement was more limited. There were fewer than one thousand demonstrators at a time in 26 different Russian cities.<sup>17</sup> There are many reasons for this low turnout including a lack of mass media coverage of the climate crisis, traditionally low political participation, and restrictions on the freedom of assembly. FFF Russia appeared to be an example of top down activism, which was inspired by the erudition of a new generation of campaigners than grassroots activists noticing the consequences of climate change. However, some indigenous activists did support FFF Russia. Practitioners highlight the comparatively high media literacy of the young climate activists. It helped them to initiate online campaigns, such as 'online pickets', which continued during the pandemic.<sup>18</sup> Greenpeace Russia in cooperation with FFF Russia and celebrity activists created an educational project on the climate crisis, RRRReaction.<sup>19</sup> After the Russian invasion of Ukraine many FFF Russia activists protested against the war and were subsequently forced to flee the country.

17 "Announcement of Climate Strike in Russia", Fridays For Future Russia, 24 September 2019, [https://vk.com/fridaysforfuturerussia?w=wall-183827695\\_566](https://vk.com/fridaysforfuturerussia?w=wall-183827695_566)

18 "CLIMATE CHANGE - MYTH OR REALITY? How to join the climate movement Fridays For Future", EcoWiki, <https://ecowiki.ru/fridaysforfuture/>, accessed 05 September 2022.

19 See <https://climate.greenpeace.ru/>, accessed 05 September 2022.

The politicisation of environmental and climate problems is condemned by the Russian establishment even when political demands are the main part of the movement. It is most likely that the "politics of depoliticisation" was a part of the Russian project of "sovereign" or "ruled democracy" in the 2000s (S1.5). From this perspective, politicisation was linked to radicalism and idle superficial criticism, which were contrasted with technical expert knowledge. It is commonly believed that juxtaposing "radicals" with "experts" was one of the ways the authorities successfully divided the Russian anti-nuclear movement. One example of this approach is evident in an article on climate diplomacy authored by a professor at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations:

In terms of the international agenda, ecology without politics is the equivalent of gardening. However, it is probably the main task of traditional actors of international relations to restrain the artificial and excessive politicisation of this sphere, to channel the sentiments of the most radical eco-activists (Reinhardt 2020).

Despite the fact that confronting state actors with demands to respond to the climate crisis almost certainly does not fit Russian political culture, a new generation of climate activists has emerged and joined the Fridays for Future movement. Moreover, the new generation of activists have their role models in the West (S1.4) and accept the politicisation of the climate movement as a norm rather than excessive radicalism (S1.7). Practitioners note that the culture of communication and conflict resolution among the new climate activists differs from earlier generations. They are more capable in terms of social media, as well as in resolving intra-group conflicts (S1.5). By the most optimistic estimates, at the peak of the movement, Fridays for Future was able to gather up to 700 participants at demonstrations in different Russian cities.<sup>20</sup> However, COVID-19 restrictions hampered the development of the movement (S1.7). Also, FFF-Russia remained primarily an urban youth movement and had only weak ties to grassroots environmental movements. The leaders of the movement were mostly educated people, who learned about the issue from the media but not from their own experience (S1.4).

## A special path in Southern and Eastern Europe

Until the end of the dictatorships in Greece, Spain and Portugal, the scope of civil society organisation was limited which impeded the development of a climate movement. This changed with the onset of the democratisation process.

An important impetus for the institutionalisation of environmental policy came as a result of EU integration, rather than pressure from internal forces (Jiménez 2007, Queirós 2016). On the state level, increased environmental regulation in Southern Europe was closely linked to the enforcement of European environmental policy. However, environmental issues were rather weakly represented in the political party system. Environmental NGOs operating at a national level thus "transformed into a technocratic pragmatism" and professionalised in order to influence policy making (Queirós 2016). Apart from mainstream professional environmentalism, especially in Greece and Spain, and to a lesser extent in Portugal, the

20 "Announcement of Climate Strike in Russia", *Fridays For Future Russia*, 24 September 2019, [https://vk.com/fridaysforfuturerussia?w=wall-183827695\\_566](https://vk.com/fridaysforfuturerussia?w=wall-183827695_566).

movement is now composed of local environmental groups (Kousis 1999). Although Southern European countries tend to rank lower than their Northern European counterparts in terms of their environmental organisations' resources (number of members, resources, degree of professionalisation), protest activity including formal and informal organisations is fairly high. Compared to Northern European countries, the climate movement is more decentralised and informally structured (Kousis et al. 2008).

A development comparable to that in the South took place in the Eastern European member states. Although climate and environmental issues were already being addressed by the state and had resulted in civic initiatives, the scope for civil society organisation was limited (S1.1; S1.2). In the 1990s, the first environmental organisations emerged, but in contrast to Southern Europe, global environmental NGOs such as Greenpeace shaped the process from the beginning. As one interviewee noted:

There was a strong interest from Western donors, including foundations and governments, to support environmental protection in Eastern Europe. That was the key enabler for civil society organisations, the 'organised civil society', such as Friends of the Earth, Greenpeace and other major organisations (S1.2).

The presence of international climate NGOs also heavily influenced which environmental issues were on the agenda. Another interviewee observed that:

Key issues at that time were pollution and waste storage. (...) Another important issue was energy, especially nuclear energy, because at that time information on the outcome of the Chernobyl disaster was made public for the first time. This led to a critical assessment of atomic energy in the region (S1.2).

However, dramatic economic crises and political upheavals meant that climate and environmental issues remained on the margins (S1.1; S1.3).

The EU-accession process fuelled a new wave of climate and environmental activism. One participant commented that, "suddenly western NGOs found out that there was no one in the East to lobby on pieces of [environmental] legislation" (S1.1).

In reaction to increased environmental regulation, national environmental NGOs professionalised in order to influence both the public debate and policy making. At the same time, parties with an explicit environmental agenda failed to become part of the political system in the region. Against this backdrop, the environmental movement consisted of nationwide professional NGOs and locally rooted initiatives, both formal and informal, often acting in response to environmental or climate issues.

## From global to local: The European climate movement after Fukushima

The UN climate conference in Copenhagen in 2009 and the nuclear disaster in Fukushima two years later mark a turning point in the recent development of the European climate

movement. After a phase of consensus-oriented UN summits, more critical and protest-oriented activists stressed the unfolding of multiple crises of neoliberalism and increasing closure effects in international institutions. A growing part of the climate movement expressed concerns about the prospects for the success of international climate negotiations. Despite decades of mobilisation and international climate agreements obliging the contracting states to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, the Copenhagen summit made it clear to critics that the international community alone is not capable of solving the climate crisis and limiting global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius. Instead, some activists have warned against isolating the climate movement from other social movements, which share similar concerns and goals, especially with regard to human rights and social justice issues (della Porta & Parks 2013).

Linking climate and social issues was also a response to the economic policies of the European Union. The economic integration of the member states usually went along with the privatisation of energy companies, or critical infrastructure such as water supply. The climate movement was increasingly wary of the dominant role of private companies in the energy sector (or other sectors of critical infrastructure), as this would mean that the power supply would continue to be controlled by corporations and municipal utilities with limited democratic oversight (Sander 2016). In the course of the German 'Energiewende' – the decision to replace fossil fuels with renewable energies – the government of Angela Merkel defended the interests of the established major power companies, which had so far invested little in low-emission energy sources and thereby impeded a decentralised transformation towards a post-fossil fuel society (ibid.).

This initiated a "new cycle of movements" in the European climate movement (ibid.). Focusing on local or regional climate struggles, the climate justice movement concentrated on the main drivers of climate change, such as coal-fired power plants, and demanded direct democratic control over the production of energy (Energy Democracy). This sparked campaigns such as 'Ende Gelände' calling for an end to the use of lignite in Germany, and similar protests in the Czech Republic and Poland. In contrast to earlier protest cycles, questions of ecological transformation were more firmly linked with social inequality and concepts of a 'good life' (*buen vivir*), which were particularly elaborated in the Latin American context. Still, international climate conferences continue to be focal points for the movement because they provide the opportunity to politicise environmental and climate issues. One example of this was the mobilisation for the COP 2015 in Paris. In addition, the climate targets that have been adopted provide an important reference point for the debate.

## Activism and the Russian state in 2020s: progressive trends on the surface, intolerance to dissent underneath

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has deepened the trend of choosing immediate 'realpolitik' national goals over long-term 'idealistic' global aims. The main political goal of the authorities has been to keep and preserve their political power. Furthermore, the invasion has diminished the significance of the climate change problem in the perception of Russian civil society. Wartime censorship has become a threat to the security of activists. Many of them protested against the war and have had to flee Russia (S 1.6; S 1.7). Presumably, climate activism has been affected by the 'activist drain' more than environmental social movements and NGOs because of activists' international perspective and connections.



## Conclusion

Today, climate policy issues are no longer a marginal topic in the EU. This is clearly demonstrated by the adoption of the EU's Green Deal, which has given fresh impetus to the debate on climate change in all member states. Still, the European climate movement finds itself in a peculiar situation. On the one hand the mainstreaming of climate politics has opened a window of opportunity to campaign for stricter climate goals and influence decision makers but, on the other hand, shrinking spaces on the national and international level limit the scope of action for civil society not only in authoritarian states but also in the supposedly democratic countries of the EU. In Germany, Deutsche Umwelthilfe came under considerable pressure after it exposed the emissions scandal involving the German car giant Volkswagen. When it claimed that neither the Ministry of Transport and Digital Infrastructure nor the Federal Motor Transport Authority had exercised their supervisory function in the required manner, the government threatened to withdraw the status of the non-profit organisation (Handelsblatt 2019). Pressure on climate movements can be observed in other EU member states as well. Although the Italian government of Mario Draghi put an emphasis on green politics, legal pressure on climate activists has grown. Almost one hundred protesters opposing the Trans Adriatic Pipeline transporting natural gas from Azerbaijan to Italy, faced charges based on weak evidence (The Conversation 2021). In May, the police raided the homes of three climate activists over accusations that they had damaged the offices of two gas importers with business links to the Russian energy company Gazprom (Politico 2022).

The differences between the Central/Northern, and Southern/Eastern European climate movements can be explained by the specific historical development and social relations of each member state shaping the relations between social movements and the state. Another important factor is the existence of different models of interest mediation (see Kousis et al. 2008). In the Anglo-Saxon liberal model, environmental organisations are rich in resources and are professionalised, although they enjoy little state support. In the neo-corporatist model, prevailing in Germany and Scandinavia, environmental organisations are also rich in resources and professionalised, but they enjoy a rather high degree of state support. In the mixed model, found in Southern and Eastern Europe, with a tradition of authoritarian corporatism and repression of autonomous trade unions, environmental organisations are poorer in resources and less professionalised. However, they enjoy some state support, partly because they perform services previously done by the state.

Russian state support became a method of dividing and taming independent NGOs after the passage of the law on "foreign agents" in 2017. Environmental organisations were among its first victims - 36 environmental organisations were among 227 NGOs named "foreign agents".<sup>21</sup> Despite state pressure, environmental activism in Russia has grown over the last decade. However, it is mostly limited to and maintained by the state at a "small deeds" level. Support of environmental movements was one of the factors that might contribute to being designated a "foreign agent", usually resulting in the closure of the NGO concerned because of the requirement for detailed reports, fines, and an informal prohibition on interaction with such an organisation. However, independent and politicised climate movements, such as Fridays for Future, were able to operate and they

21 "List of NGOs and individuals included in the register of 'foreign agents' in connection with environmental activities" (in Russian), *Environmental Crises Group*, <https://help-eco.info/envfa/>, accessed 20 December 2022.

succeeded in mobilising young Russian supporters until the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic. COVID-19 restrictions essentially ended collective climate action and the authoritarian backlash in Russia after the invasion of Ukraine made climate protest impossible, leaving national environmental NGOs in danger of closure.

However, the trends that are visible today in both federal legislation (such as "foreign agents") and regional politics (e.g., intolerance to political challenges) are not news and have been developing over a number of decades. They went hand in hand with the monopolisation of politics and of a significant part of the economy, in areas such as agriculture and waste disposal. Coercive state power, which was a feature of the previous decade, diminished the autonomy of Russian regions and created hierarchical governance institutions in a situation known as 'power vertical'. This produced a scenario where environmental movements had chances to win when challenging medium-scale businesses or regional authorities but were doomed to failure in the case of challenging the state or formally private, but appropriating hegemonic discourse, corporations, or also the reportedly corrupt mining corporations of regional authorities, and branches of executive power, such as the Federal Security Bureau.

Some extracting corporations have tried to keep their distance from the state to avoid reputational damage, such as Nornickel, but they are an exception to the rule. However, regional officials, such as governors, may be displaced as a result of highly popular environmental protests. For example, the head of the Arkhangelsk region, Igor Orlov, resigned after protests in Shies and the huge landfill which prompted the demonstrations was cancelled while still under construction. Nevertheless, similar opportunities depend on the political regime in the region concerned.

The 'power vertical' system functions not only as way of keeping regional powers subservient to the federal authorities, but also as a way for the head of state to deal with political challenges. Thus, regional officials take their cues from their federal superiors in terms of their negative approach towards social movements. For example, a senior regional bureaucrat in one of the districts of Krasnodar Krai called people protesting against a landfill polluting land and water "an aggressive minority and a mob imposing their opinion on the normal majority".<sup>22</sup> This is one of the many discursive constructions used to blacklist any opposition social movement as an intolerable dysfunction of normal community life and even a threat to the security of the Motherland (Turovets 2019). Pressure on social movements concerns NGOs too. A regional NGO practitioner noted that after supporting a highly popular local grassroots environmental movement representatives of their organisation were excluded from consultations on the prevention of, and adaptation to, climate change (S1.11). Activists and NGO practitioners also mentioned defamation campaigns directed against them after they challenged federal or regional politicians (S1.6; S1.11). Although leaders of many grassroots movements have often been officially invited to join advisory councils (Davydova 2021a), such measures are usually more about subduing protests than enriching the policy process. In most cases Russian political scientists view the influence of such advisory councils as limited.

