Energy and identity: imagining nations through hydrocarbon flows

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Abstract

The relationship between energy systems, on the one hand, and narratives and practices of identity building at different scales, on the other, has received little attention in the mainstream human geography and social science literature. There is still a paucity of integrated theoretical insights into the manner in which energy formations are implicated in the rise of particular cultural self-determinations, even though various strands of work on energy and identity are frequently present throughout the wide—and rather disparate—corpus of social science energy research.

Therefore, this paper explores the manner in which the exploitation and management of energy resources is woven into discourses and debates about national identity, international relations, as well as a nation’s path of future development and its significance on the global arena in the case of Russia. We investigate some of the policies, narratives and discourses that accompany the attempt to represent this country as a global “energy superpower” in relation to the resurrection of its domestic economy and material prosperity, on the one hand, and the restoration of its global status as a derzhava (or “Great Power”), on the other. Using ideas initially developed within the field of critical discourse analysis, we pay special attention to the state-building role played by geographical imaginations about the country’s past and present energy infrastructural links with, and hydrocarbon exports to, neighboring states.

Introduction

Human geographers—and social scientists more generally—are becoming increasingly interested in the political dimensions of energy flows at different scales, partly thanks to the expanding body of research into the “ongoing global, yet highly differentiated, struggle for sustainability against the hegemony of fossil fuels” (Jiusto 2009, 535). There is a growing theoretical recognition that the politics of energy conversions and circulations are central to the operation of contemporary societies, involving the embedding of a wide array of power relations, institutional regulations, and collective decisions (Jones 1979; Nye 1999; Högselius 2006; Klare 2008). The competing global interests of different nations, expressed through the geopolitical relations underlying international energy flows and exchanges—especially hydrocarbons—have received particular attention in this regard, not the least due to their ramifications on a much broader array of state policies, behaviors and decisions (see, for example, Carmody 2007, Bradshaw 2009). Even though a great deal remains to be done in terms of integrating the scholarship in this field into a coherent set of epistemologies, there is little doubt that the spatialities of energy politics are gradually moving out of the margins in social science.

One of the domains that has received comparatively less attention in this context, however, is the manner in which energy systems shape, and are shaped by, narratives and practices of identity building at different scales. This links into a broader deficiency of scholarship regarding the multiple social and cultural interdependencies between energy and identity per se. While it is widely recognized that notions of belonging and territorial affiliation are mediated, inter alia, through the realities—material as well as imagined—of energy infrastructure networks and projects (Frankel 1981; Hughes 1993; Banerjee 2003), there is a palpable lack of clear conceptual frameworks for understanding the manner in which energy formations are implicated in processes of territorially-bound cultural self-determination. Even though work on energy and identity is implicitly present throughout the wide corpus of social science energy research, it has not been theorized through an explicit conceptual lens. This is particularly true when one considers the growing literature on the geopolitics of energy, where issues of identity construction are ever-present but have rarely been linked to contemporary geographical debates regarding the production of discourse, imagination and scale. As a result, the mechanisms through which state-level actors create particular visions of national identity with the aid of, and in relation to, energy infrastructure, remain largely unexamined.
In order to address these gaps, this paper explores some of the ways in which the exploitation, management and transport of energy resources is woven into discourses and debates about a nation’s identity, its image of its significance on the global arena and its visions of its own future development. As a case study we draw on evidence gathered in Russia, which occupies a very special geopolitical position with respect to the flows of hydrocarbon-derived energy from the resource-rich areas of the former Soviet Union to the resource-poor regions of Western and Central Europe, and Eastern Asia. The paper investigates the discourses that accompany the attempt to represent Russia as a global “energy superpower” and the relationship of the energy superpower image to Putinist concerns with the resurrection of Russia’s domestic economy, on the one hand, and the restoration of its global status as a derzhava (or “Great Power”), on the other. By examining some of the public debates around these issues, it aims to shed further light on the interaction between the discursive geopolitical spaces of “energy superpower” and the Russia’s real-existing energy landscapes. In particular, we are interested in role played by energy in geopolitical visions about the country’s past and present links with neighboring states in the post-Soviet space, in what is commonly termed the blizhnee zarubezhe or “Near Abroad”.

