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## **Climate Change Politics in Putin's Russia: A Civil Society Perspective**

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**Abstract:**

The Russian Federation is one of the world's largest exporters of hydrocarbon energy, and its economy is heavily dependent on fossil fuels. However, in the late 2010s the Putin regime began signaling concern about climate change and joined the Paris Agreement. At the same time, the authoritarian Putin regime has taken great lengths to prevent challenges to its supremacy that could arise from civil society, even on tame topics like the environment. Given these contradictory factors, the relationship between the state and environmental activists is in question. This study explores how environmental activists relate to their authoritarian government and its climate change response in hydrocarbon-dependent Russia. This question is contextualized in a novel theoretical framework of authoritarianism, hydrocarbon superpower culture, climate virtue signaling, and uncivil society that explains Russian climate change politics and how they may affect climate activists. The empirical study is a survey of 12 Russian environmental activists sharing their experiences with and views on the regime and its climate change response. The findings indicate an "uncivil" society split between repressed and co-opted groups, with dissenting activists condemning the regime's duplicitous climate change rhetoric and the greed that keeps the hydrocarbon system in place. While many environmental activists disapprove of the regime and its environmental policies, activism in Russia is crippled and politicians prioritize the war. These findings shed light on the centrality of authoritarianism to civic life in Putin's Russia at a time of war and climate crisis.

Authorship Declaration: I have prepared this thesis independently. All the views of other authors, as well as data from literary sources and elsewhere, have been cited.

*Rachel Mohr, 5 August 2023*

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## *Introduction*

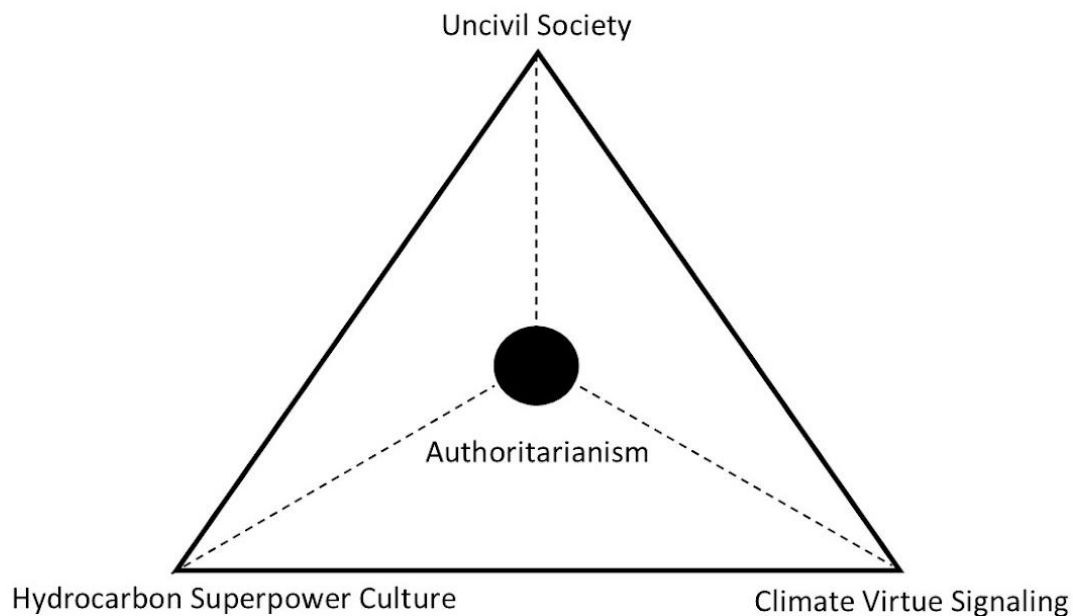
It was at the November 2021 COP26 climate conference in Glasgow that U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken sat down with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy to warn him for the first time of intelligence indicating that a massive Russian invasion of Ukraine was imminent (Harris et al, 2022). As representatives from nearly 200 countries came together to tackle humanity's oncoming storm, a cold shadow descended on the future of Europe. In the face of a natural catastrophe that can only be solved together, humanity is again divided. Our policy priorities, our spending, and our fear are devoted to Ukraine as it faces a threat that should be unthinkable in the 21st century. For over 16 months, countless Ukrainians have lost their lives in a flagging war of attrition. Meanwhile, in early July 2023 the world has just experienced the hottest week ever recorded. Extreme weather events like forest fires and heat waves are quickly becoming the norm, outstripping our capacity to adapt to them. The world is faced with two great challenges, one natural and one man-made.

The salience of Russian internal politics to these challenges cannot be overstated. Russia's hydrocarbon energy reserves help keep the Putin regime in power, funding the state and its brutal war in Ukraine. The interconnection between autocracy and hydrocarbons in Russia is all the more relevant as the effects of climate change begin to be felt and the world attempts to prepare for a low-carbon energy transition. The war has already resulted in energy shortages across Europe as Russian oil has been banned, and Russia has sought out Asian markets to keep its economy afloat with discounted fossil fuel exports. No one knows what the future holds for Ukraine, for Russia, or for Europe as a whole. The Kremlin seeks to divide the free world and make room in the international space for authoritarianism, completely reliant on plundering energy resources and selling to whoever will buy oil tainted with the blood of Ukrainians. The world watches and hopes for the Putin regime to fall, but the Kremlin has taken great lengths to prevent challenges to its supremacy that could arise from regular citizens organizing themselves. Expressing dissent is no longer tolerated in Russia, and engagement in independent civic activism is limited even for more tame topics like the environment if there may be a threat to the status quo. Environmental activism provides a special case in the study of Russian civil society because strong linkages to

transnational groups may provide fertile ground for Western ideas about climate change and politics to bloom among activists, but environmental activism can also represent a benign, apolitical civic outlet with potential for co-optation by the authoritarian state. In this study, we will hear from climate activists who represent a range of organizations, some having defied a repressive environment to share their experiences, their opposition to the Putin regime, and their pain at what Russia has become.

Despite its relentless fossil fuel contributions to global greenhouse gas emissions and its spoiler role in the Western geopolitical sphere, the story of Russia's climate change response is not entirely straightforward. During the late 2010s, a shift was noticed in official Russian rhetoric on climate change. Whereas the authorities' consensus was previously unconcerned and perhaps even eager to enjoy certain effects of a warmer Russia, leaders began to acknowledge the anthropogenic nature of climate change and the importance of combating it to prevent natural disasters and human suffering. Putin referred to climate change in his 2015 address to the United Nations as "one of the gravest challenges humanity is facing", and in 2019 the Kremlin ratified the Paris Agreement, the prevailing international treaty attempting to combat climate change (The Moscow Times, 2021). A spat of extreme weather in Russia in 2021 brought further attention from the authorities and the public to the climate issue. At the same time, there are many indications that the Kremlin's apparent concern has not translated to real action to combat climate change. The emissions mitigation commitments made for climate treaties are empty plans, and the Russian leadership does not cooperate with the international climate agenda. What, then, lies behind these strange signals of climate-friendly values? Why does Russia not act decisively to develop green energy, especially when its hydrocarbon economic model will become obsolete in a future low-carbon world? Why and how does the regime repress environmental civil society? A thorough review of several literatures will pose answers to these questions. The empirical section of the study will seek to answer the central research question of this thesis: where do Russian climate activists find themselves in this milieu of contradictory climate change response and civil society repression? How do they relate to the state, and what are their views on the climate change response in Putin's authoritarian, resource-dependent Russia?

This thesis will investigate these questions with an original application of the literatures on Russian authoritarianism, climate virtue signaling, hydrocarbon superpower culture, and civil society repression to an empirical study of Russian climate and environmental activists. I propose these four theoretical concepts as a novel triad with authoritarianism at the center, illustrating how the authoritarian nature of the Russian state underpins its climate change response, its hydrocarbon economy, and its relationship with civil society. At a moment in history when Russian authoritarianism has yet again reared its ugly head to bully the world around it, humanity is facing an unpredictable natural threat that will require unity to overcome. Will peace come in time?



### *Concepts & Theoretical Framework*

The aim of this study is to make sense of Russian climate activists' relationship to their government in the context of contradictory, puzzling factors: a repressive civil society environment and an official climate change response consisting of some climate-friendly rhetoric paired with insufficient policy action. This research interprets the way the activists relate to the Putin regime, including their perspectives on Russia's climate change response. The concept in this case is thus a relationship between one

group being studied empirically and a government, which can be studied through the existing literature. The operationalization of this relationship for the purposes of this study are the experiences, interactions, and opinions of the climate activists relating to their government and its approach to climate change. These indicators were observed for the study thanks to the activists sharing their perspectives. There are two possible explanatory factors affecting this relationship. The first is the repression of civil society, including environmental civil society, which has intensified throughout the Putin regime to become a near monopoly on the civic space at the present time. This concept is explored through a close examination of the literature on the formation and nature of the present Russian authoritarianism, the development and gradual repression of civil society throughout modern Russia, and the resulting “uncivil” society of repressed and divided environmental organizations. The second explanatory factor is the inconsistent rhetoric and weak policy on climate change from Russian officials, which has wavered between climate virtue signaling and propping up an entrenched “hydrocarbon superpower” mentality. The relevant literature needed to fully understand this concept is broad; it includes work on the “resource curse” and its implications for authoritarianism, the centrality of hydrocarbons to various aspects of Russian society, and various views on Russia’s participation in the global climate change effort.

This review of several literatures demonstrates the key relationship between authoritarian incentives of the Russian state and my proposed triad of hydrocarbon superpower culture, uncivil society, and climate virtue signaling in this study. The Russian state has spoken about supporting climate protection for soft power points, but its desire to completely control the civic space and continue milking the fossil fuel-based economy seem to trump ecological values. These factors leave the position of climate activists in relation to the state in question. Thus, this thesis focuses on the central question of the true relationship between the activists and the regime, including how the activists feel about the regime in general and how they evaluate its climate change response. The application of a novel triad of literatures to this case represents a new approach to the study of Russian civil society.

## *Russian Authoritarianism and the Resource Curse*

The overarching concept that must be unpacked when considering the relationship between Russian civil society and the state is authoritarianism. Russian climate organizations are constrained in their activities by repression stemming from an authoritarian desire for complete control, which the regime terms “sovereignty”, over the civic space. Russia’s official response to climate change and thus, climate activists, are also intrinsically linked to authoritarianism through the “resource curse” and hydrocarbon superpower culture, thus forming part of our triad. It’s worth reviewing the literature on the nature of Russian authoritarianism and the “resource curse” to better understand the political situation Russian climate activists find themselves in and how this state of affairs came to be.

Authoritarianism in modern Russia is synonymous with the name Vladimir Putin. After the chaotic 1990s under Boris Yeltsin, Putin was hand-picked as his successor in the midst of an economic crisis and renewed civil war in Chechnya. Putin greatly strengthened the Russian state through a strong power vertical dynamic and centralized key industries under loyal leaders in a patronalistic political system (McFaul & Stoner-Weiss, 2008; Hale 2014, ch8). Putin’s bold tactics gave Russians the economic stability they so craved after the fall of the Soviet Union, making him a wildly popular president throughout his four terms (Colton & Hale, 2009; Levada Center, 2023). Russia’s economic success was quietly accompanied by rollbacks on reforms initiated under Gorbachev and Yeltsin in human rights, media freedom, and democratic processes (Feldmann & Mazepus, 2018). A key turning point towards authoritarianism was marked when Putin retook the presidential office back from Dmitry Medvedev in 2012 after exceeding the allotted two terms designated by the Russian constitution. While this elicited a wave of protest from democratically-minded citizens, it was swiftly put down by the security services and a new, more assertive state control model emphasizing militarism and patriotism emerged (Shevtsova 2015, p.25; Pride Brown 2018, p.167-168; Flikke, 2018). Putin’s popular triumph in annexing Crimea two years later solidified a kind of social contract wherein Russians enjoy prosperity and national pride at the expense of personal liberties while the regime enjoys their submissiveness and

approval (Feldmann & Mazepus, 2018; Hale 2014, ch.8; Gudkov, 2018; Tynkkynen 2019, p.16).

Putinism as a political ideology and governance system has been closely examined and sensationalized across the field of political science. As experts began to move away from the idea of a post-Soviet democratic transition when presented with clear signs of backsliding, new conceptions of the nature of the Russian state emerged (Gudkov, 2018; Vorozheikina, 2009). Competitive authoritarianism, popularized by Levitsky and Way (2002), describes an electoral system in which rivals are legitimately allowed to run for office, but an uneven playing field virtually guarantees the success of the dominant party. This was likely an apt descriptor of Russian electoral politics for a period of time, but the system has evolved into a more efficient machine that no longer allows for even a modicum of real competitiveness. Other literature focuses on the mechanisms of Russia's societal control, such as a monopoly over the information sphere and the perfection of the state propaganda machine. Treisman (2018) characterizes this as an "informational autocracy" in which violence is kept to a minimum in favor of simply keeping public opinion in line through disinformation. While this approach assumes that the state prefers to avoid violence because of its inacceptability in the modern world, the invasion of Ukraine and subsequent crackdown on protestors at home in 2022 showed the world that Putin is not only willing to commit large-scale violence, but is confident that he can do so openly and against his own people without arousing a real challenge to his regime either from the populace or from abroad. This crackdown comes from a "siege mentality" in which regime stability is paramount and all potentially subversive influence, whether from within or without, is seen as a serious threat and thus dealt with summarily. As many questions about Putin's Russia are far from being answered, the simple moniker of authoritarianism will suffice to describe Russia's regime type throughout this study.

Russia's history of authoritarianism has also been linked to its vast fossil fuel energy resources, and this combination has predetermined Russia's weak and inconsistent climate response (our second explanatory factor). The question of how fossil fuel resources have contributed to authoritarianism in Russia must be addressed through the lens of the resource curse. Due to the easily exploitable nature of valuable

fossil fuels, regimes generally have an incentive to keep them in government hands. This has been observed to influence democratic prospects negatively in fossil fuel-rich countries. The nexus between fossil fuel resources and regime outcomes has been studied most famously in M.L. Ross's *The Oil Curse* (2012). Ross finds that oil states are 50% more likely to be ruled by autocrats and often suffer other significant setbacks to good governance. The boon to public funds provided by oil reduces the importance of taxation, thus cutting off part of the traditional social contract in which leaders are meant to be responsive to the needs of their constituencies (Ross, 2015; Tynkkynen 2019, p.16). Oil wealth is also relatively easy to hide from the public and varies greatly depending on global oil price fluctuations. In the Russian case, we can observe a correlation between the rising oil prices of the 2000s and the increase in state capacity that allowed Putin to re-nationalize energy resources, spur economic growth through public spending, and consolidate his grip on power. The Russian case has also aligned with more of Ross's long-term oil curse predictions; oil wealth tends to make autocratic regimes more durable, more corrupt, and less susceptible to threats by a free media space (Ross, 2015).

Non-renewable energy resources have unquestionably shaped the modern Russian state. At the same time, the threat posed by climate change has elicited coordinated international movements to mitigate the use of the resources that prop up the Russian economy, and by extension, its government. Therefore, oil-rich countries like Russia face a choice between keeping their economies reliant on fossil fuels in a decarbonizing world and risk the threat of climate change, or a massive transition to a more sustainable economic system in coordination with the international community. In an authoritarian political system, citizens are left out of this decision, and attempts to impose an international climate response may be seen by those in power as a threat to sovereignty and regime stability. Hydrocarbon extraction was key to Putin's rise and his regime's continued durability (Tynkkynen, 2019; Rutland, 2008). Thus, the fossil fuel-based economy props up an authoritarian governance system, which has incentives to choose a weak climate response in order to preserve economic output and regime security. The climate activists' views on their country's government type and economic energy dependence will likely have a significant impact on how they see their work in

relation to the state and how they evaluate the state's climate policies. In the next section, we examine Russia's climate change response and its engagement in climate virtue signaling. We also consider the hydrocarbon superpower culture that has emerged from Russia's authoritarianism and resource wealth, and how hydrocarbon interests have won out in the state's climate change response.

