



Strategies and challenges of sustainable development in Eurasia

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ABSTRACT

While supporting the values and goals of sustainable development at the international level, states might employ very different strategies at the national level. The goal of this Forward and of special issue is twofold. First, it aims to advance our understanding of different strategies, paying special attention to China and Russia at global, national, and sub-national levels. Thus, analysis of their strategies across different levels presents a more rounded picture. The second goal is to identify at least a few of the most pressing challenges of sustainable development across Eurasia (e.g. nuclear supply chain, emissions, environmental conflict management) and to attempt to understand their triggers, outcomes, and potential solutions. This Forward aspires to develop a better dialogue across different sets of literature in area studies, environmental politics, and international relations to improve our understanding of obstacles to sustainable development in Eurasia.

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Introduction

Studies on democratisation and regime transition in Eurasia have flourished over the last two decades.¹ The literature has looked into a wide range of causal explanations of the consolidation of a variety of political regimes in Eurasia and in the European Union's (EU) neighbourhood, such as historical legacies of Communism, the impact of the EU, and (associated with it) the diffusion of democratic values and principles even beyond its enlargement, at national and sub-national levels.² Membership in international organisations (IOs) has usually been associated with promotion of human rights, democratisation, marketisation, and economic development.³ Only recently have scholars made the next step to ask a question regarding the possibility of the opposite impact of regional IOs led by autocracies on the consolidation of non-democratic regimes across Eurasia.⁴ Yet, this rich and fast-growing body of literature on the variety of political regimes emerged in Eurasia, their causes, and their consequences, has somehow been detached from studies looking into the problems, challenges, and strategies of sustainable development in Eurasia.⁵ In

Table 1. Strategies and challenges of sustainable development in Eurasia.

<i>Strategies: Nation-States as Global, Regional, and National Actors</i>		
States as Actors	Strategy employed:	Contributions by:
China and Russia	Global and International	Jale Tosun and Karina Shyrokykh
China and Russia	National	A. L. Demchuk, M. Mišić, A. Obydenkova, J. Tosun
Kazakhstan	National	Marianna Poberezhskaya and Alina Bychkova
<i>Challenges: Emissions and Nuclear Chain</i>		
Challenges:	Hypothetical Causes/Solutions:	Contributions by:
GHG Emissions	Political Regimes/Diffusion of Practices (introduction of tariffs)	Ilya A. Stepanov and Igor A. Makarov
CO ₂ Emissions	FDI, Economic Growth, Trade / Environmental Conditionality	Raufhon Salahodjaev and Arletta Isaeva
Nuclear Supply Chain	Historical Legacies and Modern Political Regimes/ Diffusion	Ksenija Hanaček and Joan Martinez-Alier

aThe summary outlined in this table goes beyond the arguments of contributions.

economics, however, a few studies have emerged connecting political regimes to outcomes of environmental policies, among other issues (e.g. Fredriksson & Neumayer, 2013; Fredriksson & Wollscheid, 2007; Nazarov & Obydenkova, 2021b). Despite this, there seems to be space for further, more interdisciplinary analysis of specific case studies and actors in Eurasia. While two sets of studies have been developing fast, they seemed to exist in two parallel worlds without much engagement with each other. Yet, both bodies of literature exhibit some similarities and unique insights, and can certainly benefit from establishing a deeper dialogue with each other. This special issue aspires to build on both somewhat separate sets of studies (on political regimes and on sustainable development in Eurasia) and to develop further the dialogue between them.

The goal of this special issue is two-fold. First, it aims to advance our understanding of different strategies, paying special attention to China and Russia at global, national, and sub-national levels. Singling out levels of analysis is highly important in this context. As the articles discussed below argue, both Russia and China seem to care about their international image as benevolent, environmentally friendly actors in the global arena. Yet, while supporting the values and goals of sustainable development at the international level, they might employ very different strategies at the national level. A certain degree of isolation and a lack of information and transparency allow for a generous interpretation of their actions within their own borders, which does not always come to the attention of international community. Thus, analysis of their strategies across different levels presents a more rounded picture.

The second focus of this special issue is to identify at least a few of the most pressing challenges of sustainable development across Eurasia and to attempt to understand their triggers, outcomes, and potential solutions. Table 1 outlines the structure, logic, and summary of the main ideas advanced in this special issue.