Although we are aware of the complex controversies involving identity formation per se (see Wenger 1998; Butler 1999), restrictions on space do not allow for a full discussion of these issues. Consequently, the bulk of the paper focuses on the attempt to build “discourse coalitions” (Bulkeley 2000) in order to further the aspiration’s of Russia’s Putinist elite to achieve global and regional hegemony via the strategic use of energy resources and flows. The tenets of “critical discourse analysis” (Fairclough 1995; 2001; 2005) have proven particularly useful in this regard, especially thanks to its systematic overview of the different ways in which power struggles are produced and reproduced through texts, practices and socio-political events. We have also partially relied on Leigh Star’s (1999) claim that infrastructure is “learned as part of membership” via the operation of particular organizational arrangements. Before exploring the specifics of the energy superpower discourse, however, we would like briefly to outline some of the principal ways in which theorizations of energy technologies and flows have engaged with the politics of identity formation at different scales.

Connecting energy, discourse and identity: an uncharted field
Although geographers and other social scientists have written remarkably little about the representational underpinnings of energy infrastructures as it relates to national identity formation, these themes have received greater attention in several strands of work within the field of history and sociology of science. Much of this scholarship highlights the different ways in which the past development of networked energy infrastructures has been contingent upon the articulation of particular political narratives and socio-technical projects (see, for example, Hughes 1983; Star 1999; Graham and Marvin 2001). In particular, investigations of the histories and politics of electrification in the developed world emphasize the importance of “communities of practice” in the electricity industry’s diffusion of meaning and identity across various geographical contexts (Wenger 1998). This has helped to affirm the role played by political and social contexts in the development of technological frames. Conceptualizations of the relationship between energy and social change have thus been enriched with an improved understanding of the multiplicity of political practices, world views, and cultural understandings that are implicated in the expansion and development of energy technologies (Frankel 1981; Dooley 2006; Montgomery 2010).

Historical insights into the expansion of electricity infrastructure in the developed world during the first part of the twentieth century provide some of the most vivid illustrations of the extensive symbolic and cultural ramifications of energy technology diffusion on the development of urban and regional landscapes. One example would be the extensive body of work in this field (e.g. Nasaw 1992) which highlights the “decisive impact” of electric lighting on “the psychogeography of urban space” (McQuire 2005). It is argued that electric illumination helped forge a particular sense of identity and self-recognition in American and European cities, thanks to its central role in the newly-created phantasmagoria of urban architectural sublimes at the onset of early modernity. But the ability of electrification to generate meaning and mould the national consciousness expands beyond its visible, material significance in everyday cityscapes. In Russia, for instance, the symbolic messages embodied in government-led mass electrification projects—embodied in Lenin’s historic credo that “Communism is equal to Soviet power plus the electrification of the entire country”, prominently displayed on the central power station in Moscow—served as state’s primary technological and political “instrument for modernizing the country” (Banerjee 2003, 49).
Nye’s (1990) seminal exploration of the social and cultural implications of early twentieth-century electrification in America emphasizes that the spatial implications of this process were “culturally determined, as Americans used the flexibility of electrical power to atomize society rather than integrate it” (p. 384). He contrasts the American experience, where electricity led to the rise of individualism—since it was implicated in the rejection of “centralized communal services in favor of personal control over less efficient but autonomous appliances” (ibid)—with the Danish one, where “communities have built large power stations that use steam turbines to generate electricity and then pump the resulting boiling water through underground water to heat businesses and homes”. Nye (1990) also suggests that cogeneration in this form has the “secondary effect of binding the community more tightly together” and is the product of a technological style that has grown out of Danish society’s “ethnic and cultural homogeneity and its commitment to broadly shared social services” (ibid). The Danish experience is juxtaposed with the abandonment of district heating in America as a result of the dominance of private utilities in its energy sector, otherwise predicated on the prioritization of the market and individual enterpreneurship.

Glaser (1999) takes some of these debates outside the traditional urban context, pointing out that “rural communities in America maintained their sense of identity and place by accessing electricity in ways that allowed them to integrate these changes on their own terms” (p. 12).

