



Making territory through infrastructure: The governance of natural gas transit in Europe



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ABSTRACT

Recent political and military events in Ukraine have brought into sharp focus concerns over the security of European gas supplies from Russia. At the same time, the creation of an infrastructural and political ‘energy union’ has become a key stated priority for the governing bodies of the European Union. Both contingencies have highlighted the 28-nation bloc’s dependence on energy sources well beyond its state boundaries, underpinned by the existence of a transnational network for the transport and distribution of natural gas. We develop a theoretical framework predicated upon assemblage and governance approaches to explore the regulatory practices and spatial features associated with this hitherto largely unexplored infrastructural realm. Qualitative evidence from interviews, policy documents and media reports is interrogated interpretively and with the aid of social network analysis techniques. The paper reveals the existence of a socio-technical assemblage for the transmission of natural gas across national boundaries emerging as a result of the erosion of decision-making power away from established state actors, and the rise of new institutional orders. While undermining the organizational arrangements that have traditionally dominated the European gas sector, these contingencies also challenge existing understandings of transnational energy governance as they apply to overland gas transit.

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1. Introduction

As evidenced by concerns over European gas supply as a result of the crisis in Ukraine (Goldthau and Boersma, 2014; Pirani et al., 2014), the policy challenges surrounding the transit of gas across national boundaries regularly attract high-profile political and media attention. In part, this can be attributed to the complex and contested nature of the relationships among infrastructure investment, low-carbon transition and energy security at the global scale. Social scientists are becoming increasingly involved in attempts to shed further light on the internal workings of transnational energy circulations, using an ever-expanding array of theoretical and methodological tools. Many discussions on the topic focus on the rising number of policy actors and geometries seen during the last decades, and the changing role of the state as a provider, regulator and owner of networked infrastructures. This has

been accompanied by a broader effort to interrogate the organizational and material aspects of socio-technical transitions, predicated by an understanding of governance systems as ‘complex and historically rooted “arenas” coevolving with the energy issues they address’ (Cherp et al., 2011, p. 75).

The European gas sector provides particularly fertile ground for such investigations, as a result of its economic and spatial idiosyncrasies. The European Union (hereafter EU) has been undertaking far-reaching processes of economic and regulatory liberalization aimed at creating common gas and electricity markets. More recently, this has been supplemented by efforts to create an ‘energy union’, which involves, among other goals, ensuring the security of supply and moving towards a low-carbon economy. Such initiatives have been unfolding against the systemic transformation of state and corporate structures responsible for the production, transmission, distribution and consumption of natural gas, spanning a wide range of geographical realms. They have been embedded in the specific material character of Europe’s energy demand, resource endowment and geographical configuration, whereby a large volume of the continent’s natural gas needs have to be met via overland gas pipelines.

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The circulations of power and political agency that are associated with the emergent geopolitical and economic reality created by gas sector restructuring in the European Union are poorly understood, especially when placed within the context of the wider movement towards a low-carbon economy and society (Bridge et al., 2013; Kama, 2014; Schmidt-Felzmann, 2011; Shaffer, 2013). Adding a further layer of complexity is the on-going global erosion of traditional state power, both towards transnational organizations and in the direction of regional and local actors. A burgeoning body of academic literature on the meanings and practices of ‘territory’ has emphasized the extensive spatial and political implications of the weakening of traditional forms of state authority (Agnew, 2005; Brenner, 2004; Newman, 2013). Some of the key contributions to this field have focused on the increasingly fluid and networked nature of territory, which can be organized around forces other than the state. Painter (2010, p. 1090) in particular, has opened the space for understanding territory as the outcome of ‘networked socio-technical practices’ and ‘a product of relational networks’. This kind of thinking has prompted Sassen (2013, p. 38) to claim that some of the critical components of current territorial authority are ‘no longer national in the strict sense of the term’ as they function in a larger operational space that involves new dynamics of debordering outside traditional state boundaries. Elsewhere, the heuristic of ‘geopolitical economy’ has been put forward as an entry point for challenging state-centric understandings of the spatial implications of transnational power relations, market transformation and capital flows (Desai, 2013; Le Billon, 2004; Sparke, 1998).

The now widely accepted notion that territory can be understood as a ‘political technology’ (Elden, 2010) is mirrored in studies of large socio-technical systems, where a multiplicity of theoretical perspectives have foregrounded the diverse agencies involved in the construction and functioning of infrastructure networks (Anderson et al., 2012; Bailey and Maresh, 2009; Furlong, 2011). Yet thinking on energy infrastructures and territory rarely communicate (although see Barry, 2013; Bridge et al., 2013); and when it comes to territorially bounded systems such as the European gas sector, these bodies of work have seldom entered into a dialog with the expanding body of literature on Europeanization as a multi-scalar territorial and ecological project (Bialasiewicz et al., 2005; Jensen and Richardson, 2003; Moisis et al., 2013).