### *Russia's Climate Change Response*

This section will explore how Russia's response to climate change has wavered between climate virtue signaling and a prioritization of maintaining the hydrocarbon superpower culture status quo, which form two parts of our theoretical triad. Virtue signaling denotes an expression of a desirable virtue for the sake of bettering one's own image (Eriksen, 2021). In the case of Russia, climate virtue signaling has been accompanied by a weak climate change response. Observers have witnessed a rhetorical transition from derision to concern about the climate, but a continuation of empty policy responses (The Moscow Times, 2021). The pro-climate rhetoric expressed by Russian leadership in their climate virtue signaling provided small soft power benefits to Russia (Koch & Tynkkynen 2021, p.534; Tokunaga, 2018). However, Putin's need to continue the hydrocarbon economic model that enriched his regime and maintain absolute sovereignty seems to trump his desire to keep up appearances and pander to the global climate effort (Tynkkynen, 2019). This recent inconsistency in climate rhetoric must be examined in a study of Russian climate activism because it may muddle the attitudes of activists toward their government and obscures the state's level of support for climate activism. Because the state has sent mixed signals to the activist community about its commitment to fighting climate change, the activists' views on the state climate response must be consulted in our study.

Russia has signed several treaties and taken policy steps to combat climate change without actually implementing real changes. The Kyoto Protocol was an easy commitment because it was based on emissions reductions relative to 1990, the year before the Soviet economic collapse. Russia's emissions were already below the 1990 level in 2004 and it thus fulfilled Kyoto aims automatically. This empty commitment was an easy way for Putin to score soft power points on the international stage because the

U.S. had pulled out of the treaty and Russia's 17% of global emissions gave it a loud voice in the negotiations (Gusev 2016, p.40). Thus, Russia did not reduce emissions whatsoever, but did produce its first climate change policy document, the Climate Doctrine of the Russian Federation until 2020. The Doctrine proffered platitudes about the anthropogenic nature of warming and the need for a low-carbon transition without giving a reduction target (Ministry of Natural Resources and Ecology, 2009). This tactic was repeated for the 2015 Paris Agreement, with a target of 70-75% of 1990 emissions levels that still actually permitted an increase. Russia's intention to continue its extraction-based economy was made clear in its 2021 Energy Strategy to 2035, while Putin declared the same year that Russia would be carbon-neutral by 2060 after an emissions peak in 2030. The actual plan for reductions is still under development and assumes a miraculous 100% increase in forest carbon sink capacity; it was likely announced due to international pressure ahead of the 2021 UN Climate Change Conference (Climate Action Tracker, 2022).

Along with these policy actions, we can observe a shift in official climate rhetoric from derision to virtue signaling. As international climate agreements have progressed and global concern has intensified, statements assuring the public of Russia's intention to fight climate change have escalated up to the highest levels of government over time. These comments painted a remarkably different tone to Putin's previous jokes about saving money on fur coats in a warmer Russia, the threat wind turbines pose to birds, and suggestions that warming cannot be anthropogenic (The Moscow Times, 2021; Tokunaga, 2018). Putin began to talk seriously about the threat of anthropogenic climate change from around 2015 in fora such as the UN General Assembly, the Valdai Club, and his annual direct phone-in event. In his 2015 address to the UN General Assembly, Putin referred to climate change as "one of the gravest challenges humanity is facing". He has pointed out specific possible consequences in Russia like melting permafrost and agricultural damage, but has also spoken out against renewable energy and skirts the issue of his country's fossil fuel reliance (The Moscow Times, 2021). An observer might assume that these high-level statements are rooted in real concern about climate change, and take Russia's climate change response policies at face value, as Gusev (2016) and Reinhardt (2020) seem to have done. However, a close

examination of these previously referenced policies including the Climate Doctrine of the Russian Federation until 2020, the 2021 Energy Strategy to 2035, and Russia's Paris Agreement NDC reveal empty platitudes with no real framework for emissions reduction. There is no plan to shift Russia's economy away from fossil fuels, and the documents simply assume that unrealistic increases in forest absorption capacity will mitigate climate change (Climate Action Tracker, 2022). If the Kremlin were truly concerned about the threat of a changing climate, the authoritarian power vertical should make short work of taking decisive policy action; on the contrary, other interests seem to be at play.

Russia's real motive for signaling climate concern seems to be seeking soft power gains while taking no real policy action. This inaction is what makes Russia's climate change response a form of climate virtue signaling that hurts the environmental movement. The weakness of Russia's climate change response relative to its sustainability rhetoric has been noted in several works, most notably those of Veli-Pekka Tynkkynen. By engaging in climate virtue signaling, Russia has derived legitimacy from its feigned concern about the climate on the world stage, painting itself as modern and investment-friendly (Koch & Tynkkynen 2021, p.534; Tokunaga, 2018). International environmental fora provide a way for Putin to score soft power points both at home and abroad by signaling concern about something almost universally agreed upon as a threat (Tynkkynen 2019, p.93). Showing leadership in such arenas may inspire pride in Russians that makes up for the regime's shortcomings at home, while also preventing a Western monopoly on these issues (Shevtsova 2015, p.25). However, Putin has increasingly signaled that he is far more concerned about so-called "sovereignty" at home than international cooperation, of which he described Russia as a bullied victim starting in 2022 after invading Ukraine (Tynkkynen & Tynkkynen, 2018). Therefore, it is very likely that 2022 will be looked back upon as a transition year in which Russia withdrew from its virtue signaling positions in various multilateral bodies as most of the West rejected its participation on moral grounds. Meanwhile, the Russian leadership probably recognizes on some level that the natural consequences of climate change and the economic consequences of a clean energy transition will likely be devastating to Russia, but the factors preventing an adequate response are manifold.

Despite its illusions of concern, Russia has massive economic incentives not to take decisive action to reduce carbon emissions. Firstly, the Russian economy is largely based on fossil fuel extraction and export, unlike most wealthy economies based on services. Fossil fuel revenues made up a whopping 45% of the federal budget in 2021 (IEA, 2022). Because of the incentives of the resource curse, most of Russia's hydrocarbons are under the control of state companies with elite oligarchic leaders. Mitigating climate change would require a massive and likely painful restructuring of the Russian economy, the hypothetical costs of which are much more tangible to wealthy elites than far-off predictions of future issues. Pokrovsky (2010) points out the continuities from the late Soviet economic model to the modern Russian one: Kremlin-connected elites occupy the highest ranks of energy companies and enrich the government in an increasingly outdated raw materials-based system while putting off ecological concerns indefinitely. Sustainable policies in more democratic countries often come from giving civil society voices a seat at the policymaking table along with scientists and business executives. Russia's authoritarianism and lack of space for civil society may make truly sustainable policies impossible to achieve (Koch & Tynkkynen 2021, p.525). While business and economic incentives related to hydrocarbon-centricity represent the most obvious motives for Russia not to fight earnestly against climate change, there are many other factors related to its culture of hydrocarbons that also play a role.

Russia's relationship with its hydrocarbon industry has been well-studied, producing a proliferation of ideas about the arenas of Russian society that have been defined in some way by hydrocarbons. These include Tynkkynen's works on hydrocarbon energy as political power and national identity (2018; 2019), Bouzarovsky and Bassin's article on "hydrocarbon superpower" identity understood as a mix of economic prosperity and global status (2010), and Rutland's assertion that energy superpower status enables Putin's authoritarian political system - although he rejects the "superpower" moniker (2008). While some authors have focused narrowly on hydrocarbons as mainly a business matter (Kivinen, 2012) or as a foreign policy tool (Balmaceda, 2017), this research requires a broader interpretation of the field of meanings of hydrocarbons in modern Russia. The term "hydrocarbon superpower

culture” is thus used throughout this study to summarize the centrality of hydrocarbons not only to Russia’s economy and business interests, but also its authoritarian political system, foreign policy decisionmaking, and national identity.

As previously mentioned regarding our triad, hydrocarbon profits have been instrumental in propping up Putin’s authoritarian regime and keeping it powerful, so the authorities have a strong incentive to continue relying on a fossil fuel-based economic model (Ross, 2015; Rutland, 2008). Russia has weaponized its energy resources as a tool of foreign policy by cutting off gas supplies to Ukraine on multiple occasions (Balmaceda, 2017). Putin also uses neighboring countries’ reliance on Russian energy to maintain influence in its near abroad, furthering neoimperialistic ideas about Russia as a mother nation to weak surrounding states that ought to be grateful (Tynkkynen 2019, ch.3). The extraction of oil and gas has also historically played a large role in distinguishing Russian identity from that of the West, and the Kremlin has found it beneficial to play up the centrality of oil and gas to the Russian experience throughout history (Tynkkynen 2019, ch.2; Tynkkynen & Tynkkynen, 2018). This also provides an excuse to decline meaningful participation in global efforts to transition away from hydrocarbons on the grounds of an exceptionalist “special path” for Russia, while remaining intentionally blind to the reality of a new global economy in which Russian energy will play an increasingly unimportant role (Tynkkynen 2019, p.7-8). While the rhetoric has wavered for the sake of public image, the policy actions demonstrate that the value of hydrocarbon superpower culture to Russia outweighs the threat of climate change. Thus, the various economic, political, and identity aspects of hydrocarbon superpower culture play a strong role in keeping Russia’s climate change response weak.

We can observe evidence of Russia’s prioritization of its hydrocarbon superpower culture by looking more closely at some non-virtue signaling themes in its climate rhetoric. Despite participating in international efforts to fight climate change, Russia has often resisted outside attempts to “infringe upon its sovereignty” by demanding a contribution to mitigation efforts, claiming that the West is encouraging “politicization” of a fundamentally scientific issue (Reinhardt, 2020). This brings the authoritarian siege mentality of the Russian state into its climate change rhetoric. The

Kremlin has in the past channeled its paranoia about sovereignty into promoting climate denialism among the Russian public (Tynkkynen & Tynkkynen 2018, p.1115; Tynkkynen 2019, ch.6). As a result, some Russians still think of climate change as a Western hoax, and few even among those who believe in it are willing to acknowledge Russia's contributions to emissions and responsibility to act (Tokunaga, 2018; Poberezhskaya, 2018; Poberezhskaya & Ashe 2018, ch.4,5). Instead of decarbonizing, Russian businesses paste vaguely environmentally-friendly messaging into their mission statements, but never mention climate change, and block renewable energy development so they can continue to enjoy the riches of hydrocarbon superpower culture (Molchanova et al, 2020; Martus, 2018; Koch & Tynkkynen, 2021). Climate change is clearly a fraught issue in Russia, and the Putin regime's response to it has been both inconsistent and impotent.

It's important to note that Russia declines to participate meaningfully in the fight against climate change specifically because of its entrenched hydrocarbon superpower culture; simply being authoritarian or being a resource-intensive economy is not enough to determine this. China provides an interesting foil to Russia because it is also authoritarian, and the most carbon-emitting country in the world, while also being the fourth-largest oil producer in the world. However, while it still depends massively on coal and oil, China has also made some of the most progressive and meaningful steps toward a clean energy transition. This duality can be explained by the fact that China's rapid and large-scale industrialization has already had a disastrous impact on its environment; thus, China's desire to take action against climate change comes from internal alarm about future environmental disasters (Beeson, 2016). The government has a strong interest in decarbonizing that does not come from external international pressure. Others point out China's economic incentives to quickly develop and implement green energy solutions (Engels, 2018; Gang, 2019). Furthermore, China's authoritarianism may actually have helped its sustainability efforts; its policy response has been characterized as "environmental authoritarianism" in which the authorities have taken quick and decisive action to curtail unsustainable behavior (Beeson, 2016; Gilley, 2012). Thus, China demonstrates that an authoritarian regime type and economic reliance on fossil fuels do not necessarily determine a weak climate change

response; Russia's interests in this area are dictated by the historic centrality of hydrocarbons to its politics, economy, and identity.

This section has summarized Russia's weak and inconsistent climate change response. Through the literature, we find that hydrocarbons are so central to Russia's authoritarian political system, economy, foreign policy, and identity that the threat of climate change and pressure of international climate change mitigation efforts could not possibly bring about a meaningful change to its resource-intensive model. The main response has been climate virtue signaling, which brings cheap soft power benefits. We have thus fleshed out three of the points in our theoretical triad; however, the role of climate activists in society is still left in question. Allowing climate activism could be a potentially easy and low-risk means of climate virtue signaling by the state, and would demonstrate some consistency with recent climate concern rhetoric. In the next section, we will explore how Russian civil society has developed and eventually been subordinated by the authorities into an "uncivil" society divided between repressed organizations deemed subversive and co-opted organizations made useful to the state's interests.

### *Russian Civil Society Development and Repression*

This thesis endeavors to contribute to the literature on Russian civil society by studying climate activists from a new perspective using the previously discussed triad of literatures on Russian authoritarianism, hydrocarbon superpower culture, and climate change response. In order to examine how Russian climate activists relate to their government now, we must consider the evolution of the role of environmental activism in Russian society. This section will be devoted to showcasing the special status of environmental activism in Russia as dependent on transnational links that may introduce Western ideas, while also being vulnerable to repression or co-optation by the authoritarian state, depending on the extent to which activists challenge the authorities. I thus unpack the development of civil society in modern Russia and its subsequent downfall into an "uncivil society" where subversive voices have been repressed since the passage of the Foreign Agent Law in 2012. Climate activists that openly oppose Russia's fossil fuel-based economic model are now threatened, drawing a contrast with

empty platitudes from officials about environmental protection. Through the Foreign Agent Law and co-opting benign alternative civic groups, the authoritarian regime has effectively eliminated the ability of independent civil society to challenge the authorities. This has erased any likelihood of a civic threat to authoritarian regime stability and the hydrocarbon superpower model.

“Civil society” in social science research may be interpreted as broadly as any civic engagement existing in the space between the citizen and the state, or as narrowly as a formal organization with a clearly designated purpose and structure (Javeline & Lindemann-Kamarova, 2020; Putnam, 2000). Most definitions of civil society include key characteristics such as a not-for-profit purpose, voluntary engagement by members, and some sort of organizational structure. A robust civil society is seen by many experts in academia, politics, and the non-profit sector as a key attribute of a healthy democracy (Levitsky & Way 2002, p.61-63; Putnam, 2000; Burnell & Calvert, 2004; Henderson, 2003). As post-Soviet Russia was largely expected by the Western world to embark upon a democratic transition, interest in its budding civil society sector has produced a proliferation of research from the 1990s until the present day. Some of the most studied civil society organizations focus on causes most closely tied to democratization: human rights, good governance, and media freedom. But the environmental movement, while less directly political, has also attracted academic attention.

Examining the development of Russian environmental civil society from the Soviet era is necessary to understand the current relationship between the authoritarian Putin regime and climate-focused organizations. Artificial civic activity mandated by the Soviet government still taints modern Russians’ conception of volunteer work and activism. The Party-sanctioned civil society groups simulated civic engagement by “volunteering” citizens to do work for community benefit outside of normal working hours on Saturday, “субботники”, sometimes to supplant labor shortages. The compulsory nature of such civic engagement created a lasting bias against volunteerism in post-Soviet societies (Pride Brown 2018, ch.3). While some nascent environmentalist advocacy existed among intellectuals during the Soviet period, meaningful civil society could not emerge until the end of the Communist Party monopoly over civic power. Pokrovsky (2010) describes the student and scientist-run nature protection groups that

mark the initial environmental movement as having been more or less “tolerated” by the Communist Party because of their seemingly benign and apolitical nature. This non-confrontationalism continues today in certain environmental groups that have dodged authoritarian repression. On the other hand, Pride Brown (2018, ch.2) contends that in a field of power so thoroughly dominated by the Communist Party, only those environmental organizations that were seen as non-threatening to the Party’s monopoly on civic engagement and non-confrontational to the state’s resource-extractive economic model were permitted to operate. The advent of гласность and перестройка (openness and restructuring) in the 1980s under final Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev brought sweeping change to the Russian environmental movement. Diverse grassroots organizations proliferated, and notably, these groups engaged in protests that successfully prevented the construction of a number of potentially harmful infrastructure projects (Yanitsky, 2010, Preface; Pride Brown 2018, ch.2). Tysiachniouk et al (2018, p.619-20) describes the environmental movement of this time as being at the forefront of globalization in the Russian civil society sector, engaging with transnational networks promoting conservation, sustainable development, watershed protection, and nuclear safety while actively lobbying to improve environmental policy.

