

“Green Guardians”: Attitudes of Russian Conservatives to Environmental Problems*

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Abstract. This article examines the attitudes of contemporary Russian conservatives toward “the green agenda.” Although the topic of ecology was originally considered a priority of left-wing parties and movements, in recent years right-wing European politicians have been increasingly discussing and using environmental issues to boost their popularity. While the left-wing green agenda largely focused on global issues, such as climate change, cutting greenhouse gas emissions, and energy transition, right-wing populists, denying the importance of the declared environmental policy, proposed focusing on local problems – preserving local nature and national control over natural resources. This trend can now be observed in Russia: domestic politicians actively discuss the green agenda, offering their evaluations and ways to solve environmental problems. This article pursues a twofold aim. First, to show that the Western and Russian conservative discourses have more similarities than differences, the Russian green political discourse tracing its roots both to the Russian environmental movement and to European populists. Secondly, we investigate whether the views of conservatives influence environmental policies in Russia. To this end, we studied data on presidential environmental grants supported for 2018-2022. A total of more than 4,000 applications were analyzed. The results show that the majority of projects have a local character. Patriotic organizations are getting more involved in environmental

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issues, with several environmental organizations deliberately starting to use patriotic rhetoric. The results seem to indicate traces of conservative attitudes in environmental policy.

Keywords: ecology, the green agenda, conservatism, right-wing populism, Russian ideology, eco-activism, presidential grants.

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Introduction

Ecology and protection of the environment are among the key issues on the global political agenda. It is universally acknowledged that “the green agenda” has been appropriated by the ideological and political left. Environmental demands are often framed in terms of anti-capitalism, dirigisme, with an emphasis on active use of tax mechanisms to redistribute resources in favor of environmental protection and counter global climate change. Other notable features are activism, including campaigns over specific aspects of ecological problems, the stressing of the “science” behind the problems of climate change, the right to a clean environment. Studies show the link between environmental concerns and the growth of post-materialistic emancipatory values [19]. In other words, whereas concern for the environment and ecological activism is becoming part of the left agenda, the right agenda should be indifferent to ecological problems while stressing other priorities, such as economic growth (which may suffer from “green” restrictions), “limited state” and free market. But on closer analysis, things turn out to be more complicated. In recent years, right-wing leaders, parties and movements have been actively appropriating the “green agenda” adapting it to populism, conservatism and traditionalism [4; 13].

Recent Russian instances of ecological protests call into question the notion that ecological activism is associated with post-materialistic values [24; 41; 39]. Local activists often frame their protests in a right-wing, traditionalist, conservative vein. We believe that this is the research puzzle. On the one hand, the Russian case may be seen as a deviation from the global mainstream which is dominated by the left-wing ecological discourse, but on the other hand, it may give an incentive to take a closer look at the right-wing ecological movement in Russia and in the world. It is unclear to what degree the views of Russian conservatives on ecology differ from those of the European right. This fact actualizes interest in environmental issues in Russian conservative traditionalist discourse. How do Russian conservatives perceive “the green agenda”? How does their position relate to that of the European conservatives and right-wing populists? The question also arises of the influence the Russian conservatives exert on ecological policy in the light of the conservative turn of Russian policy [35].

We formulate the research question of this paper in the following way: how do the positions of Russian conservatives on ecological issues influence environmental policies? The aim of this study is to show how the conservative discourse on ecological matters is formed and to identify its possible influence on the implementation of the “green agenda” in Russia. In other words, how does the discourse of Russian environmentalists relate to the actual policies that are pursued? Without claiming that there is a causal relationship between discourse and politics, we will try to show that words are reflected in deeds. To this end, we have examined the allocation of presidential grants for ecological projects to non-profit organizations (NPOs) in order to see whether the conservative ecological discourse influences the implementation of ecological policy.

We have analyzed the discourses in various conservative media outlets and revealed the similarities and differences between the two main trends in modern Russian conservatism. Next, we analyzed the extent to which the identified meanings are related to trends in supported environmental projects within the framework of the presidential grant competition for non-profit organizations. We have studied the data on all the ecological projects that garnered support in the form of presidential grants to NPOs for 2018-2022 (4,000 applications).

The paper is structured as follows. In part one, we show that the interest of the Russian conservatives in the “green agenda” is part of the more universal trend of the ecological agenda being appropriated by right-wing populists in Europe and partly in the United States. The positions of conservatives inside and outside Russia on ecological issues have more similarities than differences, suggesting a borrowing or mutual exchange. Part two analyzes the discourse of two trends within Russian conservatism on ecological matters, drawing on conservative-leaning media outlets. Part three looks at how the views of Russian conservatives are reflected in the implementation of ecological policies, using as an example the funding of environmental projects via presidential grants. The last part presents the findings of our study.

Right-Wing Populists in the West and in Russia: The Attitude to the “Green Agenda”

The battle between the left and right over the ecological agenda is an important aspect of world politics [9]. In the developed countries, environmental issues (at least, those included in the traditional left-wing discourse [1]) tend to become elements of the political struggle between the right and left.

In the beginning, the “green agenda” in the West was closely associated with left-wing movements – communists, anarchists, radicals, pacifists – with the origins of many “green” parties clearly pointing to links with these groups. Accordingly, their agenda was close to left ideas, i.e., anti-capitalism, anti-globalism, nuclear disarmament (opposition to nuclear energy) and radical transformation of the industrial consumer society [3; 32]. At the initial stage, “green” radicalism manifested itself in a critical attitude to property, state structures, big business

and calls for social self-government and participatory democracy [32, p. 24]. It is important to note that a number of studies have pointed to the link between participation in the “green” movement and the spread of post-materialistic values [20; 18]. As successful parties and movements became integrated in power structures, many “greens” moderated their radicalism, demanding not a root-and-branch transformation of industrial society, but merely its “green” adjustment.