22 "'You are an aggressive minority and a mob!': the deputy head of the Krasnoarmeisky district does not consider the opinion of Kuban residents protesting against the landfill - VIDEO" (in Russian), *Utrenniy Yug*, 19 September 2022, <https://utyug.info/new/21015/>, accessed 15 October 2022.



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# The phenomenon of youth activism in the EU and Russia

by Maria Chiara Franceschelli and Magdalena Klarenbach

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## Introduction

The goal of this section is to present the experience of young activists engaged in the fight against the climate crisis across Europe and Russia, and to develop a wider analysis of the current state of youth climate activism based on the activists' first-hand experience. This chapter is divided into four parts. The first part looks at the emergence of youth climate activism in the region(s): drivers, motivations, external circumstances, and socio-political context. The second part looks at the challenges and achievements of youth climate activism in different contexts: political opportunities, allies, challengers, constraints, and accomplishments. The third part looks forward, offering an overview of different understandings, prefigurations, and approaches towards the future. The fourth and final part offers a brief account of how the current war in Ukraine has affected youth climate activism in the region, based on the testimonies of the interviewees. A brief conclusion follows.

The report is based on qualitative methods and relies mostly on individual, semi-structured interviews with climate activists aged 19-35 from the European Union, Ukraine, and Russia. The potential respondents were selected both based on information publicly available on the movements' social media channels and through the snowball method. They were contacted via email or messaging apps such as Telegram and Signal and the interviews were carried out remotely in July 2022. In total, 11 activists were interviewed, and interviews lasted between 60 and 120 minutes. The authors decided to include activists from Ukraine for several reasons. First, on 23 June 2022, the European Council granted Ukraine candidature for accession to the EU. Second, the Russian invasion of Ukraine is having and will continue to have a significant impact on climate activism in both the EU and Russia. These dynamics deserve scrutiny, to which the reports of local activists largely contribute. Third, the authors believe in the necessity of giving voice to Ukrainian activists in these dramatic times. This sample is not necessarily representative, but it does highlight the range of experiences in terms of youth climate activism across various regions.

Throughout history, young people have often been the driving force behind social mobilisation and have contributed significantly to societal change. When assessing civil society initiatives vis à vis the current climate crisis, young people once again stand out among the protagonists of collective action. Since 2018, an unprecedented wave of climate activism has spread around the globe. The momentum of the 'school strikes for climate' movement initiated by the then-fifteen-year-old Greta Thunberg, as well as networks such as Fridays For Future (FFF) and Extinction Rebellion (XR), and other civic initiatives have united young people from different parts of the world in the fight against the climate crisis. Activists resorted to various forms, strategies, and methods of mobilisation, from strikes and online initiatives to civil disobedience and petitions. They have formed solid transnational networks and entered the global public discourse about the climate crisis.

Different political and social contexts pose varying challenges and opportunities for the global climate movement. In the Global North, especially in Europe and the United States, the issue of climate change began to receive attention in the 1980s, along with the rise of the so-called 'new social movements' and the advent of the post-industrial economy and subsequent post-materialist issues (Della Porta and Diani 2020). However, a turning point for the global climate movement was the summit in Copenhagen in 2009, known as the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change Conference of the Parties (COP15) (De Moor et al 2020, Hadden 2015). A number of factors drove the increase in

climate activism including increasing scientific evidence and media attention; the process of ‘climatisation’, whereby NGOs hopped on the increasingly popular climate change bandwagon to advance their own causes (Aykut et al., 2017); and the growing interest in climate issues on behalf of the global justice movement (Hadden 2015). Nonetheless, the subsequent lack of action by international policymakers undermined the expectations of campaigners, who had channelled their efforts into establishing negotiations with the institutions, and subsequently slowed progress on climate change.

After the failure of the COP15 negotiations, the overlap between climate and social justice issues largely increased (Parks, della Porta, & Portos 2022) and confirmed the return of materialist stances in the climate movement (Schlosberg 2019).<sup>1</sup> The new wave of climate mobilisation beginning in 2018 focused attention not only on negotiations and influencing policymakers, but also on direct social action and increasing self-reliance. The modes and methods of collective action would focus less on policymakers and those in power, and more on transforming society as a whole. Boycotts and demonstrations against the fossil fuel industry (De Moor et al. 2020; Malm 2021) and against the extractivist approach of powerholders of the Global North were at the heart of climate movements. At the same time, FFF, XR and the constellation of climate-oriented initiatives that emerged after 2018 had a number of unique features. These included an emphasis on generational gaps and the major involvement of younger generations in contentious politics (Zamponi et al. 2022), the consistent resort to civil disobedience and ‘do-it-yourself’ forms of action, together with new creative and unconventional collective modes of action, and a vague prognostic framework of “listening to the science” (De Moor et al. 2020).

Russia, on the other hand, offers up a very different scenario. Although global networks like FFF and Climate Action Network International (CAN) are present in the country, local grassroots initiatives are at the core of youth climate activism. Environmental and ecological initiatives dominate as opposed to climate-oriented projects. Movements and groups are mainly engaged in non-contentious action, mostly focusing on raising awareness about environmental issues and climate change and on promoting environmentally oriented behaviour rather than campaigning for policy change. This is the result of a long-standing environmentalist tradition dating back to the late Soviet times, where scientists-turned-activists were often engaged in local nature protection initiatives (Yanitsky 1999, 2012; Henry 2010). However, these strategic choices are also designed for a political environment that is simply not conducive to collective action. Indeed, Russian climate activists face significant challenges. Starting with the so-called ‘NGO Law’ in 2006, the Russian government has progressively eroded the space for civil society initiatives that had opened up in the 1990s and early 2000s. By imposing an increasing bureaucratic and administrative burden on civil society initiatives, the government actively discouraged grassroots movements and NGOs from engaging in collective action (Crotty, Hall, & Ljubownikow 2014). The situation has worsened over time. After the protests that accompanied Vladimir Putin’s return to power in 2011–12, the regime increased repression of civil society. Domestic opportunity structures shrunk, while the degree of cor-

<sup>1</sup> The 1970s and 1980s saw the proliferation of the so-called “new social movements” in Europe and the US. Unlike the previous waves of class-based mobilisations, new social movements did not address eminently class-based (“materialist”) issues, but rather focused on environment, peace, gender issues, ethnicity, and identity, etc. [see Laraña et al., 1995; della Porta & Diani 2020]. Recent climate mobilisation reincorporates materialist stances to its claim by focusing on social justice and stressing the economic distress that global climate policy exerts on MAPAs (Most Affected People and Areas).

ruption within law enforcement agencies and the judicial system remained exceptionally high and aligned with increasingly predatory behaviour on behalf of political institutions (Cheloukhine et al. 2020; Rochlitz, Kazun, & Yakovlev 2020). In 2012, the passing of the “Foreign Agent” law, and the amendments that followed, marked a significant step in the restriction of civil society’s operating space (Crotty & Hall 2013; Tysiachniouk et al. 2018).

In this environment, movements often engage in non-contentious and seemingly apolitical service provision to avoid repression (Froehlich 2012; Polishchuk et al. 2019, 2021). Opting for service provision reflects the tendency toward the depoliticisation of collective action but may represent a viable way to socially mobilise in a hostile institutional environment. The Theory of Small Deeds, as formulated by Russian revolutionary Yakov Abramov in the late 19th century, came back into fashion. This involved attempting to achieve change without calling into question larger, more contentious issues (or deeds) such as electoral processes, corruption, the rule of law or freedom of expression.

Youth participation and mobilisation in Russia was therefore shaped by the relative absence of political opportunities and increasing repression. However, a turning point for youth activism and participation in Russia were the so-called Colour Revolutions - the popular uprisings around Central and Eastern Europe between 2000–2010, and the Orange Revolution in Ukraine in 2004, in particular. These events gave rise to both pro- and anti-Kremlin youth movements. This is consistent with the principle of “managed democracy” (Mandel 2005), where civic initiatives and organisations are categorised as “allies” or “adversaries” of the state. Since the 2000s, the government has put considerable effort into filling the civic space with government-organised non-governmental organisations (GONGOs) that can hide the substantial absence of operating space for civil society by using carefully managed ‘civic’ initiatives. A good example of this practice is the Civic Chamber of the Russian Federation (*Obshchestvennaia Palata Rossiyskoy Federatsiy*), a platform to stimulate the dialogue between civil society and state institutions, whose members are appointed by the Kremlin (Stuvøy 2014). There are similar government-sponsored youth organisations, like Ours (*Nashi*), the Young Guard (*Molodaya Gvardiya*) of the United Russia party and Young Russia (*Rossiia Molodaya*), which help to reinforce the Kremlin’s cultural hegemony (Lyytikäinen 2014) and remain part of the Putin establishment (Heller 2008). However, it would be reductionist to dismiss all pro-Kremlin mobilisation in Russia as fully state-managed and research has revealed a more complex picture (see Lassila 2001). Russia had no prominent youth climate movements prior to the arrival of global organisations like FFF and CAN, indicating that Russian youth climate activism is deeply embedded in the wider global movement on climate change.

Before the escalation of the war in Ukraine in February 2022, Russian youth climate activism could still find its way through the cracks of an authoritarian regime. It often combined new liberal forces with Soviet continuities to contribute to the formation of modern post-Soviet identities. In doing so, it became part of the opposition in the Putin era and participated in wider transnational and global disputes.



## The origin of climate youth activism

This section aims to present different experiences concerning the emergence and evolution of youth climate movements in the EU, UK, Ukraine and Russia since 2018. First, we focus on the drivers behind the evolution of the youth climate movement. Second, we analyse the aims of some representatives of that movement. Finally, we consider how the climate crisis is understood as well as the wider definition of climate youth activism in order to achieve a broader perspective on the issue.

Across Europe, there exist youth climate organisations with national or regional coverage. They have formed coalitions and networks to take action on climate change and are mostly coordinated by young people (e.g., CAN, UK Youth Climate Coalition, Youth and Environment Europe, FFF, and various student organisations). These movements have close links with international climate movements such as the African Youth Initiative on Climate Change; the European Youth Climate Movement; the Northeast Asia Youth Environmental Network; the South American Youth Climate Coalition and the South Asia Youth Environment Network. These local, national, and continental organisations come together to form the International Youth Climate Movement.

### Drivers

Among the various drivers behind the emergence of the post-2018 youth climate movement the most prominent were frustration with climate injustice around the world, the perception of political indifference towards the climate crisis, the lack of political agency and institutional representation, and the influence of individuals, most prominently Greta Thunberg. Activists stressed the anthropogenic origin of the climate crisis and how it reflects pre-existing socio-economic divides. According to one interviewee the climate crisis is:

an unfair and unjust mechanism and is really about human rights and our humanity. It shows the inequality of power in society. It is the manifestation of everything that is wrong in our system (S2.2).

This divide can also be seen in the so-called MAPA (Most Affected People and Areas) countries which have suffered the greatest impact in terms of the climate crisis and colonialism.<sup>2</sup> Respondents emphasised the importance of the word “crisis” as it shows the seriousness of the phenomenon and its possible consequences.

Systemic inequalities mean that those most affected by the climate crisis are women, children, indigenous people, and the young. Accordingly, this last group wants to:

make sure that voices of young people are heard, (...) focusing on the idea that we as young people have the right to be a part of the decision-making processes (S2.2).

<sup>2</sup> Reyes, M. & Calderon, A., 2021, “What is MAPA and why should we pay attention to it?”, *Fridays For Future Newsletter*, <https://fridaysforfuture.org/newsletter/edition-no-1-what-is-mapa-and-why-should-we-pay-attention-to-it/>, accessed 27 September 2022.

The need for change combined with a lack of political expertise was another factor that mobilised young people to put pressure on politicians to take action at national and international levels. Finally, the appearance of Greta Thunberg – the Swedish teenage activist who in 2018 decided to show her disappointment with institutional climate action and hold weekly strikes in front of the Swedish parliament – encouraged young people around the world to converge around the cause. Soon, her weekly strikes gained widespread attention and mobilised the global youth around the new-born movement Fridays For Future. However, her leadership had additional implications. Her media presence helped to educate young people about the climate crisis and engage in public discourse and also raised awareness among other societal groups. However, Thunberg, is also a controversial figure for some, especially those who were involved in the climate youth movement before 2018. As one interviewee noted, “there are so many public figures who have the status of Greta from Africa, from South America, and indigenous groups” (S2.5).

Climate activism can also be a key element of one’s identity. Activists are crippled by eco-anxiety – the distress caused by the climate crisis which makes people feel anxious about their future (see Coffey et al. 2021). Climate action is also strongly related to lifestyle activism (see Lorenzini & Forno 2022) and individual choices, ranging from dietary habits (vegetarianism and veganism) to consumption choices. Climate activism is pervasive and becomes entangled in one’s own lifestyle and identity. As one respondent observed:

I can’t imagine myself not acting or doing anything about climate change because I have that climate awareness and it is not possible for me to forget about the climate crisis, about what is happening and what we need to do. It’s become inseparable from myself (S2.1).