The relationships between identity formation and energy networks are also clearly evident in the organizational and procedural capacities associated with national politics and decision-making regarding the construction and expansion of energy supply technologies (Jones 1979; Sahr 1985; Gamson and Modigliani 1989). Nuclear power provides a classic illustration of some of the ways in which “mega energy ideas”, requiring centralized, national-scale and corporate-led control networks have been advanced in relation to energy technologies (Byrne and Toly 2006). Thus, Jasanoff and Kim (2009) use the notion of “sociotechnical imaginaries” to explore state responses to nuclear shocks, challenges and the spread of the anti-nuclear movement in Korea and the United States. They underline that “although nuclear power and nationhood have been imagined together in both countries since the beginning of the atomic age, the nature of those imaginations has remained strikingly unlike” (p. 121). In the United States, “the state represents itself as a responsible regulator of a potentially runaway technology that demands effective containment, while delegating the task of development and promotion to the private sector” (ibid). At the same time, South Korea “retains responsibility not just for regulation but also for the development of nuclear power...
through a logic of self-reliance”. Both of these approaches, they argue, reflect different national imaginaries that “have the power to influence technological design, channel public expenditures, and justify the inclusion or exclusion of citizens with respect to the benefits of technological progress” (p. 120). A similar claim has been advanced in relation to large-scale hydropower dams, which, to cite Byrne and Toly (2006, 1) represent an “attempt at a technofix of the democratic-authoritarian variety”, by integrating a “continued commitment to the promises, prospects and perils of the conventional energy regime and its social project”.

It is worth noting that the incorporation of identity narratives and meanings in the articulation of energy technologies is not limited to state-led projects aimed at harnessing natural resources. A wide sociological literature—otherwise poorly connected with the broader field of energy studies as such—focuses on the symbolic meanings created, appropriated, and communicated through the consumption of energy. One of the largest bodies of research in this domain pertains to the social and cultural implications of automobile ownership, which has gradually come to embody combinations of meanings that were previously not associated with this technology (see Kurani et al. 1996; 2006; Gjøen and Hård 2002; Yavuz 2006; Heffner et al. 2007; Turrentine and Kurani 2007; Luedicke et al. 2010).

Debates and narratives about the cultural significance of energy consumption patterns often have a normative dimension to them, since, as argued by Perelman (1989), the “coming transition” to sustainable energy will entail a “radical transformation” in the “theory, philosophy, values and goals that define the direction of social behavior” (p. 392). Many authors working in this vein emphasize the need for appreciating the existence of multiple identities in the process of environmental governance, in order to move decision-making from “technical reason to political reason” while exploring deliberation and participation in politics as a way of “extending the public sphere” and providing a “normative basis of democracy” (Murphy 2007, 7). The role of environmental world views in the formation of the attitudes, values, and assumptions that underpin public preferences is a frequent theme in this literature (Kuhn 2008), as is the importance of scale and participation in alternative policy commitments to energy (Morrison and Lodwick 1981).

In response to the biopolitics of personal identity associated with the policy drive towards enacting energy efficiency and decarbonization measures at the scale of the home and household (see, for instance, Lovell 2008), Potter (2009) claims that the emphasis on the
“individual as an agent of self-monitoring” allows the facilitation of government agendas at a distance. Self-policing measures such as energy meters, carbon accounting and the retrofitting of energy efficient technologies in the domestic domain thus shift “previously private practices into a public realm of countability and accountability”. The ontological fixity—and rather peculiar territorialization of energy security—brought about by the notion of the “carbon footprint” that often underpins such developments, she argues, brings into light the multiple intersections and entanglements of life politics created by decarbonization discourses. However, such a radical theoretically-grounded perspective on climate change, energy security and personal identity is rare in the academic literature on the subject, which is full of technocentric evaluations of the comparative strengths and weaknesses of various policy options (see, for example, Hillman et al. 2007).

