



# The uneven response to global environmental governance: Russia's contentious politics of forest certification

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## ABSTRACT

When do contentious politics arise around forest certification? In Russia, forestry firms have adopted Forest Stewardship Council certification more rapidly and with fewer challenges in Northwestern regions than in the Russian Far East. In 2011–2012, contentious politics broke out in response to a revision of Russia's national FSC standards. This case allows us to build upon and extend arguments about how domestic conditions shape actors' responses to private environmental governance. Regional variation in Russia suggests that collective mobilization to weaken certification is more likely to emerge under conditions of high levels of biodiversity, proximity to markets that are not sensitive to certification, and low penetration by multinational firms. However, the key factor facilitating collective action in this case was the emergence of an industry-government alliance that was rooted in prior industry-government collusion on the illegal logging, mutual investments in wood, and a lack of knowledge about FSC certification. Contentious politics gave way to constructive negotiations between stakeholders in 2013–2017 following the construction of several forums of negotiation.

## 1. Introduction

Market-driven, private governance of forests bypasses the state to appeal directly to the ecological values of consumers and to firms' corporate responsibility and desire to increase profits by certifying their products as sustainably produced. Forest certification presents an opportunity for firms to gain access to new, and potentially more lucrative, markets and an advantage over their competitors. At the same time, certification imposes significant costs on economic actors and requires that they deploy resources to monitor their social and ecological impact. In response to global market-based certification initiatives, companies may choose to participate in or to reject the opportunity to certify. In other cases, companies may engage in contentious politics to attempt to weaken certification standards. By challenging the rules of certification, private actors may try to gain economic advantages without meeting strict environmental or social requirements.

In this article, we explore the question of when contentious politics arise around forest certification.<sup>1</sup> When global governance initiatives, such as forest certification, designed to promote sustainability are adopted and when they are opposed are questions of great empirical

and theoretical significance. While certification schemes are global in concept, their adoption and effectiveness depend on how they interact with political and institutional contexts at the state or local level. Frequently, however, studies of global governance may “under-represent the importance of local perceptions, bargains, norms, and practices” while focusing on the features of the transnational rules and standards (Dauvergne, 2004). National and local political, economic, and environmental conditions can create opportunities and obstacles for the institutionalization of new global rules (Bostrom, 2003; Cashore et al., 2004; Espach, 2006). Countries with weak enforcement of national law and regulation and a high level of corruption are difficult sites for the institutionalization of global governance (Auld et al., 2008; Cashore et al., 2006).

Thus far, scholars have done relatively little to integrate the insights of the field of contentious politics into our questions about the expansion of global governance. This study contributes to our understanding of when and how industry and state actors contest private governance and how that contestation might lessen, even if only temporarily, due to new lines of communication and negotiation. Our study highlights two important points – first, the on-going and variable nature of this contestation as FSC standards are revised and implemented in different

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locales and, second, the way in which communication across scales of political action can either stoke or ameliorate conflict. In elaborating these points, we build upon and extend arguments about how domestic conditions shape actors' responses to global environmental governance (Espach, 2009), by examining not only firms' decision of whether or not to certify their products, but through their coordinated efforts to alter a certification scheme.

To examine when firms attempt to change certification standards through coordinated action and to investigate the conditions that contribute to contentious politics, we consider varying reactions to Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) certification within the Russian timber industry. Why did firms adopt forest certification more rapidly and with relatively fewer challenges in the Northwest regions of Russia than did firms in the Russian Far East? In particular, why did an industry-led alliance with government officials emerge in the Far Eastern regions of Khabarovsk and Primore in 2011–2012 in response to the 7th version of Russia's national standards under the Forest Stewardship Council? How did the contentious politics give way to constructive negotiations between stakeholders in 2013–2017? Until the 1990s, Russia's Northwest and Far East had identical models of industrial organization, operated under the same regulatory environment, and, prior to Gorbachev's perestroika reforms, faced little pressure from environmental organizations, domestic or international. Since that time, the Russian timber industry has undergone a process of decentralization and differentiation, as well as different export market pressures, providing fertile ground for comparison (Naumov et al., 2016). Moreover, the Russian case is crucial to international forest conservation efforts since 26% of the world's virgin forests are located in Russia, most of them in Siberia and the Russian Far East where there are significant territories of intact but uncertified forests (Kraxner et al., 2017, 14). Theoretically, this comparison sheds light on the local and regional factors that may facilitate or inhibit the spread of global forest governance. It also draws our attention to forums of negotiation over global governance where stakeholders deliberate and try to influence standards and policies.