### Goals

What do young climate activists want? First, most respondents aim to influence the decision makers who are necessary for political change to be implemented. Their second goal is spreading climate awareness, understood as “educating society about problems connected with climate change” (S2.3). However, there is a significant range of ideas and opinions concerning education. An ongoing internal debate among activists deals with whether climate education and awareness initiatives should be incorporated in formal and institutional education systems, or carried out at a grassroots, bottom-up level, consisting of self-education and self-training initiatives that exclude institutions. Nonetheless, the importance of “creating an occasion for people to participate and educate themselves horizontally” is widely acknowledged (S2.9).

Climate justice is also a central point in the activists’ goals, understood in terms of responsibility for future generations. As interviewees noted:

We want to hear that the world is not in an ongoing catastrophe caused by the climate crisis, because we had the possibility to stop the climate crisis in time (S2.9).

An example of climate justice is the embargo on Russian fossil fuels that representatives of FFF Ukraine want to see imposed across Europe.

## Snapshot 1 Climate education for everyone! The case of Climate Youth Strike in Poland

We demand that comprehensive and up-to-date knowledge about the mechanisms of the climate crisis be included in the core curriculum at all levels of education, with mandatory training for teaching staff in this area. At the same time, climate education should be provided by local authorities to the full extent of their competences.<sup>3</sup>

The above text is one of the demands of Climate Youth Strike (Młodzieżowy Strajk Klimatyczny) in Poland. It is significant for a number of reasons. First, it refers to the effects of climate change that are already evident around the world. The global climate catastrophe and the degradation of the natural environment are challenges that we indisputably have to face here and now, which is why access to reliable and widespread climate education is so necessary. Second, it highlights the situation in Polish schools, where issues of climate change and humanity's impact on the environment appear only in a fragmentary way. Finally, it underlines the strength of Climate Youth Strike's political expertise which, during the 2019 parliamentary campaign, helped to obtain official support for this demand from almost all political groupings in the election race. Shortly after the elections, Climate Youth Strike organised a strike, one of the main demands of which was the implementation of the commitment to climate education made by policymakers and decision-makers. Further campaigning continued in 2021 when, together with partners, they launched the 'YES! for climate education!' campaign. It gained widespread publicity in both traditional and social media, and beyond. The campaign collected as many as 62,000 signatures in an appeal for the introduction of climate education in the Polish education system followed by the establishment of the Roundtable for Climate Education in July 2021. Finally, it resulted in the declaration that the Ministry of Education will implement climate education in Polish schools from 2023 onwards.

The demands of Climate Youth Strike regarding climate education were:

- 1 We demand the introduction of compulsory environmental and climate classes in Polish schools.
- 2 Teachers must be trained in climate education and be provided with sample lesson plans and teaching materials.
- 3 Educational institutions must provide tools and support which will help students and teachers to cope with climate-related depression, climate and mental health problems.
- 4 Educational establishments must adhere to the principles of sustainable development and be innovators in the field, which is why both existing and new buildings must become climate-neutral by 2030.
- 5 We consider experiential learning to be important in the core curriculum. Lessons about risks, technologies, eco-innovation, and sustainability should be practical and engaging.
- 6 We advocate the construction of natural history museums and places where we can see and experience how the climate and biosphere will change over time.
- 7 Educational institutions must take the lead in developing a responsibility for nature and society and involve young people in practising active citizenship.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> See <http://www.msk.earth>

<sup>4</sup> "Raport Edukacja Klimatyczna w Polsce 2022 - rekomendacje okrągłego stołu" (in Polish), *Global Compact Network Poland*, <https://edukacjaklimatyczna.org.pl/raport-podsumowujacy-2022/>, accessed 27 September 2022.

## Implementation

Cooperation is one of the key factors in implementing the aims of the climate change movement. This starts on an individual level by joining the movement. One respondent observed that:

They (the youth) want to organise themselves, they want to organise their passions, their views, their actions. So, they tend to join these movements so they can work on a larger scale (S2.5).

Across the movement, strong cooperation includes relationships with student organisations, NGOs and grassroots networks, as well as institutions like the EU and the UN. Opinions of the work of politicians on both sides, European and Russian, is mostly negative. One interviewee commented:

I asked myself, why are we still cooperating [with the government]? [The answer was that] there is no other arena for activists for young people to demand policy change. And I think that we should take that to the streets (S2.5).

Many activists were frustrated by what they perceive as political intransigence and a lack of cooperation. As one participant noted:

Speaking with them (politicians) is useless and hopeless. Roundtables are useless and, on the contrary, influenced my desire to leave the movement. They made me completely hopeless (S2.9).

Both Russia- and EU-based activists saw few opportunities for transnational ties with climate movements and activists abroad, with FFF and CAN being the exception. Activists from FFF and CAN stated that they have good relationships with the global networks of the respective organisations. They participate in shared online activities, are in constant contact with other national branches through group chats and vote on common issues.

## Assessing the experience of youth climate activism

This section aims to provide an account of youth climate activism in Russia, Ukraine, and the EU, based on the interviewees' accounts. It starts with the juxtaposition of the main challenges faced by activists and considers their achievements. Then, it moves on to look at the main actors in youth climate activism as well as their allies and opponents. It concludes with an account of the relationships of youth climate groups with domestic and foreign actors.

## Challenges

### Public and political apathy

One of the main challenges faced by young climate activists is limited public interest in the climate crisis. An interviewee for this study observed that, "not many people are

interested in climate and nature preservation and it's hard to reach an uninterested audience" (S2.6). Activists expressed frustration about the dismissive approach of the public towards climate change and the climate crisis, issues which are still relatively absent from the public discourse. Interestingly, a young Russian activist noted that although climate activism there is generally associated with political dissent due to its stance towards the Russian resource-based economy, even independent and opposition media outlets do not give much space to the fight against the climate crisis. Instead, this participant noted that:

Climate and environmental movements are excluded from political opposition, independent movements and the media. There is no interest or support for us because politicians and media follow the people's interests, and the people are not interested in the climate issue. It might be our fault also because we did not spend enough time building alliances. Systemic change is not debated in the public discourse, not even among activists (S2.7).

Indifference towards climate change is diagonal and crosses very diverse social groups which significantly impacts progress. Sometimes, however, this apathy can manifest itself in climate denialism, both from institutions and the general public. One interviewee observed that, "A lot of people don't believe climate change is a real issue" (S2.4) while another suggested that:

In Russia, people think that climate activism is campaigning for smaller issues like sorted waste collection. So, people think that climate activists are diverting them from the real problem, which is waste (S2.8).

### Coordination

Another significant obstacle has been the difficulties in coordinating and securing smooth decision-making processes. Respondents stressed the difficulties in reaching consensus among participants, which often sparked harsh conflicts within the activist community. Russia-based respondents suggested this was down to the legacy of the Soviet era. The Soviet system and its rigid control over civil society initiatives left post-Soviet communities of activists deprived of an efficient organisational culture and education, which they must now create from scratch. One interviewee noted that:

due to historical reasons, people do not have any experience in collective action to influence policy making process. (...) There is also very low trust in change, people say that nothing will change anyway, the police will come for you. If you sit still and be quiet, you'll live a better life (S2.8).

Such views are consistent with early literature on post-Soviet civil society, which recorded low levels of trust (Rose 1994) and civic engagement (Howard 2003). Although such stances have been problematised by later literature, which focused on civil society's specificities in the region, these problems still seem to be relevant and present today.

### COVID-19

COVID-19 was naturally also a major challenge for young activists in Europe and Russia. First, it halted the development of new movements such as FFF as they lost the opportunity to consolidate and grow during the various lockdowns. Thus, once restrictions were lifted, these groups found themselves deprived of support and the ability to mobilise. One interviewee noted that:

due to the pandemic, we were not able to organise demonstrations, people were afraid and it was very hard at the beginning for our movement (S2.1).

Another participant commented that in Russia:

the pandemic was a way to increase pressure on civic mobilisation: now all the restrictions have been lifted but the ban on 'single pickets', which earlier did not need the permission of the authorities (S2.7).

"Single pickets" (*odinochnye pikety*) are a widespread form of protest in Russia, which consist of a peaceful protest action carried out by a single person, usually standing in a public place holding a sign. Prior to the introduction of COVID-related restrictions, single pickets were very widespread as they did not require prior notification being issued to the authorities. Now, however, single pickets are banned in many cities.<sup>5</sup>

## Achievements in Russia, Ukraine, and the EU

### Public discourse

Climate movements in both the EU and Russia have made significant progress. Most of the respondents mentioned a direct correlation between a shift in the intensity and quality of the public discourse on climate change and their actions. One claimed that:

We brought the issue of climate change into Russian public debate, in the Russian language, for the first time. We translated many articles and materials. Before that, we didn't even have the words to talk about it (S2.7).

Meanwhile another participant suggested that:

In 2018, there was a significant shift in the political debate on this topic, and climate change even entered into parliament debate. (...) We were the movement to talk about climate change and we influenced political debate (S2.1).

<sup>5</sup> See this report by OVD-Info for further information (in Russian), <https://data.ovdinfo.org/odinochnye-pikety-dannye>, accessed 16 January 2023.



A political debate on the climate crisis, albeit with varying degrees of involvement, permeated the public discourse everywhere. Russian activists stressed that, despite institutions being mostly silent on climate change, with a tendency to dismiss or exclude it from the political agenda, the issue received significant public attention. By translating texts from abroad into Russian, climate activists managed to bring crucial concepts into the country's public discourse. Most of the respondents claimed this was an important contribution to the general public's climate education and, in certain cases, was also associated with a drop in climate denialism. As one interviewee noted, "we influenced the media and how they talk about the climate crisis, denialism is now discredited and not recognised now" (S2.1).

### Mobilisational capacities

All the respondents were pleased with the number of people they had managed to involve and engage in demonstrations, strikes and initiatives. One commented that:

The discussions on climate change did not die off. Despite COVID, we continued our conversations. We still mobilise. We still go to the street as young people and say no to climate change. This is still relevant. Climate change is still happening every day and we continued our business as usual, you know, and I think this is a huge accomplishment (S2.5).

Another noted that:

The last global strike in Ukraine was quite big, I don't remember the exact number, but it was in many places all over Ukraine, despite the fact that we (the organisers) are a small group of about ten people" (S2.4).

In Russia, even relatively low numbers of participants were welcomed with enthusiasm and hope especially given the current political context that has seen civil society initiatives face strong repression. Spontaneous participation in strikes and demonstrations was seen as an important sign of the presence of counter-hegemonic ideas among the population, especially in a country where environmental issues are consistently absent from the political agenda.

### Efficient management of digital resources

Respondents also expressed satisfaction and enthusiasm in the use they made of digital resources. Post-2018 climate activism is strongly embedded in online activism and in the use of the internet for social mobilisation. Respondents acknowledged this and were proud of the online and offline mobilisation they were able to achieve thanks to skilful use of digital tools. The internet was also an important resource during the pandemic. Many pointed to a loss of participants and a decrease in community membership during the pandemic due to the impossibility of physical gatherings, but digital resources were useful to help the movement continue, to keep in contact with fellow activists, and to organise online and (future) offline activities.

## Actors: allies and opponents

### Private companies

Some Russia-based climate activists, unlike activists based in the EU, showed a greater inclination towards cooperation with private companies and corporations in formulating sustainable business models and practices. Meanwhile, the approach of EU-based climate activists was more anti-systemic and critical of the current resource-based socio-economic model. Among the achievements of the various climate movements, Russian activists mentioned the establishment of bilateral cooperation with companies and corporations looking to achieve sustainable development. University-based climate movements showed the highest tendency towards building such alliances, often with the goal of increasing future work prospects for students, while remaining within the boundaries of a business model whose principles were considered acceptable. In this scenario, activists and companies worked together to promote the introduction of green practices in their day-to-day business activities, and to launch awareness-raising initiatives and campaigns among the general public. This agenda precludes engagement in anti-systemic social protest, thus reinforcing the role of youth climate activists in raising awareness rather than demonstrating against the existing system.

Hence, companies and corporations often represent useful allies for Russian climate movements, especially for youth climate groups close to universities and other institutional environments. Corporations can offer sponsorship, unlike smaller entities with fewer resources. Respondents acknowledged the risk of corporate greenwashing, but they stated that financial support is crucial to carry on their activities and saw the interest of corporations in sustainable development as a positive trend. Some EU-based climate activists also mentioned the possibility of working with private companies, if done for educational purposes. However, they were more wary of these alliances.

### International and local NGOs

Another important ally for both Russia- and EU-based climate activists have been international NGOs like Greenpeace, UNICEF (United Nations Children's Fund), EYEN (European Youth Energy Network), and AIESEC (Association Internationale des Etudiants en Sciences Economiques et Commerciales). Youth climate groups often engage in joint projects with international NGOs and benefit from their support.

Local NGOs and social movements have also given crucial support to climate activists by forming coalitions and fostering mutual cooperation. One example is the cooperation between the Russian Socio-Ecological Union (*PCoЭC*) and feminist groups. One activist noted that: "We were also supported by feminist movements and organisations, especially movements that were recently active in the Khachaturian sisters' case (S2.4)."<sup>6</sup> The Khachaturian sisters' case is an ongoing criminal case that elicited public outrage about domestic violence in Russia. Sisters Kristina, Angelina and Maria Khachaturian were arrested for murdering their father.

<sup>6</sup> Luxmoore, M., 2020, "How the killing of an abusive father by his daughters fuelled Russia's culture wars", *The Guardian*, 10 March, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/10/khachaturyan-sisters-killing-of-abusive-father-russia-trial-family-values>, accessed 13 November 2022.