The core elements of the “green agenda” today include sustainable development, the fight against global climate change (earlier, global warming), environmental pollution, reducing greenhouse gas emissions and the carbon footprint. To some extent, they also involve the struggle against transnational corporations (TNCs), which are accused of such sins as oil mining in ecologically vulnerable regions, development of the nuclear industry, vehicle exhaust pollution, growing of genetically modified crops, and illegal use of resources [33]. Because environmental problems are all-embracing, the solutions should also be global.

Although initially the popularity of the new right (or the far right, right-wing populists) was growing due to the emergence of a new values-based split around national identity, globalization and migration [23], these political parties and movements gradually ceased to be one-issue parties concerned with migration and began transforming themselves from niche into broader parties. In a way, this was a two-way movement, with mainstream parties borrowing some ideas and slogans from the populist political organizations seeing that they had resonance with significant groups of voters [1]. Thus, right-wing populism is no longer associated with only a narrow range of problems, stating its position on a broad range of issues of which the “green agenda” is but one. This article will show that this trend is relevant in the Russian political context.

Let us make it clear from the start that by the “right” we mean a very diverse group of politicians and intellectuals, including right-wing populists, conservatives, nationalists and traditionalists. In the Russian context, we will use the term “conservatives” since it has more to do with ideological self-identification than with being an organized political force. By conservatives, we mean thinkers, publicists, social activists and politicians who are usually members of informal horizontal structures (network communities) and, less frequently, participate in more organized think tanks, media platforms and political clubs. This concept does not include political parties and movements, nor does it include conservatively-minded citizens (the mass level) [7; 8].

In many ways, “conservative” in the Russian context is a self-identification determined through opposition to the “liberals” and “Westernizers.” Within this paradigm, the conservative turn is seen as a two-way movement both “from the top down,” from the RF President and other high-level officials in 2012-2013 and from “the bottom up,” from the aforementioned intellectuals, public figures and more formal non-establishment structures. Sometimes, “conservatism” is mentioned as an ideological marker to describe the Russian public space and political discourse to show that practically all significant political, ideological, economic and cultural issues on the social agenda since the 2000s have gradually

come to be discussed in the framework of conservatism (at least among much of the political class [5]).

Some authors distinguish two groups of conservatives [2; 31]. According to one interpretation, the first, statist trend emphasizes the role of the strong state, tracing the continuity of the power tradition from the Russian Empire to the USSR to the Russian Federation [2]. This trend is also called social conservatism or “Red conservatism,” which inherits above all the Soviet tradition [17]. Organization-wise, it includes the CPRF, the New Eurasians and of course the Izbornik Club. The latter is an important venue where experts, public figures and politicians [5] meet and which is attracting more and more smaller groups and organizations.

The other trend can be called Slavophile or national-conservatism (“White conservatism”), which has always put front and center the Russian people and its unique culture, with the state called upon to protect and promote the interests of the Russian people [2]. The national-conservatives have a more guarded attitude to the Soviet legacy [17]: they are more conscious of pre-Soviet symbols, i.e., Russian national revival, Orthodoxy, the uniqueness of the Russian people, and the Cossacks. In some ways, the Slavophiles look back to archaic times, denying many achievements of Soviet modernization, including industrialization and urbanization.

Initially, neither the Western right nor the Russian conservatives considered ecological problems to be important. For a long time, ecology was thought to be a “niche issue” that concerned mainly the “green” movement. However, the recent years have seen a surge of interest among the right-wing populists in “green” issues, such that Russian conservatives, too, have come to attach more importance to them. This is due to at least two reasons. First, the “green agenda” has become one of the main trends in global politics. Climate change, global warming, energy transition, curbs on carbon emissions are the most discussed topics in international and domestic politics in many Western countries, as well as in Russia. Accordingly, politicians and political parties have to make known their stand on many of these issues. The positions they articulate can attract and retain followers and win votes in elections in Western countries [28]. Second, the “green agenda” is more important to young people: if you want to speak to the youth in its language, you have to state your views on ecological matters.

The phenomenon of right-wing populists hijacking the “green agenda” has been well studied. Researchers have noted the continuity of right-wing ecological discourse, as well as the new trends. The Western literature is full of such terms as “environmental populism” [4], “eco-fascism” [38], “eco-nationalism” [11], “green nationalism” [15], and “resource nationalism” [21; 39].

The geographical spread of this phenomenon is vast and diverse. Researchers have written about eco-nationalism and eco-populism in North America, Great Britain, Germany, Italy, Denmark, Finland, Poland, the Czech Republic and many other European countries [13], as well as Russia [39]. There are similarities in that these narratives link the ideology of populism, conservatism and nationalism with the “green agenda.”

What is right-wing discourse? The right-wing agenda both inside and outside Russia is skeptical of climate science, of the left-wing ecological discourse and the ecological movement, extols the nature of their own countries and seeks to uphold national interests in international agreements. The right-wing eco-discourse in the Western countries has a marked anti-elitist thrust, while that in Russia is marked by anti-Westernism and dirigisme.

Interestingly, the right in this country and abroad has shared views on many issues of the “green agenda” (see Table 1). Like their Western colleagues, Russian conservatives are skeptical of the scale and causes of global climate change and tend to focus on local ecological problems. No wonder they are also critical of Western (left-wing) climate scientists and activists, thus seemingly juxtaposing “environmentalism” and “ecology as a science.” As distinct from their Western counterparts, Russian conservatives pin their hopes for the solution of practically all problems, including ecological ones, on smart and decisive interference of the strong state through passing laws, allocating money and nationalizing natural resources. The fact that the right-wing discourses here and in the West have more similarities than differences attests, in our opinion, to the universal character of the conservative ideology. To some extent, the universality is achieved through ideological mutual exchange, with the Russian conservatives often “importing” conservative ideas [27; 36; 25]. Attitudes to the “green agenda” are no exception; the ecological problem has highlighted the peculiarities of Russian conservative discourse. The differences and features of Russian conservative discourse will be considered in more detail below.