Strategies: nation-states as global, regional, and national actors

The first article after this foreword, by Tosun and Shyrokykh (2021), presents a detailed analysis of the strategies and activities of China and Russia in high-level forums on energy governance. The authors investigate China and Russia's involvement in the Clean Energy Ministerial (CEM). In line with literature on non-democracies, they contribute further to single out the different motivations of these actors for joining such high-level forums. The formal goals of involvement with high-level global forums is to cooperate in the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions (GHGs) through an exchange of information and practices. Informal goals, however, also include international image boosting and building a reputation as global benevolent actors (see, Tosun & Rinscheid, 2021). Another goal of both states is actual learning, networking, and contact building (see footnote 4). That is, membership in CEM not only facilitates access to technology and information, but also acts as an informal format for negotiation. Within this high-level forum, the article focuses on the strategies of the two state actors through unveiling their choice of policy initiatives undertaken at CEM. The study discovers an active and dynamic strategy on the part of China in attempting to take the lead in a number of initiatives at CEM. In contrast, Russia lags behind China in leadership strategies at CEM. The findings indicate that China has made more strategic use of the CEM compared to Russia.

The following two articles scale down from the global to the national arena, looking into how China, Russia, and Kazakhstan deal with environmental issues within their own borders. The article by Arthur L. Demchuk, Mile Mišić, Anastassia Obydenkova, and Jale Tosun (Demchuk et al., 2021) continues the comparison between China and Russia regarding environmental conflict management at the national level. It resumes a comparative approach towards the strategies employed by both states in dealing with multiple environmental conflicts at the domestic level. The study investigates strategies of environmental conflict management in China and Russia from a cross-cultural perspective. The authors argue that China and Russia share a number of characteristics, such as the role of Communism and its priorities for economic development at any cost, with its associated industrialisation and environmental degradation, but notes that both states also share a collectivist culture. The analysis of the two states also sheds light on the role played by sub-national and local governmental actors on the one hand, and on the role of public opinion and the people on the other. In the case of China, the article argues that *local governments often ally with the people*, supporting their viewpoint and helping local people negotiate the issues of environmental conflicts with central government. In contrast, in Russia, sub-national regional and local governments support 'the vertical of power',⁶ thus being accountable only to the ruling elite. On the other hand, evidence also demonstrates that regional and local government may occasionally support business actors and their related projects, which initiate the environmental conflict in the first place. The latest strategy is explained through multiple studies of corruption at sub-national level in Russia. The later strategy of support of regional and local power to business is associated with financial benefits for local government and corruption. Despite existing legal channels to settle the environmental conflicts and protect public interests, the governmental actors at local and sub-national regional levels rarely support their people in Russia. Among secondary findings, the authors argue that the environmentalist movements in Russia enjoy some international support and influence. In contrast, environmental movements in China are all detached from international influence.

The third article after this foreword, by Marianna Poberezhskaya and Alina Bychkova (Poberezhskaya & Bychkova, 2021), completes the geographical picture of China and Russia by looking at their biggest neighbour, Kazakhstan, located between the two states. The geopolitical position of Kazakhstan and its wealthy natural resources (in both oil and gas) make it an important actor in Eurasia and also at a global level. The authors highlight the role of fossil fuels in the economy of Kazakhstan and the ambiguity of the Kazakhstani position in fighting climate change. While Kazakhstan is heavily dependent on the production and export of oil to China and the EU, it also faces the devastating consequences of climate change, including decreasing amounts of fresh water, a deteriorating agricultural sector, and the spread of desertification. On the other hand, the economy of Kazakhstan relies on oil exports to China and Russia. Therefore, the promotion of at least some environmental programmes, such as the construction of renewable energy plants, is not in the interests of Kazakhstan, either in the short or long term.

To address the controversial Kazakhstani standing on sustainable development, the authors study the national discourse on climate change by focusing on the analysis of legal documents and interviews conducted with experts. After in-depth analysis of the official narratives, the authors argue that Kazakhstan's calls to advance sustainable development seem to have been triggered by a strategy of image-building. That is, Kazakhstan is attempting to *appear* as a strong, environmentally friendly actor in the eyes of the national and international public. This image should also help attract much-needed foreign investments and boost economic development. In this latter aspect, Kazakhstan is echoing China and Russia's strategies at global energy forums as described in the article by Tosun and Shyrokykh in this special issue. However, Poberezhskaya and Bychkova (2021) also insightfully notice that many rhetorical promises and commitments to sustainable development made by the Government of Kazakhstan and by the president are not realistic and will likely remain unfulfilled. The authors point to similarities between modern discourse and the multiple, ambitious promises of the Soviet Union period. Modern rhetoric on sustainable development in Kazakhstan thus seems to be one of the historical legacies of Communism.