Their defence, however, claims that they had no other choice as they had been subject to constant sexual abuse and violence for years.

### State institutions

Relationships between climate activists and state institutions are often tense, especially when activists resort to disruptive action and civil disobedience, however peaceful. On 25 July 2022, activists from Extinction Rebellion climbed onto the balcony of the Palace of the Regional Government of the Piedmont Region in Turin, Italy. They hung banners denouncing the severe drought in Italy over the summer of 2022 and chained themselves to the balcony. They were removed by the police, after resisting peacefully following the principles of civil disobedience. As a result, the authorities filed a lawsuit against 22 activists who were present, and issued an expulsion order for 15 people, most of whom were students and young professionals based in Turin. Expulsion orders, or “*foglio di via*”, are personal prevention measures issued by the police, aimed at limiting the freedom of an individual deemed socially dangerous and suspected of a crime. People who receive an expulsion order are forbidden to enter the specific municipality of reference. While six of these orders were revoked following legal action, relations among XR, the climate activist community and the authorities remain tense.

In April 2022, hundreds of members of the Scientific Rebellion collective demonstrated in front of the Congress of Deputies of Madrid to denounce the passivity of governments, companies, and institutions in fighting climate change. A group of young people threw red paint over some politicians and then staged a sit-in protest. Minutes later, dozens of riot police came to the scene and removed the demonstrators. Fourteen young activists were arrested and accused of offences against state institutions, which are a criminal charge in Spain. In Russia, activists struggle to receive the administration’s permission to carry out public actions, such as FFF’s Global Strikes for Future, and activists are consistently subject to violence and repression. One example of this is the case of the climate and anti-war activist Arshak Makichyan, who has been arrested multiple times and is now threatened with the removal of his Russian passport, which is currently the only citizenship he holds.<sup>7</sup>

Russian respondents were divided about the role of local institutions. While federal institutions were presented solely as either indifferent or openly hostile to climate activism in the country, some suggested that certain municipalities often supported climate activists in carrying out local campaigns and initiatives. Sometimes, regional governors also helped NGOs working on climate issues, as the engagement of external stakeholders like NGOs is one of the key criteria for the Kremlin’s formal evaluation of regional governors (see Kotchegura et al. 2019). Russian university-based youth climate groups reported positive relationships of cooperation and support with state institutions, although this usually referred to the local university authorities. As one activist noted, “we have no contact at all with local or federal governments, we only organise things through or within the university, which fully supports our initiatives” (S2.6).

<sup>7</sup> Farand, C., 2022, “‘Politically motivated’: Russian authorities seek to remove climate activist’s citizenship”, *Climate Home News*, 6 June, <https://www.climatechangenews.com/2022/06/09/politically-motivated-russian-authorities-seek-to-remove-climate-activists-citizenship/>, accessed 28 September 2022.

However, local authorities were often reported to be aligned with the federal government in threatening and reducing climate activism. One participant claimed that the “local authorities were not supporting us at all, they would make fun of us and not take us seriously” (S2.9). Others reported repression and intimidation by law enforcement agencies. One interviewee said that “[the] police would often come to us and provoke us, say, like, ‘what is it that you don’t like, kids?’ so that we would react, and they would film us on camera to intimidate us” (S2.9).

### Independent media

EU-based respondents said they could count on the support of a plethora of independent media outlets that can amplify their claims and their educational campaigns. The mainstream media, such as major newspapers and televised news programmes, only report on major strikes and rarely give activists the space to speak first-hand about their actions. Russia-based respondents were ambivalent about independent media organisations. Some respondents claimed that the coverage of climate-related issues by independent media groups was rather poor and that they would expect more support for climate activism and awareness raising initiatives from independent journalists and media outlets. However, others stressed that independent media channels regularly supported Russian climate activists, as in the case of the media coverage of the political persecution of FFF and activists like Arshak Makichyan.

### Fossil fuel companies

EU-based activists were in agreement when asked about their main opponents. They indicated fossil fuel companies, lobbyists, and politicians who pursue economic interests. Russia-based activists did not focus as much on fossil fuel companies and lobbyists but pointed to the repressive governmental apparatus which is either openly hostile or indifferent to climate-related issues, due to Russia’s strongly resource-oriented economy.

### Vision(s) of the future

The future is a key factor in youth activism. The massive wave of youth climate mobilisation that started in Europe in 2018 and soon went global revolves around the concept of a “stolen future”, as the leading activist Greta Thunberg stated in her famous speech at the 2019 UN Climate Action Summit:

You have stolen my dreams and my childhood with your empty words. (...) You are failing us. But the young people are starting to understand your betrayal. The eyes of all future generations are upon you. And if you choose to fail us, I say: We will never forgive you.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> For a transcript of the speech see <https://www.npr.org/2019/09/23/763452863/transcript-greta-thunbergs-speech-at-the-u-n-climate-action-summit?t=1660893988928>, accessed 19 November 2022.

Climate action is about building a different world. It demands changes in the present to attain a liveable future. It deals with the present while looking beyond it. Despite the centrality of the climate question, visions of the future are hardly homogeneous among young climate activists, and views of the future vary considerably.

A common trait that emerged in the interviews was the radical prioritisation of the present. That means a sense of urgency, and a total immersion in the here-and-now, as opposed to engagement in prefigurative practices and the projection of the self in possible futures. For young climate activists, the future is deeply embedded in the present. It does not offer any escapist perspectives, rather, it demands urgent action. To take this action, young people need to be involved in policy- and decision-making processes, and to have more power. Most respondents stated that making the voice of the young and the marginalised heard is among their group's top priorities and goals.

The practicalities, however, are problematic. An issue that most activists raised when asked about their future goals is that drafting policy proposals and papers requires in-depth expert knowledge. Being a youth movement, they lack such knowledge by definition, as they have not yet undertaken specialist education. Hence their broader invitation to “listen to scientists”, which is the prognostic framework adopted by most global climate networks (see Svensson & Wahlström 2021). Experts have been working on mitigation and actions to reverse the climate crisis for a long time, but institutions consistently ignore their proposals. One interviewee noted that:

Doing energy policy programmes is a matter for experts, so it has to be paid labour and not volunteer labour. FFF is a youth movement with no paid positions and little expertise, for this reason it's difficult to draft an energy policy programme. We support the Green Course of Russia, but we don't want to do anything on our own because it would be bad, while other expert organisations can do it brilliantly. It's a rational division of labour, which means that drafting an energy policy programme is not among our prerogatives (S2.9).

Activists from Russia expressed their support for the 'Green Course of Russia' (*Зеленый Курс России*). The Green Course provides a framework for the long-term development of Russia up to 2050, corresponding to key modern global development documents — the Paris Climate Agreement, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, and the Climate Doctrine of Russia.<sup>9</sup> The policy paper was drawn up by Greenpeace, the Russian Socio-Ecological Union and CAN Caucasus and Central Asia, in cooperation with other organisations and experts in the field. However, Russia-based respondents also stressed the need for systemic change in order to implement the framework program in a resource-based economy like Russia. One participant commented that:

Greenpeace issued an official document with an official strategy to change the conformation of the energy sector. It envisages a systemic change for resource-based economies and diversification. But the reality is that we live in Russia, which makes it impossible (S2.8).

<sup>9</sup> See <https://cc.voeikovmgo.ru/ru/dokumenty/klimaticheskaya-doktrina-rossijskoj-federatsii> (in Russian), accessed 16 January 2023.

While convinced about the need to pursue the project, they also agreed that its realisation is unlikely, due to the government's priorities in terms of energy policy and sustainability. Respondents from FFF and CAN also cast doubts on the possibility of attaining a sustainable future under the increasingly authoritarian Putin regime, which prevents a multilateral approach to policy design. Regime change would be a prerequisite to introducing a radical new approach to Russian energy policy and attaining effective sustainability.

EU activists also called for systemic change and they blamed the climate crisis on the extractivist and colonial attitude of the Global North. Climate justice emerged as a central issue of the activists' vision of the future. Respondents from FFF, CAN, and YEE showed greater sensitivity to the topic than other climate activists. They stated that it was not possible to envisage a shared future without tackling the issue of climate justice and without proactively striving to attain climate justice through new specific policies and a radical change in human behaviour. They identified colonialism (in its many forms and eras) as the main driver of climate injustice worldwide. One commented that, “we have to understand the correlation between colonisation and climate change and what damage we (the Global North) left behind when it comes to the environment” (S2.5). Examples were made about the consequences of British colonialism in the Global South and of Russian and Soviet colonialism in Siberia and Ukraine. Russia-based climate activists stressed the fact that climate justice is a very topical issue in the country, as many regions are already suffering from policy-driven climate inequality. Coal mining in the Kuzbass region<sup>10</sup> and waste policy in the Arctic (especially in the Shies case, where regional authorities launched a large landfill project in the Arkhangelsk region, designed to store Moscow's waste, and hugely detrimental to the surrounding environment) were raised as the clearest examples of climate inequality in Russia.<sup>11</sup>

Personal views of the future were mixed. Respondents expressed a range of sentiments from strong eco-anxiety to more optimistic attitudes, stimulated by the increasing popularity of sustainable practices worldwide. The present is the main arena of action for a liveable future. For many, the future is hard to process. As one activist noted, “I don't really think about the future, because the future is scary” (S2.6). It is hard to remain optimistic when the battle for the future is uphill. EU- and Ukraine-based activists pointed to the hypocrisy of the economic interests prevailing in the battle against the climate crisis. Russia-based activists stressed the current regime's complete inadequacy vis à vis the climate crisis and also the presence of bellicose attitudes, which pose an additional threat to climate mitigation and diplomacy. For FFF Russia, this radically pessimistic attitude was expressed by posting a new logo on their social media channels in August. It was the normal FFF logo, but in black and white and with an eloquent alteration to the text changing from “Fridays For Future” to “Fridays No Future” (*Friday Без Будущего Russia*).<sup>12</sup> However, there were also more positive views of the future. Activists stressed a gradual shift in public and institutional sensitivity towards sustainability, especially in the West. This, in turn, bolstered the belief that there is still operating space for mitigation and that future generations might still bring about crucial changes.

<sup>10</sup> Gurkov, A., 2020, “The black snow of Kuzbass: How coal mining is ruining nature” (in Russian), *DW*, 28 October, <https://www.dw.com/ru/chernyj-sneg-kuzbassa-dobycha-uglja-gubit-prirodu-i-zdorove/a-55411823>, accessed 24 November 2022.

<sup>11</sup> See <https://stopshies.ru> (in Russian), accessed 24 November 2022.

<sup>12</sup> See <https://www.facebook.com/FridaysForFuture.Russia/photos/a.877992179243729/1743784355997836/>, accessed 24 November 2022.



## Snapshot 2 The Green Course of Russia

At the moment, Russian energy policy is oriented towards the preservation of the country's strong position in the oil and gas sector. There is a clear contradiction between this purpose and the active development of green industries and significant investment plans in renewable energies and the green sector. To provide an alternative to this perspective, Greenpeace initiated the Coalition for the Green Course of Russia, which unites more than 150 NGOs and private businesses, and has the participation of experts from state educational institutions such as the Higher School of Economics, the Lomonosov Moscow State University, and other prominent institutions.

The Green Course of Russia is a framework program for the long-term development of Russia for the period up to 2050, which draws from the major global agreements and documents, such as the Paris Climate Agreement, the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, and the IPCC reports. The ultimate goal of the Green Course of Russia is to ensure zero net greenhouse emissions and achieve carbon neutrality by 2050, while stimulating economic growth through a strong diversification of investments with an emphasis on the green sector. The medium-term goals aspire to reduce greenhouse

gas emissions to no more than 40% of the overall 1990 level (reducing emissions by 60% compared to 1990 and by 7.7% compared to the level of 2018).

The framework of the Green Course of Russia proposes coordinated action along three lines - renewable energy, the circular economy, and forest management.

The Green Course of Russia was the first collective project to design a comprehensive policy paper that could speak to institutions and decision makers. In the context of youth climate activism, the Green Course of Russia is especially important because it provides an extraordinary opportunity to bridge youth grassroots initiatives with institutionalised climate-related projects. Although the pool of experts that contributed to the policy design process mainly consisted of senior professionals, young climate activists showed great support for this initiative and largely contributed to its diffusion among grassroots civil society initiatives, thus creating a 'second informal coalition'. In doing so, young climate activists who found themselves disenfranchised from institutional politics inserted themselves into dialogues with state institutions.

### Renewable energy

By 2030

- Produce 20% of the country's electricity
- Produce energy needed for heating
- Produce energy needed for public transportation

By 2050

- Full transition to renewable energy sources in all sectors

### Circular economy

By 2030

- Development and implementation of business models with low waste generation

By 2050

- Carbon-neutral production of metals, cement and concrete
- Carbon-neutral agriculture
- Reduce greenhouse gas emissions from per capita food consumption to a level compatible with preventing an increase in the average global temperature by more than 1.5 °C

### Forest management

By 2050

- Intensive forestry
- Transition from extractive industry to crop industry
- Design and implement effective forest fire prevention plans

## Russia's war in Ukraine

On 24 February 2022, the Russian Federation began its full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Environmental and climate-related issues are deeply embedded in the conflict. The war has exposed European dependence on fossil fuels and climate activists have recognised this position with one commenting:

Every day, Europe pays up to a hundred thousand euros for fossil fuels from Russia, [indirectly financing] the invasion of Ukraine. It wouldn't have happened if climate action had been taken (S2.2).

