



A [prevalent perspective from the early 2000s](#) among some Russian officials held that climate change could actually benefit the country by opening up Arctic shipping routes, expanding agricultural zones, and reducing winter heating costs. Russian President Vladimir Putin once [joked](#) about the prospects of Russians not needing their fur coats in a warmer climate. For many years, the Russian government trafficked in climate change denial (in part due to [the skepticism of prominent Russian scientists](#)) and made little progress (a 2013 law on reducing GHGs aimed at 25% reduction compared to 1990s levels meant little change because of the substantial decrease in emissions following the Soviet Union's collapse). However, signing the Paris Agreement in 2019 marked a critical step in Russia's climate policy away from business as usual and toward commitment to action. Although Russia does contribute a significant amount of greenhouse gas emissions ([4.61% of the world's CO₂ emissions in 2024](#)), there are signs that some progress toward decarbonization has continued.

In preparation for the upcoming COP31 in Antalya, Turkey's Environment, Urbanization and Climate Change Minister Murat Kurum even remarked on the importance of [collaboration with Russia](#). So, what has prompted this climate policy evolution from climate change denial to commitment to decarbonization and being a valued climate policy partner?

That's the question I want to answer for my first Legal Planet post. I recently started as an Earth System Interventions (ESI) Fellow in Environmental Law and Policy at [UCLA's ESI Project](#). I'm going to give an overview of the main driver behind the development of Russia's climate policy, i.e., the international climate trends. International climate policy and the new compliance requirements forced Russia to develop its mitigation strategies such as carbon tax and cap-and-trade. At the same time, however, the Arctic is one arena where Russia seeks to act as a driver rather than a follower of climate policy.

Role of international climate policy

As the 2021 report "[Climate policy in Russia: reaction to international challenge](#)" noted, international climate policy has been the main driver in the evolution of Russia's domestic climate policy. As a response to the obligations under the Paris Agreement, the 2020 domestic [law on limiting GHGs](#) by 70% compared to 1990s levels by 2030 was the turning point in climate policy. Additionally, [the EU climate policy](#), especially the instruments such as Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanisms (CBAM), had an impact on the development of Russian policies in early 2020s. However, after the 2022 Russia's invasion of Ukraine, when the EU imposed sanctions on Russia and curbed almost all Russian imports, the CBAM has become primarily an object of criticism in Russia, which led to the [launch](#) of an official WTO dispute against the EU. Russia also has to take into account the carbon measures introduced within other multilateral formats, such as [CORSIA](#) (Carbon Offsetting Reduction Scheme for International Aviation) within the International Civil Aviation Organization, which Russia has [supported](#). The Special Presidential Envoy for Climate, Ruslan Edelgeriyev, a supporter of carbon markets and Russia's representative in international climate negotiations, has [talked](#) about the necessity of carbon pricing and GHGs monitoring for the economic imperative in Russia.

In addition to the influence from the global fora such as the UNFCCC and the West from the EU, Russia must account for China's climate policy considering that China now is the country's number one trading partner. With China presenting itself as a climate leader for the developing world, Russia has some catching up to do. For example, from 2027, China is planning to [introduce a national carbon footprint management system](#), setting standards for measuring carbon emissions covering most of the industrial production, including imports. Apart from China, [other BRICS countries \(that have seen a clear trend towards climate-friendly policies\)](#) have also become more significant trade partners for Russia, such as India.

Sakhalin Climate Experiment: a case of serious climate action

One particularly telling example of Russia making serious steps toward carbon neutrality under its international commitments, is a 2022 [Federal Law](#), setting Sakhalin Oblast as Russia's first pilot region to achieve carbon neutrality. Also known as the Sakhalin Climate Experiment, it is a significant move reflecting changing attitudes to climate change and evolution in climate policy post Paris ratification. While mostly regulated via cap-and-trade, the Experiment also benefited from the efforts of the diamond mining company ALROSA. The company has implemented the [first CDR project in Russia](#) capable of absorbing up to the equivalent of 25,000 tons of CO₂ annually (which is substantial for a local project, but not meaningful for any global climate impact). While opposed by the industry and stalled due to sanctions as the result of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the Sakhalin Climate Experiment started half a year later (although with concessions to the opponents not to replicate such an experiment in other regions without a separate law). The Sakhalin governor, Valerii Limarenko, who has been the driving force behind the project, [reflected on the importance of following international trends](#): "Global warming exists, the worldwide trend [of decarbonisation] exists, and the energy companies have shown that they are following this trend. Therefore, there is no alternative for us. It is completely clear that we have to go in this direction. It's a matter of competitiveness. There is no other way. We hold that this is a factor of survival for Sakhalin." Milena Milich, the minister of ecology and sustainable development who managed the project, [pushed](#) for the project to start despite the war in Ukraine: "The problems of ecology and climate do not go away in periods of sanctions or without them, in times of peace or of crisis. This is a planetary challenge for all the global community." This first of its kind initiative [would not have been possible without regional decision-makers](#) such as Limarenko and Milich.