Challenges: emissions and nuclear chain

The second part of the special issue (articles Four, Five, and Six after this foreword) focuses on the specific challenges of sustainable development in Eurasia. It switches attention from a *state-centred* analysis (the *strategies* of nation-states) to a *problem-centred* analysis (that is, *challenge-centred*). The problem-centred approach looks into a few challenges, such as a reduction of emissions and nuclear chain. Within the analysis of these issues, the following three articles approach post-Soviet Eurasia within a larger comparative focus.

The second section starts with an article by Ilya A. Stepanov and Igor A. Makarov. The authors study the challenge of the regulation and reduction of GHG. The study looks into incentive-based instruments of GHG emissions regulation, such as carbon pricing. It analyzes this issue across the fossil fuel exporting economies in the world. The main target of the article is to learn the best global strategies for reducing GHG emissions and to apply them to the case of Russia. The main challenge analysed in this study is how to advance the carbon pricing strategy within a state with an economy that is dependent on exports of fossil fuels. Stepanov and Makarov elaborate a strategy and principles to

advance incentives to reduce and regulate emissions, while also taking into account the importance of support to society and the economy in Russia. The study presents a sophisticated analysis of emissions regulations and schemes that work across the world in other states that are rich in fossil fuels, such as Norway, Canada, and Australia, but also in post-Soviet states, such as Kazakhstan. The authors investigate different approaches of advancing carbon pricing in energy-exporting countries across the world and call for learning their lessons in Russia, thus contributing to the literature on the diffusion of practices of sustainable development. Overall, the authors suggest adopting a balanced approach supporting vulnerable social layers and weak industries, promoting fiscal neutrality, and arguing in favour of gradual implementation of reforms, as well as the use of carbon offsets.

The article by Raufhon Salahodjaev and Arletta Isaeva continues the analysis of the environmental challenges posed by CO₂ emissions. The authors build on controversial literature on the effects of trade, financial development, and foreign direct investments (FDI) for emissions. A few studies on the topic point to the ability of FDI and trade to decrease emissions through the diffusion of technology, innovation, and global values.⁷ This echoes studies on foreign aid as one of the triggers of democratisation (e.g. Wright, 2009). On the other hand, FDI and trade are associated with economic growth, without necessarily accounting for the environment. The authors test their hypotheses through looking at the effects of FDI and trade across post-Communist states and their implications for CO₂. They take into account a number of other important factors, such as consumption of energy and economic development over a two-decade period (1995–2017). Using quantitative analysis, the authors reveal that, across the 20 post-Communist states, trade and FDI are positively associated with an increase in emissions. The article echoes the previous study in calling for reforms aimed at improving the regulation of fossil fuel economies and at systematic efforts to reduce emissions across post-Communist states.

The final article by Ksenija Hanaček and Joan Martinez-Alier (Hanaček & Martinez-Alier, 2021) addresses the challenge of nuclear chain in post-Soviet Eurasia. Nuclear chain is not only a historical legacy started in the midst of the Cold War; it remains to this day and has been developed further across some post-Soviet states (e.g. in Belarus). The article focuses on socio-environmental conflicts and, thus, echoes the study by Demchuk et al. (2021) in this special issue. Hanaček and Martinez-Alier look into the public behaviour (protests) across former Soviet states. Public protests have grown into an anti-nuclear movement that is at the centre of the article. Hanaček and Martinez-Alier demonstrate that this movement is one of the few available tools capable of stopping and reverting nuclear chain and its devastating consequences for public health and for the environment.⁸ The study is based on a sophisticated and meticulous analysis of 14 environmental conflicts associated with nuclear chain across the post-Soviet space, including current EU member Lithuania, the EU's closest neighbours (Belarus and Ukraine), the Caucasus (Armenia), and Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tadjikistan). The analysis also focuses on aspects such as protests against building nuclear reactors, protests against testing nuclear bombs, and protests against uranium mining. The article makes a few important discoveries. For example, one of the crucial factors that might make a difference in combating environmental conflicts is public protest – a movement that dates back to the 1970s in terms of the environment. Even within totalitarian Communist regimes, public movements

survived and augmented in the 21st century. Out of the 14 examined environmental conflicts triggered by nuclear chain, seven were suspended due to public protests. Half of the identified conflicts remained. Overall, this highly impactful study not only addresses one of the biggest global environmental challenges of our time (nuclear chain); it also demonstrates the importance of civil society, transparency, and the nature of political regimes.