Table 1

**Attitudes of Western Right-Wing Populists and Russian Conservatives to the “Green Agenda”:
Similarities and Differences**

	Similarities	Differences
Western right-wing populists	Skepticism about seriousness of global ecological problems	Anti-elitism Anti-migrant sentiments
Russian conservatives	Skepticism about climate science Priority of local ecological concerns Critique of leftist ecological discourse and ecological movement Promotion of local nature Support of national interests in the ecological sphere	Anti-Westernism Dirigisme

Speaking about similarities, first and foremost among them is a *skeptical attitude to climate science*. Right-wing populists and conservatives both in the West and in Russia more or less openly question the validity of the official climate change narrative [12]. This takes the form of denying the scale of the threat posed by climate change or questioning the anthropogenic character of the changes [16]. Russian conservatives tend to juxtapose “ecology as a science” and “environmentalism as an ideology,” thereby questioning the scientific validity of the greens’ key arguments [34].

The existing consensus in the scientific and expert community on the nature of climate shifts, the human causation of global warming, and proposed measures such as energy transition and cutting of carbon emissions is openly attributed to a conspiracy of pseudo-scientific globalist elites and corporations. No wonder, the European right claims that the conspiracy is aimed against the interests of the “common people.” In addition to denials and doubts, the Western right-wing populists throw into the agenda alternative facts on ecological changes offered by “independent researchers” loyal to them [38]. Another recent strategy has been to draw attention to other ecological problems that are more readily understood by “the ordinary people.”

The second important similarity is a skeptical, if not downright negative, *attitude to the left-wing ecological movement*. The obvious target of the critique from right-wing politicians and experts is the left, primarily the “greens” and the ecological activists close to them, who as a rule support the official theories of climate change or even their more radical varieties. On the one hand, the “greens” and the eco-activists are perceived as enemies of “the common people” who are out to cause them harm by depriving them of their comfortable way of life, with affordable travel, good cars and red meat. For instance, the right-wing populist party Swedish Democrats claims that government agencies are controlled by “vegan extremists” [16, p. 124]; also in Sweden, the extreme right has targeted the famous environmental activist Greta Thunberg, accusing her of alarmism and a hysterical reaction to a scientifically unproven problem [43, p. 415]. Russian conservatives are equally critical of the left-wing ecological movement, claiming that ecology has become an arena of geopolitical struggle and that eco-activists themselves are promoting the interests of the TNCs. In the eyes of conservatives, the global aim of the Western “greens” is to deprive other countries of their ecological sovereignty, including control over natural resources, from hydrocarbons to fresh water. They look askance at international non-governmental organizations [34]. These arguments jibe with the views of Russian conservatives on energy matters: the critical attitude to “green” energy contrasts with the highly positive attitude to traditional energy. They argue that renunciation of fossil energy would be suicidal for the West, and would also constitute a deliberate unfriendly act aimed at undermining Russia’s energy sector.

On the other hand, Europe’s extreme right stands to gain from positioning itself as obvious opponents of the “green” parties in the electoral sphere. A study in Germany has shown that the building of wind turbines is a fiercely debated issue in local communities, which influences the parties’ election results. This rivalry benefits extreme parties, the “greens” gaining support among advocates of energy transition and the Alternative for Germany among its opponents [28].

A third similarity between the attitudes of right-wing populists and Russian conservatives is that both *uphold national interests*. In denying the scale and character of the problems caused by climate change and challenging the “greens” over proposed solutions to ecological problems, both are openly critical of the international agreements being signed by their governments that are aimed at controlling global warming. They maintain that these agreements, notably the

1998 Kyoto Protocol and the 2016 Paris Agreement, are harmful to the national interests of their countries, especially “the common people.” A popular argument is that these agreements are part of a conspiracy among globalist elites aimed at limiting national sovereignty and forming “a world government” [13, p. 9]. Another argument has to do with protection of national economic interests, and it is particularly relevant to countries with developed coal (or nuclear) energy [37]. The potential damage to the national economy of the closure of enterprises and entire industry sectors outweighs more abstract issues of carbon emissions.

Fourth, there is a similarity in the way the right perceives *its country's nature*. Very often, in contrast to the abstract demands of the fight against global climate change, the right opposes the “greens” with the image of native nature, which is precisely what needs protection and support. Local landscapes are described in a traditional, if not traditionalist, way: nature and the land are the environment, which forms a healthy nation; the (common) people are rooted in it, there is an organic bond between nature (roots) and the people (sprouts). The countryside is lauded for its purity and beauty, as well as the rustic mores of its inhabitants who remember and cherish their people's traditions, and is contrasted with the sordid cosmopolitan city which wants to get rid of its roots [40]. This position brings into focus the importance of solving local environmental problems, protecting the local natural heritage, and supporting some environmental protests (especially if they are projects of foreign companies) as opposed to global problems (climate change). It has to be noted, though, that this position often has an *ad hoc* character: cases are known of the right backing the cutting of forests in unique natural preserves.¹ Right-wing populists are intrinsically responsive to the opinions of their supporters: they admire their native nature as long as this admiration wins them the sympathy of the “common people.” Similar trends are observed in Russia: denial of the scale of climate change and of the need to take urgent measures to fight global warming goes hand-in-hand with praise of the virtues of our country's nature. Russian conservatives extol the virtues of country life and small towns, while their attitude to megalopolises and urbanization in general is lukewarm. They see rural life as the natural environment for Russians and preservation of rustic life as the country's future, its national identity, traditions and all its main virtues (for example, a work ethic and spirituality). Rural life supports tradition and harmonizes man and nature: if people till the land, they take care of it. In this paradigm, to preserve nature means to preserve the Russian people, its identity and its link with the native land. Some conservatives maintain that spirituality and morality, a return to the behests and traditions of ancestors, will solve all ecological problems.