Goldblatt (2005) also charts the identity underpinnings of the evolving discourse on sustainable consumption. However, rather than looking at the scale of the individual, he focuses on the differences among different nations in the instigation of a institutional framework to create an international environmental agenda with respect to issues such as global warming: “politically speaking sustainable consumption is in its origins essentially a Southern concern or at least the product of Southern assertiveness. Its unpopularity and relatively marginal presence on Northern national agendas reflects a continued resistance to a politically threatening issue” (p. 11). As such, his work has helped highlight the manner in which concerns about the social and environmental implications of energy use are bound up with national politics and cultural self-determination. The interdependence between energy and identity in this context becomes even more apparent in the case of the often conflicting relationship between green politics and nationalism in Europe and America (Hamilton 2002; King 2007; Galbreath and Auers 2009; Kopeček 2009) as well as the cultural underpinnings of global deliberations and discourses about environmental policy per se (Smith 2002; Dryzek 2005).

Walker and Cass (2007) point to the discursive basis of the modes of renewable energy implementation, thus opening the path for a consideration of the ideologies and narratives of energy transition. This is already a field in which significant work has been done, particularly with respect to the different representations of climate change (Boykoff 2007). One of the earliest and most thought-provoking contributions in this area was provided by Cohen et al. (1998) who have emphasized that climate change discourses in the developed world are
characterized by a reductionist logic based on a technical and instrumental rationality, in addition to moral-liberal politics. The discursive production of current energy transitions has been explored by authors such as Smith and Kern (2009), who underline the contradictory political and institutional contexts in which socio-technical change takes place.

Narratives and representations of energy relations are no less central to the geopolitical articulation of international energy flows. This is demonstrated, for example, by the manner in which different geographical imaginations and displays of technological superiority have been used to legitimize territorial claims on the Arctic seabed (Jessup 2008). In The European context, discourses relating to the construction of a new Baltic undersea pipeline linking Russia and Germany (also known as “Nord Stream”) have been used as a conduit for the articulation of particular national identity narratives and energy network development visions (Bouzarovski and Konieczny 2010). Despite being an imaginary object—the pipeline still only exists on the drawing boards held by its managing company, based in Switzerland—Nord Stream has managed to project itself into the material landscapes of the Baltic region through a variety of associated infrastructural undertakings (LNG Terminals, nuclear power stations, high voltage power lines) which have drawn their legitimacy from the discourses of fear associated with it. In Poland, the prospect of the pipeline has been refracted through a range of national imaginaries about the country’s alleged victimization at the hand of neighboring great powers: local politicians have publicly dubbed the project a ‘geopolitical disaster’ and a ‘Russian-German conspiracy’ (MosNews, 2005) (Bouzarovski and Konieczny 2010).

The question as to how and whether these “heterogeneous entanglements” (Bouzarovski 2010) of energy, discourse and identity can be extended to the social, technical and spatial imaginaries associated with the attempt to represent identity building and energy relations among and within nation states, however, remains open. In particular, there is a need to investigate the manner in which different conceptions of nationhood and international politics have been implicated in this process. On, then, to the Russian case.

**Context and origins of the “superpower” discourse**

The key underlying feature that defines the energy relations between Russia and most of its neighboring states is the massive hydrocarbon resource endowment of the former, vs. the
energy import dependence of the latter. Russia contains approximately 35.4 and 4.5 per cent of the world’s proven gas and oil reserves, respectively, despite being rather sparsely inhabited, at approximately 8.5 persons per square kilometer (CIA 2008). It lies adjacent to some of the most populous regions of the world—Western Europe and East Asia—which themselves lack indigenous hydrocarbon resources despite rising levels of domestic energy demand. The dramatic spatial differential between the two geographical realms provides the main supporting factor for Russia’s dominant role as an energy exporter with respect to some of its neighboring countries. This is especially true in the case of the European Union, which is dependent on Russia for approximately a quarter of its gas and oil alike (Euractiv, 2010), partly as a result of the infrastructural legacies of Soviet domination in Eastern Europe: an array of infrastructural and economic policies allowed Soviet Communism to create a spatial and technical fix that cemented the import dependence of its East European satellite states (Bouzarovski, 2009).