Conclusion

This volume contributes to multiple sets of literature and has raised a number of issues that are likely to stay on the research agenda. The collection of articles advances studies on the diffusion of values and practices, on the role of history, and importance of external influences for sustainable development (e.g. historical legacies of nuclear chain and emissions; external impact on environmental movements; environmental rhetoric). These concluding remarks outline some of these findings presented in this volume and place them within broader cross-disciplinary literature.

First, the special issue contributes to diffusion literature and studies of regionalism. It focuses on the international and national strategies of state actors and on environmental challenges. An important question is whether and how membership of states in different IOs (e.g. global climate clubs or the EU) matters in the fight against climate change (dealing with nuclear chain or emissions). As the study by Tosun and Shyrokykh (2021) argues, membership in climate clubs is associated with learning across states at the global level and allows direct access to the latest information, practices, and innovations. These activities, contacts, and formal and informal meetings within climate clubs (as well as within other IOs) are strongly associated with the diffusion of values and principles. Diffusion takes place at both cross-national and cross sub-national levels (Lankina et al., 2016a). On the other hand, the environmental commitments of China, Russia, and Kazakhstan can be analysed within the literature in terms of formal goals versus real motivations (see also, Libman & Obydenkova, 2018a, 2018b; Poberezhskaya & Bychkova, 2021). While formally proclaiming support for sustainable development, these non-democracies also seek to augment their international image as global, environmentally friendly actors (Kochtcheeva, 2021; Tosun & Rinscheid, 2021). This is in line with existing literature on the strategy of Russia in global environmental politics. In the words of Henry and McIntosh Sundstrom (Henry & McIntosh Sundstrom, 2007, p. 47), 'Russia's strategy will emphasise maximising profits through treaty mechanisms over maximising emissions reductions.' Henry and McIntosh Sundstrom also argue that such actions at international level (for example, the ratification of the Kyoto Protocol by Russia in 2004) aim to augment the status of Russia in other international negotiations and to 'contribute to an image of itself as a good member of the club of advanced industrialized states' (Henry & McIntosh Sundstrom, 2007, p. 47).⁹ The collection of articles in this special issue makes the next step in considering the international and national strategies of both China and Russia.

Strategies are associated with diffusion. Previous literature has mainly focused on the diffusion of liberal values and associated it with democratisation (see Footnotes 2–3). However, values and practices can be diffused in very different ways: learning can spill over from democracies to autocracies (e.g. Ambrosio et al., 2021), but diffusion can also take place across autocracies, facilitating their learning from each other. In a way, the case

study of Kazakhstan reflects these two different worlds and suggests two directions in development (Poberezhskaya & Bychkova, 2021). On the one hand, Kazakhstan seems to imitate the environmental activism of China at the global level (in line with the study of Tosun and Shyrokykh). On the other, it clearly exhibits the under-fulfilment of existing environmental commitments: its support to sustainable development seems to be more rhetorical, and its promises are not realistic (Poberezhskaya & Bychkova, 2021). Articles by Demchuk et al. (2021) and by Hanaček and Martinez-Alier (2021) also point to external influences coming from Europe and from the EU on the environmental movements in Russia (but not in China). Though this topic is not the focus of these two articles, it is still important for better understanding the triggers of environmental movements in a non-democratic context.

In line with diffusion literature, the article by Stepanov and Makarov (2021) directly engages with learning about the most efficient environmental practices used in fossil fuel democracies (e.g. Norway or Canada). The authors argue that climate change policies employed in resource-rich democracies could be imported to Russia without damaging either society or business. The topic of diffusion continues in the study by Salahodjaev and Isaeva (2021) in this issue. They discuss the potentially positive impact of FDI and foreign trade on the improvement of the environment, which could be associated with the diffusion of values through contacts, meetings, and collaboration with foreign investors.¹⁰ This expectation, however, has been refuted by empirical findings, suggesting that FDI and trade increase emissions. It is crucial to keep in mind that the study does not distinguish between FDI and trade *with democracies* (e.g. in Europe) versus investments and trade *with autocracies* (e.g. with China).¹¹ Through investment and foreign trade, it is likely that states were more subject of diffusion from such donors as China and Russia rather than from European democracies. This mystery will certainly remain for further analysis and investigation.

Finally, another two sets of literature that have inspired this special issue focused on the role of historical legacies and political regimes. Existing literature on the legacies of Communism has analysed a wide range of issues, such as public behaviour, social and political trust, public health, economic equality, and even firm innovation, tolerance, and migration, among many others (Beissinger and Kotkin 2014; Pop-Eleches and Tucker 2017; Arpino & Obydenkova, 2020; Libman & Obydenkova, 2019, 2020; Nazarov & Obydenkova, 2020; Nazarov & Obydenkova, 2021a). Yet, the implications of Communism for sustainable development seem somewhat outside the focus of these studies. Building on this literature, and as some contributions to this special issue have demonstrated, historical legacies remain highly important in existing multiple environmental challenges and their management on the part of society and governmental actors (e.g. nuclear chain; environmental conflicts).

As to political regimes, it is hard to overestimate the implications of democracy for a number of the issues discussed in this volume. Previous studies have argued that democracy is an essential component of environmental politics, environmental movements and public awareness, as well as of effectiveness of policy implementation (e.g. Fredriksson & Wollscheid, 2007; Neumayer, 2002; Obydenkova & Salahodjaev, 2016; Fredriksson & Mohanty, 2021; Obydenkova & Salahodjaev, 2017; Venable, 2011). Obviously, democracies are far more sensitive to public concerns, permitting freedom of mass media and transparency, freedom of movements and protests. While protests

may take place within a non-democratic context, democracies are still more responsive and sensitive to public opinion, demands, and choices (e.g. the anti-nuclear movement). On the other hand, non-democratic states withhold information, encourage manipulation via the official mass media to mislead the public, and may suppress protests and movements (be they political or environmental). Hence, expectations would be that environmental movements are less efficient and less developed in such a context.

Bringing together economists and political scientists specialising in sustainable development and political regimes, this collection of articles offers more insights into the nexus of environmental challenges and strategies employed by the largest actors, not only in Eurasia, but in the world – China and Russia. Building on interdisciplinary literature on political regimes and sustainable development, the special issue unites perspectives on economics, international relations, and social and political science. The issues raised within this volume, inter-disciplinary findings of articles and their further implications and considerations, should stay on the research agenda of sustainable development in Eurasia and beyond.

Notes

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2. On the legacies of Communism, see (Beissinger and Kotkin 2014; Pop-Eleches and Tucker 2017; Libman & Obydenkova, 2020; Obydenkova & Libman, 2012; Lankina et al., 2016b).
3. On the EU and diffusion of democracy, see, (Ambrosio, 2010; Börzel & Solingen, 2014; Kopstein & Reilly, 2000; Lankina et al., 2016a; Levitsky & Way, 2010; Obydenkova, 2008; Pevehouse, 2005; Whitehead, 1996). On democratisation in Eurasia, see for example, Teorell (2010).
4. Izotov & Obydenkova, (2021); Kneuer & Demmelhuber, (2016); Libman & Obydenkova, (2018a, 2018b).
5. On Russia and China, see, (Sun & Alex, 2016; Tosun & Rinscheid, 2021; Venable, 2011; Yu, 2015; Zhang et al., 2019; Zhang & Xue-Feng, 2019). On IOs as actors of sustainable development, see, Biermann and Bauer (2004). On the EU's impact, see, Andonova and Tuta (2014).
6. On the vertical of power and territorial (de-)centralisation in Russia, see for example, Obydenkova and Swenden (2013). On sub-national actors in environmental politics (deforestation) see, Libman and Obydenkova (2014); and on subnational corruption in Russia, see for example, Dinino and Orttung (2005), Obydenkova and Libman (2015).
7. Previous studies have pointed out that loans, trade, and investment might include environmental conditionality (e.g. on banks, see, Ambrosio et al., 2021; Anastassia et al., 2021; Djalilov & Hartwell, 2021; Gutner, 2002; Hall et al., 2021). Other studies demonstrate that, in some cases, financial development *reduces* CO₂ emissions, while economic growth may increase CO₂ emissions (e.g. Shahbaz et al., 2013).
8. The importance of public opinion, transparency, and the power of independent mass media in environmental conflict management was outlined in a number of studies (e.g. Mišić & Obydenkova, 2021).
9. A similar argument can also be found in Kochtcheeva (2021).

10. To some extent, this argument echoes studies on the diffusion of (democratic) values and practices developed within international dimension of democratisation (e.g. Kopstein & Reilly, 2000; Lankina et al., 2016a; Obydenkova, 2008).
11. Very recent studies have demonstrated that even loans and investment coming from the EBRD and associated with strong environmental conditionality can be subverted by China (see for example, Anastassia et al., 2021).

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