In light of these lacunae and the policy context detailed above, this paper focuses on the manner in which the transport of natural gas across and within national boundaries allows for the rise of a specific territorial assemblage beyond the traditional boundaries of the nation state. The paper has three aims. First, we wish to uncover how regulatory practices in this domain have been historically embedded in the material geography of the European gas sector, otherwise constituted by the hybrid landscape of state authorities, corporate actors and transnational organizations (van der Vleuten et al., 2013; Yafimava, 2011). Second, and drawing upon insights from network governance (Bulkeley, 2005) and critical geopolitics (Dalby, 2010), we are interested in interrogating the political and state structures that allow for the emergence of a specific form of energy governance in the case of overland gas transit. Third, the paper examines the spatial configurations that reflect the ‘making of territory’ (Keating, 2013) via socio-technical assemblages. All three aims hinge upon a conceptual approach that emphasizes the complex spatial and political processes behind energy policy-making, so as to move beyond one-dimensional analyses solely dedicated to markets or ‘the state’ as relevant actors (Bradshaw et al., 2014).

In addition to a survey of the academic literature, the evidence presented in the paper is based on semi-structured ‘expert’

interviews with key informants¹ combined with a review of secondary documents, and social network analyses of contractual links between state and corporate actors in the European gas sector derived from officially published reports. Given the methodological advantages and shortcomings of social network analyses in the context of energy circulations (Allen, 2011; De Graaff, 2012; Marres and Rogers, 2008) these explorations serve to supplement the triangulation of evidence rather than provide a central heuristic tool. The paper commences with a theoretical interrogation of the relationship between energy governance and territory, aimed at highlighting the multiple existing and possible intersections of the two frameworks as well as the need to move beyond the ‘states vs. markets’ debate in energy governance. This is followed by an examination of the spatial and temporal underpinnings of natural gas development in Europe. The paper then examines the production of a specific pan-European natural gas transit assemblage thanks to (i) the emergence of new regulatory and governance mechanisms (ii) spatial connections that allow for the rise of transnational governance networks of gas. The conclusion of the paper points to the manner in which a new set of organizational and territorial relations are altering the circulation of natural gas across the European geopolitical and economic space, while challenging dominant understandings of energy governance as they apply to this sector.

2. The energy governance – territory nexus: disjointed, polysemic, multi-scalar

Understanding the relationship between governance theories and energy studies within territorial and infrastructural contexts that exceed the boundaries of the traditional nation state is complicated by the absence of a commonly accepted definition of the ‘governance’ concept. In part, this can be attributed to the theoretical pliancy of the term, which has been used to designate both the nature and typology of governing actors, as well as the roles and tasks that they undertake (Coutard, 2002). While some scholars think of governance as the purposeful activities of social, political or administrative bodies to ‘guide, steer, control or manage societies with authority’ (Seppo, 2004, p. 21) others emphasize the importance of political work within the established ‘choice of rules’ (Buchanan, 1975) such as advocacy activities, lobbying and clientelism. Overall, the ascendancy of the governance heuristic reflects the perceived increased role of civil society in influencing and shaping relations of power, as well as the dwindling monopoly of nation state governments in this domain. Also of relevance here is the role of globalization processes, and changes in management practice and theoretical knowledge brought about by the broader conceptual movement towards a relational notion of government.

The multiple political and material dimensions of energy flows in society have regularly attracted the interest of governance researchers (Kerebel and Kepler, 2009 provide an analysis of this relationship in the European context; for a review of the strategic rules surrounding oil governance see Mommer, 2000). One of the key advantages of governance frameworks in this context lies, as noted by Coutard (2002) in its ‘polysemic’ nature with respect to analyses of large technical systems, including energy: both broad-level political and economic issues can be covered within the same framework, in addition to more specific questions

¹ Including 9 interviews with decision makers in various EU institutions and national governments, 4 interviews with company representatives, and 2 interviews with third sector organizations. The interviews lasted between 1 and 2 h. Interviewees were selected so as to ensure the widest possible representation among relevant decision-making bodies, and were approached initially via email. The professional affiliation and personal identities of the interviewees are not disclosed in this paper for ethical purposes, and most of them have not been directly cited in the paper due to constraints on space.

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