As for the differences between the attitudes of European right-wing populists and Russian conservatives to the “green agenda,” the *anti-elitism* of the European right has to be mentioned first. Anti-elitist rhetoric aimed at protecting the interests of the “common people” is the core of right-wing populism. Their argument is simple: all problems come from the cosmopolitan, corrupt elites who do not care about “common people” [29; 13]. In terms of the ecological agenda, this means that in addressing any ecological problems, the interests of “common people” (not

of nature, the elites or global corporations) should come first. Ordinary people should not suffer from “green” programs: their lifestyle (for example, free travel) should be intact, prices should not rise (for example, because of energy transition) and there should be no threat to life and health (the flora and fauna should not be protected at the expense of people). According to this narrative, many costly and superfluous changes connected with the green agenda are being promoted by corrupt elites, corporations, and the scientists and eco-activists in their service. Russian conservatives do not exhibit such overt anti-elitism, although they frequently speak about “the Russian people.”

The second difference is the *anti-Westernism* of the Russian conservatives, which is a feature of all conservative thought in Russia. By this we mean a critical attitude to Western thought and way of life, including in the ecological sphere. It is commonplace to hold the West responsible for all global ecological problems: indeed, capitalism and the consumer society are Western inventions; the rampant consumerism of “the golden billion” is responsible for waste pollution of the planet, climate change and the predatory attitude to nature. Moreover, the West is now foisting this way of life on other countries, such that Russia and the majority of other countries are victims of Western super-consumption of natural resources. Another strand of anti-Westernism is the argument about the West’s “ill will” in seeking to use the “green agenda” as an instrument to hold back the socio-economic development of the non-Western countries. Global agreements on environment protection, and the imposition of “green” standards in industry and consumption are seen as instruments of unfair economic competition between countries, of which the West is the main beneficiary. Ecological non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that promote their agenda are thought to be puppets of the global TNCs; the “new” left in the West is putting the blame for its environmental woes on all [other] countries.

The third difference that singles out Russian conservatives is the *special role* they assign to *the state*. An important feature of Russian conservative ecological discourse is its emphasis on the leading role of the state in solving all nature conservation problems. The state is not only a tool for implementing the correct environmental policy, but an end in itself. The state grows by its industry, which needs vast natural resources; hence, the development and even conquest of nature is an important state goal. Environmental pollution is recognized, but it is claimed that new technologies and stricter state oversight will minimize the damage. More importantly, the state is expected to tighten nature conservation oversight by allocating resources and adopting smart legislation. These measures should address the main ecological woes, such as pollution of the soil, air and water, accumulation of waste and landfills, and illegal mining of natural resources against the will of the local population.

Finally, unlike European right-wing ecological discourse, Russian conservative discourse practically ignores the connection between ecology and anti-migration sentiments. While for European populists the connection is logical and simple (clean nature – clean nation – renunciation of immigration) [42, p. 174], Russian conservatives approach the immigration issue very carefully [48, p. 106], especially in connection with environment protection.

Summing up the above, it should be noted that the “green agenda” is ceasing to be a marginal theme both for right-wing Western populists and for Russian conservatives. Owing to their relevance to society, ecological issues are important to all the social and political forces. Although their positions are far from the mainstream, they attract the part of society that does not share the prevailing left-wing views in this area. Conservatism has become a universal ideology, such that we can safely say that there are more similarities than differences between the views of Western right-wing populists and Russian conservatives. We are inclined to interpret this as evidence of an exchange of ideas and a manifestation of a general trend: namely, that conservatives, populists and nationalists are making a bid to hijack the “green agenda.” The Russian case fits this trend, representing a rule rather than an exception.

It is important to say that a closer inspection of the genesis of the Russian conservative discourse reveals that some conservative elements were present in it from the start. Conservatives (“eco-patriots”) contributed to the birth of the ecological movement in Russia back in the 1980s [45]. For example, in 1989, *Sovetskaya Rossiya*, a thoroughly conservative newspaper, set up a Social Committee to Save the Volga [32, p. 26]. Another early example of the ecological movement in the USSR was the Nature Conservation Patrol organized at the biological department of Moscow State University in the 1960s which embraced conservationism and was a quasi-paramilitary unit (with matching subculture, ethics and tasks) [47].² The late Soviet period saw the emergence of a pool of Russian conservative slogans: the Village Prose writers drew attention to the degradation of peasant culture [45]. The calls for the revival of the national Russian culture went hand-in-hand with the critique of the state policy of using natural resources targeting the attempts to destroy the environment of the Russian people; the main slogans were preserving pristine nature or the cultural landscape, and preserving cultural heritage [45, p. 147]. Part of that ideological legacy has survived to this day.

The two parts that follow will look at the two main Russian conservative discourses to reveal the differences and similarities between them and examine the influence of conservative discourse on the state’s ecological policy, with particular attention to ecological projects supported under the program of presidential grants to non-profit organizations.

Two Conservative Discourses in Russia

As in the West, left-wing ecological discourse is on the ascendant in Russia. The “green agenda” was strongly influenced by the ideas of socialism and anarchism about the flaws of the Soviet version of industrialization marked by a predatory attitude to nature. During the *perestroika* years, there emerged projects of an eco-socialist society based on decentralized planning (but not a market economy), as well as self-government, federalism and direct democracy [32, p. 27]. More often than not, these projects were modeled on the activities of

Western left-wing parties and movements, their ideology and organization forms. Subsequently, that trend was reinforced by cooperation with international NGOs and partial borrowing of their agenda. Indeed, the agenda of the early ecological movements included nature conservation practices, the closure or obstruction of the activities of environmentally hazardous industrial facilities, the promotion of ecological awareness, and animal rights protection. Later came the waste disposal issue (specific waste collection initiatives) and combating landfills near population centers.

Roughly speaking, there are the local and global versions of the ecological discourse in Russia [46]. The global version of the “green agenda” looks to international standards focusing on individual consumption, the development of alternative energy and the energy transition, limiting greenhouse gas emissions, sustainable development and the fight against climate change. The local agenda is focused more on the living environment. The difference is in the level of priority problems: some prioritize the battle against industrial development of valuable natural assets (the Arctic, the Lake Baikal area) while others battle landfills. For a long time, the global agenda campaigners, linked with international environmentalist NGOs, commanded public attention; they had greater visibility owing to their actions, pronouncements and legislative initiatives, many of which were oriented toward international nature conservation standards and practices.