This statement from a representative of the Ukrainian youth climate movement illustrates the consequences of the lack of political action that has meant energy dependence on Russia. According to Eurostat, Russia was the biggest supplier of both petroleum oils and natural gas to the EU last year.<sup>13</sup>

Some of the EU- and Russia-based respondents describe this situation as a "climate war" (S2.1; S2.3; S2.10). German sociologist Harald Welzer (2012), who introduced this term to the wider public, argues that a scarcity of basic resources like water, soil, and food, is one of the powerful new forces shaping 21st century society. This has been intensified by the rise in global temperatures and ever more extreme weather. The Russian war in Ukraine has also been called an ecocide, which shows the impact that the war has had on the ecological system.

Most European and some Russian organisations reacted to the war by supporting Ukrainian society on a symbolic level with an official stance or statement. Others took more direct action and joined campaigns calling for a Russian fossil fuel embargo.<sup>14</sup> For a number of reasons, not all Russian climate youth organisations had the chance to express their opinion officially. First, representatives of the Russian climate youth movement are scared of their government. Second, no change in the political agenda emerged from the data used by climate activists working in government-sponsored organisations like university-based groups. In addition, Russian activists are not sure about the degree of actual support for the war amongst Russian society and feel alienated from their own environment. As one noted:

Before the war I really believed that the Russian public didn't support the Kremlin, and that it was all Kremlin propaganda on social media. After the beginning of the war, it was disappointing to discover that even the Russian youth has been brainwashed by the regime. I don't think people in Europe quite understand the scale of the power of Russian propaganda because it's really crazy on social media, on telegram channels, and on TV (S2.3).

13 "Extra EU imports of energy products 2017 - June 2021", Eurostat, [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=File:Extra\\_EU\\_imports\\_of\\_energy\\_products,\\_2017\\_-\\_June\\_2021\\_\(monthly\\_averages\).png](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=File:Extra_EU_imports_of_energy_products,_2017_-_June_2021_(monthly_averages).png), accessed 13 January 2023.

14 See, for example [https://twitter.com/fff\\_ukraine/status/1501529673162887169](https://twitter.com/fff_ukraine/status/1501529673162887169), accessed 20 November 2022.

The consequence is an interruption in contacts and actions between the Ukrainian and Russian youth climate movements, with some exceptions.

In the opinion of the European and Russian respondents, the war in Ukraine takes a significant toll on environment. One suggested that, “I think the next part that we need to worry about is when the environment is so degraded that people will start fighting for territory” (S2.5). It has also had an unexpected and strong effect on climate change by making it less important in the public discourse. One interviewee noted that:

When the war began, I didn’t consider it to be a climate war, and now I actually see a lot of links, especially with Putin’s gas wars and the issues of energy powers and energy security for Europe, because I’m really anxious and worried about people in Europe, especially people who don’t have enough resources to pay their bills. And I see how prices are going crazy. (...) [Russia] receives money from the European Union and this money goes directly to financing the Russian army and for killing people. So, it’s definitely connected to the climate crisis (S2.3).

However, the respondents also noticed opportunities such as accelerating the shift to renewable energy in Europe and as one of the Ukrainian activists said, “make Ukraine even better than before!” (S2.4).

## Conclusion

After 2018, global mobilisation around the issue of the climate crisis gained momentum and entered a new phase. Young people were at the forefront of this mobilisation, reclaiming their future and their agency. Youth climate activism became a vehicle of empowerment, self-representation and participation for groups that had traditionally been excluded from politics and from climate-related decision-making processes. Post-2018 youth climate action has been transnational and strongly network-based, characterised by a range of strategies although activists mostly rely on civil disobedience and non-violent demonstrations. However, some Western groups have also engaged in targeted disruptive action, especially against fossil fuel industries. Activists engaged in direct confrontation with politicians and institutions, which they wanted to pressure into innovative climate crisis mitigation policies. Activists also demanded climate justice and the reduction of global socio-economic inequalities caused by an extractivist approach to resources.

However, young climate activists were confronted with several challenges. The political opportunities for collective action vary across different political regimes. In Russia, the narrow window of opportunity for climate action that had blossomed in recent years despite the strengthening of the regime has been virtually eliminated by the new repressive measures introduced after the launch of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, leaving activists deprived of operating space. Another consequence of the war is the prioritisation of anti-war mobilisation on behalf of non-aligned groups, including climate movements, which pushes climate issues down the agenda. In the West, a dismissive approach towards climate change by both public and politicians alike often results in measures, which are merely for show. The COVID-19 pandemic has radically changed the methods of and opportunities for action, forcing climate activists to face new restrictions and challenges.

Nonetheless, it has also paved the way for significant innovation in the means of collective action and for further use of the digital space. Youth climate activism has significantly impacted the quality and the intensity of the public discourse on climate-related issues, often pushing public opinion towards the acknowledgement of the severity of the climate crisis, establishing cooperation with diverse actors, and sometimes attaining a shift in the attitudes and policies of state institutions. However, the opportunities and outcomes of youth climate movements strongly depend on the wider socio-political context.

The future is a sensitive issue for youth climate movements. Consistent with a strong focus on the urgency of the climate crisis, young activists privilege the dimension of the present over prefigurative engagement with the future. They are involved in the present and the future is often referred to as a dimension that was stolen due to reckless energy policies and the prioritisation of economic interests over climate justice. This outlook also relates to the ongoing conflicts around the globe. Russia’s war in Ukraine has had detrimental effects not only on international cooperation on climate mitigation projects, but it has also, first and foremost, exposed the fragility of fossil fuel dependency.

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# Civil Society Action and Policy Advocacy

by Larissa Donges and N.N.

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## Introduction

The political work of civil society organisations (CSOs) working on climate change has been strongly influenced by multiple crises in recent months and years. In addition to the COVID-19 pandemic, the impact of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has changed the conditions for environmental and climate-related participation. On the one hand, it seems that the war is overshadowing other pressing challenges such as the fight against climate change but on the other hand, it has shown that climate action has become more necessary than ever in order to end dependence on fossil fuels. There is a clear interconnection between both crises.

In this chapter, we examine how the above challenges have affected the work of CSOs in the area of climate policy in the EU and in Russia. The focus is on advocacy activities and political work rather than specific activism or the activities of movements and grass roots organisations, which are discussed in Section 1.

CSOs across Europe face a mixed outlook. The previous Reports of the Civil Society Forum have reflected key trends, achievements, and challenges using examples of a range of CSOs across Europe. These studies considered the activities and situation of many different national CSOs. However, the focus of this chapter is on the participation of CSOs in European environmental policy making and their work and influence at the EU level. As well as the many national CSOs that contribute to EU policy making (Saldago & Demidoc 2018), a range of umbrella associations, often based in Brussels, lobby for more ambitious climate policy at the EU level. For example, ten of the largest environmental CSOs and networks working on the EU level have joined forces under the name 'The Green 10'.<sup>1</sup> The common goal of this coalition is to improve the environmental situation in the EU and its neighbouring countries. In terms of foreign policy, they advocate a global leadership role for the EU in environmental matters.

For this section, qualitative, structured interviews were conducted, particularly with representatives of such umbrella organisations and other European networks such as the German League for Nature Protection (DNR), the European Environmental Bureau (EEB), Friends of the Earth Germany and Europe and Justice & Environment. The results provide a profound insight into the current situation and describe advocacy strategies which are needed in the future to achieve positive policy changes in the fight against climate change.

The war in Ukraine has lowered the significance of the climate crisis for the surviving fragments of Russian civil society. Nevertheless, recent years have seen a significant growth of interest in this issue. The green agenda was a bridge for cooperation, business development, and political work between Russian and European CSOs, despite a very difficult relationship. In 2021, the Russian government began to highlight climate change and energy transition despite having ignored these issues for many years.<sup>2</sup> The growth of interest was supported by CSOs who helped to raise awareness on different levels, working on climate

<sup>1</sup> BirdLife International, Climate Action Network Europe (CAN Europe), CEE Bankwatch Network, European Environmental Bureau (EEB), European Federation of Transport and Environment (T&E), Health and Environment Alliance (HEAL), Friends of the Earth Europe (FoEE), Greenpeace Europe, Naturfreunde Internationale (NFI) and WWF European Policy Office. See <https://green10.org>

<sup>2</sup> "Vladimir Putin's message to the Federal Assembly" (in Russian), *tass.ru*, 21 April 2021, <https://tass.ru/politika/11206929>, accessed 27 September 2022.

education, and using crisis situations like COVID-19 to advocate for green recovery. Global warming has had a considerable impact on Russia with catastrophic fires, melting permafrost, devastating floods, and incidents affecting old fossil fuel infrastructure. These incidents have forced the government to act and have been used by CSOs in their campaigning.

The interviewees noted that it was Greenpeace and the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) in Russia that played the main roles on the topic of climate change, owing to their strong climate and energy programs which have grown in the past few years. There are also networking organisations in Russia that unite the efforts of all Russian NGOs on the topic of climate, especially around the UN Climate Change Conferences (COPs), one of the most active being the Russian Social Ecological Union. In recent years, the work of CSOs in the climate field has been more reactive, such as using environmental problems to promote the Green Deal for Russia and Russian regions.<sup>3</sup> Despite some initiatives to improve climate regulation, which were actively implemented in Russia, the influence of civil society has not been particularly strong. For instance, none of the proposals put forward by CSOs to improve the greenhouse emissions reduction law were implemented, though the government was forced to revise and adapt to a more ambitious version. The work of CSOs in the climate field is characterised by a mixture of high levels of expertise and radical PR surrounding climate actions. After the beginning of the war in Ukraine, environmental organisations faced unprecedented pressure - some stopped their work, and others refrained from confronting the government on climate issues.<sup>4</sup>

## Participation rights and achievements of CSOs

### Negotiating for a strong European Green Deal and an ambitious EU climate law

In Europe, the participation rights of civil society are based on the Aarhus Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters (AC).<sup>5</sup> Since the EU signed the AC, it has set high standards for access to environmental information, transparency and public participation in European and national administrative procedures, as well as access to justice for the EU and its member states. In concrete terms this means that citizens and environmental organisations have the right to have their voices heard and be given serious participatory opportunities in the design and implementation of EU environmental policy at an early stage. As the EU - alongside its member states - is a signatory party to the Convention in its own right, it expressed its support for the Convention's objectives and contents at the EU and national levels. The provisions of the AC, therefore, apply not only to the 27 member states, but also to EU institutions and political decision-making at the EU level.<sup>6</sup> In order

3 "Russia has been offered a 'Green Course'" (in Russian), *Kommersant*, 12 September 2020, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4490863>, accessed 25 September 2022.

4 "Russian environmentalists ask to recognize Greenpeace and WWF as foreign agents" (in Russian), *Vedomosti*, 10 April 2022, <https://www.vedomosti.ru/politics/articles/2022/04/10/917478-greenpeace-wwf-inoagent-ami>, accessed 25 September 2022.

5 For the full text of the convention see <https://unece.org/environment-policy/public-participation/aarhus-convention/text>, accessed 20 July 2022.

6 For more information on the AC at EU level see the four short films with English subtitles and three brochures, produced by the Independent Institute for Environmental Issues (UfU), [www.ufu.de/en/influencing-european-environmental-policy-new-short-films-and-brochures-on-the-aarhus-convention/](http://www.ufu.de/en/influencing-european-environmental-policy-new-short-films-and-brochures-on-the-aarhus-convention/), accessed 20 July 2022.

to advocate for European climate protection, organisations (and individuals) can participate in the numerous formal and informal participation procedures and processes of the EU. The second pillar of the AC provides for formal public participation in three different constellations: 1) In concrete decision-making procedures on particular environmentally relevant activities; 2) In the development of environment-related plans, programmes and policies; and 3) During the preparation of executive regulations and/or generally applicable legally binding normative instruments.

Apart from these formal, legally prescribed participatory opportunities, individuals and associations have the opportunity to get involved in various informal participation procedures and processes of the EU, such as the European Citizens' Forums or Citizens' Councils (Pauleweit & Donges 2022). In a global comparison, therefore, European civil society has many opportunities and the freedom to get involved in environmental issues. This is also reflected in the assessments of CIVICUS, an organisation which tracks the state of civil society and its civic space in 196 countries.<sup>7</sup> Regarding basic rights such as freedom of assembly or expression, the EU performs comparatively well. Nevertheless, recent evaluations show that the civic space in Europe continues to shrink. Even in established democracies such as France and the UK, legislative developments threatening fundamental freedoms have been documented.<sup>8</sup>

The participatory rights and opportunities described above also apply to umbrella organisations and networks that advocate ambitious climate policies at the EU level. The interviews for this study suggest that these groups make active use of these openings and that through their advocacy work they have achieved some progress. In recent times, the work of CSOs has been mainly concerned with the negotiations on the European Green Deal, the 'Fit for 55' legislative package, the European climate law, and the EU taxonomy for sustainable activities.

The majority of representatives interviewed agreed that many targets and decisions at the EU level should have been more ambitious. However, they were more or less satisfied with recent climate political developments, especially given the impact of COVID-19 and the war against Ukraine. Progress may be slow but there is a positive atmosphere. For example, one interviewee noted that in meetings with officials from the European Commission or other bodies, "the music they were playing was completely different" (S3.4).

The influence of CSOs and also public pressure can play a major role in strengthening climate protection. Much recent progress has been the result of the work of CSOs and broader civil society. For example, through this 'legitimacy from the bottom', parliamentarians can better justify their progressive positions and defend them in negotiations with other decision makers. As one interviewee observed:

I was very surprised to hear how many times they [officials] stressed the fact that pressure from the street made it possible to put forward a progressive agenda from them to the Commission as cabinet. They would never have been able to do it a year before (S3.4).