However, the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 precipitated a decade of economic hardship that saw millions facing existential insecurity, grinding civic progress to a halt. The immediate aftermath of the Soviet collapse saw a frenzy of expectation among Western experts that the newborn post-Soviet societies would soon transition naturally into mature democratic nations with all the standard accompaniments, including an active and meaningful civil society (Nikovskaya, 2011). However, the unexpected “failure” of civil society organizations to take hold in post-Soviet societies in a way that resembles existing Western democracies drew the attention of many researchers. Various social, economic, and political conditions of the Soviet era and its immediate aftermath created an environment wherein civil society struggled to take hold. Evans (2012) emphasizes the negative effects of the 1990s economic crisis on citizens’ time, energy, and financial resources needed for civil society development, but also points out a deeply-rooted distrust of and disinterest in the public sphere (except when it seeks to remedy Russians’ concrete socioeconomic concerns). Fish (1994)

notes the subsequent dormancy of groups that shot to success in the late 1980s and points to state institutional weakness as preventing environmental concerns from actually being addressed by the authorities. Howard (2003) points out that the public's disillusionment with mandatory Soviet-era civic engagement, the significance of informal support networks as an alternative to formal civic organizational structures, and overall dissatisfaction with the new post-communist order precipitated a mass withdrawal from public life. Pride Brown (2016) attributes the limitations of citizen's imagined horizons of activity to weak state government, high levels of corruption, and lacking rule of law, but Sobolev & Zakharov (2018) offer a more optimistic outlook on Russian civic activism, pointing out growth in the sector and recognizing more repressive government measures as a response to successful civil society endeavors.

A key and contested factor in the next phase of Russian civil society development is the presence of significant financial and organizational support from Western governments and global NGOs eager to prop up grassroots Russian organizations. The widespread assertion about the importance of civil society to the democratization process described by Levitsky & Way (2002), Putnam (2000), Burnell & Calvert (2004), and many others likely played a role in developed countries offering civil society-focused assistance to post-Soviet countries. Henderson (2002) discusses a real increase in organizational capacity among Russian NGOs as a direct result of this aid; however, she notes that the patron-client character of these relationships has fostered NGOs which are dependent on Western aid but have little stake in their local Russian communities. Yanitsky (2010, 2.1) agrees that the Russian environmental movement no longer carries environmental values, instead beholden to a top-down relationship with Western financial and technical aid which has limited and de-mobilized the movement. Pride Brown (2016) portrays Western aid as a definite impediment to local constituency-building among civil society organizations, citing a responsiveness to the wishes of Western donors rather than local community members. However, in Pride Brown (2018, ch.4), the author notes a positive transnational collaboration effect wherein defamiliarization helped Russian activists overcome mental barriers established by fatalistic domestic conditions. Therefore, the patron-client relationship between weak Russian organizations and strong Western ones can be said to have mixed results that

certainly fall short of the strong, independent civil society envisioned along liberal Western lines. However, these transnational links with Western groups are highly salient to our study because they can inconspicuously introduce Western political ideas and climate change narratives to Russian citizens who may not otherwise have access to outside information, as we will explore in the discussion.

While the transnational linkages enjoyed by Russian environmental civil society throughout the 2010s may have helped support them financially and ideologically, this reliance of the weak Russian NGO sector on foreign aid was also a key factor that enabled the subsequent civil society repression by the Putin regime. After a series of amendments to the Russian Federation's laws regulating NGOs, the sector was effectively crippled when the 2012 Law on Foreign Agents was passed, cutting off Western aid sources. The text of the Law on Foreign Agents stipulates that all NGOs participating in political activity and receiving financial assistance from abroad must register with the authorities as "foreign agents", a derogatory term connoting espionage. Although the organizations in question initially refused to comply, a court order eventually forced their hand, resulting in 104 organizations being listed by 2016 (Treisman 2018, ch.10). This group included Memorial, an organization dedicated to preserving the memory of Soviet repressions; The Levada Center, a long-respected independent public polling agency; Baikal Ecological Wave, an environmental organization dedicated to the protection of Lake Baikal in Irkutsk; and the Dynasty Foundation, a funder of scientific research. The Foreign Agent Law required designated organizations to submit income and expenditure reports at frequent, regular intervals and also opened them up to surprise audits with tight turnarounds. In this way, the regime levied legal power at selected organizations and burdened them with additional work that bogged down their organizational capacity. Additionally, designated organizations were required to apply to a regulatory authority to seek permission before engaging in so-called "political activity", effectively giving the state veto power over any activity deemed undesirable. Lastly, designated foreign agents must attach to each instance of published material, including internet posts, a ludicrously long disclaimer proclaiming their status as a foreign agent (Pride Brown 2018, ch.7). Because the consequences of being designated a foreign agent were potentially catastrophic for

Russian NGOs, many opted to sacrifice their foreign funding sources completely in order to dodge the designation.

Russia's reasons for enacting this law are closely connected to its siege mentality authoritarianism. We mentioned the potential for Western transnational environmental groups to introduce subversive ideas about climate change and the shortcomings of the Russian state, and the Kremlin was well aware of the dangers posed by foreign influences. The law passed in 2012 represented a decisive step in a series of incremental policies that illustrated the regime's fear of foreign involvement in Russia's domestic sphere. This fear was catalyzed by several Color Revolutions in the near abroad and anti-regime protests in 2011-2012. Fear of external influence threatening the Putin regime can be attributed to pro-Western political upheaval in Russia's neighborhood in the form of Color Revolutions in Ukraine, Georgia, and Kyrgyzstan during Putin's presidencies (Treisman 2018, p.4; Crotty, 2014; Pride Brown 2018, p.168; Flikke, 2018). The Kremlin fears popular dissident movements encouraged by ideas from the West, so the Foreign Agent Law served as a way to expel foreign influence in the name of sovereignty and retain tight governmental control over the civic space. The "siege mentality" aspect of civil society repression again harkens back to the regime preservation motive of the authoritarian state.

Another key factor in the Russian state's repression of civil society were the protests that flared up in 2011-2012 in response to Putin's announcement that he would run for a third presidential term after a short interim period in which Dmitry Medvedev occupied the presidency. Petuhov (2012) claims the protests represented the political activation of a new middle class intent on participation while distancing themselves from the derided "big politics" of state institutions. Flikke (2018) interprets the 2012 crackdown on Russian society after the protests as the outcome of a transition from Medvedev-era bureaucratic modernization, which demanded strong civil society, to legitimization through patronal politics, which calls for subordination of the civic sector to the state. The Putin regime can even call on its handpicked civil society groups to provide mass mobilization to oppose anti-regime street protests, which Robertson (2009) describes as an innovative technique of authoritarian regime control; this integration of civil society organizations into state structures may have constituted a

major redesign of state-society relations. The subordination of Russia's civil society to the state is also understood as a new tool of repression in a modern form of autocracy in which violence is considered too costly to use until the last resort by Daniel Treisman (2018). In historical context, Applebaum (2015) finds civil society repression to be not a new phenomenon of the Putin regime, but a legacy of the Leninist idea that all organizations are inherently political and thus must be banned.

In the wake of the Foreign Agent Law, the Kremlin capitalized on the civic sector's need for new funds to replace their previous foreign funding. A dual approach to civil society has been developed in which the state bullies civil society organizations it deems threatening, while supporting co-opted organizations expressing values it wants to nourish in the populace, such as patriotism. The co-opted organizations receive access, funding, prestige, and information from the state, while subversive groups find their space in society significantly constricted. This ties in with Putin's desire to replace foreign ideas and influences with patriotic, Russian-centric ones, which pairs nicely with replacing foreign funding sources with domestic ones. Daucé (2015) points out that two new institutions for grantmaking were created to replace foreign funding sources for select civil society groups: the Presidential Council for Civil Society and Human Rights and the Public Chamber. Robertson (2009) describes the activities of Nashi (Ours), a Kremlin-supported patriotic youth movement that engaged in World War II victory celebrations, summer training camps, and pro-regime demonstrations. This brings in broader questions about the role NGOs should play in modern society; the Kremlin seems to view the civic sector as a friendly helper to the government that should remedy some social issues without challenging authority. Henderson (2011) describes the Kremlin replacing foreign funding as a form of "import substitution" for well-behaved organizations that provide social services for the wellbeing of the population, while Lewis (2013) finds that some civil society groups may actually increase the legitimacy of the state by helping it rise to the challenges of twenty-first century societies.

Cheskin & March (2015) agree that "consentful" civil society is utilized by the state for the provision of goods and social services, and furthermore points out that environmental NGOs are often seen as social rather than political organizations and are thus not often targeted as threats. It is true that many of the groups targeted by the law

were more inherently political, especially those dealing with democracy and human rights. However, Pride Brown's (2018, ch.7) case study of the forced closure of Baikal Ecological Wave in Irkutsk as a result of its foreign agent designation provides a counterexample; the organization was more confrontational to the state than similar, more benign organizations that were not targeted by the authorities. Thus, the extent to which each environmental civil society group is viewed as a threat by the authoritarian state is likely a function of the extent to which it challenges state policies and authority. A radical, subversive group like Extinction Rebellion would clearly pose a threat to the Kremlin's monopoly on the civic space and would thus not be tolerated, while a group that organizes communities to clean up litter is likely apolitical and benign. Yermolaeva (2020) gives an example of a form of climate-focused activism that does not challenge the state's resource-extractive economic model and is thus permitted: volunteer response to and prevention of climate-related natural disasters in urban settings. This type of organization is ripe for co-optation by the authorities because demonstrating environmental stewardship grants the regime more legitimacy. The regime can thus choose to either use co-opted civil society groups as a tool to pursue its goals, or crush independent groups through the Foreign Agent Law if they challenge state policies or authority. This adds a layer of complexity to the case of Russian environmental activism that we will continue to explore.

The Foreign Agent Law had disastrous effects on the independence, legitimacy, and capacity of Russian civil society and forced NGOs to adopt disruptive strategies to survive in a hostile political environment (Tysiachniouk et al, 2018). Crotty (2014) and Javeline & Lindemann-Kamarova (2020) describe groups previously reliant on overseas funding needing to find new financiers or recast themselves as friendly to government interests, while marionette organizations controlled by the Kremlin began to dominate the civil society landscape. Moser & Skripchenko (2018) identified survival strategies including the creation of small support ecologies by shifting the relative importance of various audiences and by seeking new forms of legitimacy, namely as solvers of social problems. In a study of disability rights advocacy groups, Toepler & Frohlich (2020) observed successful continuation of advocacy premised upon the supremacy of the state using techniques of appealing to the state's responsibility to care for its citizens,

but without questioning the regime outright. Schlauffer et al (2022) illustrate a communication strategy in which an “angel-shift” is often used to direct focus to an educational and service provision model that provides solutions, rather than confrontational policy advocacy. While some groups were willing to compromise on their values or simply avoid criticizing the state, others found this survival strategy repugnant. Skokova et al (2018) highlights a loss in solidarity among Russian NGOs as a result of the purposive division of the sector into state-supported and state-repressed groups; many NGO representatives expressed support for the Foreign Agent Law, seeing it as a necessary measure to prevent foreign influence even while acknowledging that some organizations might be unfairly targeted. The passage of the Foreign Agent Law has thus resulted in a divided, weakened, and unstable collection of NGOs that sometimes must betray their convictions and accept co-optation by the state to survive. The Kremlin’s authoritarian endeavor to rid Russia of malignant influence in civil society has been largely successful.

The Kremlin’s repression of independent civil society in Russia forms one of the four key points underpinning the theoretical triad of this research. To reference the ideas of repression and division described above, I use the term “uncivil society” throughout this paper. The term already has a history in the social sciences, and it is worth exploring various conceptions of “uncivil society” to orient the one being used in this study. Richter and Hatch (2013) used the term “uncivil society” to explain how the regime delineates state-friendly, socially acceptable “civil society” organizations from subversive, critical “uncivil society” groups that are excluded from public space. Similarly, Kopecký and Mudde (2003) and Cheskin and March (2015) refer to “uncivil society” as being comprised of darker civic organizations that oppose liberal democratic or Western values, but are still genuinely grassroots movements supported by the public. Toepler et al (2020) use the term to refer to parts of the civil society sector that team up with an authoritarian regime to promote common values associated with nationalism or religious sentiment, referencing Muro-Ruiz and Kaldor’s work on such groups in Latin America (2003). At the same time, others have used the “uncivil” moniker to characterize repression of civil society groups by an authoritarian state, which is how we interpret it here. Glasius acknowledged the vagueness of the term and

the proliferation of various usages, summarizing the common denominator among them as “manifestations of civil society that challenge liberal democratic values” (2010). Pride Brown more directly implicated the state’s repression of civil society groups in uncivil society by referring to a field of power in which the power inherent in civil society is either “colonized” to be appropriated by the regime, or suppressed to be curbed in favor of other forms of power (2018, ch.1). Human Rights Watch also emphasized the role of the authoritarian state in curbing the power of independent NGOs in post-Soviet Russia, describing this as an “uncivil approach” to civil society (2009). Drawing from usages of the term relating to authoritarianism, this paper’s conception of “uncivil society” characterizes the current state of civil society in Russia as defined by two elements. The first is the Kremlin’s largely successful attempt to repress independent civic power, especially that which has foreign financial backing, in a bid for “state sovereignty” which in reality assumes complete control over the civic space. This then disables civil society’s potential to be an independent check on the regime and prevents democratization; the top-down nature of this process removes truly “civic” action from Russia’s civil society sector, thus making it “uncivil”. The second element of our “uncivil society” paradigm is the division of NGOs into co-opted and repressed groups and effectively turning them against each other, thus engendering incivility or “uncivility” between two groups that have completely different relationships with the state. This helps to ensure the sector’s weakness and again augments state control over the civic space.

To sum up this section, Russian civil society has been effectively subordinated to the Putin regime by the Foreign Agent Law in accordance with an authoritarian prioritization of regime stability and preserving the status quo. A previous reliance on transnational support networks may have introduced Western ideas to the civic space, but also made them vulnerable to weaponized regulation by the Kremlin. The civic sphere is now dominated by organizations that are either directly run by or accepting interference from the authorities, while independent groups that hope to challenge state authority are deprived of civic space. Groups must either compromise on their values and defect to government intervention, or adapt and struggle to survive (Goncharenko & Khadaroo, 2020). The divided nature of the current Russian environmentalist sector is

key to note for this research because both anti-state, subversive climate groups and state-affiliated, “sellout” groups could be represented in the data gathered, and their understandings of their relationships to the authorities would likely differ vastly. Pride Brown (2018, ch.7) summarizes the 2012 Foreign Agent Law as attacking three crucial elements of civil society - its organizational capacity, its worthiness and legitimacy in society, and its global funding connections - through legal nihilism, wherein the vague wording of the law is applied selectively to key groups identified as challenging state power. The result is effective consolidation by the regime of an “uncivil society” in which the repressed NGOs are too weak to occupy the space between citizens and the state, or to hold the authorities to account, even if they maintain dissenting views (Crotty, 2014). Pokrovsky (2010) describes this as an essential resumption of the state of play during the Soviet Union by a resurgent authoritarian state with the capacity to once again bring most civic activity under its purview. In the environmental context, this allows the state to continue its “economy over ecology” playbook from the Soviet era that funds Russia on the hydrocarbon superpower model.

### *Conclusion*

This chapter has surveyed the triad of literatures on Russia’s authoritarianism, climate virtue signaling, hydrocarbon superpower culture, and uncivil society to explain the factors that may affect how Russian climate activists relate to their state and its climate change response. The Putin regime has strong incentives to continue milking the hydrocarbon culture that has enriched and empowered Russia’s authoritarian machine. Policy responses to climate change are thus void of meaningful mitigation content, despite small soft power benefits offered by virtue signaling environmental values before the 2022 Ukraine invasion. The Kremlin is likely aware that climate change poses some danger to Russia in the long term, but any challenge to its hydrocarbon superpower culture is seen as a threat to sovereignty in Putin’s siege mentality authoritarianism. Sovereignty is so vital to the regime that it crippled its blooming civil society by cutting off its foreign support structures in 2012 out of fear of destabilizing ideas. Thus, the regime goes unchallenged by its civic sector and controls it through co-opted groups amenable to its interests. Non-confrontational groups are

permitted to operate, but organizations that challenge the carbon-intensive economic model of the state are either threatened or eliminated. This literature review has proposed that this “uncivil society” and mixed messaging in official climate rhetoric may have affected the relationship between climate activists and the state in Putin’s authoritarian, hydrocarbon-dependent Russia. To test how our novel triad of theories on Russian authoritarianism, hydrocarbon superpower culture, climate virtue signaling, and uncivil society apply to the views of Russian activists, this study surveys volunteers from various organizations. Their answers reveal the true nature of their relationship with the state and their views on the climate change response.