Although Russia’s energy assertiveness in Eastern Europe and the Caspian region thus has a long historical record (see, for instance, O’Lear 2004; Laurila 2003), it has only been in the last decade—since Vladimir Putin’s ascension to power—that this dependence has taken on a particular political connotation. Over the eight years of his presidency, Putin’s political vision crystallized into a cluster of doctrines which have come to be called—awkwardly but quite aptly—Putinism (Migranyan 2004, Whitmore 2007; Beichman 2007; Rahn 2007; Aron 2008). The overriding priority was to reverse the decline which the country had undergone over the preceding decade and re-establish Russia’s national greatness. This project of revival involved two dimensions: the resurrection of Russia’s domestic economy and material prosperity on the one hand and the restoration of its global status as a derzhava or Great Power on the other. From the beginning, moreover, Putin was convinced that these ambitious goals could only be achieved on the material basis of the country’s energy sector. In the course of his PhD research in the 1990s he gained a specialist knowledge of the energy industry, and from his first days in office he made his views on its critical importance to Russia’s future development quite clear (Putin 2000; Putin 2005).

It was not until mid-decade, however, that an ideological formula was found which captured Putinism’s belief in the existential dependency of Russia’s national revival on the development of the energy sector. This was the novel concept of Russia as an energeticheskaia sverkhderzhava, or energy superpower (a formulation that had already been
used for some years by Western commentators, see Hill 2002, Hill 2004). In its Putinist version, the energy superpower concept was proposed by the energy analyst and Putin minion Dmitrii Orlov (Orlov 2006a; Orlov 2006b), and it quickly caught on to become one of the most recognizable catchwords of Putinism (Irgunov 2006; Kokoshin 2006; Leont’ev 2006). It was enthusiastically taken up by leading ideologues of the regime, not least of all the influential director of the National Energy Security Foundation Konstantin Simonov, who provided the most comprehensive elaboration of the concept in a book-length manifesto simply entitled *Energy Superpower* (Simonov 2006).

The conviction that energy represents a *conditio sine qua non* for Russia’s healthy national development in the twenty-first century insures that in all of its manifestations—as a natural resource, an industrial activity, a commercial transaction, and a subject of international relations—the energy superpower discourse is implicated in an assortment of fundamental questions relating to contemporary Russia’s domestic affairs, its global profile, and its national identity and destiny (Saivetz 2007; Rutland 2008). As it turns out, these patterns of implication are in and of themselves quite revealing of the complex and in certain respects contradictory aspirations for Russia’s future development associated with the Putin project (Legvold 2008). While for the most part energy has strongly positive associations—logically reflecting the immense material wealth and political capital which it represents—it paradoxically has negative evocations as well, which help bring out the insecurities and ambivalences that color Russia’s preoccupation with its national future.

The re-attainment of *derzhava* involves above all the reestablishment of Russia’s former status as a global political power. While this is understood most immediately in terms of the global profile of the Soviet superpower after 1945—in 2005 Putin famously declared that the collapse of the USSR was the “greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century” (“Putin deplores collapse of the USSR”, 2005)—the aspiration for *derzhava* had been a prime motivating factor in imperial Russian attitudes and policy since the eighteenth century, and this historical legacy plays an important role in Putin’s vision for Russia’s future. In the present day, however, it is Russia’s potential as an energy producer and supplier that can transform the aspiration into a reality, to the extent that a new Russian global superpower must be precisely an “energy superpower”. As Simonov explained in the introductory pages of his text,
“Every person wants to live in a great country. Citizens of the Russian Federation are no exception to this. Many people call on us to abandon our ambitious plans, to make peace with the fate of a small state, to whose opinion the rest of the world has no need to pay attention .. But in our case this is hardly possible, if only for the reason that the largest country in the world in territorial terms cannot remain at the periphery of world politics. We want our country’s voice to be weighty and significant ..”