7 See <https://monitor.civicus.org/whaticivicspace>, accessed 20 July 2022.

8 See <https://findings2021.monitor.civicus.org/europe-central-asia.html>, accessed 20 July 2022.

The European Green Deal, a package of measures to preserve Europe's natural environment and to achieve climate neutrality by 2050, was launched by the European Commission in December 2019. Since then, European CSOs and networks have begun joining forces and lobbying for the ambitious design and implementation of related policy initiatives. Even if some targets have been watered down, it is positive that the Green Deal is still an important sign and driver for change and is partly due to the influence of civil society. One participant noted that, "this is also a great achievement. This was not given after COVID, this was not given during a time of war" (S3.4).

A key initiative, which is included in the Green Deal, is the 'Fit for 55' package. This set of legislative proposals and amendments to existing EU legislation aims to translate the ambitions of the Green Deal into law. The European Climate Law, which entered into force on 29 July 2021, aims to enshrine the goal of 2050 climate-neutrality into EU law. The legislation also includes the 2030 climate target of at least 55% reduction of net emissions of greenhouse gases compared to 1990. Considering that the initial agreement was a reduction target of 40% emissions reduction, the 55% target can be seen as progress and as the result of pressure from CSOs (S3.1). Additionally, it is considered a success that the European Parliament had initially demanded an ambitious 60% target during the triologue negotiations (S3.1). In this context, it was furthermore mentioned that it had been very helpful to learn from the experiences of different European countries and member organisations that already have national climate laws (CAN Europe 2022) when developing the common positions (S3.1).

With regard to the negotiations on the EU taxonomy for sustainable activities, it was seen as progress that, at the time of the interviews, the two responsible European Parliament committees objected to the inclusion of nuclear and gas in the list of environmentally sustainable economic activities (S3.3). However, at the beginning of July 2022 the European Parliament voted in favour of the inclusion of gas and nuclear in the sustainable finance taxonomy. Environmental CSOs consider this inclusion as a threat to the European climate targets and will continue to campaign against it.

Regarding renewable energies, the European Community Power Coalition has been able to achieve several successes, at national and EU levels (S3.3).<sup>9</sup> At the EU level the coalition successfully changed the legislative environment for community ownership. The work of the coalition led to a central note in the Energy Union communication, to the European Commission's working paper 'The New Deal for Consumers' and to the European Parliament report on Delivering a New Deal for Consumers (Griffin report).<sup>10</sup> CSO pressure – and the need to reduce dependency on Russian fossil fuel imports – has also pushed the key European Parliament Committees and the Commission into adopting a 45% target instead of the previous 40% goal by 2030.

<sup>9</sup> The Coalition promotes the development of citizen and community ownership of energy in the transformation towards 100% renewable energy. It brings together a diverse network of about 40 organisations across Europe, <https://communitypowercoalition.eu>, accessed 25 July 2022.

<sup>10</sup> "CO-POWER Success Stories", *Community Power*, 13 June 2016, <https://www.communitypower.eu/en/1952-success-stories.html>, accessed 25 July 2022.

Another tool to force governments and corporations to do more to prevent climate change and to adapt to its impacts is climate change litigation.<sup>11</sup> Legal action that aims to combat the climate crisis is growing around the world and has become an effective way of pushing climate action and justice (S3.2). Currently, in Europe and Central Asia, 59 litigation cases have been documented.<sup>12</sup> There are a range of plaintiffs in climate cases including individuals, communities and groups consisting of indigenous peoples, women, farmers, and migrants, corporations, subnational governments, and NGOs (United Nations Environment Programme 2020). Furthermore, European umbrella associations and networks provide legal assistance to their member organisations and support them in exercising their right of access to justice (S.3.2). Over the years there have been a wide range of climate litigation cases, all dependant on a number of factors such as the type of claim or the specific plaintiffs and defendants.<sup>13</sup> In Europe, there have been a variety of different climate cases which have raised awareness. For instance, the decision in *Urgenda v State of the Netherlands* in 2015 is a well-known example, which has influenced other plaintiffs in Europe and beyond. Applying similar strategies, other plaintiffs have achieved success too in domestic courts (Strömberg 2022). Roger Cox, who initiated the lawsuits in *Urgenda* and *Klimaatzaak* was later the lawyer in the case *Milieudefensie et al. v Royal Dutch Shell plc.* (see Snapshot 1). With the exception of a few popular and successful cases, many that are brought to court do not win in the end. But even this litigation can raise awareness about the climate crisis and put pressure on governments to strengthen climate mitigation and adaptation. As an interviewee noted:

I personally don't believe in changes of the legislation through tribunals. What I do believe is that court cases may change public opinion and make way for changes in the political landscape (S3.4).

Existing analyses of the impact of climate litigation show that it may have a number of different outcomes. These include, but are not limited to, shifts in policies and governmental behaviour, an increasing perception of litigation risk linked to inaction or insufficient action on climate change, the growing public profile of a specific climate issue in the media or public discourse, as well as direct legal and regulatory effects (Peel & Osofsky 2020).

<sup>11</sup> The Climate Change Laws of the World database by Grantham Research Institute on Climate Change and the Environment and Sabin Center for Climate Change Law covers national-level climate change legislation and policies globally and features climate litigation cases from over 40 countries, [www.climate-laws.org](http://www.climate-laws.org), accessed 22 July 2022. Information about climate change litigation in the US is covered by the Sabin Center and Arnold & Porter database, <http://climatecasechart.com/us-climate-change-litigation/>, accessed 22 July 2022.

<sup>12</sup> See <https://climate-laws.org/geographies/european-union>, accessed 22 July 2022.

<sup>13</sup> For an overview of the key elements of the most common types of climate litigation see the Action4Justice Climate Litigation Matrix, <https://action4justice.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/A4J-Climate-Litigation-Matrix.pdf>, accessed 22 July 2022.

## Snapshot 1 Milieudéfensie against Shell

Milieudéfensie (Friends of the Earth Netherlands) is a non-governmental organisation that was founded in 1971. Staying true to their origins as a grassroots organisation, they take a bottom-up approach in line with their conviction that true change comes from the people. The overarching principle that informs all their campaigning and advocacy work is climate justice. Thus, they try to never lose sight of the impact the Dutch people and registered companies have both at home and globally. This most notably includes the 30 biggest polluters in the Netherlands – one of them being Shell, which is responsible for 3% of all global greenhouse gas emissions and therefore plays a key role in driving the climate crisis.

Initially, Milieudéfensie requested climate strategies from all 30 companies, which turned out to be insufficient. For multinational companies, it is often all too easy to escape national laws whilst maintaining their image through lofty corporate strategies. After years of negotiations and media campaigns, Milieudéfensie finally decided to take Shell to court in 2018. Besides changing Shell's climate policy, their goal was to change the law and eventually achieve a legally binding framework that would hold multinational companies accountable for their emissions.

In a historic ruling, the court ruled in favour of Milieudéfensie in May 2021. The verdict stipulates that Shell must reduce 45% of its 2019 emissions by 2030 and take into consideration all corporate and consumer emissions since their contribution to the climate catastrophe puts peoples' lives at risk. This ruling forms a precedent and proves that Shell and other heavy polluters are violating human rights by neglecting their impact on the climate regime.

Although it was not the tool initially favoured by Milieudéfensie, the court case against Shell has proved the immense power of legal action. Nine de Pater and Laura van Tamelen, both campaigners at Milieudéfensie, suggest that, "If this is the only way to force corporates to stop violating human rights...we might need to hunt down the remaining 29 companies."

(Based on an interview with Nine de Pater and Laura van Tamelen, 19 July 2022.)

## A Green Deal for Russia: a holistic approach for raising awareness

Russian CSOs working on climate change have focused their political work on testing various approaches and finding arguments that would force the government to reduce greenhouse emissions in the broadest context. However, for many NGOs, the common theme was the promotion of local solutions such as renewable energy and energy efficiency, which has a short-term environmental or economic impact, while still contributing to the reduction of greenhouse emissions. Also, many Russian environmental NGOs continue to focus on recycling and the 'plastic problem', as these are the most popular issues for the Russian public. CSOs have also been looking for less controversial arguments related to solving urgent problems, promoting economic growth, or strengthening relations with foreign partners, mostly from the EU. One of the most successful cases was the development of a Russian Green Deal as a response to the COVID-19 crisis, which was inspired by the EU Green Deal.<sup>14</sup> Almost all climate CSOs and leading experts were involved in its development. Based on proposals from green businesses, NGOs and experts, a package of 100 specified climate solutions for Russia was developed. The solutions were divided into 3 main areas - clean energy, a circular economy, and sustainable forest management. It was presented as a new national idea and supported by leading energy experts. As one interviewee noted:

We were the first to propose the Green Deal as a new unifying idea for Russia and many people supported it. Different academic and government institutions also began to prepare reports with names like Green Turn or Turn to Nature. Everyone was talking about the Green Deal idea. The deputy prime minister started use phrases like 'Russian Green Deal'. In the end, there was an announcement of carbon neutrality in 2060. Even in 2020 getting that sort of commitment seemed impossible (S3.9).

The Russian Green Deal contained fewer controversial solutions for society and the authorities in the field of waste management, and radical proposals like stopping the development of new oil and gas fields and reducing their production. According to all interviewees, it was an effective way to pitch climate action in Russia. The Green Deal was also a universal response to all the initiatives in the field of climate legislation to meet the targets set under the Paris Agreement and achieve carbon neutrality. Disasters that occurred in Russia, such as the huge diesel spill along the river near Norilsk in the North of Russia, catastrophic forest fires, and the mass marine death in Kamchatka in 2020 became arguments that helped significantly in achieving the goals of promoting the Green Deal to a Russian audience. More than 250,000 signatures were collected for a petition demanding a 'green recovery' for Russia.

Another successful approach, according to an interview with Greenpeace, was working with regional authorities. Regional governments had a closer understanding than the federal authorities of how climate change was affecting their specific areas and it was possible to piece together a mosaic of the regions most affected by global warming. Greenpeace prepared a regional ranking of openness to the Green Deal which garnered

<sup>14</sup> "Green Course of Russia" (in Russian), Greenpeace, [https://greenpeace.ru/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/GC\\_A4\\_006.pdf](https://greenpeace.ru/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/GC_A4_006.pdf), accessed 20 July 2022.



## Snapshot 2 The Green Turn in Russia

At the annual meeting between the Russian President, Vladimir Putin, and the Human Rights Council in 2019 one member of the Council, journalist Ivan Zassoursky, highlighted ways to mitigate the impact of climate change on Russia and called for a technological transformation of the country's economy. President Putin argued with him but agreed that the Council would prepare a special report on global warming in Russia based on the expertise of national scientists and experts. The report was ready at the next meeting in 2020<sup>15</sup> It included many interviews with leading climate experts, scientists, and economists about the current state of climate action and best practices to mitigate and adapt to the climate crisis in Russia.

Alongside the report, a series of thematically related scientific articles were published, that examine the problem of climate change from multiple

perspectives, with a primary focus on how it will affect Russia. This report was the first document in the Russian language to focus on reassessing security risks to the nation from a human rights perspective, while providing an overview of the scientific consensus on climate change and showing the trajectory of developing scientific discussion. In 2021, the government finally announced a move towards a low carbon economy and carbon neutrality. This represented progress in Russia's response to the climate crisis but there was no real change due to the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

<sup>15</sup> To read the full report see <https://climatescience.ru/greenturn.pdf>, accessed 15 January 2023.

<sup>15</sup> To read the full report see <https://climatescience.ru/greenturn.pdf>, accessed 15 January 2023.

huge media coverage and over 1000 articles about this initiative have been published. In the area of renewables, CSOs have used a business-to-business approach and urged the government to introduce renewables based on economic arguments. Other CSOs have focused on raising climate awareness amongst several key Russian officials, which had significant results in 2021.

## Challenges in policy advocacy

### Finding common European positions in times of crisis and connecting climate protection and nature conservation

Despite a number of policy successes, CSOs usually face numerous barriers to participation in crucial climate political decision-making. Previous analysis has shown that European CSOs struggle with managerialism, marketisation, financial problems, increasingly onerous regulations at the national level, or internal challenges such as a lack of professionalism. For CSOs and networks working at the EU level the hurdles are somewhat different.

Major obvious barriers to campaigning for strong climate action include current unpredictable crises such as COVID-19 and the war in Ukraine. They change political priorities and shift the attention of the public as people focus on other pressing problems (S.3.1; S3.4). Apart from the brutal consequences of the conflict and the pandemic, companies and others also misuse these crises to argue against the European Green Deal and to water down climate targets. As one interviewee noted:

They [COVID-19 and the war] represented running horses on which the oil companies and the big farming companies, and others, went on to ride the wind, you know, and push back the European Green Deal agenda. So, we have had to fight hard (S3.4).

This situation makes it harder for umbrella associations and networks to agree on priority topics and to elaborate common positions (S3.1; S3.2). For example, with regard to the EU Emissions Trading System (ETS), member organisations had different opinions and it was not easy to find a common direction (S3.1). In the end, lobbying is often characterised by compromises, and these trade-offs can lead to decisions which are rarely in line with the common 1.5-degree target (S3.3).