### *Methodology & Research Design*

This research is a single case study of state-civil society relations in Russia based on observations of individuals working in climate-focused organizations. The study begins from the ontological frame of relativism, wherein social reality is formed of various human experiences, beliefs, and opinions that gain epistemological meaning from their social, political, and cultural contexts. Applying the interpretivist research paradigm allows meaning to emerge from the research subjects based on their unique, subjective interpretations of their realities (Bhattacharjee, 2012). Russian society is conditioned by such contextual factors as a nearly unbroken history of authoritarianism, corruption, and a sense of lost empire. The lived experiences and expressed viewpoints of Russian research subjects cannot be interpreted outside of this field of meaning, and the researcher must thus make sense of the findings and communicate them in light of this. Interpretivism is particularly appropriate for this exploration of individuals’ personal relationships with an authoritarian government because it is highly subjective and context-based. Previous studies of Russian civil society activists have often used an interpretivist lens to capture the complicated socio-cultural milieu surrounding activism under authoritarianism. In this study, determining how activists feel about the regime and its climate change response will depend on their personal experiences as activists and the subjective meanings they assign to them. Factors likely to affect their views include instances of support or repression by the authorities, both rhetorical and in real interactions with the state. The activists apply their personal political views formed from

various influences of the family, educational curriculum, pro-state and independent news media outlets, contacts made in the activist community, etc. to their subjective interpretations of interactions with the state and its rhetoric on climate change and civil society. This research seeks to uncover these resulting interpretations, as well as hints about the political views and the experiences that lie behind them.

From an empirical standpoint, qualitative research using content analysis allows for subjective meaning that cannot be captured quantitatively to be derived from the data. The qualitative observations of this study consist of written accounts of climate activists' experiences in their work and their interactions with the government. The interpretation of these results explains how climate activists relate to the Russian government in an increasingly repressive civic space, but wherein officials have signaled some climate-friendly values. The indicators of the explanatory factors (civil society repression and inconsistent climate rhetoric) are the documented policies and actions levied against civic groups by the authorities and the official statements and actions taken in Russia regarding climate change. These are covered in the preceding review of the relevant literature on these topics. The indicators of the factor being explained in this research (the relationship between the government and climate activists) are the experiences, interactions, and opinions of the climate activists relating to their government and its approach to climate change. These were collected empirically through a survey questionnaire. These observations are useful for interpreting how civil society actors relate to their government on the topic of climate change, and their views of the current regime. The study of this case in Russia can inform on broader themes of top-down climate rhetoric in authoritarian and resource-dependent economies, civil society operations and repression under authoritarian regimes, and climate activism in fossil fuel-dependent economies.

The primary data source for this research was a Russian-language Qualtrics questionnaire sent directly to activists working in climate-focused NGOs. A questionnaire format was chosen over interviewing because of the ability to access vulnerable populations abroad remotely, maintaining anonymity, and convenience for both respondents and researcher (Bhattacharjee, 2012). The responses were collected between November 2022 and February 2023. The target group was identified through

professional connections (network sampling) and a general internet search for Russian climate activists. As the target population within Russia is difficult to access, snowball sampling was also employed to encourage an initial professional contact to forward the survey to additional potential respondents in their network (Atkinson & Flint, 2004; Gideon 2012, ch.5). The survey was sent to potential respondents along with an introductory recruitment message, a Plain Language Statement, and a Privacy Notice, all in Russian. The questionnaire collected no personally identifiable information and I had no further contact with the activists after sending the survey; thus, even I do not know the identity of any respondents. The survey questions were formulated with consideration for the research question, avoiding leading questions indicating bias, triangulating items to encourage complex reflection, and ordering questions from least sensitive to most sensitive (Gideon 2012, ch.7). The open-ended nature of the survey questions allowed for respondent flexibility to effectively capture a wide range of responses for analysis. The questions addressed the nature of climate-focused activities carried out by the volunteer's organization, their perceptions of the government's climate rhetoric and policy, and perceptions of their relationship with government authorities. The questionnaire can be found in Annex I.

Twelve respondents completed the survey to the end. I utilized qualitative content analysis, or thematic analysis, to summarize and interpret meaning from the primary textual data collected from survey respondents. Qualitative content analysis is a widely used, structured way to conduct descriptive or interpretive research that allows for subjective interpretations of reality while maintaining the methodological rigor of quantitative research (Drisko & Maschi, 2015; Mayring, 2000). I translated the responses into English and parsed content through two rounds of qualitative text coding, wherein a short word or phrase becomes a "code" assigning an attribute to a portion of text and capturing its meaning. Coding text allowed for patterns to be identified inductively and developed into data-grounded "categories" of content. An inductive approach was key to this research within an interpretivist framework to allow respondents' own subjective experiences to come to the fore. As the respondents belong to a vulnerable group in a repressive political regime, elevating their voices was paramount. The second round of coding perfected the organizational structure for the

coding and resulted in five consolidated categories: activists' repression and struggle to carry on, regime obsession with status and appearances, motives of greed and corruption, perceptions of inconsistency and hypocrisy, and non-prioritization of climate change, especially during the Ukraine war. These then became the key themes of the analysis and formed the structure for the research discussion in engagement with the previously presented theoretical literature on this topic (Saldana, 2012).

### *Limitations*

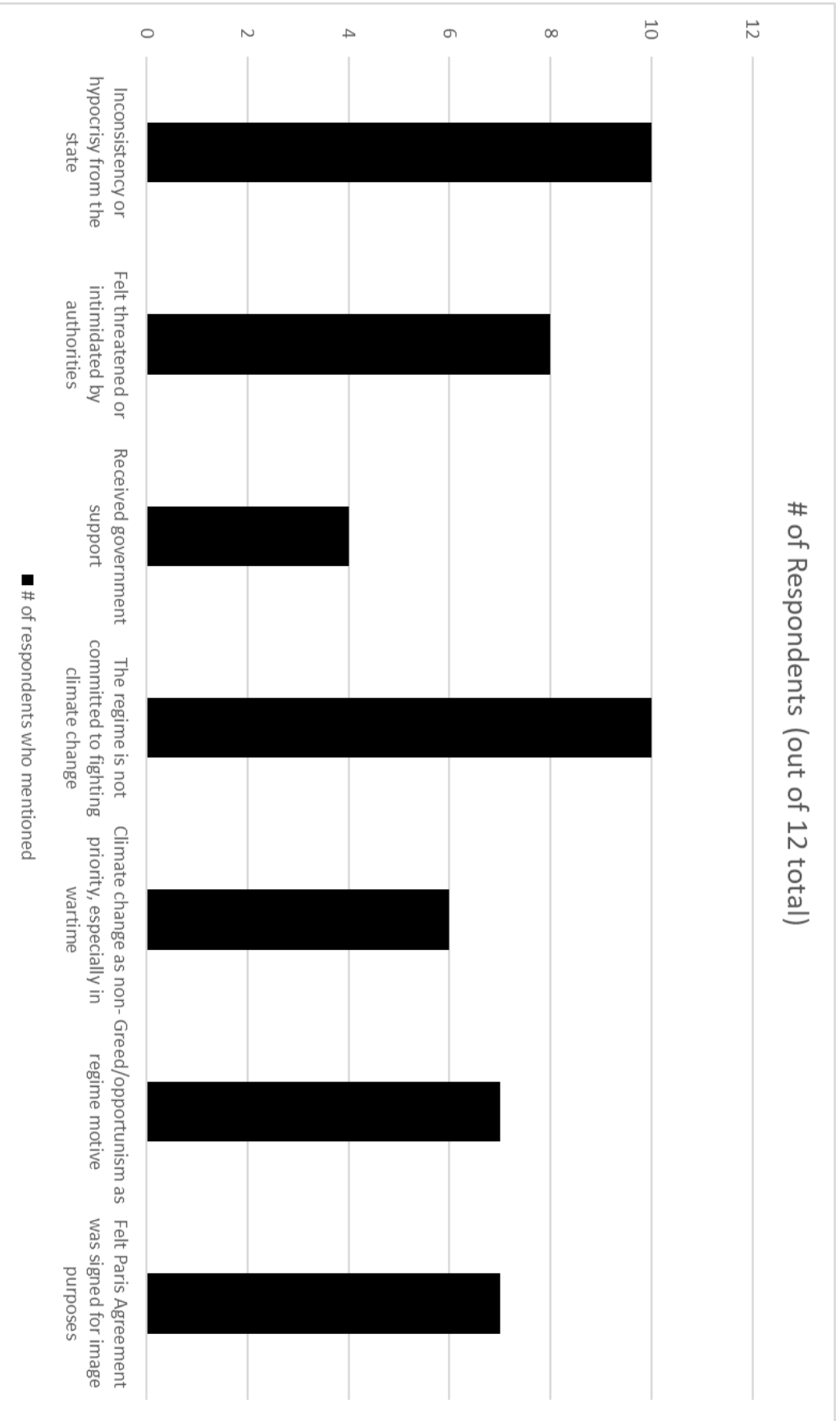
The sensitive nature of studying political opinion and activism in an authoritarian country brings several limitations to this study. Because climate activists in Russia are a concealed and potentially repressed population who likely bear high risk when completing political questionnaires, the rate of non-response or partial survey completion was high, and anonymity was especially key in securing responses. High nonresponse is common in survey research in the post-Soviet space due to the cultural difficulties of applying Western research methods in a distinct socio-cultural milieu. Historic problems in Russia include a persistent lack of trust in institutions, unfamiliarity with social science research due to Soviet stunting, and fears of backlash for discussing politically laden topics (Buckley, 1998). The gradual crackdown on the civic space, electrified in 2021 after the arrest of Alexei Navalny, has only exacerbated these issues, making social science research in Russia incredibly challenging and ethically fraught. Pursuing this study necessitated considerable concessions to meet ethics guidelines, but the perilousness of this moment in Russian society imbues activist voices with a new gravity.

Along with these socio-cultural issues, the need for complete anonymity to carry out the research ethically limited the potential for representative sampling of the concealed climate activist population, and prevented demographically-differentiated analysis. Representativeness was not logistically possible to achieve with such a vulnerable population living under conditions of authoritarianism, and furthermore, the purpose of the study was not to generalize all Russian climate activists, but to interpret a small selection of rich qualitative data. I was not permitted to ask the respondents for the names of their organizations or any demographic information like age, location,

political affiliation, etc. that could have shed light on geographic or demographic patterns in the data. The responses thus must be taken at face value with no possibility of identifying demographic sources of bias or ensuring that the sampled group accurately reflects the views of all Russian climate activists. Misreporting is also always a possible issue, but assurances of full anonymity to respondents should have mitigated their incentives to conceal their true thoughts and feelings; the voluntary inclusion by several respondents of their organizations' names testifies to their comfort and candor.

Lastly, the research was designed around the experiences of volunteers working for formal organizations because this is the type of civic activity that attracts attention, both positive and negative, from the government. The study thus excludes more individual, freelance-style "eco-influencer" activism which may have become a popular way for climate-conscious Russians to engage civically with low risk of state interference. A separate study on the role of the "eco-influencer" in authoritarian societies would be needed to explore this phenomenon. The exclusion of such unorthodox forms of climate activism may have limited the number of survey responses, which were already guaranteed to be low by the small population of activists and their concealed nature in a repressive civic sphere. The 12 responses included volunteers from non-climate focused groups, such as volunteer firefighters, but their overall proximity to climate issues and informed opinions on the topic provided enough data to make meaningful comparisons between different groups and draw takeaways from this limited population.

### *Overview of Findings*



The survey was completed to the end by 12 respondents, albeit with most respondents skipping certain questions like follow-up items that did not apply to them or issues they felt they had already addressed. The respondents came from a range of civil society backgrounds, and several openly named their organizations, including Fridays for Future, Greenpeace, and the Baikal Ecological Wave. Other respondents included volunteers from a firefighting organization, an environmental education program, and a forest protection group. Two respondents declined to give any details about the organization with which they were affiliated or its goals. In the first section of the discussion, I analyze how the organizations' extent of transnational links and radicality of goals correlated with the activists' expressed level of support for the regime and how they characterized organizational relations with the authorities.

Several themes appeared consistently throughout the responses. The first deals with experiences of repression in the activists' interactions with the authorities, causing them existential insecurity and a struggle to carry on. At the same time, others claim support from and tacit harmony with the authorities. Four subsequent themes deal with critical activists' perceptions of government actions and motives relating to climate change, which reveal their understanding of the Putin regime as a whole: maintaining status and appearance, greed and corruption, perceived inconsistency and hypocrisy, and climate as a non-priority during wartime.

The first key theme was the respondents' fight for their organizations' survival and feelings of existential insecurity as activists under a repressive regime. Eight of the activists had felt threatened or intimidated by the authorities in the course of carrying out their organizations' work. On the other hand, four respondents reported receiving official government support. However, the boundary between government-repressed and government-supported organizations is slightly blurred; two respondents reported working for both Greenpeace and a government-funded ecological project. Another claimed the authorities had supported other initiatives of their organization, but had threatened the initiative on which the respondent worked.

The next theme emerged from asking respondents what they felt was the reasoning behind the Kremlin's climate virtue signaling actions, such as Russia's signing of the Paris Agreement. Seven respondents answered that they suspected the

motive in signing was to build or maintain some sort of status or appearance. Only two respondents felt the agreement was signed for this noble reason. Also on the topic of regime motives, seven respondents mentioned greed and corruption related to the fossil fuel sector as undermining the climate change response in Putin's Russia. The disparity between Russia's stated motive of climate concern and its real motives of seeking status and wealth bring us our next theme. A perceived inconsistency or hypocrisy from the authorities in regards to their climate change response was expressed a total of 12 times by ten unique respondents. The final theme brings us into the present reality of Russian society: the sense that climate change is not a priority to the Putin regime, especially since the 2022 invasion of Ukraine. This was mentioned by six of the respondents. Ten respondents said they didn't think the regime was committed to fighting climate change. These themes recurred frequently enough to merit their inclusion as the key points of this discussion.

These five main emergent themes are useful to answer my research question about the relationship between Russian climate activists and the Putin regime. The ideas discussed by the survey respondents tie in closely to the novel triad of literatures on Russia's "uncivil society" paradigm, hydrocarbon superpower culture, climate virtue signaling, and authoritarianism. The respondents' accounts of interactions between the state and the activists demonstrate an existential insecurity and struggle to survive in an environment where independent civil society is repressed, which fits our uncivil society model characterized by top-down repression and division (Glasius, 2010; Pride Brown 2018, ch.1; Human Rights Watch, 2009). Assumptions by survey respondents that much of Russia's official climate change response represented a grab for increased status or an enhanced image on the world stage fits the critical lens taken by Veli-Pekka Tynkkynen, Natalie Koch, and Masahiro Tokunaga on a climate change rhetoric that essentially amounts to climate virtue signaling (2019; 2021; 2018). The authorities' underlying motive of greed criticized by climate activists in the survey responses as preventing an adequate climate change response fits into the idea of a patronal political system (Hale 2014, ch.8; Bessonova et al, 1996) relying on hydrocarbon superpower culture for its prosperity (Tynkkynen, 2019; Bouzarovsky and Bassin, 2010). The inconsistency and hypocrisy of the state as noted by respondents illustrate the

informational autocracy facet of Russia's authoritarian identity that protects regime security (Treisman, 2018). Lastly, the activists noted that climate change has become a complete non-priority to the state since the start of the war in Ukraine as the toxic ideology of restoring a lost empire takes center stage (Shevtsova, 2015; Götz, 2022; Putin, 2021). This discussion will use the relevant triad of literatures to illustrate how authoritarianism has shaped Russia's climate change response, its uncivil society sector, and its hydrocarbon superpower culture. The combined views expressed by the climate activists in our survey serve as a response to the state that can be explained by this triad.

