



The framing of unconventional natural gas resources in the foreign energy policy discourse of the Russian Federation

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HIGHLIGHTS

- We examine the image of “unconventional gas” in Russian foreign energy policy discourse.
- Two main frames (reliable supplier and triumphant natural gas) were identified.
- Two main argumentation schemes (economic and environmental) were identified.
- The “unconventional gas” is defined as a mistaken and inferior source of energy.

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 25 November 2013

Received in revised form

15 February 2014

Accepted 4 April 2014

Keywords:

Unconventional natural gas resources

Russian Federation

Foreign energy policy

ABSTRACT

The advent of unconventional resources of natural gas has altered the order on global as well as continental gas markets. With rising liquidity, the position of established dominant suppliers is eroding. We focus on the initial response of Russia, the leading supplier of natural gas to Europe, to the new situation, building the research on unit-level constructivism and discourse analysis. We use frame analysis to reveal what image of unconventional resources was constructed in Russian foreign energy policy discourse (FEPD) in the period between 2009 and 2011, when the “unconventional revolution” did not yet have any sharp contours. We conclude that in Russian FEPD the unconventional resources are considered as a distinctive and inferior source of energy compared to conventional natural gas. Emphasis is put on their economic irrationality and environmental hazards. The bottom line of the discourse is the idea that there is a choice between conventional and unconventional sources, with this choice being framed as one between good and bad, or right and wrong.

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1. Introduction

The recent disappearance of the U.S. market from the global LNG trade has re-routed LNG flows towards Europe and Asia. Hence, the conventional gas suppliers who had dominated the three continental markets until 2005 are now under significant pressure from both commodity-to-commodity and gas-to-gas competitors. Their initial reactions varied—on the North American market, many majors and independents have acquired small companies pioneering the extraction techniques or have pursued their own projects in order to cut out as large a chunk of the unconventional production as possible. Acquisitions made by

Chesapeake in the last five years may serve as a good example. Meanwhile, Qatar has kept confident about the firmness of the Sales and Purchase Agreements it signed mostly with its Asian buyers (Kanady, 2012), and on the European front, Moscow long hesitated before it publicly admitted the very existence of this challenge (Khvostunova, 2013).

This article aims to evaluate the initial stages of formation of the Russian position towards the new sources. The following text examines the framing of the unconventional gas resources (UNG) in the foreign energy policy discourse of the Russian Federation. The article deals with the following central research question:

How are the UNG framed in the foreign energy policy discourse of the Russian Federation in years 2009–2011?

Utilizing the concept of foreign energy policy, we build on the work of Balmaceda (2013, pp. 61–93), Liuhto (2010), or Shadrina (2010). We define foreign energy policy (FEP) in accordance with Shadrina (2010): p. 14 as “a system of views on the content, principles and main areas for energy cooperation with other

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countries.” The foreign energy policy discourse (FEPD) is then understood as a particular social representation of FEP that is shaped by texts and talks (see Fairclough, 2000). The research is exploratory oriented, since we do not account for framing effects, i.e. the consequences that specific frames have for actors’ identities and actions, nor for frame-building processes, i.e. the interplays of actors and actor-structure interactions which give rise to specific frames (see Vliegthart and Van Zoonen, 2011). The analytical focus is thus not on “why a particular outcome was obtained,” but rather how these discursive structures are socially constructed (see Doty, 1993). The objective of the article is to show how the “UNG issue” is framed in a given discourse.

2. Literature review

Current literature dealing with Russian energy policy is divided into two branches according to different ontological assumptions. It can be argued that the vast majority of existing research is theoretically embedded in ontologically materialistic geopolitical (For example: Ebel, 2009; Petersen and Barysch, 2011; Zhiznin, 2010) or market approaches (For example: Binhack and Tichý, 2012; Černoch et al., 2011; Finon and Locatelli, 2008; Noël, 2008).

Literature grounded in ideational ontology is traditionally concerned with concepts such as “identity” (Brooks and Wohlforth, 2006; Williams and Neumann, 2000), the “search for international recognition” (Tsygankov, 2006; Neumann, 1996) mediated by domestic perceptions and debates (Tsygankov and Tarver-Wahlquist, 2009), the Russian “place in the World” (Light, 2003), or the nature of “relations with the West” (Tsygankov, 2006) and how they are perceived by the Russian citizens (O’Loughlin, 2000). Energy analyses building on ideational ontology also exist, although they are considerably less common. Shadrina (2010), for instance, demonstrates how the Russian behavioral pattern towards different regional partners shifted in order to be perceived as a more “reliable, mature, or businesslike partner.” Kortunov (1998) analyzes mutual perceptions of Russia and Central Asian states in order to map Russian endeavors to “unlock Central Asian and Caucasian energy assets.” Monaghan (2007), in turn, focuses on what the “Energy Superpower” status stems from, and questions the popular notion of Russia holding such status. Kratochvíl and Tichý (2013) explore the dominant interpretations of the EU–Russian energy relations by using discourse analysis.