Another factor that has made effective participation difficult is that most CSOs do not have the capacity (time and financial resources) for advocacy work at the EU level, as opposed to local, regional, and national concerns (S3.1). Even if work on European topics has financial support, project funding and EU funds are often very specific, so that there is little flexibility and hardly any long-term perspective (S3.3). Additionally, while CSOs find lobbying European parliamentarians relatively straightforward, getting traction in the Council is much harder. Lobbying energy and economic ministries - the key decision makers on climate relevant energy policy - in timely conjunction with the relevant EU processes leading to new legislation, remains a challenge for CSOs. This is especially the case given that many NGOs have closer ties with environment ministry officials rather than their counterparts in the energy and economic departments. NGOs fail to achieve their goals as gains achieved in the

European Parliament are not matched by progress in the Council. Thus, when the two institutions come to agree a common position for a new law, the outcomes are not as ambitious as CSOs would like (S3.12).

As described above, there are a number of formal, legally required ways to participate in policy making at the EU level. However, CSO representatives question how effective some participatory instruments actually are and whether the results of the processes are seriously taken into account by decision makers (S3.3). For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the importance of and need for electronic public participation increased. However, the EU is still struggling to facilitate modern, effective and more inclusive environmental decision-making, such as via the Have-your-say-Portal (Pauleweit, Donges & Aragão 2022).<sup>16</sup>

Finally, there is a great need to bring climate protection and nature conservation together without the one issue being played off against the other (S.3.1).

### Climate action vs. national interests

One of the main challenges to combating climate change in Russia is the dependence on fossil fuels. The obvious idea of stopping coal, oil, and gas exploration is viewed by most decision makers as contrary to the national political and economic interest. This makes campaigning for action on climate change in Russia extremely difficult. The low cost of energy due to subsidies provides a lack of motivation to save energy and develop clean alternatives. For Russian society, environmental and climate problems are a lower priority than other problems, such as human rights and poverty. In the environmental field, the topic of climate change is still far behind the issue of waste management. Many surveys suggest that people believe one of the main solutions to global warming is recycling.<sup>17</sup> In 2020, however, CSOs became more engaged with climate change and this issue has become a priority for them despite limited public awareness. Indeed, popular concern about climate change has even lagged behind the government at times.

The invasion of Ukraine has further exacerbated this situation, especially as the policy of divesting from fossil fuels is seen as contrary to Russia's interests. As of 2021 the rapid development of renewable energy in Russia has stalled and likely will not continue due to problems with logistics, access to technologies, and a lack of green finance. Senior officials have come out against renewable energy in favour of fossil fuels with President Vladimir Putin blaming what he called:

...the short-sighted policy of European countries, and above all the European Commission, in the energy sector. We see what is happening there... Everything seems to be fine, but the only bad thing is when unqualified, unfounded recommendations are given on what needs to be done

<sup>16</sup> The web-based portal run by the European Commission offers members of the public, stakeholders, scientific and technical experts, opportunities to contribute to initiatives as they take shape before their adoption by the European institutions, [https://ec.europa.eu/info/law/better-regulation/have-your-say\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/law/better-regulation/have-your-say_en), accessed 25 July 2022.

<sup>17</sup> Davydova, A., 2020, "Do Russians believe in the climate crisis?" (in Russian), *Greenpeace*, 11 August, <https://climate.greenpeace.ru/veryat-li-rossiyane-v-climaticheskij/>, accessed 25 July 2022.

in the energy sector, the possibilities of alternative types of energy are exaggerated: solar, wind, (...) And at the same time, they have begun to belittle the importance of traditional types of energy, including, and above all, hydrocarbons.<sup>18</sup>

Even before the war in Ukraine, Russian officials argued that the main solution to the climate crisis was carbon absorption by Russian forests. This was despite the recent fires and the lack of accurate scientific data on this topic. Russian officials have made the forests the focus of a national decarbonisation strategy. This was aimed at showing European partners that the carbon footprint of Russian products was low, an issue on which CSOs have also contributed research. However, one of the challenges for CSOs is they are given no credit for any political changes on the environment. This is because officials will not admit that they changed their position due to the influence of civil society (S3.11).

## Communicating the climate crisis

### The struggle for attention

In Europe, climate change has been an increasingly important topic in the media, especially since 2019. In that year, the continent experienced the hottest year since records began and extreme weather events are becoming increasingly noticeable. However, an analysis by the European Journalism Observatory shows that European media outlets have yet to formulate a clearly defined editorial policy on climate issues. For example, conservative media outlets in certain countries are often reluctant to view climate change as a crisis and to report on the issue accordingly.<sup>19</sup> The research also shows that there is an East-West divide in European coverage of climate change.

Currently, crises like the war in Ukraine are getting most media attention and crowding out other issues. This can make it difficult for CSOs get sufficient coverage of climate change in the press (S.3.1). Furthermore, journalists argue that there is often not enough progress to merit increased reporting on the issue (S.3.3). It is also difficult to make the case for action on climate change in a time of war, without being misunderstood (S.3.4). Moreover, CSOs face the challenge of communicating the need for combining climate protection with social justice issues (S.3.1). Many CSOs simply don't have the capacity for intensive press relations and when reaching out, they often focus on 'new media' (S.3.2). However, information which CSOs spread on social media platforms is very short-lived and filtered. Although there are many distribution channels it is difficult to reach the widest possible range of target groups (S.3.3). On these platforms CSOs have to quickly respond to changing events, running the risk that their positions are not fully thought through (S.3.1).

<sup>18</sup> "In yellow, greedy Africa" (in Russian), *Kommersant*, 4 June 2022, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/5391321>, accessed 20 June 2022.

<sup>19</sup> "Do European media take climate change seriously enough?", *EJO*, 18 February 2022, <https://en.ejo.ch/specialist-journalism/do-european-media-take-climate-change-seriously-enough>, accessed 25 July 2022.

## The ups and downs of climate in the Russian media

Before considering the issue of climate change in the Russian media, it must be stressed that Russian journalism is facing a huge crisis and that since the beginning of the war in Ukraine almost all independent media has been banned. The attitude of state media on global warming is governed by the federal authorities. Until 2021, the issue was largely ignored by the national media. More recently, however, Russia's achievements in the field of fighting the climate crisis have been fully covered. Some traditional media still publish climate sceptics, but this is more due to unprofessionalism than from a conscious anti-climate change agenda. At the same time, it emerged that a well-known Russian journalist, Yulia Latynina from the high-level independent media outlet *Novaya Gazeta*, was an extreme climate sceptic. This delayed the growth of climate change reporting in the independent media. Ms. Latynina's emotional, but ultimately unscientific, statements about the climate crisis had an impact on the Russian public.<sup>20</sup> CSOs had to spend a lot of time refuting these articles and demonstrating the inconsistency of their conclusions. According to those interviewed for this study, professional climatologists and some CSOs tried to avoid the federal media because they felt the issue had become too marginalised; in some cases, people were actually invited to vote on the topic of whether climate change exists or not. On the other hand, Greenpeace used almost every opportunity to talk about the climate crisis even in state-owned channels, such as NTV. As one interviewee noted:

We need to show housewives who watch this flow of propaganda another position. Without our involvement, they will drown in conspiracy theories and miss the reality of the climate crisis (S3.9).

Recently, the media in Russia has begun to give much more coverage to the climate crisis. Initially, journalists struggled to make the issue interesting for their audiences. Since then, CSOs have worked on creating the language of the climate crisis for the media, which includes translating basic terms into Russian. As a result, coverage has increased significantly. The professional community of climate journalists that has formed in the Russian business media should also be mentioned as they influence decision makers while also having close contacts with CSOs. Indeed, this has been one of the most effective campaign tools for climate CSOs. The war in Ukraine has reduced coverage of climate change in the Russian media but CSOs are working on ways to change that situation.

## Addressing decision makers

### Shorter distances but less transparency and focus through digital communication

CSOs who aim to achieve changes in policy, legislation, and practice need to advocate on multiple levels. Advocating for climate action at the EU level is very specific and complex (S3.3). The EU is characterised by a unique system of multi-level governance with many different institutions and locations. Hence, civil society representatives need a profound understanding of this system, the legislative procedures and EU law, and they need to elabo-

<sup>20</sup> Latynina, J., 2020, "What is a 'hockey stick'?" (in Russian), *Novaya Gazeta*, 6 January, <https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2020/01/06/83362-tserkov-globalnogo-potepleniya>, accessed 20 June 2022.

rate a corresponding multi-layered system of communication in order to influence through a range of channels. It is also necessary to know the characteristics of communication and culture within and between EU institutions and different decision makers such as European Commission officials, diplomats on the Council of the European Union and MEPs. CSOs engage with EU decision makers in many different ways including face-to-face meetings, lunch briefings and other casual meetings, written briefings, consultation procedures, hearings, stakeholder conferences, seminars and workshops (Farkas & Novakova 2015).

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, many meetings with political representatives in Brussels took place online. For CSOs that had already established relationships before the pandemic, it was often easier and faster to get appointments and develop closer ties (S.3.1; S.3.3). Furthermore, digital meetings at the EU level allowed for more opinions and perspectives from different member CSOs or countries (S.3.4). At the same time, certain decision-making processes became less transparent (S.3.3). There was also the issue of so-called 'Zoom fatigue' at the EU level. Many political representatives and CSOs grew tired of online meetings and discussions often lacked substance (S.3.4). In the future, a combination of in-person and digital communication will probably be the best way to shape the EU agenda (S.3.1).

### Think tanks and radical PR

In Russia, contact between decision makers and CSOs is rare and usually based on established personal connections. Representatives from Greenpeace and WWF suggested that they use several such channels to get their message across to senior officials. While this approach has been successful there is a large gap at the intermediate level. Without personal connections, officials do not have much desire to establish contact and even try to avoid it, especially with international organisations. At the same time, some CSOs have high levels of expertise and their work features anonymously in government reports and even in the climate strategies of large companies. This, in turn, helps them to maintain some contact with policy makers. However, government ministries are very strongly influenced by the lobbyists of the fossil fuel industry and sometimes directly deny the issue of climate change. Meanwhile, regional administrations have historically tended to ignore environmental CSOs. It is only with the need to develop policies to deal with the impact of climate change that they have started to pay some attention to these organisations. However, most regional officials show little interest and on a national level the authorities don't see any value in environmental CSOs, instead perceiving them as a source of problems.

One important window of opportunity for civil society is participation as observers at the COPs. During these conferences, it is possible to explain the position of CSOs towards current policies and plans and, if possible, to convey that thinking to top officials. On several occasions this has prompted the formation of interdepartmental commissions, with the participation of NGOs. However, this has been the exception rather than the rule and has had no serious effect.

### Fighting the climate crisis together

In Russia, CSOs actively work with scientists and for some this has been the main way to promote climate issues. They transform scientific knowledge into understandable language and convey it to the general public and decision makers. Working with scientific institutions also gives CSOs greater public credibility.



### Snapshot 3 Fern opens space for civil society

Fern is a small EU-based organisation dedicated to using EU policies and processes to protect forests and forest-dependent people around the globe. Its theory of change is that having representatives of affected peoples at the decision-making table leads to positive changes. Before Fern existed, its founder Saskia Ozinga used to organise meetings of forest activists called the Forest Movement Europe. It was at one of these meetings that the idea for Fern was born, when NGOs expressed a need for an organisation who could keep track of forest policies and explain how to input them into complex EU decision-making. Whilst Fern identifies opportunities to protect and restore forests, it also opens space for other organisations to raise their own voices. Fern listens to the movement's needs, whilst keeping an eye on the EU political agenda. They focus on supporting partners and opening doors for national groups to achieve aims that link to EU policies. This can be done through putting them in contact with MEPs or by helping to frame letters and press releases in a way that will convince EU policymakers.

Since Fern was created, national groups have increasingly gained access to the EU and employed staff to specifically work on EU policy. In response, Fern has developed a new set of tools to support member organisations to become self-sufficient. "I wish every group had at least one person who focussed on EU policy", says Kelsey Perlman, Forest and Climate Campaigner at Fern. She emphasises that the more NGOs that enter the EU discussion, the greater leverage the forest movement has to change laws. Even when national groups can represent themselves and their agendas among EU bodies, there will still be a need for Fern to coordinate group advocacy.

(Based on an interview with Kelsey Perlman, 20 July 2022)

There are a number of environmental organisations in Russia, and they often work together, such as in networking organisations or developing joint positions for COPs. Previously, Russian organisations often worked with European partners but in recent years the "Foreign Agents" law has reduced this work to a minimum and many projects with European funding have stopped. Nevertheless, interaction continues and is an important part of their work, both to exchange experience and increase expertise, as well as to provide the latest information about Russia. Some representatives of NGOs note that it is only possible to promote the issue of climate change through co-operation, which is why a lot of resources are spent on community building. Events and joint activities under the auspices of the Climate Action Network (CAN) are very important for climate CSOs as they are way to grow expertise and offer greater inclusion in the wider climate change movement.

Greenpeace and WWF differ from other climate CSOs because they have a strong connection with, and support from, other offices around the world and a common global framework. This helps to localise the most progressive ideas in Russia and also explain what processes are really taking place in Russia.

### Future strategies to achieve positive policy changes

#### Understanding the complex European system of policymaking and pushing topics proactively

To push climate protection and adaptation, CSOs need good strategies to exert influence and make their voices heard. The representatives interviewed working at the EU level named a number of leverage points and tactics that have been important so far and need to be pursued more intensively in the future in order to shape European climate policy.