### *Discussion*

The first section of this discussion analyzes the activists' characterizations of their organizations' relationships with the authorities as marked by existential insecurity and a struggle to carry on, painting a painful picture of repression in an "uncivil society". The activists' accounts of their interactions with the authorities demonstrate how complicity with regime interests is rewarded with organizational support, while dissent is stamped out. I draw connections between the regime's support of non-subversive ecological groups and climate virtue signaling, and illustrate why silencing climate change groups is paramount in an authoritarian hydrocarbon superpower. At the same time, the responses add nuance to the division aspect of our "uncivil society" frame, illustrating a spectrum of views that does not lend itself to a completely dichotomous understanding of "repressed" versus "co-opted" organizations.

The second section explores the respondents' critical perceptions of Russia's climate virtue signaling through climate-conscious rhetoric and the signing of the Paris agreement from the late 2010s until the invasion of Ukraine. The Kremlin's motive behind this virtue signaling is understood by our activist respondents as a preoccupation with status and appearance. The draw of the small soft power gains to be made on the world stage by touting ecological values exemplifies Russia's desire to exert influence outside its borders and maintain the status of a great power. Such imperialistic aspirations also motivate its recent aggressive foreign policy decision making. Hard power strategies to boost Russia's status recently trumped soft power attempts at

climate virtue signaling when Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022. Therefore, our respondents report that the regime's short-lived mock interest in climate protection has come to a sudden end.

The third section discusses the greed and corruption the critical activists think may be the real motives behind the government's lacking climate response. More than half of respondents called out a persistent greed undermining Russia's climate change response and keeping Russia dependent on fossil fuels. Greed seems to play a key role in Russia's patronalistic form of authoritarianism in which elite interests uphold the hydrocarbon economic status quo while exploitation damages the environment. A focus on short-term profits, especially during wartime, leaves the country unprepared for the coming global green energy transition. Our respondents voiced their fears for the country's future under leadership that stewards the environment irresponsibly and may consider climate change beneficial to economic interests. The Kremlin's hydrocarbon greed has undermined any attempt at a real climate change response and incurred our activists' opposition.

The fourth section highlights the activists' criticism of the disparity between the rhetoric the regime has attempted to peddle through climate virtue signaling and the real hydrocarbon greed motives understood by the activists; the result of this disparity is an overwhelming impression of inconsistency and blatant hypocrisy from the authorities. A critical view of inconsistency between government rhetoric and actions was the most commonly expressed sentiment in the survey. It brings forth a comparison of the public's passiveness toward inconsistency or lies under the authoritarian regime with our climate activists' apparent willingness to reject propaganda and take in outside perspectives. The findings suggest a downtrodden sub-sector of civil society actors who keep their voices low, but eyes open and clear.

The fifth and final section of this discussion brings Russia's climate change response into the present day: it has virtually ceased to exist. The invasion of Ukraine has taken away the option of courting soft power gains at international climate fora and the internal crisis in Russia following the invasion triggered a sharper crackdown on civil society to maintain full control. Our activist respondents shared their thoughts on how the Kremlin's abrupt change in priorities toward an aggressive foreign policy destroys

the potential for a climate change response. In authoritarian wartime Russia, climate change is the last thing anyone is thinking about, and our activists don't expect that to change. Their despair for their rogue country choosing to destroy lives instead of building a better future for humanity is palpable through the responses.

### *1 - An "Uncivil" Society*

This section answers the first part of my research question about the nature of the relationship between Russian climate activists and the Putin regime. When asked about their experiences operating in an authoritarian country and interacting with authorities, eight out of twelve activists expressed a struggle for their organization to survive and an existential insecurity in the civic space in Russia. At the same time, four reported receiving support from the government, and some of these seemed to somewhat approve of the state's climate change response. A few more fell somewhere in the middle. This section will examine the spectrum of experiences and opinions voiced by activists from varying environmental groups and relate them to the repressing and dividing aspects of our "uncivil society" paradigm. We will also analyze the respondents' evaluations of the government and its climate change response and discuss how dissenting views seemed to correlate with the subversive organizational goals and transnational linkages.

The eight survey respondents who reported feeling repressed by the authorities recounted detainments of their members, foreign agent designations, and intimidation from authorities. One recalled how "the police illegally detained an activist with the use of physical force, removing her from a solitary picket, and we are still suing to this day" (R4). Another admitted that "due to repression, many have been forced to leave, and the work of the movement has almost stopped...Perhaps we, too, will someday be recognized as "foreign agents"" (R7). The most dramatic example of repression was the forced closure of the Baikal Ecological Wave in 2016 after being designated as foreign agents and penalized by the authorities: "We felt we couldn't continue our work as an organization in this situation. Our good reputation had been blemished by an unfounded label" (R3). This atmosphere of repression and a struggle to carry on for independent, subversive groups seems to reflect the repression aspect of the "uncivil society"

paradigm as understood by Glasius (2010), Pride Brown (2018, ch.1), and Human Rights Watch (2009), referenced previously. According to one activist, "environmental NGOs (that were in the vanguard of progress in the sphere) were amongst the first to be cut back by the Foreign Agent Law" (R3). This supports the idea that environmental organizations that challenge the status quo are targeted for repression. Even some respondents who had not had direct confrontations with the authorities reported feeling threatened and unsafe carrying out their work.

The survey respondents also described survival strategies employed to keep their organizations alive and themselves safe. After a leader had been designated a foreign agent, one activist reported that "we have to avoid publicizing the fact of our joint work" (R5). This is a form of self-censorship intended to avoid attracting the attention of the authorities by associating with a foreign agent-designated person. Another case of self-censorship was thus: "My colleagues and I run a climate podcast and we're not allowed to talk about fossil fuels...There is a threat, so I always do events very carefully and look for partners, and it is very difficult to do this without getting into a mess that will ruin my reputation" (R9). Taking a different tactic, another said: "we are not officially registered, so we are not an organization" (R7). Forgoing registration eliminates the possibility of being designated, but also limits what groups can achieve. These reported survival strategies lend support to the findings of aforementioned studies of Russian civil society groups by Crotty (2014), Moser & Skripchenko (2018), Toepler & Frohlich (2020), Tysiachniouk et al (2018), and Schlaufer et al (2022). It was not clear whether respondents experiencing repression were still working in Russia, working abroad, or had had to give up activism. If asking the current location of respondents had been allowed, it could be predicted that this group of respondents may have been more likely to leave Russia following the invasion of Ukraine. If they remain in Russia and have continued their work since the invasion of Ukraine, they likely take on significant personal risk in pursuit of their activism; this was clearly demonstrated by the designation of Greenpeace Russia as an undesirable organization and its subsequent closure shortly after some of its volunteers were surveyed for this study.

The previous literature and these survey results both indicate that any environmental activity that represents a threat to regime interests is summarily blocked

and its participants sometimes castigated. Greenpeace Russia was recently designated an “undesirable organization”, a harsher designation than “foreign agent” that automatically outlawed the group. The grounds were that the organization was “promoting a political position, interfering with internal affairs of the state, and undermining its economic foundations”, amounting to “a threat to the foundations of the constitutional order and the security of the Russian Federation”; Greenpeace insisted that the designation actually was made because of the organization’s opposition to development projects that would harm the environment (Greenpeace International, 2023). Most respondents in this study knew of organizations that had been affected by the Foreign Agent Law, and some even belonged to organizations shut down by the law, like the Baikal Ecological Wave. Even among those in the survey who had not been affected by the Foreign Agent Law, it was universally condemned as “absurd” (R1), “repressive” (R7), “unlawful” (R13), and “offensive” (R12). The law has thus tainted the names of many groups and precludes them from doing meaningful work out of fear of being forced to stop. The literature points to our other triad points of authoritarianism and hydrocarbon superpower culture as the reasons for this civil society repression.

The authoritarian justification for civil society repression was introduced in the literature review. To reiterate, a key factor in civil society repression is the regime’s fear of organized popular movements influenced by ideas from the West. In order for the Putin regime to feel that its grip on power was secure, it asserted its sovereignty over civil society by reorienting civic actors away from transnational influences unfriendly to the state and towards Russian interests. This was seen as vital in the wake of unrest following the announcement of Putin’s third presidential run, which was likened to the destabilizing potential of the color revolutions that had taken place in the previous decade (Treisman 2018, p.4; Crotty, 2014; Pride Brown 2018, p.168; Flikke, 2018). A domestic uprising supported by the West represented a terrible bogeyman to the regime; this fed into Putin’s siege mentality and likely influenced him to exert greater control over civil society from 2012. But this sort of paranoia is not unique to the Russian case; leaders in other countries have also felt threatened by foreign influences in the civic space, especially when its citizens appeal to outside help to pressure their country to change (Rutzen, 2015; Richter & Hatch, 2013; Scheidel et al, 2020; Matejova

et al, 2018; Orlova, 2019). The key issue is a regime's desire for sovereignty, understood as a freedom to conduct internal affairs as they like without meddling by outside actors. On environmental issues that are often transnational or global in nature, international advocacy networks abounded, making environmental activism a special case in the study of Russian civil society. Because these foreign linkages may have exposed Russian activists to Western ideas about climate change and politics, the self-preservation impulse of the authoritarian state called for a leveling of the independent environmental civic sector.

The other factor that compels the state to repress subversive environmental organizations is Russia's hydrocarbon superpower economy. The country's reliance on fossil fuels to maintain a strong economy affects state-civil society relations in two ways. Firstly, hydrocarbons were a key factor that enabled Putin to increase state capacity and construct an authoritarian power vertical during his first two terms (Rutland, 2008). As his cadre of patronalistic oligarchs possess these hydrocarbon resources, Putin's ruling class and his repressive policies are funded by a fossil fuel resource curse that keeps autocrats in power (Ross, 2015; Tynkkynen, 2019; McFaul & Stoner-Weiss, 2008; Hale 2014, ch.8). As we have just discussed, a desire to retain regime power was a significant contributing factor to civil society repression. Secondly, the hydrocarbon superpower economy of Russia is inherently threatened by notions of climate change mitigation and greenhouse gas reduction. As fossil fuel exports make up nearly half the federal budget, the elites in charge have absolutely no incentive to transition to a more sustainable economy (IEA, 2022; Tynkkynen 2019, p.7-8). The unlimited pillaging of Russia's raw materials is the only way for them to continue their oligarchic lifestyles and fund the police state (Tynkkynen, 2019; Pokrovsky, 2010). Therefore, while some tame environmental activities may be allowed by Russia's authoritarian leaders, the energy sector elites cannot tolerate defiant calls for change from climate activists.

The effects of authoritarianism and hydrocarbon superpower on Russia's policy choices were noted by the activists in our survey who had experienced repression. There seemed to be a correlation between organizational goals and the activists' level of disapproval of the government and its climate response. On one side, the respondents that experienced repression tended to work in organizations that

challenged existing environmental policies and had strong international ties, such as Greenpeace, Fridays for Future, and the Baikal Ecological Wave. These three organizations represented nearly half of the responses. They also had more negative opinions on the regime's climate strategy and politics in general; one lamented: "In 5 years the state destroyed the remnants of freedom of speech, became a dictatorial fascist regime, which made continuing the fight against climate change almost impossible" (R7). Globalization likely plays a role in shaping anti-regime opinions among this group because they mostly worked in organizations with strong transnational ties; this will be further discussed in the fourth section on activist perceptions of state inconsistency and hypocrisy. This exposure to ideas from outside Russia's information sphere may have influenced the generally Western political ideas they expressed, again demonstrating the importance of transnational networks to Russian environmental activism. The references made by the respondents indicated an advanced understanding of governance and climate policy issues. For example: "[Russia's] official COP delegation consists of big businessmen from the gas, nuclear, and banking industries. Putin never personally came to COP" (R7). This group also seemed more certain of their beliefs than other respondents, and perhaps more pessimistic and disillusioned about the future of environmental policy in Russia: "No one is going to reduce oil consumption...Russia will not pay attention to this...I think it's the last thing they care about" (R12). While overtly political questions were not asked in this survey, it is clear from these fragments that some critical respondents are highly aware of the authoritarian and hydrocarbon culture obstacles facing environmentalism in today's Russia.

The other half of the respondents had more diverse opinions, reflecting a greater diversity of organizations. Represented among this group were a firefighting organization, an environmental education program, a forest protection group, and two organizations with unstated goals. Most of these environmental groups do not seem to focus on climate change or challenge the government's environmental policies, although these activists left much unsaid about their work; there may be no subversive element compelling the authorities to silence them. A few members of this second group had experienced repression or were seemingly just as critical of the government as

those in the first group, with one lambasting Russia's "uncontrolled use of resources for maximum profit" (R10) and another reporting "direct pressure" (R1) applied by the authorities to thwart their work. The second quote could be chalked up to belonging to an unnamed organization with either radical policy goals or strong international ties, but the first came from a forest firefighting group that had received grants from the state. Similarly, one respondent worked for both Greenpeace and a state-affiliated ecological project, where they apparently held a leadership position. However, they expressed critical views of the state's climate change response: "If they really wanted to solve the problem, then they would make more determined attempts to develop green energy" (R9). Indeed, a few respondents seemed to toe the line between disapproval of the regime and working with it, showing a spectrum of views rather than a strict dichotomy between the views of repressed and co-opted groups. Therefore, while all the activists working in transnational, more radical climate groups seemed consistently and overtly critical of the climate change response and the regime more broadly, volunteers from more benign organizations were also sometimes critical. This criticism, however, is likely silent and hidden from their state partners.

Our respondents' portrayals of dissenting environmental volunteers being able to represent benign, apolitical civic outlets that may be co-opted by the authoritarian state raises questions of how activists calculate the tradeoffs between environmental action and involvement with the authoritarian regime. Perhaps those with dissenting views justify working for a state-affiliated organization because without them, no one would engage in environmental protection in Russia at all. Perhaps they are passionate about the climate but politically indifferent, like many in Russia who have become numb to outlandish propaganda, but do not seek alternative sources of information. They may simply want to do something good for the planet as part of an organization that is safe from political controversy. Digging into these deeper motives behind each activist respondent is outside the scope of this study (and indeed outside the realm of possibility given how politically sensitive these topics are), but this diversity brings dimension and life to our "uncivil society" model.

At the same time, environmental activists who had received governmental support *and* seemed to somewhat approve of the regime's climate response were also

represented in the survey responses. Three respondents described the government's environmental goals as compatible with their organizations' work, and four had received some sort of support from the government for their work. Still, only one, an environmental educator working with schoolchildren, seemed truly optimistic about the government's response to climate change, saying: "Recently, authorities have been talking more and more about greenhouse gases, reducing energy consumption and reducing the amount of carbon dioxide emitted" (R2). This stands in sharp contrast to the first groups of activists who claimed nothing is being done. Another two, who volunteered with forest protection groups that worked with the government, did not evaluate the regime's climate change response at all and shied away from political questions, providing little insight into their opinions on the climate response or the regime: "I don't follow government statements much" (R11). This small cluster of respondents, however lukewarm, affirms a key aspect of our "uncivil society" paradigm because it demonstrates the results of the regime's civil society co-optation efforts. Claiming that all environmental civil society is repressed would overlook a key point of our "uncivility" paradigm - the division between "chosen" and "repressed" groups. To some unknown extent, the Kremlin has managed to manufacture civic activism that either approves of the regime's supposedly environmental values, or remains passive enough not to oppose its anti-ecology agenda. Even passivity is a major achievement when the goal is putting down opposition. Furthermore, environmental groups provide the Kremlin a special opportunity for co-optation that lends the regime environmental legitimacy and help alienate dissenting groups.

Revisiting the literature on civic group co-optation in Russia contextualizes the situation of respondents who collaborate with the state. For the Putin regime, managing a field of hand-selected or contrived do-gooder civic organizations seems to be a convenient way to virtue signal and promote values that align with regime interests (Robertson, 2009; Lewis, 2013). They can also let such groups take on some of the state's burden by ameliorating problems in society (Cheskin & March, 2015; Henderson, 2011). The groups can give credit to the regime for its support, which may give the authorities a boost in legitimacy in the public eye. While some of the biggest state-affiliated civic groups focus on nurturing "patriotism" in young people, environmental

groups may also provide especially fertile ground for co-optation; they can provide clearly beneficial services to society while remaining entirely politically innocuous. Programming like urban waste cleanups or planting trees provides visible benefits to the environment while giving volunteers a sense of contributing positively to the community. While there is, of course, nothing inherently bad about such ecological volunteerism, the implications of state involvement complicate things. The regime can score easy public image points by funding forest protection groups to demonstrate responsible stewardship and care for the environment, while skirting the fact that Russia's inspirational landscapes have been pillaged and polluted for profit by the powers that be for generations. Furthermore, the environmental educator in our survey can lend legitimacy to the state by teaching schoolchildren how Russia earnestly cares for its environment.