With regards to shale gas, materialistically grounded texts dominate the current literature. They mostly deal with issues such as the impact of shale gas on North American, European, and Asian gas markets and consequently on Russian market share outlook (Actagon Research Institute, 2013; Melling, 2010; Medlock et al., 2011), or they elaborate on the likely development of emerging global LNG market under the new circumstances (Rogers, 2012; KPMG, 2011; Jaffe and O’Sullivan, 2012). Some also combine what are possibly the two biggest threats Gazprom faces now: the European Commission legal probe and shale gas development, to see where the company might find itself in the months and years to come (Sartori, 2013; Riley, 2012; The Economist, 2013).

Ideationally grounded literature on this matter is at the moment practically non-existent. To a limited extent it is covered by Aalto (2010) who argues that the change Russian energy sector is likely going to undergo in the near future is a part of a bigger (energy) paradigm shift stemming from the clash between material forces represented by path dependency and inertia in usage of fossil fuels and ideational forces represented by political and societal efforts to develop a more harmless energy industry. His structuralist article nevertheless only scratches the surface of the phenomenon. The research on Russian perception and/or framing

of shale gas is still out there to be done. Commentary on particular statements of various actors of Russian energy policy and industry can be found in both Russian (ITAR-TASS, 2013) and Western (Kravchenko and Shiryayevskaya, 2013) media, but their overall image remains scattered and incomplete. The work done by Khvostunova (2013) is so far closest to what could have been done on the issue. Unfortunately, the publishers’ format did not allow her to build a more robust analysis on solid theoretical and methodological foundations.

3. Theory

In accordance with Wendt’s (1999) constructivism, we assume that social world is chiefly “made of and driven by ideas.” These ideational structures shape actor’s social identities, thus forming their beliefs and interests and consequently their behavior. The structures are at the same time reproduced as emergent products of routinized actors’ interactions (Searle, 1995). Complementary to Wendt (1999) who is primarily interested in the systemic level of analysis, we focus on the domestic level drawing on “unit-level” constructivism¹ literature (especially Hopf, 2002; Weldes, 1996). Katzenstein et al. (1996) made a strong case for inclusion of the “unit-level” factors when focusing on domestic social and legal norms enabled the explanation of variation of identity, interest and action across states (Reus-Smit, 2005: p. 200). Hopf (2002, p. 22), argues that foreign policy actors’ identities are largely construed domestically and understanding of other states is consequently possible only through the actor’s self-understanding. Similarly Weldes (1996, p. 280), maintains that policy makers can engage in international politics only due to concepts which arise from the meanings produced in their domestic context. An actor’s ability to imagine certain courses of action is thus possible only because certain kinds of social actors and relationships, background meanings, metaphors and analogies, such as the “Russian threat,” “the bridge between the East and West,” or the “Cold War” are already present in a given “cultural stock” and carry a specific (and negotiated) meaning (Doty, 1993: p. 298; Weldes, 1996: p. 284). Hopf (2002, p. 6), uses the concept of social cognitive structure which “establishes the boundaries of discourse within a society” and is created by competing discursive formations. This situatedness within the interrelated discursive formations then shapes actors’ understanding of themselves as well as Others.

This line of reasoning is consistent with well-developed constructivist variants of frame analysis (For example: Entman, 1993, 2003; Goffman, 1974; Johnston, 1995; Steinberg, 1998; for a conceptual overview, see Scheufele and Iyengar, 2011; Van Gorp, 2007). The process of articulation², i.e. the construction of temporarily fixed meanings by establishing chains of connotations among different linguistic elements, as described by Weldes (1996, p. 284), is close to the central idea behind the concept of frame. Snow and Benford (1992: p. 137) define a frame as “an interpretative schemata that signifies and condenses the ‘world out there’ by selectively punctuating and encoding objects, situations, events, experiences, and sequences of action in one’s present or past environment.” Entman (2003, p. 417), offers a widely accepted conceptualization of framing: “Framing entails selecting and highlighting some facets of events or issues, and making connections

¹ Reus-Smit (2005): p. 200 defines the unit-level constructivism as the inverse of systemic constructivism. Instead of focusing on external, international domain, unit-level constructivists concentrate on domestic factors, i.e. the very factors which are bracketed by Wendt.

² The following part of this process involves the interpellation of the subjects. Specifically, a particular social identity is taken up from a nexus of social relations. Different identities then correspond with different representations of the world and consequently with different interests (Weldes, 1996: pp. 287–289).

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