We need projects, he continues, that will allow us “to pull Russia by its hair out of the swamp, and return it to its former status.” And in order to achieve this, Russia must develop its competitive advantages precisely as an energy superpower. This is not merely an plan for economic development and national enrichment, he emphasizes, but also a “vital geopolitical task for the country, the solution of which could [help us] regain our lost status and with it our role in global political processes” (Simonov 2006, 5, 6). As an energy superpower, Russia would necessarily be at the very heart of a new global regime of energy security, in which capacity it would act as the leading guarantor of international development and stability (Simonov 2006, 22, 13).

If the determination to re-establish the country’s global pre-eminence draws on a traditional national mindset, then Russia’s principal opponent in this quest is identified in traditional terms as well. It is the “West”—i.e. Western Europe (more specifically the EU) together with the United States. From the perspective of Putinism, the end of the Cold War failed overcome the endemic hostility of the West to Russia. Indeed, the former understood the collapse of the Soviet Union rather as the decisive defeat of a long-standing enemy, and has been playing a victors’ game ever since, treating Russia disdainfully as a subjugated client or satellite and insisting that it must now uncritically adopt the political institutions and civilizational values of its conquerors. The discourse thus maintains that Russia must resist these pressures today as it has in the past, by asserting its autonomy and sovereignty. Its new-found potential as an energy superpower provides the vital basis for this, enabling Russia not merely to maintain its independence, but more fundamentally to rewrite the rules of the game. Russia’s current role as the EU’s primary supplier of fossil-fuel energy puts it in an unprecedented position of authority and power. By refusing to allow the West to dictate the conditions and rules of the game—for example by not signing the Energy Charter of the EU—Russia can resist European attempts to manipulate international energy flows and the operation of energy markets (Veletminskii 2006).
Geographical imaginaries and national identity politics: the role of energy in Russian relations with neighboring states

The Putinist discourse of energy superpower maintains that Russia’s energy resources provide an opportunity for it to reshape balances of power on a global scale. Although Russia currently directs much of its fossil fuels toward the West, there is no inherent need for it to indulge in this preferential “Eurocentrism”, for there are rich and beckoning markets in Asia as well (Simonov 2006, 131). The improvement of Russia’s political and diplomatic relations with these regions was an important and highly visible aspect of Putin’s international strategy from the outset, and Russia’s energy potential plays a vital role in this endeavor. The Russian energy sector could provide the basis for a “strategic triangle”, in other words an anti-Western block between Russia and the up-and-coming—and energy-hungry—powers India and China (Buszynski 2006, Pant 2006). “A union of the bear, the elephant, and the dragon could become a real nightmare for the West” observes Simonov (1997, 131, 138).

The rapid growth of the economies of China and India suggest that there will be insufficient energy resources for these leading global powers. This insures that the struggle between the USA and China (or more broadly, between the USA and the EU on the one hand and India and China on the other hand) for world domination will be highly oriented toward energy. In these terms, energy becomes the supreme strategic weapon, for once a competitor is denied the energy resources it needs for its development, “the geopolitical struggle is won.” The position of China is particularly dramatic in this regard, insofar as without a guaranteed supply of fossil fuels its very survival is doomed. In view of these circumstances, “Russia’s significance is sharply enhanced. The development of the global political process depends on its decision as to which direction to send its oil and gas” (Simonov 2006, 10; emphasis in original).

The great-power aspirations of Putinism are refracted regionally as well, through the relationship of Russia (as the Russian Federation) to the “Near Abroad”. The breakup of the Soviet Union into sovereign independent states shattered the geopolitical unity of the traditional space of Russian imperial state, over which Russians had exercised authority for many centuries. It is thus unsurprising that the project of resurrecting Russia’s great-power status is linked in principle to reestablishing Russia’s dominating position within this space.
Once again, energy in its various manifestations is directly implicated in this striving for regional hegemony. Ironically, the deployment of energy in this manner today depends on a material infrastructure and set of relationships developed in the Soviet period for the very different purposes of integrated and “balanced” economic development. Thus, although newly-independent states such as Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, or Azerbaijan have become major energy producers in their own right, they remain dependent on the old Soviet pipeline infrastructure—based largely on Russian territory and under Russian control—in order to export their products. This dependency of the post-Soviet periphery on the Russian center can also be seen in the patterns of reliance of Ukraine, Belarus, Georgia, Armenia and other states on Russia for their energy supplies that carry over from Soviet times. Significantly, however, Russian dominance is now challenged by the fact that Russia’s energy exports to Europe make heavy use of pipelines running across the territory of certain newly-independent states and thus subject to their jurisdiction.