In characterizing the relationship between Russian climate activists and the authorities, the survey responses generally fit the "uncivil society" model of authoritarian repression and civic sector division in our triad of literatures (Glasius, 2010; Pride Brown 2018, ch.1; Human Rights Watch, 2009). Two-thirds of those surveyed reported experiencing repression or pressure placed on them by the authorities, resulting in the closure of several of the groups most challenging to the authoritarian status quo. While such experiences and close transnational ties with Western groups led these respondents to oppose state climate policies, there were a few respondents who either tacitly or wholeheartedly supported the regime's response to climate change. These respondents seemed more likely to work for benign environmental organizations that did not challenge state environmental policies, and had worked with the government. This demonstrates how environmental activism in Russia represents a special case that can serve as a conduit for either dissent or co-optation. However, a few respondents held a mix of critical views and government affiliations that defied dichotomous classification. The regime's sponsorship of certain forms of civic activity allows it to engage in climate virtue signaling to demonstrate its sustainable values to its citizens, while punishing groups that bring dangerous ideas from abroad. Authoritarian siege mentality and hydrocarbon superpower culture prop up a system that perpetuates the division of the civic space into privileged and punished groups, and challenges to state supremacy are

not tolerated - an “uncivil” society. In the following sections, we will focus on some of the ideas expressed by respondents who were critical of the regime’s climate change response and its motives in general.

## *2 - Keeping Up Appearances*

The next sections are themed around some of the activists’ perceptions of government motives relating to the climate change response, which illustrate their criticism of the regime. In the literature review, we discussed the triad point of Russian climate virtue signaling, demonstrated by examples such as signing the Paris Agreement and making official statements with a rhetoric of concern. Our survey respondents were asked why they felt the regime had signed the Paris Agreement in 2019 and sometimes spoke about the importance of fighting climate change. Six of the twelve respondents expressed some impression of fallacious motives from the regime, not genuine concern about the consequences of climate change. Only two respondents felt the regime’s concern for the climate was genuine, and two assumed Russia hoped to profit financially somehow from climate issues, which will be covered in the next section on greed and corruption. The responses that mentioned Russia’s obsession with status and appearance bring our discussion to Russia’s varied strategies to regain its great power status and their recent geopolitical repercussions.

Most of the responses were unique in their phrasing about Russia’s climate response motives. One said plainly that the Paris Agreement had been signed “to keep some position amongst world leaders” (R3). Another expounded, saying: “I think this is duplicity and a desire to show that he is supposedly a modern and democratic ruler who upholds the same values as the West. This is a cover to gain the loyalty of Western politicians” (R7). One other respondent said the authorities felt climate change was a “trifle of the West” (R13). This ties in to the idea that climate concern is an inherently Western concept, which has been suggested by the Russian authorities in a negative light previously (Tynkkynen 2019, ch.6; Reinhardt, 2020). Three mentioned global trends: “It was an attempt to be on-trend and retain its international status, it was probably like ‘fashionable’” (R13); “To remain, on paper, on trend with the global agenda” (R1); “But there is a feeling that all this was done only for the sake of formality

(Paris agreement, pressure from the West, compliance with trends)” (R12). Remaining on the forefront of geopolitical trends may be desirable for any country, and particularly for ones who want to become more influential on the world stage. Another answer was the simplest: “To seem like the good guy”(R10). These answers all revolve around two goals of Russia’s behavior on the world stage: a good image and enhanced global status. In this section we will explore these motives and how they have played out in Russian decisionmaking.

In essence, the responses indicate that the suspected motive for Russia’s climate virtue signaling is to boost Russia’s profile by expressing cheap concern about something broadly recognized as a threat to humanity. As we have discussed, examples of the actions Russia has taken to this end include signing the Kyoto and Paris Agreements, announcing carbon neutrality by 2060, Putin mentioning climate change in his 2015 address to the UN Assembly, and the topic of this research - funding some environmental civil society groups (Climate Action Tracker, 2022; Lewis, 2013). Feigning concern about climate change is a form of climate virtue signaling that allows Russia to seem responsible in the public eye and aligns with the image Putin wants to project of a great power that influences other countries (Koch & Tynkkynen, 2021; Tokunaga, 2018; Shevtsova 2015, p.25-27). As climate change has, for the most part, been agreed upon as one of the greatest challenges of this epoch of humanity, Russia could not simply stay mum on the topic even as a major fossil fuel exporter. Its self-appointed status as a world leader precludes it from simply appearing uninterested in such an important issue (Koch & Tynkkynen, 2021; Tokunaga, 2018; Gusev 2016, p.40). To abstain from engaging in climate virtue signaling could raise questions among the domestic population and hand China and the West a monopoly on global climate change mitigation leadership. As many countries do on a variety of issues, it took a stand because it was expected to follow the pack, not because the regime takes a particular interest in environmental issues. Thus, the literature confirms the two sides to the motivation to engage in climate virtue signaling mentioned by respondents: maintaining appearances, both to its own citizenry and generally among nations, and clutching for status on the world stage.

This is not to say that Russia is the only country that engages in climate virtue signaling. Given the severity of the threat, near unanimous agreement on the need for action, and the very high cost of that action to certain countries, incentives abound for leaders to exaggerate their commitments to the climate crisis. Climate Action Tracker asserts that no signatory country's mitigation commitment is actually compatible with the 1.5C warming targeted by the Paris Agreement. In the list of critically insufficient contributions along with Russia are Mexico, Iran, Turkey, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam (Climate Action Tracker, 2023). Such weak commitments beg the question of these countries' reasons for signing the agreement in the first place; perhaps Russia was not alone in its ulterior motives. Russia is also not the only fossil fuel producing country to have signed on. The U.S., Saudi Arabia, the U.A.E., China, India, Canada, Brazil, and Iran are all in the top ten oil producers in the world and are signatories to the agreement (U.S. Energy Information Administration, 2023). The massive expense and economic upheaval inherent to a potential low-carbon transition in any of these countries gives considerable incentives to greenwash their insufficient climate change mitigation commitments. Greenwashing, or deceptively claiming environmental friendliness as an advertising strategy, is also common among companies in climate-conscious economies (Eriksen, 2021). Duplicitous claims of climate-friendly behavior are inevitable in a world economy so deeply rooted in hydrocarbon use.

In a similar vein, the motivators of image and status are important to all nations to some extent, but Russia has been particularly concerned with rebuilding its image as a great power since the fall of the Soviet Union. The unexpected and messy end to the great Eurasian empire was deeply embarrassing to Russian sensibilities, and destroyed a significant facet of Russia's identity as an imperial nation (Shevtsova 2015, p.27; Lynch, 2001; Rutland, 2015). Not only did it experience a huge drop in status by effectively losing the Cold War and giving up large swaths of its former territory, it also soon had to contend with the possibility of the newly independent states joining a rival security bloc (Götz, 2022). Russia's territory is a source of pride and the source of the resources upon which its economy has always relied (Rutland 2015, p.79; Tynkkynen 2019, p.46). Essentially, for Russia, its land represents both power and identity, and Russia still follows a realist outlook in international relations wherein power is the most

important determining factor of the geopolitical order (Lynch, 2001; Götz, 2022). More than thirty years after a massive reduction in the size of its territory, Putin is still trying to win that lost land power back at any cost. Russian leaders had already found consensus on prioritizing maintaining a Moscow-centered security order in the region as a policy priority in the 1990s. But it was not until the presidency of Vladimir Putin and the state's subsequent increase in capacity that this policy was pursued in earnest (Götz, 2022). Therefore, it may be the case that modern Russia's desire for status demands imperial aspiration, but only through strong leadership can this be realized. This brings the conversation back to the authoritarian nature of the Russian state under Putin.

The actions Russia has taken under Putin in pursuit of a sphere of influence and the status that comes with it can be understood as imperialism enabled by Putin's authoritarian consolidation of state capacity. We know that Russian state capacity was greatly boosted during the 2000s thanks to re-nationalized energy enterprises and a rise in world oil prices, which in turn solidified his grip on power (Ross, 2015; Rutland, 2008; McFaul & Stoner-Weiss, 2008). This increase in state capacity revived Russia's ability to pursue its imperialistic goals, which played out in aggressive foreign policy interventions in Georgia in 2008 and Crimea in 2014 (Götz, 2022). These actions were wildly successful in reviving Russia's identity as a great power to its own people; Putin's popularity shot up after he annexed Crimea (Levada Center, 2023). This shows that the Russian people approved of imperialist foreign policy actions because it helped them recover their pride in a "great power" Russian identity (Feldmann & Mazepus, 2018; Gudkov, 2018). Thus, the Kremlin's motives for engaging in imperialistic foreign policy may be both ideological assumptions about Russia's place in the world, as well as the public opinion boost the regime receives when its citizens feel pride in their great power status.

Compared to other foreign policy actions, climate virtue signaling was but a small and benign example among many arenas in which the Putin regime tries to wield influence abroad to make up for its lost empire. Russia's desire to exert influence outside its borders and maintain the status of a great power strongly motivates its aggressive foreign policy decision making. Its increasingly aggressive incursions into

neighboring countries have recently triggered the most serious threat to Europe since World War II with the invasion of Ukraine. Such overt imperialism seems out of place with twenty-first century geopolitical norms, but is still pursued with zeal by the authoritarian Putin regime. This boldness is a big step away from previous subtler strategies to boost the national image that capitalized upon Western norms, such as climate virtue signaling. Signs of Russia's disagreement with international efforts against climate change included an insistence on Russia's sovereignty over its own climate policy and a resistance to comply with agreements to which Russia was signatory (Reinhardt, 2020). This contradiction was noted by our survey respondents: "Russia as a state renounces obligations and participation in international conventions" (R13); "now Russia does not seek to fulfill its obligations" (R7). This combination of rhetorical virtue signaling and policy inaction ended with Russia's invasion of Ukraine. In the fallout from the invasion, Russia was shunned by Western multilateral institutions and ceased to speak about climate change. Our survey respondents noted the change: "[Russia signed the Paris Agreement] to remain, on paper, on trend with the global agenda. But with the start of the war this has all become the past" (R1). Another listed some previous decrees promising environmental action, "however, no one has mentioned anything about this over the past year, apparently because of the war" (R12). Thus, the Ukraine invasion marked the end of Russia's soft-power climate virtue signaling campaign and the rapid hard-power escalation of its quest for imperial great power status. This phenomenon will be further discussed in the fifth section on Russia's non-prioritization of climate issues during wartime.

This section has explored the survey respondents' perceptions of Russia's obsession with status and appearance. Russian leaders engaged in climate virtue signaling through climate-friendly rhetoric and participation in international climate agreements in order to access small soft power gains both domestically and on the world stage. The activists felt that Russia previously wanted to give an impression of aligning with Western values, but Putin's aggressive foreign policy actions in pursuit of recovering lost imperial status paint a different picture. Illusions of any intent to help fight climate change were dispelled when Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022 based on deep-rooted imperialistic interests. The regime stopped talking about climate change

because it is no longer a viable avenue to better its image. Both climate virtue signaling and the invasion of Ukraine represented very different attempts to boost Russia's global status, but the deadly path has now been taken. This change has been noted by our dissenting surveyed activists and compelled them to point out the emptiness and hypocrisy of Russia's climate response all along. In the next section, we will further discuss how hydrocarbon greed ensured an empty climate change response.

### *3 - The Root of All Evil*

We have just discussed the respondents' understandings of Russia's prior motives for engaging in climate virtue signaling; now we will examine what they suspect is its much stronger motive for taking no real action on climate change prevention: greed. More than half of the respondents in the study brought up Russia's hydrocarbon economic interests as a major factor affecting its lacking climate change response. Several respondents criticized the state harming the environment to pillage natural resources, reliance on the oil sector to enrich elites, and the way that the authorities sometimes see environmental activists as obstacles to their financial interests. One volunteer from a Lake Baikal protection organization themed all of his responses around the idea of an entrenched culture of corruption. Some of the responses hint at a paternal authoritarian system that enriches elites while hindering Russia's development towards a green energy transition. Under the current hydrocarbon superpower culture status quo, Russian opportunism seeks benefits of warming without adequately considering climate change risks, and puts off planning for a future low-carbon economy in favor of short-term profits. This greed and short-sightedness alienates the climate-concerned public, and our activists seem to wish their environment and economic future were in different hands.

The critical survey respondents connected elite greed with both their organizations' poor relationships with the authorities and the state's lacking climate change response. Their outlook was extremely negative. On the uncomfortable position of climate activists to hydrocarbon economic interests, one respondent said "The fact that eventually pressure was applied to move us out of the way indicates that it was considered to be an obstacle to certain economic interests" (R3). We previously

discussed the two linked justifications for the state to resist climate activism specifically in the first section on uncivil society: the authoritarian regime's reliance on hydrocarbon superpower culture to keep them in power (Rutland, 2008; Ross, 2015; Tynkkynen, 2019; McFaul & Stoner-Weiss, 2008), and the threat to the hydrocarbon-based economy posed by calls for a green energy transition (IEA, 2022; Tynkkynen 2019, p.7-8; Pokrovsky, 2010). These incentives not to act to mitigate climate change were noted by respondents: "Since Russia's economy is based on fossil fuels...Russia's climate strategy exists only on paper" (R7); "Definitely the authorities are not doing enough, moreover, they continue to sponsor the economy based on fossil fuels." (R13). Furthermore, a few brought in the concept of a greedy state: "The authorities are committed to the uncontrolled use of resources for maximum profit" (R10). The respondent who themed many of his responses around state greed was much more verbose: "The Baikal natural territory, its wild lands, were all given over to investors and tourism...Business interests take precedence over nature...Corruption in all spheres of power and bodies, the golden calf has eaten their souls...Here they will make a mess, take a lot of money, and go abroad...Everyone is trying to snatch from its territory for himself personally, if they have money, connections, and power" (R4). This response brings us to the individual level of greed that exists in tandem with Russia's systemic economic dependence on hydrocarbon export revenues.

While we have spoken much of the reliance of the entire Russian economy on hydrocarbons, it is important to note that our respondents are aware that this system is maintained by elite individuals who personally benefit from the hydrocarbon superpower status quo, regardless of its negative consequences for the environment. One respondent said of fossil fuel energy: "For many elites in power it is a way to get rich" (R7). The literature confirms this claim; Russia's system of actors exchanging rewards via personal ties to power has been termed "patronal politics" by Hale and "razdatok-economy" by Bessonova et al (Hale 2014, ch.8; Bessonova et al, 1996). In this system, Putin is the patron of many clients, including the oligarchs. Oligarchs in Russia may seem like giants, but their wealth does not automatically entitle them to much decision making power when it comes to energy policy or other matters, because their power is contingent upon a warm relationship with the leader (Hale 2014, ch.8). The oligarchs we

know today can actually be considered a “second generation” of oligarchs, as a few shrewd individuals became extremely wealthy by buying up privatized capital following the collapse of the Soviet Union. These 90s oligarchs, however, were eventually replaced by members of Putin’s own personal circle, many of them associates from his early career days (Seddon & Ivanova, 2022). The patron and his clients exist in a symbiotic relationship wherein Putin provides the oligarchs with wealth beyond their wildest dreams as heads of state energy companies. In return, the oligarchs are expected to show loyalty by running the country’s energy enterprises well and acting in Putin’s best interests. This system is a key feature of Russia’s patronal form of authoritarianism; Putin has effectively consolidated political power under himself since the most economically powerful figures in the country owe everything to him and could be replaced if their loyalty is called into question (Hale 2014, ch.8; Seddon & Ivanova, 2022).