At the same time, the design of the quota system is not without flaws. For instance, as climate finance expert Ekaterina Kirgizova-Barskaya noted in an interview, companies exceeding their quotas can either offset the excess with carbon units or pay a fee, with no obligation to make up the shortfall the following year. The General Director of the consultancy Carbon Lab and a climate expert, Mikhail Yulkin, argued that a [heavily forested region like Sakhalin should aim not merely for carbon neutrality but for net-negative emissions](#) to offset less-forested parts of Russia. Moreover, low penalties for exceeding quotas give companies little incentive to cut emissions.

Nevertheless, the Sakhalin experiment marked a shift in Russian climate policy. As climate journalist Trojanova [noted](#), the Sakhalin Experiment represents “the few things Russia is doing seriously for the climate, despite environmental and regulatory shortcomings.” Since 2026, [the model has been expanding to other regions](#), with Yakutia, the Komi Republic, the Republic of Tatarstan, Irkutsk and Arkhangelsk Oblasts, and Stavropol Krai joining as pilot regions in a national low-carbon development system.

Arctic: driver rather than a follower

The Arctic presents a particular case in the development of Russia’s climate policy. In contrast to following the international climate trends, when it comes to the Arctic, Russia’s ambition is to drive the climate policy development in the North according to the interview with two climate experts based in Russia. This is not surprising considering that the region is warming three to four times faster than the planet as a whole, and the permafrost (which accounts for 65% of Russia’s territory) degradation already threatens a lot of infrastructure as the [Norilsk diesel spill](#) in 2020 revealed. While some of the economic sectors will benefit from the opening of the Arctic routes in a warmer North, substantial investment in infrastructure development is required to adapt to the new climate conditions.

Post-2022 invasion of Ukraine, the main platform for cooperation in the region, the Arctic Council, stalled its operations with Russia. Although some work has now resumed, Russian and Russia-linked actors have used [the UNFCCC, specifically COP meetings, as an alternative venue for Arctic cooperation](#). The Northern Forum, an international organization of northern and Arctic regions, with the support of the Andrey Melnichenko Foundation, organized the first Arctic Pavilion at COP29 in Baku two years ago. In March 2026 ahead of COP31 [at the meeting organized by the Northern Forum](#), experts called for the Arctic Pavilion in Antalya to strengthen climate dialogue. And, as the climate expert Aleksey Kokorin noted during the meeting, this presented an opportunity to provide adaptation indicators: “The Arctic could serve as a testing ground for demonstrating effective metrics. Unlike developing nations, we face no competition for climate finance, which allows us to offer clear, science-based solutions.” However, as the Northern Forum announced last month [“despite being granted the right to establish the Arctic Pavilion at COP31”](#) the Pavilion will not take place due to [lack of funding](#). Instead, there will be an Arctic Day as a side event scheduled for November 9th and 19th at the main Russian Federation Pavilion. As the Program Coordinator of COP29 Arctic Pavilion Arsenii Kirgizov-Barskii noted in the interview, to achieve neutrality Pavilion should

be supported by private contributions from various companies and organizations. The challenge, however, is that the Northern Forum's Secretariat is registered in Yakutsk, Russia (although founded in Alaska in 1991). Given the current circumstances, the organization is practically cut off from international funding opportunities and faces difficulty securing funding domestically.

Concluding thoughts

Russia's climate policy moved away from business as usual after signing of the Paris Agreement influenced by the international climate policy trends. For Russia to remain a relevant and a competitive global actor requires compliance not only with the global commitments but also alignment of its climate policies with the West and East. While the Sakhalin Experiment is a remarkable case in illustrating the essential role of individuals in shaping policy, these individuals are also in part driven by the objectives of keeping up with the international trends as illustrated by the comments of Limarenko. There is no alternative for Russia but to follow the global climate trends of decarbonization and that is exactly what the current climate policies in Russia aim for. However, as the Arctic initiatives at COPs showcase, climate policy development in the North opens the door for Russia to lead although some practical challenges remain given the current geopolitical situation.