Polyester producers increase use of Russian oil in 2023

Major fashion brands ignore Ukrainian misery and embroil customers in Russia’s war machine

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Some of the world’s largest polyester producers used more war-tainted oil in 2023 than ever before. Major fashion brands and retailers did little to cut ties to these producers, despite being warned about the problem a year ago, according to research by the non-profit Changing Markets Foundation.

Reliance Industries, which claims to be the world’s largest polyester producer, bought over half India’s total crude imports from Russia in early 2023, together with another firm, according to trade figures. In the same period India became the largest buyer of Russian seaborn crude oil. Reliance reportedly draws a third of its crude supply from Russia and has been upping those purchases. China also “gorged” on record volumes of cut-price Russian crude this year, with a significant share going to Hengli Petrochemical, which claims to be one of the world’s largest polyester producers. Both firms sell polyester to manufacturers that supply the largest fashion brands, including H&M, Inditex, New Look, Next, C&A and Zalando.

Fashion brands and retailers are ‘playing dumb’, Changing Markets says. It first alerted them to the problem a year ago. This November it followed up, asking 43 brands and retailers if they have taken steps to avoid Russia tainted polyester. It was met largely by silence. Only a quarter (11 companies) completed a questionnaire, the lowest response rate in years.

Among those staying silent are Patagonia, ASOS, Nike, GAP and Kering, firms that make prominent ethical or environmental claims.

Two firms, ESPRIT and G-Star Raw, told Changing Markets they have stopped using Russia-tainted polyester. Four others, Asda, C&A, Tesco, Zalando, said they do not know. H&M, C&A and Inditex also pleaded ignorance, but said they plan to stop using polyester from virgin oil within two to five years.

Ultra-fast fashion brand Shein ignored Changing Markets. It is reportedly teaming up with Reliance Retail, a subsidiary of Reliance Industries, in a re-entry to the Indian market. Polyester forms nearly two thirds (64%) of the material mix for Shein’s 10,000 products released daily. It is highly likely a significant share of these will be tainted by Russian oil, Changing Markets warned.

Hugo Boss did not respond on the Russian connection, but said it aims to phase-out polyester and nylon by 2030.
Changing Markets campaign manager Urska Trunk, said: “Fashion brands continue profiting from Ukrainian misery, despite us raising this with them a year ago. When you pull on polyester’s oily threads, they lead from Russia around sanctions and on to polyester makers and eventually into clothing stores. It was not hard for us to uncover this ugly truth, but the biggest brands continue to look the other way. Decades of textile scandals and still their own supply chains are a mystery to them. It is willful ignorance. Turning a blind eye to a brutal war waged by a nuclear armed tyrant is not a good look. We are calling on fashion again to clean up its act.”

Zero Waste Alliance Ukraine’s head of sustainability and circular economy, Anastasiia Martynenko, said: “As we head into a second year of the destructive war by Russia in Ukraine, it is shocking that these companies are still putting their profits above international law and climate targets. It is time they act with humanity, recognise the climate catastrophe we are facing and end their addiction to fossil fuels, starting with Russian oil and gas.”

Changing Markets also asked companies about polyester from coal, synthetic fibre phase-out, climate objectives and reporting. Fourteen firms said they are switching to polyester made from used PET bottles. This is a false solution, Changing Markets said, because it disrupts closed loop bottle recycling, continues to create microplastic pollution and most clothes from any form of polyester are discarded.

Polyester is the most widely used synthetic fibre, found in more than half (56%) of textiles and is synonymous with fast fashion. Cheap and disposable, synthetic clothing is a major source of waste and microplastic pollution. The textile sector is the third largest user of plastic and synthetic fibres account for 1.35% of all oil use, higher than the annual oil consumption of Spain.
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