Because of this authoritarian power vertical system, Russian energy oligarchs are not the ones deciding not to pursue a climate change policy. However, even if they did have some say in such policy decisions, they certainly have no incentive to advocate for renewable energy development or economic diversification when the current system enriches them plenty. As one respondent said of the elites, “They simply have no time to think about the climate, no time, and no reason” (R4). While some energy executives in other countries have decided that being on the cutting edge of the low-carbon transition would be strategic in a competitive field of energy firms, there is no sign of such a motive in the Russian energy sector (Tynkkynen 2019, p.7-8). Rather than the innovation and progress that entrepreneurial leadership could bring, the relationship between the patron and the clients in Russia’s system operates on a currency of greed. Putin’s greed is for more absolute power, and personal financial perks, like his alleged palace on the Black Sea. The elites oblige this by acting as “wallets” to misappropriate funds for him in exchange for fabulous wealth, knowing that a wrong move could cost them everything (Navalny, 2021). The stewardship of Russia’s hydrocarbon resources by oligarchs brings wealth to elites while the wellbeing of workers and the environment are not considered (Hale 2014, ch.8; Bessonova et al, 1996). Since the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, however, the oligarchs’ loyalty has been

tested and their wealth threatened. Many oligarchs also had assets abroad, and Western sanctions dealt a great blow to their incalculable wealth (Seddon & Ivanova, 2022). Most seem to be staying quiet, bemoaning the loss of their Western assets, and sometimes turning up dead in suspicious circumstances (Godfrey, 2022). The case of the oligarchs demonstrates the greed and corruption inherent in Russia's political system and the effective consolidation of Russian authoritarianism under Putin. Similar to the civil society sector, the oligarch class has been cowed into submission by the Putin regime.

The greed and corruption which permeate modern Russian authoritarianism have led some to call it a kleptocracy, or a plutocracy (Aslund, 2019; Dawisha, 2015). Hydrocarbon superpower culture represents a massive misappropriation of the country's wealth directed into the hands of already unimaginably wealthy people. The easily exploitable nature of hydrocarbons has contributed to a resource curse in which the authorities seize the resources for themselves and use them to build an authoritarian system resistant to change. Thus, the government has a funding source independent of the citizens' approval of the regime, and a responsibility to work in the nation's best interest is absent (Ross, 2012; Ross, 2015; Rutland, 2008). Meanwhile, regular citizens miss out on most of the profits of resource wealth, progress toward a more diversified economy is stagnant, and the environment is pillaged and polluted carelessly (Tynkkynen, 2019; Pokrovsky, 2010). One respondent called this out by stating that the regime lies about its environmental goals and that in fact its main goal is "the exploitation of natural resources" for "maximum profit" (R10). This invocation of exploitation hints at the idea of the resource curse, and the respondent's disapproval and helplessness to change the situation are keenly felt. While many Russians may understand the weaknesses of a resource-based economy, the government keeps the people content with decent salaries and spending on infrastructure projects. But being a hydrocarbon superpower means that the price of oil and the state of global energy markets determine everything; Russia is in a very weak position for a future global green energy transition.

A drop in the global demand for fossil fuels precipitated by a low-carbon transition to fight climate change would be an insurmountable challenge for Russia's

current status quo. One astute survey respondent noted that “Europe plans to abandon gas and oil at some point. This cannot but affect Russia, and Putin understands that the economy needs to be made less dependent on oil / gas exports” (R12). However, the wealth of hydrocarbons propping up Putin’s authoritarian regime and funding the entire country may be irreplaceable in such a resource-intensive economy, and the Kremlin’s lack of policy action on this issue does not indicate an eagerness to adapt (Ross, 2015; Tynkkynen, 2019; McFaul & Stoner-Weiss, 2008). Another respondent disagrees with the first: “They continue to sponsor the economy based on fossil fuels. There is no enlightenment” (R13). This wording conjures an idea of backwardness and resistance to change, of which a low-carbon future would require too much. At the same time, it seems doubtful that the authorities are putting the needs of regular citizens first when they consider their incentives to continue down the hydrocarbon path. The hydrocarbon superpower economic model is outdated, reactionary, and undeniably unsustainable, but it has proved extremely profitable for the Putin regime. Concerns about the climate, the future decrease in demand for oil, and the Russian economy of tomorrow are put off indefinitely in favor of elites squeezing the last drops of wealth from the hydrocarbon economy.

Furthermore, climate opportunism may also play a role in Russia allowing climate change to proceed unmitigated. Two survey respondents brought up the idea that Russia as a northern country hopes to benefit in certain ways from a potentially warmer climate, giving it an incentive not to act against climate change. Said one activist: “They only use the aspects [of climate change] that are beneficial to them...the politician is thinking about the prospects of growing new crops when the warming gets stronger in southern Russia” (R9). Another said, “there is also an opinion that climate change will have a positive impact on the Russian economy and agriculture” (R6). Putin himself has jovially alluded to this before shifting to more climate-friendly rhetoric (The Moscow Times, 2021; Tokunaga, 2018). This introduces a double role for greed in the case of the Russian climate response; the Putin regime expects both short-term profits from continuing to milk the country’s fossil fuel resources, and potential long-term benefits from contributing to warming. According to the Stern Review, moderate warming could increase crop yields, open Arctic sea lanes for shipping and new oil extraction, and give

Russia a more moderate winter climate (Stern 2007, p.8). Increased year-round access to the Northeast Passage is particularly intriguing for opportunist Russia as it has fiercely vied for supremacy in the Arctic, both to control the prized shipping lane and to extract natural resources. However, the results of climate change are difficult to predict given its multifactorial nature, and Russia could suffer some severe consequences as well. Extreme latitudes seem to be experiencing the most dramatic rates of warming thus far, meaning that Russia's Far North permafrost and the towns and fossil fuel-extractive infrastructure resting on it are already jeopardized. This damage may require significant investment to repair in changing climatic conditions. Additionally, crop yield increases can only be capitalized upon if Russian agriculture is significantly redesigned as temperatures continue to rise; crops that currently thrive in the south will need to be moved north, and the south may suffer more frequent droughts (Stern 2007, p.8). Indeed, Russia has already suffered an increase in heat waves, forest fires, and flash floods that have brought attention to the issue of climate change even at the highest levels of government (Digges, 2021). However, this attention was short-lived and ultimately did not produce any action, as our survey respondents noted: one claimed this flurry of concern had "faded into the background" (R11), while others referenced meaningful rhetoric and high-level meetings being followed by "no real action" (R4) on the issue. This evident lack of follow-through on climate change policy demonstrates how Russia does not prioritize the climate change agenda.

It's impossible to say how Russia will ultimately benefit from and be negatively affected by climate change. But Russia's climate optimism would be short-sighted in the face of the inevitable low-carbon transition. Threatened by imminent climate change and bullied by oil-controlling countries like Russia, many governments are expanding renewable energy production as quickly as is feasible, and the EU has set a 32% renewable energy target for 2030 (European Environment Agency, 2023). This process has taken on a new significance with the Russian oil ban widely adopted in the West. While Russia has been able to divert much of its energy export eastward to Asian markets at a discount, the world's days of relying on oil-producing countries are numbered (Menon, 2023). Natural gas may be profitable as a less carbon-intensive "transition" fuel for some time, but not permanently; Russia must diversify its economy.

It is difficult to identify any significant ways the Putin regime has attempted to prepare for a green energy transition. Another respondent pointed out their expectation of the government's failure to rise to this challenge: "In reality, no one is going to reduce oil consumption, especially at a time when all the country's money goes to the front" (R12). This response also points out that as fossil fuel revenues currently fund the war effort in Ukraine, there is no planning for a brighter future. Russia simply continues to sell its fossil fuel resources to anyone who will still buy them to fund the war machine.

Many of our surveyed activists deplored Russia's hydrocarbon superpower economy and the greedy elites who accept patronalistic authoritarianism to profit from ecological exploitation. They made clear their understanding of the Kremlin's hydrocarbon reliance as its main motive not to act decisively to mitigate climate change. Thus, the activists' perceptions of elite greed and corruption influences them to evaluate the regime's climate change response negatively and perhaps oppose the regime as a whole. As some mentioned a looming global green energy transition, they are likely also worried that the irresponsible cadre of leaders are incapable of properly stewarding Russia's economic and ecological future. For a group so passionate about environmental protection, watching the regime put its greed before Russia's future must be infuriating.

#### *4 - Janus-Faced State*

This section explores the critical activists' sense of disparity between the rhetoric the regime has attempted to peddle through climate virtue signaling and the real hydrocarbon greed they understand to motivate climate policy choices. This disparity points to their views of the authorities as chronically inconsistent and blatantly hypocritical. Such views were expressed a total of 12 times by ten unique survey respondents, including some who took a softer view on the government in general. As this was the most commonly expressed sentiment in the survey, it is likely safe to assume that many in the civil society sector share this feeling. Many respondents exemplified this phenomenon of dishonesty by pointing out "no real action" (R4, R5, R6) taken on climate policy, an environmental "facade" (R9), and a failure to follow through on international commitments. The respondents draw a clear distinction between what

the regime says, and what it does: “To say is not to do, that's our policy” (R4). This type of response was especially common among respondents working for organizations with goals that challenged Russian environmental policy and links to Western transnational organizations. This section will examine the authoritarian regime’s record of dishonesty and rhetorical manipulation of the populace, and how inconsistencies or outright lies are perceived by the public versus by our climate activists, who may have a special perspective made possible by contact with Western activists. Official dishonesty is not prohibited by the prevailing social contract dictating relations between the Russian government and its people, so the public response is disengagement and passivity. However, on climate issues, domestic Russian rhetoric finds itself in competition with the international climate crisis rhetoric, and civil society actors working in this transnational space may be more likely to condemn rhetorical inconsistencies than other members of Russian society.

The survey responses indicate an awareness among Russian environmental activists that the Putin regime claimed it would take certain steps to fight climate change, but has fallen short on implementation: “In their words there is some meaning, but in their actions - nothing” (R1). There is an implication in their wording that some may have initially believed promises made based on signing the Paris Agreement, arranging inquiries into climate-related natural disasters, and holding high-level discussions on the climate change issue - until those commitments fell flat. “Finally, they recognized that climate change is an anthropogenic process, there were decrees to reduce emissions, to open climate centers throughout the country, to support state projects...However, no one has mentioned anything about this over the past year, apparently because of the war. And apparently in the coming years Russia will not pay attention to this” (R12). As another says, the authorities “checked a box, and forgot about it” (R4). Of course, there are various reasons that a policy priority could fail to be seen through: political gridlock and lack of state capacity or funds, to name a few. But based on what we know about the Kremlin’s power vertical and our theoretical triad points of climate virtue signaling and hydrocarbon superpower culture, we can probably conclude that the state did not have a serious interest in fulfilling these commitments in the first place. Climate virtue signaling was a false narrative that covered up the state’s

stronger motives of seeking international influence and convincing the population of its responsible stewardship of the environment (Koch & Tynkkynen, 2021; Tokunaga, 2018; Gusev 2016, p.40; Shevtsova 2015, p.25).

Another respondent highlighted a formerly cordial organizational relationship with the authorities until relations turned frosty and repressive tactics came into play: "In 2019, the authorities were determined to cooperate with us...We received permission to hold climate rallies...Starting from 2020, repressions have intensified, we stopped holding protests, and the authorities no longer make contact with us. Now, due to repression, many have been forced to leave, and the work of the movement has almost stopped" (R7). These inconsistencies in Russia's relationship with climate change and environmental civil society groups make it difficult to discern regime motives at each point in time, but the overall picture is consistent with themes previously mentioned here. At one point, Russia felt it had at least some incentive to signal climate concern and cooperate with global climate change mitigation efforts. Then the invasion of Ukraine erased that possibility. Before the Color Revolutions in the former Soviet region, the Russian government was less concerned about transnational civil society groups. Then 2012 protests sparked a wave of paranoia about state sovereignty and authoritarian regime stability that precipitated the passage of the Foreign Agent Law (Treisman 2018, p.4; Crotty, 2014; Pride Brown 2018, p.168; Flikke, 2018).

These examples of Russia's inconsistency in its climate change response and its relationship with civil society point to a broader culture of dishonesty and information manipulation in Putin's Russia. Daniel Treisman (2018) characterizes this form of authoritarianism as an "informational autocracy" where the manipulation of truth and the narrowing of information sources guarantee regime stability. Examples of these tactics include the state's restriction of the media space, careful use of public opinion polling, and expertly cultivated disinformation. We can also see dishonesty as a guiding principle in Russia's hydrocarbon superpower tradition of hidden financial flows and secret corruption (Ross, 2012; Ross, 2015). The most blatant lie in the whole country, of course, is that it runs on democratic values and that elections mean something (Levitsky & Way, 2002). More subtle manipulations of the truth form the official historical narrative concerning topics like the Great Patriotic War and the history of Ukrainian statehood

(Putin, 2020; Putin, 2021; Gudkov, 2018). More recently, Russia seems to have perfected its propaganda machine to convince passive consumers of TV news that Ukraine was playing host to Western bioweapons labs, run by Nazis, and torturing Russians in Donbas (Yablokov, 2023). A ramping up of Russian false rhetoric concerning its foreign policy actions in the past decade may be interpreted as an attempt to encourage a siege mentality in the population to unite it against outside foes rather than let them reflect on internal stagnation (Shevtsova 2015, p.25). This culture of official dishonesty may have serious implications for state-society relations in Russia.

While it was previously difficult to ascertain to what extent Russians believed Kremlin propaganda and supported state policies, since the onset of the war and subsequent crackdown on dissent, it has become impossible. Still, the Kremlin employs official public opinion polling to track the level of discontent among the populace and adjust policy accordingly to prevent popular uprisings that could threaten the regime (Treisman, 2018; Alyukov, 2022). It is interesting to note that two of the lowest moments of Putin's approval (his return to the presidency in 2012 and the COVID pandemic) were relatively shortly followed by aggressive foreign policy actions that caused his popularity to shoot back up (annexing Crimea in 2014 and invading Ukraine in 2022) (Levada Center, 2023; Feldmann & Mazepus, 2018; Gudkov, 2018). This could indicate a possible strategy of using foreign intervention to generate a rally-round-the-flag effect at home. Indeed, approval for Putin and the war have been extremely high throughout the war (Levada Center, 2023). At the same time, however, public opinion polling in Russia cannot be trusted, even when it is conducted by independent pollsters. Russia's wartime authoritarianism makes any sort of public opinion polling fraught with potential pitfalls (Alyukov, 2022). Even before the war, studying public opinion in Russia was made difficult by low response rates caused by an inherent distrust of institutions, unfamiliarity with survey research due to Soviet stunting of social science, and fears of backlash for discussing politically-laden topics (Buckley, 1998). Thus, we will likely not know Russians' true feelings about this period of its history for a long time, if ever. But we can understand some of the effects of Russian propaganda in other ways.

While the field of disinformation psychology is still nascent, a study has shown that the Continued Influence Effect makes it difficult for people to let go of the first

perspective they encounter on a certain event, even if that source is later contradicted by other sources (Ecker et al, 2022). As most Russians have easy access to state TV propaganda channels and state-controlled major news sites, the state easily dominates peoples' first impressions of current events. Older Russians in particular seem to be highly susceptible to television news propaganda (Alyukov, 2022). Even if some Russians, usually younger, elect to seek out independent media sources afterwards, the influence of the first media source may remain in their personal understanding of events. Many others may not have access to or know how to use VPNs to circumvent blocks on banned media websites. And others still may eschew news media altogether because of its untrustworthiness. Many different propaganda narratives have been offered as the war has progressed, and Russians may have latched on to some or none of these (Yablokov, 2023). Maintaining an overwhelming number of narrative streams may help the Kremlin by confusing the public and leading them to give up on seeking the truth, or dissenting (Paul & Matthews, 2016). Many people disconnect themselves from the flood of information that they don't feel equipped to dive into and parse for reliability. With new techniques aimed at preventing civic engagement added on to a foundation of institutional dishonesty, Russian disinformation is at an all-time high.

At the same time, the phenomenon of the Russian state lying to its people is nothing new. The Soviet Union was sustained by promoting the tenets of communism by any means necessary, including manipulating information about the productivity of the Soviet economy and claiming the impending downfall of the capitalist West (Mazower 1999, p.276; Service 2005, p.356). Thus, Russians' only experience with a freer information space was between the Gorbachev glasnost and the Putin media consolidations. The result of this tradition of lying in modern Russia is one of the lowest levels of institutional trust in the world (The Moscow Times, 2019). Although it is difficult to track the metric of government trust or any element of public opinion under the Putin regime, there is likely mass awareness among the populace that the state regularly lies to them. This phenomenon was illustrated by public doubts about the government's messaging during the COVID-19 pandemic (Trudolyubov, 2020). High levels of government distrust bring up the question of the role of honesty in the social contract between the state and society. If Russians felt that truth from authorities were important

enough to be part of the current social contract, then the regime would lose legitimacy by failing to fulfill this. The broadly accepted social contract in Russia may be based on a combination of satisfying a need for good economic performance, which assuages fears of a return to 90s destitution, and satisfying a desire for a strong national identity, which was previously lost after the fall of the Soviet Union (Tynkkynen 2019, p.16; Feldmann & Mazepus, 2017; Shevtsova 2015, p.27). The Kremlin's propagation of a new Russian national identity characterized by conservatism and orthodoxy satisfies the public's needs (Feldmann & Mazepus, 2017; Shevtsova 2015, p.25). Thus, Russians may overlook other failings of their government, such as the failure to tell them the truth, as long as economic and identity needs are met.