Our comparison suggests that forest industry and government representatives are more likely to mobilize collectively to oppose certification when high levels of biodiversity and virgin forests mean that the territory available for harvest is likely to be diminished significantly and when firms are located proximate to markets that do not place a premium on certified wood. These factors are necessary but not sufficient for explaining contentious politics around certification in the Russian Far East (RFE), however. The most important factor in this case was the emergence of an industry-government alliance. Our argument identifies the path-dependent conditions under which this alliance in opposition to certification developed, extending research on how domestic factors influence actors' response to private governance. In the RFE, the relationship between timber company representatives and regional government officials was based on three factors: 1) prior industry-government collusion in the illegal logging trade; 2) mutual investments in developing wood processing capacity in the regional timber industry; and 3) low information about FSC certification and Russia's national FSC standards. Several other potential explanations were not supported by these two cases. The relative importance of the timber industry to the regional economy did not appear to play a role in influencing mobilization, while NGOs active in the two regions had different effects. Ultimately, Far Eastern actors' critical discourses around certification were ameliorated in part in multiple new forums of negotiation that knit together global governance nodes of design and local sites of implementation within the FSC governance generating network.

Following McDermott (2012) and Johansson (2013), the research methodology was designed to probe the perceptions of potential FSC stakeholders about certification and its legitimacy, as well as the discourses that construct shared meaning about sustainable forestry. This paper focuses on a specific period of contention: the response of Russian

stakeholders to the adoption of the 7th version of national standards for FSC, specifically acceptance in Russia's Northwest and a coordinated negative response by industry and state actors in the Far East. In-depth interviews were conducted to elicit actors' "understandings and sense-making efforts" (Soss, 2006, 132; see also Kvale, 1996). Longitudinal interview data on FSC certification in the Russian regions of Karelia, Arkhangelsk, and Komi, and internationally since 2002 and the Russian Far East since 2007 collected by the authors was used to provide context for this study. Data for this paper was drawn from more than 20 interviews with state, market, and nongovernmental actors in the Russian federal subjects of Primore, Khabarovsk, Irkutsk, and Karelia carried out by the authors in Fall 2011 and Summer 2015. The initial interview period in the Russian Far East coincided with an active and contentious debate about certification related to the shift from the 6th to the 7th version of Russian FSC standards. Documents from the FSC, regional governments, and forest companies were examined, including an analysis of FSC-Russia documents and meeting protocols, as well as local press around this issue. In 2013–2016, additional data was collected through participant observation in seven stakeholder meetings in the Far East and in FSC-Russia Board meetings, in addition to interviews with representatives of the FSC-Russia office in Moscow.

## 2. Theoretical framework

The certification of products as sustainably or ethically produced is a type of non-state market-driven governance that has received significant attention in studies of global environmental governance. Scholars focus on the emergence and institutionalization of new regulatory tools (Cashore et al., 2004; Boström and Gartsen, 2008) and have examined the expansion of forest certification specifically, considering when firms participate and why (Auld et al., 2008; Cashore et al., 2004; Galati et al., 2017). In addition, scholars study the institutionalization of global policies on the ground and the effectiveness of implemented standards (Malets, 2014; Carlsen et al., 2012; Tysiachniouk, 2012; Maletz and Tysiachniouk, 2009; Araujo et al., 2009; Espach, 2006). Emphasizing that certification is a form of private governance, early studies of the FSC tend to focus on the state only indirectly – in considering how certification may supplement, surpass, or reinforce state regulation (Gulbrandsen, 2004; Lister 2011). Still, a growing number of scholars have demonstrated how states create favorable or unfavorable conditions for private certification (Burns et al., 2016; Gulbrandsen, 2014; Bartley, 2003) and how private and state authority interact (Bartley, 2014; Espach, 2006), at times resulting in a ratchet effect in policy making (Overdevest, 2009). Recent work has shown that struggles for rule-making authority are continuous as different actors try to gain influence, and that the growth of certification can prompt state actors to reassert their authority in favor of state-led national schemes (Giessen et al., 2016).

We contribute to this scholarship by considering why responses to certification may vary regionally, even in the same federal regulatory environment, and by disaggregating "the state" in our analysis. The certification of forest products by the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) is a form of global private governance that emerged as a product of contestation and conflict among NGO representatives, stakeholders, forest industry actors, and state officials (Gale, 2014; Bartley, 2007; Cashore et al., 2006). With few exceptions, scholars tend to focus narrowly on one level of analysis: either on the development of FSC standards at international level, the response of domestic stakeholders, or the effectiveness of these standards on the ground. We offer an alternative analytical framework that emphasizes the global-local interplay of networked actors from FSC offices, industry, stakeholders, and the state as they use competing discourses to contend over the future of the FSC. Tysiachniouk and collaborators have synthesized several of these approaches within the concept of a "governance generating network" (GGN) (Tysiachniouk and McDermott, 2016; Tysiachniouk and Henry, 2015; Tysiachniouk, 2012). A GGN includes three elements:

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