At the internal and organisational level, it is important to strengthen the professionalism of organisations and umbrella associations (S.3.1). Furthermore, European CSOs should cooperate and network in their countries and at the EU level in order to join forces, share experiences and gain more political power (S.3.1; S.3.3). At the same time, it is crucial not to dilute arguments in advance when negotiating common positions, but to enter negotiations with decision makers with ambitious goals and demands (S.3.3). As well as strengthening cooperation among CSOs, it is also essential to stay connected to the youth movement because it has become a key driver of change and has influenced the political landscape significantly in recent times (S.3.4; see Section 2).

Regarding the political level, a civil society representative underlined how important it is to understand in detail the EU's complex system of policy making and related processes. As they observed:

[It is important] to find out what takes place where and when at an early stage. I don't need to lobby the parliamentarians when they're not yet talking about the topic, but when it's still in the Commission (S.3.3).

When addressing decision makers, it is helpful to keep in mind that knowledge is power. It is not only essential to be technically well prepared in order to be able to argue for climate protection, but also equally important to give specific, relevant information to the political representatives through meetings and briefings. Experience shows that a lack of knowledge among parliamentarians, for example, can lead to negative decisions, which weaken climate

goals. In general, it is also a good strategy to push important topics very proactively, instead of just reacting to political decisions and development. In this way, civil society has been able to put the topic of energy poverty on the EU agenda (S.3.3).

Regarding topic setting and strategic framing, one interviewee pointed out that climate policy should be communicated more strongly as a means of achieving greater independence. The more Europe moves away from fossil fuels and promotes sustainable solutions, the more independent it will become in geopolitical terms. Another way to win more advocates for climate action is to pursue climate change mitigation, adaptation and nature protection policies together (S.3.4). This is particularly the case in the field of energy supply where it is necessary to find solutions to existing conflicts such as the compatibility of renewables with biodiversity goals.

Another solution mentioned to strengthen climate protection and win greater support is to connect climate policy and social justice. Ambitious climate action and social progress must go hand in hand. Future climate protection and mitigation measures must be socially fair. Furthermore, ambitious climate policies can have many positive mutual benefits in the areas of social justice, inclusiveness, health, and gender equality and these need to be strengthened in the future (S.3.1; S.3.4).

Finally, CSOs and networks should elaborate their specific theory of change, based on the intended impact of the specific organisation or network. This theory should formulate what an organisation wants to achieve and then go backwards from these results to identify strategies, activities, and measures to achieve these outcomes. Previous strategies can be evaluated and adjusted in the light of current theory. Going through this process can show that lobbying is an important pillar of political advocacy but that it should be accompanied by strategic media work and broad public mobilisation (S.3.3).

The ongoing war in Ukraine makes short term planning impossible but the climate crisis is certainly not slowing down, as the summer of 2022 clearly shows. Some Russian CSOs noted the need to bring the topic back into the media spotlight, to develop cooperation with Asian partners, and try to expand cooperation with the EU in this area with the help of third parties. Others noted the need to continue working with businesses to promote renewable energy and use economic arguments and local solutions. Other views include focussing on education projects which will be very important in the future and also thinking about how to use the current crisis to divest from the dirtiest industries, like coal. Unfortunately, Russia is facing a huge degradation in the climate agenda and it will take years for a relatively sustainable path to emerge.

## Conclusion

In recent years CSOs and networks on European environmental and climate policy have increased both their advocacy and influence at the EU level. CSOs make use of diverse formal and informal formats and channels to participate in EU policy and law-making processes. The framework conditions for participation are comparatively good but they are becoming increasingly difficult in some countries and in relation to certain specific issues. Current crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the war against Ukraine make it difficult for CSOs to demand ambitious climate policies and bring about significant changes. Since Ursula von der Leyen became president of the European Commission in 2019, there have been some positive developments and signs of a 'fresh wind'. However, the risks are high and there are indications that climate targets are being watered down and ambitions being reduced. There has been progress, but much greater political effort and fundamental changes are needed to address the climate crisis.

In these times of crisis, CSOs must find solutions for a range of challenges. For example, it is not always easy for European umbrella associations and networks to agree on common priority topics and to elaborate common positions on climate-relevant issues. Furthermore, CSOs are in a constant battle to get the attention of decision makers, the media and the public. For future advocacy to be successful, it is crucial to thoroughly understand the complex European system of policy making and to be proactive in campaigning on various different political levels. Combatting climate change and moving away from fossil fuels must be sold as a means of achieving greater independence and freedom, regardless of the current conflict in Ukraine. Furthermore, ambitious climate action and social progress goals must go hand in hand in order to win popular support and to find fair and sustainable solutions to the climate crisis for society as a whole.

In Russia, despite very limited resources for CSOs, the topic of the climate crisis began to be seriously discussed after 2019. But since the war in Ukraine this issue has been largely ignored. CSOs are now focused on survival but hope that the action on climate change will return. Even though the current situation is bleak a lot of work has been done in recent years and it is hoped that this will provide a strong foundation for future activity.

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### List of interviews

Interview S3.1: Policy Officer for EU climate and energy policy at a German umbrella organisation of conservation and environmental protection organisations

Interview S3.2: Attorney and co-leader of the climate topic team in a network organisation of green law NGOs located in different EU countries and elsewhere

Interview S3.3: Expert on international climate policy at a German civil society organisation for environmental protection

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## Conclusions and Opportunities

by Angelina Davydova and Delia Villagrassa

This report analyses the most important civil society actions and trends in the area of climate change in the EU and in Russia. Our authors speak from very different standpoints formed by the political situation in their countries and recent developments within the civil society sector.

In the first section of the report, the authors state that climate policy issues are no longer a marginal topic in the EU, but the European climate movement nevertheless still finds itself limited not only in authoritarian states but also in the supposedly democratic countries of the EU. The authors outline the differences between the Central/Northern, and Southern/Eastern European climate movements, which can be explained by the specific historical developments and social relations of each member state, which, in turn, has shaped the relations between social movements and the state.

At the same time, the situation within Russia is characterised by dividing and taming independent NGOs after the passage of the law on "foreign agents" in 2017. Yet despite the ever-increasing state pressure, environmental activism in Russia has grown over the last decade, while mainly limited to the local level. However, larger independent and politicised climate movements such as Fridays for Future were able to operate and succeeded in mobilising many young Russian supporters.

COVID-19 restrictions and further authoritarian backlash following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine made climate protest in the country essentially impossible, leaving national environmental NGOs in danger of closure and forcing many activists and experts to leave the country.

These trends of oppressing civil society activities in Russia have been developing over a number of decades, hand in hand with the monopolisation of politics and a significant part of the economy. Environmental movements saw success when challenging medium-scale businesses or regional authorities, but were doomed to failure when challenging the state or the reportedly corrupt mining corporations which often had special influence and/or connections with the regional authorities.

The full-scale invasion of Ukraine which began in late February 2022 also had an influence on civil society working on climate-related issues in the EU: not least, the war has exposed European dependence on fossil fuels. Most European and some Russian organisations reacted by supporting Ukrainian society symbolically with official statements or joint campaigns calling for a Russian fossil fuel embargo. Russian climate youth organisations could not express their opinions freely due to ever-increasing political and legal pressure, and potential threats both for the organisations and personally for the activists.

In the second section of the report, which investigates the development of youth climate activism, the authors come to the conclusion that after 2018, global mobilisation around the issue of the climate crisis gained momentum and entered a new phase; youth climate activism became a vehicle of empowerment and participation for groups that had traditionally been excluded from politics and from climate-related decision-making processes. These trends were highly present within the EU.



It is also remarkable that post-2018 youth climate action has been transnational and strongly network-based and included various strategies including civil disobedience and non-violent demonstrations. Some Western groups also engaged in targeted disruptive action, especially against fossil fuel industries, while others directly confronted politicians to pressure them to adopt climate mitigation policies. Activists also demanded climate justice and the reduction of global socio-economic inequalities caused by an extractivist approach to resources.

In Russia, the narrow window of opportunity for youth climate action has been virtually eliminated by the new repressive measures introduced after February 2022, leaving activists deprived of operating space. Another consequence of the war is the prioritisation of anti-war activism on behalf of non-aligned groups, including climate movements, which pushes climate issues down the agenda.

In Western Europe, the COVID-19 pandemic radically changed the methods of and opportunities for action, forcing climate activists to face new restrictions and challenges. Nonetheless, it also paved the way for significant innovation in regards to collective action and in the digital space. Youth climate activism has significantly impacted the quality and intensity of public discourse on climate-related issues, often pushing public opinion towards the acknowledgement of the severity of the climate crisis, and sometimes attaining a shift in the policies of state institutions.

The urgency of the climate crisis remains a very important topic for youth climate movements, both in the EU and Russia. Young activists privilege the dimension of the present over prefigurative engagement with the future. The future is often referred to as a dimension that was stolen due to reckless energy policies and the prioritisation of economic interests over climate justice.

The third section of the report analyses civil society action and policy advocacy on climate change topics. It concludes that, in recent years, CSOs and networks on European environmental and climate policy have increased both their advocacy and influence at the EU level. CSOs use diverse formal and informal formats and channels to participate in EU policy and law-making processes. The framework conditions for participation are comparatively good but it is becoming increasingly difficult in some countries, and in relation to certain specific issues. The COVID-19 pandemic and the war against Ukraine make it difficult for CSOs to demand ambitious climate policies, with indications that climate ambitions are being watered down. There has been progress, but much greater political effort and fundamental changes are needed to address the climate crisis.

In this analysis, imagining the future of climate activism also plays an important role, with concrete recommendations provided by the authors:

- CSOs need good strategies to exert influence and make their voices heard. They therefore must, at the internal and organisational levels, strengthen their professionalism. CSOs should cooperate and network in their countries and at the EU level to join forces, share experiences and gain more political power. It is also crucial not to dilute arguments when negotiating common positions, and to enter negotiations with decision makers with ambitious demands. Furthermore, it is essential to stay connected to the youth movement, as it is a key driver for change.

- It is important for civil society experts and activists to give specific, relevant information to political actors through meetings and briefings, and to push important topics proactively instead of just reacting to political decisions and developments.
- In the context of the ongoing war in Ukraine (but also independently of the war), climate policy and moving away from fossil fuels should be communicated in the EU more strongly as a means of achieving greater energy independence.
- Climate policy and actions should be connected to other topics, for example, pursuing climate change mitigation, adaptation, and nature protection policies together. Similarly, linking climate action to social justice and fairness issues is important, as ambitious climate action and social progress must go hand in hand. Also, CSOs should highlight that ambitious climate policy has many benefits in the areas of social justice, inclusiveness, health, and gender equality.
- CSOs and networks should link their specific theories of change to the intended impacts. Based on the stated goals, identify strategies, activities, and measures to achieve them. Strategies should be constantly evaluated and adjusted, recognising that, while lobbying is an important pillar of political advocacy, it should be accompanied by strategic media work and broad public mobilisation.
- Overall, CSOs must find solutions for a range of challenges. It can be difficult for European umbrella associations and networks to agree on common priority topics and positions. Furthermore, CSOs are in a constant competition for the attention of decision makers, media and the public. For future advocacy to be successful, it is crucial to thoroughly understand the complex European system of policy making and to be proactive in campaigning on various different political levels.
- The situation is completely different for Russian civil society actors. Despite very limited resources for CSOs, the topic of the climate crisis began to be seriously discussed, but since the war in Ukraine it has been largely ignored. CSOs are now focused on survival but hope that action on climate change will return. A lot of work has been done in recent years and it is hoped that this will provide a strong foundation for future activity.
- Some Russian CSOs are still trying to work on climate change, without mentioning the war, or trying to make the issue sound less political, e.g. continuing working with businesses to promote renewable energy and using economic arguments and local solutions. Others focus on education projects and are thinking about how to use the current crisis to divest from the dirtiest industries, like coal.

Climate activism and civil society groups working on climate issues are key for a liveable future, in the most existential sense. CSO activities in their various forms are also crucial for a functioning, democratic society where political decisions are made, taking into account public opinion and various forms of political participation and engagement.

Since the beginning of the full-scale war in Ukraine, conditions for the work of climate activists and civil society groups working on the topic have become highly restrictive and organisations within Russia can only continue working on a narrow set of topics. Many climate activists and civil society experts on climate issues have also left Russia and now



are residing in other countries, in exile, continuing their work on climate change and trying to develop a new vision for Russian civil society. Many are also conceptualising a new socio-political system for the country, following possible political changes in Russia.

Finally, Russia- and EU-based CSOs working together to advance an ambitious climate protection agenda, enabling democratic discourse, and upholding the freedom needed for civil society to be able to participate actively in the political and economic space of their respective countries, is also important. Democratic forces are under threat, today as much as in the past. Supporting each other and working together, civil society can be a bulwark for freedom and a climate compatible future for all. Maintaining contact, continuing the dialogue, exchanging information and analysis, while also thinking and talking about future post-war scenarios is a key priority for the cooperation of CSOs from Russia and the EU at the present moment, even as the war in Ukraine is still ongoing and the political atmosphere within Russia is becoming more restrictive.

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### Your feedback and contributions

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This report shows the important role civil society plays in pushing climate policy. Despite governments not living up to the urgency, it is clear that without civil society calling for more ambition, decision-makers would even be more reluctant to act. The challenge to influence policy-making is obviously bigger in Russia and it is heartening to see this does not stop individuals and organisations from putting forward their suggestions and mobilising support.

Wendel Trio, climate change science and policy analyst, former Director of Climate Action Network





### Your feedback and contributions

Your comments and proposals are very welcome, especially on themes and countries which might be included in future reports. Send your feedback and ideas to [info@csf-ev.org](mailto:info@csf-ev.org)



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