On the other hand, our surveyed climate activists may have liberal political views and connections with the West that compel them not to subscribe to this version of the social contract and question Russian narratives. As we have discussed, the Kremlin has peddled inconsistent narratives about the threat of climate change and the need to fight it, most recently resulting in no attention given to the issue at all, as we will discuss in the next section. But the international environmentalist community has more or less formed a consensus that, at the very least, climate change is a serious threat to humanity and it can potentially be mitigated by decreasing greenhouse gas emissions. This creates a competition between the domestic and international narratives on climate change. Despite the best efforts of the Foreign Agent Law, some transnational environmental groups in Russia like Greenpeace and Fridays for Future maintained close ties with foreign organizations, especially Western ones (Pride Brown, 2016; Henderson, 2002). Baikal Ecological Wave also had close ties with foreign environmental groups, and was represented in this survey despite being shut down in 2016 (Pride Brown 2018, ch.7). These foreign partners represented an outside information source unblemished by Russian state propaganda and unavailable to members of the population not engaging with foreigners.

The international version of the climate change narrative, and perhaps other political narratives as well, may have affected the views of our surveyed climate change activists. One noted that Russia's climate response was "still much less than in neighboring European countries" (R11). Their portrayals of the inadequacies of Russia's

climate change commitments also reflect the international environmental consensus on this subject: “[it’s] like creating the illusion of fighting climate change” (R10); “Russia’s climate strategy exists only on paper” (R7). Furthermore, we have seen that a majority of the respondents working in transnational groups appeared to hold anti-Putin, liberal views in defiance of the efforts of Russian information manipulation, speaking of a “dictatorial fascist regime” (R7) and “corruption in all spheres of power” (R4). The Kremlin likely understood the threat to managed public opinion posed by these transnational links; thus, information control was another justification for Putin to subordinate the civic space. We thus return to the idea of Russian environmental civil society as a special case of contradictions, wherein transnational linkages may have produced a more dissenting civic sector, but also ensured a repressive response from the authorities. Many of the activists who managed to survive the uncivil society reckoning seem to remain entirely unconvinced by official regime narratives thanks to their transnational links.

The survey respondents’ criticism of state dishonesty exemplified by bogus climate virtue signaling and hidden greedy motives demonstrates a cold clarity of vision which defies the narratives peddled by Russian propaganda. While some may have had their organizations shut down because of their subversive goals and transnational links, many in this group still did not hesitate to express critical, dissenting views about how the regime really operates. Their responses highlighted Russia’s system of informational autocracy wherein lies and information manipulation are used as tools to overwhelm media consumers into passivity. The Kremlin attempted to flush out all foreign influence to prevent the emergence of dissenting ideas that could threaten regime stability, but some of the activists in this survey still maintained transnational links that may have influenced them towards oppositional views. These findings suggest a downtrodden sub-sector of environmental civil society actors who keep their heads down, but eyes open.

## *5 - The Fog of War*

This research has highlighted the fact that the Russian authorities engaged in climate virtue signaling in recent years, and especially through the act of joining the

Paris Agreement in 2019. The critical survey respondents' assertions that Russia's motives for climate-conscious rhetoric were more for appearances than genuine climate concern supports the claims of previous work by Koch & Tynkkynen, Tokunaga, and Shevtsova (2021; 2018; 2015). However, the state's engagement with climate issues has already completely changed because of the 2022 invasion of Ukraine. This merits attention to bring our discussion into the present day where war has shifted Russia's focus. We already mentioned that the state's previous climate virtue signaling strategy was forfeited in favor of the invasion of Ukraine, which alienated Russia from the international arena. Many of the survey respondents reported noticing this abrupt end to the authorities' interest in the climate agenda and expressed pessimism about the future of climate change efforts in the country. In this section, we examine the role of the war in Ukraine in Russia's pivot of interests away from global climate change mitigation efforts based on what the respondents had to say about Russia's priorities now.

The Kremlin's non-prioritization of climate issues and the role of the war were noted by six survey respondents in this study. Ten said they didn't think the authorities were committed to fighting climate change when asked directly; only one said the process was "underway", albeit "slowly" (R2). One respondent lamented that "all the country's money goes to the front...no one has mentioned anything about [climate change] in the past year, apparently because of the war...I think that's the last thing they care about. Especially now, when even the basic needs of the population cannot be covered, and all the money goes to military operations, no one is interested in climate change" (R12). In the third section on hydrocarbon greed, we touched on the fact that the need to fund an expensive and drawn-out war has even further heightened the importance of hydrocarbon revenues in Russia's resource-based economy and decreased the likelihood of preparing for a low-carbon transition. By expanding exports in Asian economies, Russia has thus far dodged total economic ruin at the hands of Western sanctions and protected the cash cow that funds its war machine (Menon, 2023). The respondent above also gave a negative assessment of the state's shift in interests due to its focus on the war in Ukraine, which they claim has resulted in a wartime economy where all resources go to the front and the basic needs of the populace go unmet. Even if we cannot tell from the response given whether this activist

opposes the war on principle, their blatant criticism of how the powers that be are currently running the country leaves a distinct impression of dissent.

Other responses bring us back to the question of the Kremlin's motives behind its policy actions. One respondent pointed out the end of official climate virtue signaling by noting that the Paris Agreement was signed so that Russia could remain "on-trend" with the global agenda, but "with the start of the war this has all become the past" (R1). Another respondent highlighted the inconsistency in rhetoric that became obvious after this official shift from climate concern to ignoring the issue, saying that the attention received by climate-related natural disasters like forest fires in 2021 had "faded into the background" (R11). This further supports the idea that even if Russia had genuine climate concerns around this time of intense natural disasters, they were outweighed by two motives: hydrocarbon superpower culture initially, and eventually, a shift in focus from soft power signaling to an aggressive foreign policy agenda that has consumed the Kremlin's resources and attention. These two motives together serve to explain why Russia does not act to mitigate climate change, despite the fact that they seemingly contradict each other because the war has cost Russia dearly and hydrocarbon revenues are considerably deflated because of sanctions (Soldatkin et al, 2023). We may posit that either the leaders' personal wealth is insulated from the economic fallout of the war, and/or the motive for war is ideologically vital, related to restoring Russia's lost identity as an empire as discussed in section two (Götz, 2022; Shevtsova 2015, p.27; Putin, 2021). Because this motive is not directly related to Russia's climate change response, we will leave it for others to interrogate, but it is important to mention that some overwhelming foreign policy motive played a role in the state drifting away from any efforts to virtue signal climate values.

Another response to the survey noted how the war has intensified the repression aspect of the "uncivil society" paradigm in Russia, recounting how "public protest has been limited considerably...with the war in Ukraine, the use of the Internet for disseminating information has shrunk drastically (limited access to Social media)" (R3). This reflects the broader impact of the war on Russian society; initial public outrage was met swiftly with brutality, successfully silencing dissent. Even speaking out against the war online could lead to prosecution. As the respondent noted, the authorities blocked

access to Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram on the grounds that they promoted extremism and hatred towards Russians (Sauer, 2022). Independent media outlets TV Rain, Echo of Moscow, and Meduza were targeted (CIVICUS LENS, 2023). This authoritarian crackdown also had effects on civil society organizations, which had already been struggling to survive since the passage of the Foreign Agent Law in 2013. Some ecological groups targeted in this most recent wave of foreign agent designations include the Salmon Research Center, Sakhalin Environmental Watch, and WWF Russia (The Moscow Times, 2023). The authorities went a step further with Greenpeace Russia, designating it an undesirable organization and banning it from operating (Greenpeace International, 2023). These actions demonstrate the lengths the state is willing to go to for complete control over civic space in Russia, further illustrating the “uncivil” society of repression and division.

Our last point comes from a mention by a survey respondent of the real ecological damage being done to Ukraine by the war, in addition to mass loss of human life and the destruction of the built environment. The respondent starts by stating their view that the authorities don’t view climate change as a policy priority, followed by this claim: “practically everything that is being done is endangering the climate. First and foremost the war in Ukraine and all that that involves” (R3). This harkens back to Russia’s hydrocarbon superpower economy, as well as bringing in the idea of new ecological damage sustained as a result of war. Infrastructure such as nuclear power stations, oil storage facilities, gas transmission lines, and industrial sites have all been damaged in the invasion, resulting in the pollution of water, soil, and air. Forests, farmlands, and wild landscapes have been scarred by violence. Ukraine’s environmental minister estimated total environmental damage at over \$50 billion USD (Guillot et al, 2023). When the war eventually ends, Ukraine will have to work through long-term economic losses, psychological trauma, and environmental damage of as yet unknown extent. The activist’s mention of this issue reminds us of the role environmental civil society is likely to play in future ecological restoration efforts. It also displays an impression that the Russian government not only does nothing to prevent a climate crisis, but also actively destroys the environment in its pursuit of its imperial

interests. The activists are disappointed in a state that does not even see environmental protection as a real priority compared to aggressive foreign policy goals.

This section has demonstrated the activists' understanding that in wartime Russia, climate change is the last thing the government is thinking about. After invading Ukraine, Russia's previous signals of international environmental values were replaced by complete silence on climate issues and the destruction of Ukraine's environment. Hydrocarbons continue to fund the wartime economy and political focus has turned away from most other issues. The war has strengthened the authoritarian grasp on the civic sector, and our survey respondents have little hope for future environmental efforts. Their condemnation of the state's prioritization of the war illustrate disgust toward a regime that uses hydrocarbon funds to kill people while willfully ignoring the looming climate crisis. Russian climate activists are powerless to do anything more than watch.

### *Conclusion*

This thesis has employed a study of Russian climate activists to commentate on authoritarian Russia under Vladimir Putin at a time of war and climate crisis. I have demonstrated an application of a new theoretical relationship between the authoritarian nature of the Russian state and its civil society repression, climate virtue signaling, and hydrocarbon superpower culture. This triad of factors applied to this study allows for contextualized interpretation of the surveyed climate activists' relationships to the regime and their views on its climate change politics.

In the Russian case, we observe an "uncivil" society of civic organizations that have been divided based on the state's judgment of each as subversive or benign, then repressed or co-opted accordingly. The state's motives for seizing control of its civic space are rooted in a siege mentality that fears any potential challenge to the authoritarian regime and the hydrocarbon economic system that keeps it in power. Among our respondent pool, most activists were critical of state policies and had experienced repression by the authorities, but a few worked in cooperation with the state despite their dissenting views, and a small number approved of state climate policies and received state support. This sample illustrates how the regime's attempts to

co-opt environmental civil society to improve its legitimacy and remove Western ideas that challenge the state's extractive economic model have been somewhat effective. At least some portion of environmental civil society in Russia is either approving or passive towards the state's environmental policies, and subversive activism is limited and struggling to carry on.

Among activists who were critical of the state's climate change response, many suspected that the Kremlin had engaged in climate virtue signaling rhetoric and participated in international climate agreements mainly to boost its image and be seen as a leader on the world stage. This can be understood as part of a larger campaign to regain the lost superpower status of the Soviet Union. This campaign has now changed course away from soft power virtue signaling to focus on aggressive foreign policy actions intended to restore Russia's imperialistic influence by force. When Russia invaded Ukraine, activists noted that official climate-friendly rhetoric abruptly ceased. However, many respondents also noted that Russia's climate change response had always been impotent due to the greed of its entrenched hydrocarbon superpower culture that benefits elites and endangers the environment. Russia operates within a patronalistic form of authoritarianism wherein Putin's clients are rewarded for their support with energy wealth, indicating a resource curse keeping the extractive autocratic regime in power. Elite greed prevents Russia from modernizing its economy in preparation for a green energy transition that will threaten Russia's prosperity, and environmental activists feel those in power make the wrong choices for Russia's future.

Because our surveyed activists recognize a sharp disparity between the regime's expressed values and real motives, they see the state as hypocritical and inconsistent, dishonest in pursuit of a controlled population that will not challenge authority. The subversive activists see through the state's informational autocracy perhaps thanks to their transnational ties with Western organizations. They defy the narratives propagated by the state to flush out foreign influence; their dissent is quiet, but full of conviction. At the same time, they remain pessimistic about the future of environmental action in Russia because the war machine has dictated a further crackdown on civil society and decimated Ukraine's environment. The government does not see climate change as a valid policy priority, and continuing to export hydrocarbons is vital to crushing Ukraine.

Environmental activism in Russia is impotent to change this state of affairs, and many activists have fled to countries that may actually listen to their climate concerns.

My findings enrich the fields of study of Russian environmentalism and Russian climate change politics. The case of environmental civil society has provided a special area for exploration of Russian state-society relations because of its contradictions: transnational ties with liberal Western organizations may have cultivated dissenting political views in Russian activists, but also spelled their doom by making them vulnerable to repression under the Foreign Agent Law. Furthermore, while environmental activism in Russia sometimes takes a radical approach that challenges state policies, the civic space in Russia is also rife with benign, apolitical environmental organizations that were easily targeted by the regime for co-optation to build green legitimacy and maintain control.

At the same time, the implications of this study may be applied to other cases of climate change activism and climate change policies in authoritarian, fossil fuel-exporting economies, and to other studies of Russian society. Since Russia's orientation as an authoritarian power has been confirmed by recent developments, scholars must take authoritarian politics into account in every study of Russian society. Society cannot exist in a vacuum; the authoritarian motives of pursuing regime stability and full control of the populace have significant implications for state-society relations that require careful consideration. Furthermore, studying "civil society" under authoritarianism is fraught because liberal political elements presumed in Western conceptions of civil society may be completely absent in authoritarian contexts. Under repressive conditions, civic action may take forms that fall short of or reinvent the concept of "civil society", but are nonetheless worthy of scholarly focus. Activists' inherent subversiveness in repressive authoritarian environments makes even their survival a triumph.

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## Annex I - Survey Questionnaire

Do you consent to your answers being used in a University of Glasgow master's thesis under conditions of anonymity? (Yes/No)

1. What is your role at the organization you work for and what are its main goals? Do you see the goals of your organization as similar to any goals of the Russian government? Why or why not?
2. How would you say that the authorities talk about climate change in Russia? What about natural disasters related to climate change? Do you think this has changed at all over time?
3. Did you or your organization take notice when President Putin ratified the Paris Climate Agreement in 2019? If so, what was your or your organization's reaction to this?
4. Why do you think the president signed the Paris Agreement and sometimes speaks about climate change?
5. Do you think that the authorities are committed to fighting climate change? Why or why not?
6. Would you say that the government's attitude toward climate change has affected your work, either directly or indirectly? How so?
7. Do you think the current regime in Russia supports or does not support the work of your organization and similar organizations? What actions have the authorities taken that led you to believe they support or don't support your organization's work?
8. Have you ever been threatened or intimidated by authorities in the course of carrying out your organization's work? Please explain.
9. Have you ever received any form of government support for your organization's work? Please explain.
10. Has your organization or any partner organization been designated as a Foreign Agent by the authorities? If yes, when did this happen? How did it affect that organization's activities? Do you think this designation was legitimate?
11. Do you think the work you and your organization do is valued by society? Do you think it is valued by the authorities? Do you think this has changed at all in the last 5 years?

## **Annex II – Respondent Reference System**

R1 – Activist with unknown organization

R2 – Environmental educator for schoolchildren

R3 – Activist with Baikal Ecological Wave

R4 – Activist with Lake Baikal protection organization, possibly BEW

R5 – Activist with unknown organization

R6 – Activist with forest protection organization

R7 – Activist with Fridays for Future

R8 – Activist with unknown organization (survey left incomplete after first 2 questions)

R9 – Activist with Greenpeace

R10 – Volunteer forest firefighter

R11 – Volunteer organizer for forest firefighting group

R12 – Activist with Greenpeace

R13 – Activist with Greenpeace

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