In view of all this, the energy superpower discourse is emphatic in its insistence on the imperative for Russia to reassert its “historical rights” and prerogatives over the spaces of the former Soviet Union. On the highest diplomatic levels, this can be legitimated in the benign terms of a natural primordial fraternity and “commonality” (obshchnost’) between the Russians and the other post-Soviet nations—a rhetoric which not insignificantly had long found an echo in the Eurasiaism that serves as official state doctrine in Kazakhstan (Kokoshin 2006; Nazarbaev 1996). For most commentators, however, these sorts of rationalizations are dismissed in favor of more hard-headed assertions of exclusive Russian national interest. The establishment of Russian control over the energy infrastructures of the former Soviet Union is a vital “step toward achieving energy superpower status” affirmed Dmitrii Orlov. He describes this as a matter of Realpolitik which cannot be achieved through idle “conversations about ‘Slavic brotherhood’ [between Russia, Ukraine and Belarus’] and ‘historical commonality’” (Orlov 2006a; Markedonov 2006). Simonov comes down yet more firmly on this point. “Russia should clearly indicate its political interests in Central Asia…and in the European parts of post-Soviet space, because these territories are critical” if Russia is to achieve the sort of leading position on world energy resource markets that it seeks. Specifically, this involves Russian control over the pipelines which deliver its supplies to European markets “even if they run through the territory of neighboring states,” together with “political domination” over Central Asia. “If we are to call things by their real names,
this is one of the necessary conditions if Russia is to become an energy superpower” (Simonov 2006, 9, 71, 26).

It is well appreciated that Russia’s great-power ambitions cannot be met without a thorough overhaul of the decrepit industrial infrastructure and organization inherited from the Soviet Union. Thus—and again echoing a theme that has been part of Russian thinking about national development for over two centuries—the project of economic and industrial modernization forms a central part of Putin’s vision. As part of this, energy is invoked as a vital and necessary foundation. The point is highly contentious, to be sure, and influential voices within the political opposition argue precisely the opposite, namely that the excessive reliance on a single resource, however valuable, will ultimately work to distort and undermine economic and industrial modernization rather than foster it (Shevtsova 2006; Iavlinskii 2006; Gaidar 2006). They point to the negative experiences of the so-called “Dutch disease”—derisively reformulated by former presidential adviser Andrei Illarionov as the “Venezuelanization” of the Russian economy—and insist that this strategy will convert Russia not into a “petroleum heaven” (neftianyi rai) but rather a resource “fringe” that is weak and dependent upon the leading world economies (“Plius venesuelizatsiia vsei strany” 2005; Milov 2006).

In direct contravention of this argument, the proponents of energy superpower depict a very different scenario. This begins with Vladimir Putin himself, who declared that a dominant energy sector will “reanimate” Russian industrial growth and “become the major catalyst for the modernization and qualitative development of the entire economy of the Russian Federation” (Putin 2005). Specifically, the argument is that over a certain period of time (generally counted in decades), abundant revenues from energy sales can be used to stimulate the creation of “growth poles” which will provide the foundation for a more general transition. The director of a leading think-tank devoted to energy and economic development Leonid Grigor’ev dismissed apprehensions about over-reliance on the energy sector, maintaining that, to the contrary, energy exports represented the only available “source of assets” for finally effecting the necessary “switch to European-style capitalism” that the country had failed to achieve in the 1990s (“How Russia’s energy superpower status can bring supersecurity and superstability” 2006; Simonov 2006, 7). Indeed, for some adherents, precisely this anticipated “reanimation” of Russian industry represents “the most powerful
argument for the intensification of the role of the energy sector” and the creation of an energy superpower (Veletminskii 2006, Kokoshin 2006).