The Russian conservative discourse is not monolithic, having as it does the two aforementioned trends, the state-conservative and national-conservative. We will call them “red” and “white” conservatives respectively. The first trend often looks to the best Soviet-era practices, and the second advocates a return to the traditions of the Russian people and the preservation of the unique Russian civilization, the latter position being closer to that of the right-wing European traditionalists.

Here, we use the discursive data analysis approach, which can be defined as “gaining an insight into how the use of language is involved in the construction of a particular version of events” [44, p. 343]. Of the wide range of interpretations of this method, we prefer that given by Stuart Hall, which can be called analysis of “cultural representations” (quoted from [44, p. 342]). Hall’s work seeks to find out how various meanings are created and reproduced through language. He defines language as any media that construct and reproduce meanings and whose role is “to organize and regulate cultural practices, influence our behavior and hence have real practical effects” [14, p. 3]. The distinctive feature of discourse analysis is that it seeks to identify political (that is, power) structures, processes of formation of identities and other rules of the game [14]. We have chosen this approach because our key task is to deconstruct how politicians, journalists and public intellectuals who identify themselves as conservatives, nationalists and patriots, try to spread their ideas on how the “green agenda” should be interpreted in Russia and how society and the state should be organized in order to promote it.

We have analyzed publications on the topics “environmental protection” and “ecology” on several resources that can be considered pro-state, i.e., the daily

interactive outlet *Zavtra.ru*, including the electronic version of the newspaper *Zavtra*, its blogs and communities, as well as materials from the Izborsk Club information and expert center [60]. The publications *Russky Dom* [69], *Soyuz Russkogo Naroda* [76], and *Russky Vestnik* [70] were screened for national-patriotic content.

The newspaper *Zavtra* carries articles on ecology, nature and the environment less frequently than, say, on economics and politics. However, the number of publications on the “green agenda” has been growing steadily since 2018. This follows the general European trend of the formation and problematization of the ecological agenda in right-wing discourse: the number of publications on ecology in the weekly issues of *Zavtra* increased from 22 in 2013-2018 to 82 in 2023. Ecology as a science is contrasted with environmentalism and ecologism, which are seen as instruments of the neocolonialist policies of Western countries. The differences and similarities between the two aforementioned conservative discourses are shown in Table 2.

Table 2

**Similarities and Differences between
the Two Conservative Discourses in Russia**

Similarities	Differences
Role of the state Spirituality and traditions Attitude to eco-activists	Attitude to nature Attitude to urbanization

Speaking about the similarities between the two trends, we should first of all single out the role they assign to the state in tackling ecological problems. The state must assume responsibility for a sound ecological policy by passing the necessary laws, supporting sound initiatives and providing adequate funding. Even the planting of trees is impossible without a state plan: “One can launch a popular movement for planting trees, but this initiative will peter out and wilt without a state plan” [78]. Grassroots initiative is allowed, but it will hardly amount to much without the state.

The second similarity is an extremely *negative attitude to pro-Western liberals* who have carried out market reforms, which have aggravated all of the ecological problems in Russia. The market economic model is based on the export of natural resources (often extracted in a predatory fashion), with the local administrations bearing the cost. Transition to capitalism depletes and degrades nature.

The third similarity is the shared idea of regeneration of the country’s nature through *recreating spirituality, morality and traditions*. Natural resources are depleted because the modern civilization is given to limitless consumption, such that, in the opinion of many conservatives, the solution of most ecological problems lies in the moral revival of the Russian people. Metropolitan Veniamin writes on the *Russky Vestnik* site:

We are concerned with clean ecology, but do virtually nothing to clean the spiritual-moral ecology. We are dismayed by the amount of hydrocarbons released into the atmosphere or the amount of toxic waste dumped in our water. But we are oblivious of the emanations of sin issuing from our souls [81].

Finally, we should note the similar attitude to eco-activists. On the one hand, we see many examples of a very guarded attitude to them, especially when they articulate global problems. They are perceived not as scientists but as alarmists:

Many mistakenly equate ecologists with those who rant hysterically at international forums, but there is a vast difference between alarmists and ecologists. The task of ecologists as scientists is objective assessment of the changes taking place on the planet on the basis of empirical data. The alarmists have a very different goal: to exploit the primitive fears of people for their lives and the lives of their loved ones for their own benefit and that of their employers [49].

Eco-activists are also accused of working for global TNCs, rocking the regime with their protests, and in general following eco-activism as a fad:

Initially big transnational capital was hostile to ecological initiatives. Over time, it realized that the ecological agenda is a powerful instrument of influencing world public opinion, so it is better to head up the process than to oppose it [67].

On the other hand, local ecological protests may meet with some sympathy. One comes across publications that explain the aims of the protests (“protecting our lives and those of our children, all that we hold sacred, our land and its waters” [82]) and encourage people to join the protests: “God has created land to be tilled for the good of people... protecting it is our sacred duty” [82]. All conservatives share concern about local ecological problems as important ones, as opposed to specious global ones. So, conservatives worry about problems such as conservation of nature, waste disposal and the revival of the Russian countryside. Protests over environmental issues are not seen as off-limits by Russian conservatives. Taking part in protests is justified by the need to preserve nature for the present and future of the nation: for instance, the Cossacks in the Khopyor area have come out in protest against nickel mining by the Urals Mining Company [71], and activists from the monarchist organization Union of the Russian People have backed the protests in Shiyes [82].

Even so, there are serious differences between the two conservative trends. The state conservatives and national-patriots differ in their attitudes to nature as such. For the former, nature is a source of resources required for economic growth, even under environment-friendly conditions and with the use of ecologically clean technologies, while the latter call for a curb on the profligate use of nature and on consumption, putting the conservation of nature above industrial growth. State conservatives hold as an ideal of the relationship between nature and man the unrealized Stalin plans of the transformation of nature, and see the state as the key agent in the relationship between man and nature:

Unimplemented major projects, just like industrialization, collectivization and post-war economic rehabilitation carried out during the Stalin era, show that our country, given its natural-climatic conditions and its size, can develop only through state mobilization projects [72].

“White” conservatives decry industrial growth which, in their opinion, encourages consumerism and pursuit of personal pleasure at nature’s expense.

There is a similar split on the issue of urbanization. “Red” conservatives are more supportive of reasonable urbanization, paying special attention to the problems of small towns:

Russia is a shroud. On it, Moscow is embroidered in gold, provincial capitals in silver. The rest of Russia is studded with pearls. The small *uyezd* towns of Russia are shining gems [64].

The concept of “garden city” is an important part of the narrative of reasonable development of the environment [77]. “White” conservatives usually are against further urbanization and city sprawl, which is also considered to be harmful for nature. Among proposed solutions are de-urbanization and investment in rural development, with a return to the traditional rural life of the Russian people seen as a social ideal, which combines the ideals of clean environment, spirituality, revival of original Russian traditions, and renunciation of the Western consumer society.

The question is to what extent are these ideas of Russian conservatives empty rhetoric, and to what extent do they lead to real actions, political decisions and initiatives? As noted above, the “green agenda” was not initially a priority of conservatives; rather, they had to react to it because it was becoming more important in global and domestic politics. Russian conservatives did not confine themselves to writing ecological articles: one can cite examples of socio-political initiatives they launched themselves. For example, Aleksandr Prokhanov in 2019 called for the creation of the movement “There Will Be a Russian Forest” [75], and the same year, Aleksandr Zaldostanov, better known as Biker Surgeon, the head of the Night Wolves biker club, kick-started the Russian Forest campaign [50]. In its framework, anyone could plant a tree in honor of a relative who fought in the Great Patriotic (Second World) War. The action was timed with the 75th anniversary of the Victory in the Great Patriotic War and the 30th anniversary of the Russian Ministry for Emergencies. Its aim was to restore forests and unite people concerned about the problem of forest fires in Russia. These are some “green” initiatives that arose in the conservative camp. How indicative are they of the entire field of environmental activities?

There are many instances of conservative environmental initiatives. For example, the Russian Ecological Society has launched several regional ecological-patriotic education initiatives in the Russian regions [74]: thus, the Society’s Perm chapter has implemented joint projects with the regional chapter of Yunarmiya (*Young Army*) [68]. Another example is the Orthodox Initiative, which focuses on support of ecological projects, notably the Orthodox Youth Ecological Patrol (Rostov oblast), From a Clean Source (Penza oblast), to mention just a few. Although some of the projects have a more pronounced traditionalist character (“The organizers set themselves the task of contributing to the solution of the pressing problem of unnatural transformation of modern society into a ‘consumer

society' ") the majority of them are standard in character, focusing on ecological education, waste collection and fostering of patriotism [53].

The next part will look at how conservative ecological discourse is related to the government's environmental policy. To this end, we studied data on the allocation of funds under presidential ecological grants in the years 2018-2022. This tender is one of the largest in terms of the number of projects and the size of the grants; therefore, it can be seen as a reflection of official ideas of what an optimum ecological policy should be.

Support of Environmental Initiatives: The Conservative Footprint

The Ecological Doctrine of the Russian Federation adopted by the RF Government in 2002 set the following priorities of the state ecological policy:

- reducing environmental pollution and saving resources,
- conservation and restoration of the natural environment,
- ensuring sustainable use of nature [62].

However, the government's interest in ecological problems has become more sustained in the last several years. In 2018, the Ecology National Project was adopted for the period between 2019 and 2024. This project is significantly more specific compared with the items in the RF Ecological Doctrine. It included:

- doing away with illegal landfills;
- waste processing;
- improving the quality of drinking water;
- cleaning the air;
- improving the ecological state of Lake Baikal and the Volga River;
- conservation and maintenance of water facilities in general;
- ensuring ecological diversity and development of eco-tourism;
- forest preservation;
- improving technological support of all the above areas [26].

In 2020, environmental protection policy was officially declared to be a priority of the state policy in the new version of the RF Constitution, which charged the Government with

implementing measures aimed at creating favorable conditions for the activity of the population, reducing the negative impact of economic and other activities on the environment, preserving the unique natural and biological diversity of the country, and forming in society a responsible attitude to animals [55].

It also stressed the need to create “conditions for the development of a system of ecological education of the citizens and instilling ecological culture” [55].

The special role of nature in the Russian identity is stressed at the highest level. Vladimir Putin said during a discussion of ecological policy: “We are talking about our national heritage in the full meaning of the word, about our pride and our duty to the present and future generations” [66]. Pursuant to the

president's remarks, recommendations on the development of ecological culture and education were added to the aforementioned legislative acts.³ Thus, the growing interest of the Russian conservatives in the "green agenda" coincided in time not only with a similar growth of such interest among right-wing populists in the West, but also with actualization of ecological policy in Russia. Below we will consider one area of this effort, namely, support of ecological initiatives of non-profit organizations by presidential grants.

Our initial assumption is as follows: although activities in addressing ecological problems may take very diverse forms, the distribution of presidential grants will reflect certain political priorities. In other words, more "loyal" organizations and initiatives have better chances of receiving support for their projects than less "loyal" ones. Proceeding from the foregoing review of conservative discourse on the "green agenda," we expect the supported projects to be in line with the conservative principles described above. These are revival of nature, focus on solving local ecological problems (and not a shift toward global ones), and ecological education in the traditionalist style. We expect to see minimum support of the European left-wing green agenda, any initiatives to diminish individual carbon footprints, and any attention to the global warming issue.

We have analyzed the data on ecological projects backed by the presidential program for NPOs over five years, from 2018 to 2022. A total of 4,410 projects from all the Russian regions had applied for grants. Proceeding from the Presidential Grants Fund site data base on these projects [63] we have gleaned information on the title of the project, region, type of organization, the level of the project, the theme in accordance with our code system and the amounts of funding allocated. Thematically, the projects were broken down into the following groups: ecological enlightenment, practical measures, eco-protection, eco-research, providing public amenities, fire protection, forestry, water supply, processing, energy, climate change, carbon footprint.

In many ways, some of these themes are part of the "traditional agenda" (eco-education, eco-protection, providing public amenities) inasmuch as they focus on local problems: "green" conservatism shifts the emphasis from global climate change to more immediate local tasks, making successful use of the slogans of local patriotism, preservation of traditions and conservation of the local nature.

Let us cite some examples of projects, proposed and supported, which illustrate the aforementioned trends of framing of ecological as conservative, traditionalist, and patriotic discourse:

2018 – "We Are for a Clean Russia!!!" Project of the NGO Veterans of the Chechen Conflict (Murom, Vladimir oblast). The project description stresses

patriotic education of the youth through more active work of the Murom city NGO Veterans of the Chechen Conflict and fostering love of the native land; ecological education of the youth through organizing work specifically aimed at creating favorable sanitary-hygienic and ecological conditions [79];

2018 – "What Does the Motherland Begin With? With a Clean City Where I Will Live." A project of the Moscow City Women's Council with the stated aim of

working out a new morality of the civilized way of life, forming the ecological culture of the young generation in keeping our neighborhood, street and city clean, elementary awareness of the impact of their actions on the environment... This is a manifestation of genuine patriotism, genuine love of the Motherland [80];

2019 – “To Protect Nature is to Protect the Motherland” proposed by the Bashkortostan Republic’s branch of the Russian Geographical Society, aimed at “popularizing the Knight of the Forest movement for the purpose of eco-patriotic education of the population” [65];

2019 – Operation “Ch” project, aimed at identifying and monitoring river polluters, planting greenery, cleaning and ameliorating the banks of the Chusovaya River run by the Sverdlovsk region branch of the All-Russian Nature Conservation Society with the aim of

creating an information, socio-pedagogical, patriotic and ecological basis of the development of the Chusovaya River basin... Developing patriotism, love of the native land, the wish to preserve the local nature, development of the volunteer movement in the Sverdlovsk Oblast [61];

2019 – “Ecological Expedition,” a project of the Autonomous Non-Profit organization Pokrovskaya Druzhina of the Center for Patriotic Development of the Youth aimed at

encouraging the youth to be actively engaged in environmental protection issues, fostering a sense of ecological responsibility by instilling nature conservation habits and enhancing ecological awareness [52];

2020 – An international ecological school students’ rally “Give Life to the Planet,” a project of the Autonomous NPO Ecological and Patriotic Initiative (Kaluga Oblast) with a stated goal of

promoting ecological and patriotic world view of school students through ecological and patriotic enlightenment, creating a venue where the participants can increase their knowledge about ecology, environmental protection and learn about the national Ecology project and its implementation in the Kaluga Oblast [54];

2020 – “Forest Patrol Guarding the Forest,” a project of the civic and patriotic education non-profit organization “I am a Patriot” (Republic of Bashkortostan) aimed at “preventing forest fires by forming patriotic voluntary teams” [57];

2021 – “From Landfill to Wonderland,” a project of the Tarnoga Charity (Vologda Oblast) aimed at “involving local villagers in social life, instilling ecological culture and patriotism” [58];

2022 – “Clean Sea of Ob,” a project of the Autonomous NPO Useful Services Center the Siberian Way (Novosibirsk Oblast) aimed at

patriotic upbringing of members of military-patriotic clubs, clubs of young seamen of Novosibirsk and Novosibirsk Oblast who take part in boating expeditions in the Novosibirsk Reservoir through social activities and imparting ecological thinking to them and to people spending their leisure on its shores and islands [51];

2022 – “Life Spring,” a project (submitted but rejected) of the Valuysk Cossack Society (Belgorod Oblast) with the stated goal of

creating conditions for supplying the 975 residents of the village of Kazinka with clean spring water, promoting a healthy way of life, ecological awareness and preserving the Orthodox traditions of the inhabitants of the wellspring area [73];

2023 – project “International Memory Garden Action” of the Memory Garden non-profit organization for the promotion of ecological, social and patriotic projects (Moscow); the aim of the project is

to promote a culture of responsible attitude to ecology, popularization of eco-activism and preservation of historical memory by involving the citizens of the Russian Federation in planting trees in memory of the heroes who defended the Motherland and by organizing competitions of children’s drawings [59].

The above information prompts several observations. First, many ecological initiatives are launched by “patriotic” actors, and many patriotic projects by “ecological” ones. Thus, ecology is used as a vehicle by many organizations that are not directly involved in it. Secondly, we should stress the diversity of actors involved in ecological matters, including church parishes, social organizations, Cossack societies, trade unions, local self-government, i.e., the framing of local problems through ecological and patriotic education improves the chances of success for many projects. “Ecology – native nature – birthplace – patriotism” are meanings that come together on a wide range of issues from waste disposal to restoration of wellsprings and planting of trees.

Let us now look at some numbers in the body of data on ecological projects that have been awarded presidential grants. Of the 4,410 projects, only 1,177 (26.7%) have been supported. This shows tough competition among applicants; such that it is obviously not enough to frame the application in a traditionalist vein to get the application accepted. On a year-by-year basis, we find the largest number of applications falling in 2022, almost one-third of all the projects, although this had no significant impact on the share of the projects that received funding (Table 3). It has to be noted that the type of the bidding organization has had no significant impact on the breakdown of the ecological projects awarded grants (Table 4).

Table 3

Breakdown of Supported Ecological Projects by Year

Year	Grant awarded or not		Total
	No	Yes	
2018	409 (67.94%)	193 (32.06%)	602
2019	440 (73.83%)	156 (26.17%)	596
2020	542 (69.49%)	238 (30.51%)	780

2021	701 (75.13%)	232 (24.87%)	933
2022	1,141 (76.17%)	358 (23.83%)	1,499
Total	3,233 (73.3%)	1,177 (26.7%)	4,410

Table 4

Breakdown of Supported Ecological Projects by Type of Applicant

Type of organization	Supported or not		Total
	No	Yes	
Non-governmental organizations	975 (72.01%)	379 (27.99%)	1,354
Funds and charitable organizations	612 (68.92%)	276 (31.08%)	888
Territorial self-government organizations	254 (82.2%)	55 (17.8%)	309
Associations and unions	148 (76.68%)	45 (23.32%)	193
State-owned and municipal budget-financed institution	331 (79.19%)	87 (20.81%)	418
Autonomous non-profit organization	729 (72.32%)	279 (27.68%)	1,008
Religious organization	41 (74.55%)	14 (25.45%)	55
Cossack organization	52 (88.14%)	7 (11.86%)	59
Other	91 (72.22%)	35 (27.78%)	126
Total	3,233 (73.3%)	1,177 (26.7%)	4,410

As for the themes of the chosen projects, we see that almost all themes received equal support (Table 5). Even so, some remarks are in order. First, there are very few projects on stock left-wing “green” themes that have to do with the carbon footprint, climate change and energy, only 13 projects, and not a single one of them garnered support during the years under review. Secondly, the most popular themes of the projects submitted are ecological awareness (1,495), zoological protection (1,003), provision of public amenities (666), and waste processing (235). However, in terms of the projects supported, the ranking is as follows: zoological protection (36.39%), water supply (30%), waste disposal (28.39%), ecological measures (28.05%), and ecological awareness (25.48%). Thirdly, the majority of the projects submitted addressed local problems, while global problems were conspicuous by their absence. The breakdown by level of projects points in the same direction: 2,104 municipal-level projects (571 accepted), 1,867 regional-level (505 accepted), and 439

federal-level (101 accepted).

At first glance, many projects are devoid of political content. Ecological projects are not about politics, but about involvement in the affairs of local communities and the creation of a comfortable environment – beautification of public spaces and provision of amenities, fire safety, water supply and protection of the flora and fauna. Still, these observations warrant a cautious conclusion about the influence of the conservative discourse on the state’s ecological policy:

Table 5

Breakdown of Accepted Ecological Projects by Theme

Theme	Accepted or not		Total
	Not	Yes	
Ecological enlightenment	1,114 (74.52%)	381 (25.48%)	1,495
Ecological measures	159 (71.95%)	62 (28.05%)	221
Zoological protection	638 (63.61%)	365 (36.39%)	1,003
Eco-research	91 (81.98%)	20 (18.02%)	111
Provision of public amenities	530 (79.46%)	136 (20.54%)	666
Fire safety	125 (73.53%)	45 (26.47%)	170
Forestry	76 (78,35%)	21 (21,65%)	97
Water supply	77 (70%)	33 (30%)	110
Waste disposal	168 (71,61%)	67 (28,39%)	235
Energy	4 (100%)	0 (0%)	4
Climate change	2 (100%)	0 (0%)	2
Carbon footprint	7 (100%)	0 (0%)	7
Other	241 (83.97%)	46 (16.03%)	287
Total	3,233 (73.3%)	1,177 (26.7%)	4,410

– the global agenda is excluded, with only the local initiatives getting support, which leads to ecology being perceived as part of the local identity linking the notions of “local nature” and “native land”;

– the projects that are proposed and accepted, apart from sometimes directly using traditionalist discourse, are becoming thematically close to many

conservative ideas, with eco-awareness often helping to marry patriotism and love of indigenous nature;

– the ecology theme begins to be seen instrumentally by many actors who initially were not involved in nature conservation activities, for example, religious and Cossack organizations.

– the “green agenda” is becoming an instrument to promote a wide range of ideological projects based on conservative ideas.

Conclusion

For several years, the “green agenda” has been a battleground between the left and right in the West. Aware of its key role for many various political courses as well as its significance for many groups of voters, especially the youth, the right in Europe and the United States has been actively playing in the “green” field. The shift of emphasis toward skepticism about global climate change, the proposal of alternative views and solutions to many ecological problems and, most importantly, the promotion of an alternative “green agenda” focused on local and not global ecological problems are beginning to bring dividends to right-wing politicians in Europe and North America. Conservatives in Russia have picked up on this trend, knowing that the “green agenda” is bound to become more and more important, such that they would have to formulate a position on ecology matters no matter what: these issues used to be hardly central for Russian conservative thinkers [30; 10]. We have shown that Russian conservatives have partially borrowed some ideas from their European colleagues (for example, a skeptical attitude to global climate change), while being at odds with them on some other points (including the role of the state and anti-Westernism). The conservative camp is not monolithic: even a cursory look reveals the existence of advocates of a strong state and national-conservatives. While the former espouse the ideal of rational use of nature for the sake of the grandeur of the state, the latter extol the traditional, rural way of life, which they associate with revival of the morality and spirituality of the Russian people.

We can say that “green” conservatism is on the ascendant in Russia to become a notable part of society’s ideological landscape.

We have also sought to trace the impact of the conservative ecological discourse on the implementation of ecological policy and the decisions to support this or that ecological project. The review of the breakdown of presidential grants in the years 2018-2022 shows that the conservative players in the field whose projects link the ideas of patriotism and the ecological agenda have an advantage. There is a marked tendency to submit and carry out initiatives focused on local themes, while projects fitting the left-wing global agenda are totally lacking. This is not to say that ecological projects have become instruments of ideological manipulation, but it does show that the right-wing conservative “turn” cannot be denied.

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Notes

¹ For example, the Law and Justice party in Poland ignored the demands of eco-activists who, with the backing of EU agencies, tried to stop felling of trees in Belovezhskaya Pushcha [37], and the Danish People's Party called for the shooting of wolves that attacked sheep in Jutland [22].

² The project was subsequently spread to other universities.

³ However, today eco-awareness in schools, for example, is not part of the curriculum and is left to the discretion of individual teachers [56].

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