There is however a darker side to the Putin project of national rejuvenation, a sub-theme of peril and danger. In the final analysis, Putinism sees international relations as driven not by international cooperation but rather by antagonism and rivalry between contending states. This means that the Russian derzhava of the future will operate in a hostile global environment, where powerful competitors seek constantly to undermine it and secure their own advantage at its cost. Here once again, the energy superpower discourse is implicated in a fundamental manner, both to illustrate the nature of the challenge as well as to identify a means of overcoming it. It depicts the international energy economy as a zero-sum game and indeed “process of war”, driven by competition between the producers of energy on the one hand and between producers and consumers on the other (Simonov 2006, 9, 130, 123). The overriding significance of energy, moreover, means that this competition will not necessarily be played out according to standard rules of international commerce and arbitration.

Thus, along with the advantages of Russia’s abundant energy resources come risks which are “extremely high, namely that all other powers will use all means at their disposal to try to snatch away our ‘oil barrel’” (Simonov 2006, 124-5) Russia has most to fear from being “torn apart” by its traditional opponents to the west and east. Both will pursue the same general goal of undermining the power of the Russian state and its control over its resource wealth, but they will go about it in very different ways. Led by the United States, the West may be expected to deploy so-called democratization—“long used as an ideological weapon”—in order finally to achieve the full Westernization of Russia and its conversion into a pliant and impotent power. Indeed, in the form of the “color” revolutions in Ukraine, Georgia and Kirgizia, all of which were strongly supported in the West, Putinism clearly believes this process has already begun (Simonov 2006, 8).

From the east, however, the challenge is yet graver. Here, paradoxically, the positive picture we saw above of an anti-Western block between Russia and China is turned upside-down with a characterization of the latter as an uncouth and resource-starved superpower, intent not merely on curtailing Russia’s independence but actually conquering and annexing its territory. The means for this conquest need not be military, for it can quite easily be accomplished by “creeping demographic expansion” using masses of Chinese agriculturalists.
to occupy the sparsely-settled expanses of the Eastern Siberia and the Russian Far East and establish effective control. These remote territories, which contain immense stores of energy resources, are today “only nominally part of Russian economic space,” and in future they “risk being taken away (vyvedennyi iz sostava) from the Russian Federation” altogether.

This prospect of an imminent “surrender of sovereignty” is not mere alarmism, moreover, as the experience of the breakup of the USSR—also deemed delusional to many people until it actually happened—clearly indicates (Simonov 2006, 9-10, 56-7, 132). The only way to avoid this threat is for Russia to treat its energy resources not merely as a commercial commodity but also explicitly as a geopoliticheskoe oruzhie or “geopolitical weapon”. In this spirit, one highly-placed official in the energy industry claimed in conversation with a Western specialist that energy plays the same role for Russia today that nuclear weapons played for the Soviet Union (Legvold 2008, 14). This weapon needs to be deployed in two ways: the urgent expansion of energy production, primarily through the development of reserves in the Russian East, and the continued determination that all aspects of Russia’s distribution strategy will be dictated single-mindedly by Russia’s national interest. Nothing less than Russia’s “national survival” is at stake (Simonov 2006, 11, 122).

Conclusion

In this paper, we have highlighted the manner in which discourses associated with particular state-building initiatives and projects are grounded in the infrastructural realities associated with energy production patterns and hydrocarbon export dependencies across national boundaries. An exploration of the Putinist vision of Russia as an “energy superpower” has helped us pinpoint some of the practices that allow notions of national identity to be socially produced—and reproduced—through geographical imaginations and infrastructural materialities in the given context. By constructing a “discourse coalition” (see Bulkeley, 2000; Szarka 2005; Mander 2008) predicated upon particular notions of national identity, Putinism has bound the “energy superpower” discourse with the physical disposition of socio-technical networks for the conversion and circulation of energy. The existence of this spatial and political link, we would argue, points to the need for a continued critical engagement with the multiple material sites where energy and identity interact and are co-produced. Geographers have taken only a marginal interest in these questions to date, and a common framework to study them is still lacking. The broader purpose of our contribution,
therefore, has been to underscore the need for the creation of such a theoretical matrix, while pointing to the importance of the relationship between the material and the imagined in this context.

References:


