Understanding the 2014 Russo-Ukrainian Gas Dispute

A Comparative Analysis of Russian and Ukrainian Political Discourses

Master thesis International Relations (specialisation International Studies)

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Abstract

This thesis seeks to gain insight in the current state of Russo-Ukrainian gas relations by focusing on how both sides have perceived their mutual gas trade during the 2014 conflict in Eastern Ukraine. Specifically, it looks into the recent changes in Russia’s energy policies towards Ukraine, most notably the increase in gas prices and the termination of discounts, that have led to a gas dispute between the two parties. In order to do so, a discourse analysis is conducted on speeches, interviews and other documents like news updates and transcripts of official visits that were issued by the Russian and Ukrainian governments. The results of this thesis show that different actors can have a significantly different perception of certain events, depending on the ways in which they ascribe meaning to them. It is shown that while the Russian official discourse surrounding the 2014 gas dispute has a strong commercial focus, presenting legal and economic arguments to justify Russia’s actions, the Ukrainian discourse frames it as an issue of politics and national security, perceiving it as part of the broader military conflict between the two states.
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1. Introduction

Russia plays a diverse role in the energy sector and can be said to act simultaneously as an energy producer, consumer, exporter, importer and a transit state. However, it is Russia’s alleged use of the ‘energy weapon’ that has received most attention in both public and scholarly debates. This term refers to the threat that energy-rich nations could use their control over natural resources to manipulate the political behaviour of client states and originated as a response to the 1973 Arab oil embargo (Smith Stegen 2011). It denotes the use of natural resources for political purposes, by targeting enemy states with punitive price increases and energy cut-offs, while awarding ‘friendly’ governments with subsidies and discounts (Newnham 2011). This can include an array of energy sources like coal, nuclear, oil or natural gas, with the latter two being most noted for their ability to cause political tension. Not surprisingly, in the case of Russia the concept has mostly been used in reference to its energy strategies towards the former Soviet states.

Above all, a series of energy related disputes with these countries, like the 2006 and 2009 gas conflicts with Ukraine, have profoundly contributed to the politicization of Russian energy trade (Kratochvil & Tichy 2012). Russia’s price hikes and supply disruptions have pushed critics to view natural resources like oil and gas as the Kremlin’s primary political instrument, used to keep energy dependent customers under the Russian sphere of influence. Some have even argued that the government’s energy policies are directly aimed towards re-building a ‘Greater Russia’, by limiting the sovereignty and pro-Western orientation of its target states (Nygren 2008).

Although Russian government officials have emphasized the economic nature of these actions, claiming that Russia’s energy relations with other countries are driven primarily by the market and not politics, the affected countries continued to perceive them as a tool to achieve not only economic, but also foreign policy goals (Radoman 2007). Following the events of the 2014 Ukrainian revolution and the subsequent Russo-Ukrainian conflict in the Eastern provinces of the country, talks of Moscow using the ‘energy weapon’ once again appeared in international headlines. Therefore, it seems interesting to reassess Russia’s energy policies and the main principles underlying them, while also paying attention to how they were interpreted by other parties. In order to do so, this thesis will look at the political discourse surrounding this topic, articulated by Russian and Ukrainian
actors. Specifically, it will focus on the perception of the recent changes in Russia’s energy policies towards Ukraine, most notably the increase in gas prices and the termination of discounts. The time frame will be limited to the period starting from the end of February 2014, when the new government of Arseniy Yatsenyuk took over power in Ukraine, until the end of 2014, after the three-month gas agreement between Russia and Ukraine was finally signed. Consequently, the research question that will be investigated can be formulated in the following way: “How have Russian and Ukrainian officials perceived their mutual gas trade during the 2014 conflict in Eastern Ukraine?” The analysis of discourse has proven to be very useful in uncovering the motives guiding actors’ actions and showing how they interpret reality (Kratochvil & Tichy 2012). Hence, it appears to be a suitable approach to gain insight in the current state of Russo-Ukrainian gas relations.

The next section of this thesis will first discuss the ways in which previous analyses have interpreted Russia’s energy relations with post-Soviet countries like Ukraine. Then, it will proceed to pinpoint a gap in the existing literature and justify the added value of this research.

2. Explaining Russia’s energy policies

In recent years, Russia’s role as an energy supplier in the post-Soviet region has become a widely studied topic in the field of international relations. Its unstable relationship with a number of important transit countries, combined with its growing assertiveness in global affairs has caused many scholars to question Russia’s reliability as a trading partner. Particularly the fact that a number of European countries are largely dependent on Russia for their energy imports has led to much research into the possible motivations underlying Russia’s energy strategy (Feklyunina 2012). What are the central factors determining these policies and why? When addressing this question, existing scholarly literature can be roughly divided into two groups: articles pointing towards the use of energy for geopolitical purposes and those emphasizing how economic considerations limit this possibility.
2.1 Energy as a geopolitical tool

Without a doubt, the most pronounced theory is that Russia’s oil and gas sector is a tool to achieve the strategic and foreign policy objectives of the government. Underlying this view is the realist assumption that state behaviour is determined by considerations of power and national interest (Donnelly 2001). When applied to energy trade, realism assumes that energy is not a regular commodity, but a strategic resource used to gain geopolitical advantages and increase national power. In the case of Russia, this can include ensuring the election of pro-Russian leaders in neighbouring countries, sustaining military bases in strategic locations and maintaining a special sphere of interest in the post-Soviet region by establishing customs unions and free-trade zones (Orttung & Overland 2011).

There are a number of criteria that are often mentioned for a state to successfully wield this ‘petro-power’. Newnham argues that first and foremost, there needs to be an asymmetrical interdependence between the supplier state and the target state, which is clearly the case between Russia and most post-Soviet countries (Newnham 2008). Firstly, the fact that Russia has a larger economy makes it more resistant to economic conflict, like oil and gas disputes. Secondly, the fact that the percentage of Russia’s trade with these states is lower than the other way round, causes the imposition of any boycotts to do little harm to itself (Ibid.) Nygren adds that another important prerequisite for the use of energy for foreign policy purposes is that the state has control over the nation’s vast oil and gas reserves (Nygren 2008). While the Kremlin’s grip is not that apparent in the oil sector, which is divided between several competing players, this is different in the case of natural gas. The Russian state holds a 51% ownership of Gazprom, a company controlling over 72% of Russia’s gas supplies and essentially enjoying a monopoly position within the Russian gas sector (Gazprom 2014). Moreover, the Russian government has been actively trying to consolidate its control over the pipeline transmission network by both acquiring transit assets outside its borders and developing new transit routes (Smith Stegen 2011).

2.2 Economic limitations

The second, much smaller, group of scholars favours a market-based approach when discussing Russian energy policies and points out how economic forces put limitations on the use of energy for political purposes. However, they do not completely deny that Russian officials might want to use energy as a foreign policy tool. While recognizing that the geopolitical approach might include some useful explanations, their main argument
against it is that it “overestimates Russia’s actual power” (Ortung & Overland 2011, 76).

One often mentioned restriction is the fact that due to the current pipeline transportation infrastructure, Russia is largely dependent on other countries for the delivery of its energy exports. Hence, scholars argue that confrontations between Russia and transit states like Ukraine are not only a regional issue, but can also have notable consequences for European nations. Huotari clarifies this point by explaining that any “disruptions of internal supplies to Ukraine may cause problems for external transits, as the pressure of the pipeline will change” (Huotari 2011, 125). Considering that Russia is much more dependent on the incomes generated from oil and gas exports to the European Union (EU), than the EU is on Russian oil and gas, the opportunities Russia has to use energy as a political weapon against transit countries are considered quite limited. Even though Russia’s overall relations with Europe are currently problematic and scholars point out a reorientation towards Asian, Russia will still try to solidify its position on the Western market and hold on to its European customers for as long as possible (Six 2015). Not only is Europe a huge “cash cow”, immediate diversification of gas flows is difficult for Russia due to the pipeline infrastructure needed for its transportation (Ibid., 45). Moreover, threats of cutting off or reducing energy supplies to any country will have an overall negative effect on Russia’s international reputation as a trustworthy trade partner and would not be in its long-term interests (Feklyunina 2011). When it comes to the changes in Russia’s energy policies, scholars adhering to this position point towards Gazprom’s financial concerns and its goal to maximize the increase of profits. Gazprom is viewed as a commercial enterprise, whose main priority it is to gain revenues from the sale of energy. Following this assumption, many of the policies that are perceived in light of geopolitics, like claiming control over infrastructure routes and increasing oil and gas prices to world market levels, are attributed to a change in the economic order.

However, the material conditions outlined by both the approaches discussed above do not give much insight in the intentions of the Russian government. Control over resources and delivery methods are not enough to implement an energy weapon; more importantly, the supplier state must intend to convert this power into political gains (Smith Stegen 2011.). Existing literature thus mainly outlines the possibilities and restrictions of the Russian government, not its actual goals or motivations.
2.3 The added value of this research

Summing up, what all the above analyses have in common is that they show an overemphasis of structural explanations when dealing with the energy relations between two actors (Kratochvil & Tichy 2013). Such explanations are based on the assumption that external surroundings create constraints and opportunities for political action, therewith dictating actors’ behaviour (Beach & Brun Pederson 2013). Kratochvil and Tichy make a similar point in their research on the mutual energy relations between Russia and the EU (Kratochvil & Tichy 2013). They argue that the majority of analyses draw their conclusions based on a study of such material structures like the availability of resources, the control over transport routes and the institutional procedures regulating the energy trade between the two parties (Ibid.). Kratochvil and Tichy thus come to the conclusion that what is missing is the analysis of political discourses (Ibid.). Something similar can be said about the research that has been carried out on Russia’s energy relations with former Soviet states like Ukraine; barely any attention has been paid to the ideational frameworks through which the countries give meaning to their mutual energy trade. Therefore, this research aims to fill this gap by placing a stronger emphasis on human agency, favouring ideational explanations over structural ones. Such a view assumes that the ways in which actors interpret their world constrains behaviour, not the material structures.

Moreover, scholars tend to analyze Russia’s energy policies solely from a Russian centred point of view. Consequently, there has not been enough attention for the perceptions in target countries, nor efforts to compare and explain any possible differences in interpretation. However, this is important because the ways certain events are perceived can be just as important as the real situation. Balmaceda illustrates this point by arguing that even if there were no political considerations at all underlying Russia’s energy policies, legacies of the past would still heavily affect the ways countries like Ukraine interpret them (Balmaceda 2013). Such a sensitive issue as its energy ties with Russia is “unavoidably perceived as politically significant trade with the former hegemon” (Ibid., 8). Tsygankov shares a similar view, arguing that a nation’s historical experience with Russia influences its perception of external threats and Russia’s behaviour in the international environment (Tsygankov 2001). Fredholm even claims that countries like Latvia and Georgia have deliberately complained about “Russian energy blackmail” to...
accelerate their membership into NATO or the EU (Fredholm 2005, 13).

Therefore, this thesis seeks to compare the perception of Russo-Ukrainian gas relations in both countries. While doing so, it aims to determine whether disputes and contradictions between the two sides have been framed in economic or political terms and most importantly, what might have motivated this. Along with the theoretical relevance outlined above, this research also has some practical policy relevance. Overstating Russia’s intentions to convert its vast natural resources into political weapons can lead to an inability to distinguish real threats from ‘political bluff’. This in turn can limit policymakers in adopting a suitable response to Russia’s actions, while avoiding the unnecessary use of conflict-laden language that might escalate the situation. Therefore, this research can contribute to a better understanding of Russia’s energy policies.

3. Theory and Methodology

3.1 Theoretical framework: constructivism

This section will focus on the theoretical framework underlying this research. As the above discussion of the existing literature has made clear, the position taken in this thesis is closely linked to the constructivist school of international relations. Constructivism places a heavy emphasis on the importance of normative and ideational structures, as opposed to only material ones (Reus-Smit 2001). Based on this belief it is argued that surrounded by similar material circumstances, different actors will construct their goals and interests differently. In stark contrast to realist theories, which perceive the world as a given and point towards universal principles like anarchy that govern the international system, constructivism views the world as inherently contextual and formed by the processes of interaction between states. From a constructivist point of view, how states act towards material conditions, like natural resources, is determined by the meaning they assign to them. To explain Russia’s policies in the field of natural gas, it is therefore important to determine whether the meaning attached to them is more in line with political or economic goals: a tool to influence foreign policy, or a prime source of income for the national economy. Moreover, constructivists argue that a state’s understanding of its identity heavily influences its actions. This seems a reasonable explanation in the case of Russia, where great importance is attributed to its international image as a reliable trading partner (Feklyunina 2012).
The same can be said about the perception of policies. Although constructivists do not deny the existence of certain aspects of reality that are not contested, they argue that the meaning attached to them is (Flockhart 2012). Flockhart provides the example of states possessing nuclear weapons: “a North Korean nuclear warhead may look similar to a French nuclear warhead, and both have the same devastating consequences, but despite their similar material attributes we attach different meanings to each” (Ibid., 83). Most likely, it would be perceived as a much more dangerous development in the case of North Korea, for it is interpreted in the social context of hostility. Once such an image of a state is developed, almost any action can be framed to be consistent with it, as “people often perceive what they expect to be present” (Jervis 1976, 68). Moreover, actors often tend to overestimate their role in others’ policies and perceive any harmful effects resulting from them as an intentional move against them. Jervis clarifies this by arguing that “when the other's behaviour is undesired, the actor is likely to see it as derived from internal sources rather than as being a response to his own actions; in this case the actor believes that the other is trying to harm him rather than that the effect was an unintended consequence or a side-effect” (Ibid., 343). Uncovering decision makers’ ideas about the world and images of others is therefore crucial in explaining any policy in international relations. In order to do this, constructivists often turn to discourse analysis.

Before moving on to a more detailed description of this methodology, the choice of constructivism as a theoretical framework and not, for example, post-structuralism, deserves some explanation. Clearly, these two approaches have some obvious similarities. Even methodologically, many researchers from both schools engage in the study of discourse and representation. However, they differ in what is identified as the main goal of their studies. For constructivists, this primarily includes understanding and explaining specific aspects of international politics by focusing on the subjective views and motives of different actors. Because discourse can be defined as the “socially constructed knowledge of reality”, it provides an effective way to determine what these are (Schneider 2008, 4). The analysis of texts in constructivist research thus provides insights into how actors interpret their external environment and produce “shared knowledge about the world” (Flockhart 2012, 82). Because this thesis is concerned with determining what meaning is attributed to Russia’s actions in the field of energy and how socially constructed identities and interests play a role in shaping these, constructivism appears a very suitable method.
On the other hand, post-structuralists claim that explaining or understanding such processes is in itself problematic, as it is questionable whether people can even have access to objective reality. For post-structuralists, there is nothing outside of language; the real world can only be known through perspective (Devetak 2001). As opposed to constructivism, perspective is thus not only seen as a way in which certain events or actions are interpreted, but as “the means by which the status of reality is conferred on them” in the first place (Ibid., 164). Therefore, while analyzing discourse the purpose of post-structuralist scholars is mainly to critique dominant concepts and representations in international relations by uncovering the power structures underlying them.

3.2 Methodology: discourse analysis

As already mentioned in the previous section, discourse analysis provides a useful methodological tool for the constructivist interpretation of inter-state relations. In the broadest terms, discourse can be understood as a particular way of talking about the world. Employing a more specific conceptualization of discourse as the “socially constructed knowledge of reality” (Schneider 2008, 4), this thesis will understand discourse analysis as a way to illustrate and describe the relationship between textual and social processes” (Jackson 2007, 395). Language is understood to produce meaning and construct certain social realities, “particularly in terms of defining subjects and establishing their relational positions” (Ibid., 396). A discourse therefore contains a collection of ideas “about a specific object that frame that object in a certain way and, therefore, delimit the possibilities for action in relation to it” (Epstein 2008, 2).

However, discourse analysis is not a single method, but rather a collection of different approaches to study patterns of representation in different utterances of communication. As has already become clear, this method can be associated with different theoretical frameworks within international relations and is even applied within a broad variety of other disciplines. The specific discourse analytic approach that is chosen for this research focuses on the “language practices of predication - the verbs, adverbs and adjectives that attach to nouns” (Milliken 1999, 232). This method is most compatible with the goals of international relations research, which usually draws its conclusions from diplomatic documents, policy outlines, speeches and official statements. By using predicate analysis it is possible to uncover the features and capabilities assigned to a particular object or event.
This form of discourse analysis investigates whether there are any traceable regularities in the ways these are discussed. In this research, the focus will be on the predications assigned by both Russian and Ukrainian officials to their mutual natural gas trade, but also on the predications they assign to one another.

Looking at the selection of case material, there are roughly two ways for carrying out an analysis of discourse. The first one is referred to as a “synchronic sectional examination” of statements and other communicative outings on a specific topic at one specific point in time (Schneider 2008, 8). On the other hand, the second, “diachronic” method focuses on a comparison of the discourse over time (Ibid.). Due to the limited scope and specific timeframe of this research, which is set on the period starting from the end of February 2014 until December 2014, the former type of analysis is a better fit. Therefore, not much can be said about the development of Russo-Ukrainian gas relations over time, nor can any generalizing conclusions about this relationship be made. Despite this limitation, this single case research can provide an in-depth analysis of the current state of affairs and the main ideas underlying it.

The research material of this thesis will consist of a number of texts produced by a variety of influential actors in the energy sector and those who often comment on Russo-Ukrainian energy relations. If the goal of an analysis is to uncover socially constructed representations, as is the case with this thesis, a single text will not suffice to support any empirical arguments (Ibid.). Instead, a number of statements made by different authorized speakers are necessary to draw any significant conclusions on the discourse employed by a certain group. Therefore, the sample will consist of multiple speeches and interviews, as well as other documents like news updates and transcripts of official visits and conferences issued by the Russian and Ukrainian governments. Materials were selected from the government websites of Russia (http://government.ru, http://en.kremlin.ru/) and Ukraine (http://www.kmu.gov.ua/) as well as the official websites of Gazprom (http://www.gazprom.com) and Naftogaz (http://www.naftogaz.com/), the main companies involved in the Russo-Ukrainian gas trade. On these websites, a search action containing the keywords: “energy”, “gas”, “Gazprom”, “Russia”, and “Ukraine” was conducted in both English and Russian. The resulting texts were then filtered according to the selected time frame and skimmed through to determine their relevancy. This has provided 11
Russian- and 13 Ukrainian sources. The sample includes texts in both Russian and English. This amount of materials has proven to be sufficient, for new texts could be interpreted according to the identified themes and did not provide any new categories of predication. In other words, the distinguished interpretations were sufficient to explain texts that were not part of the original sample.

Before moving on to the actual analysis, the next chapter will provide a short justification of the 2014 Russo-Ukrainian gas dispute as the specific case study for this thesis, as well as a brief overview of the historical ties between Russia and Ukraine in the field of energy.

### 3.3 Case Study

It is no exaggeration to say that the relationship between Russia and Ukraine in the field of energy is a very complicated one. After the Soviet Union disintegrated in 1991, several countries were suddenly confronted with a new reality, going from “constituents of a single energy-rich state to separate energy poor entities heavily dependent on Russia and lacking strong national-level institutions to deal with their new energy challenges” (Balmaceda 2013, 3). Gas has an important place in Ukraine’s economy, making up 40% of the primary energy mix and essential for its energy-intensive industries in the chemical and metallurgical sectors (IEA 2012). Up until recently, Ukraine was the largest importer of Russian gas among all the post-Soviet States, and still remains the fifth largest importer of natural gas worldwide (Ibid.). In the period between 2000 till 2010, Russia has engaged in more energy conflicts with this country than with any other former Soviet state: four in total (Orrtung & Overland 2011). Moreover, Ukraine has repeatedly been pointed out as a powerful case for Russia’s use of the ‘energy weapon’ and is said to be a largely representative example of Russia’s policies in this region (Balmaceda 2013).

**Brief historical background**

Russo-Ukrainian gas relations have been strained from the beginning, despite the fact that for a large part of the 1990s, the prices Ukraine was paying even went below domestic consumption prices in Russia (Kropatcheva 2011). Even then, Ukraine was unable to pay for the large amounts of gas it imported, leading to growing debts and cut-offs due to unpaid bills. While both states were trying to strengthen their position on world markets at the beginning of the 2000s, Russia was still heavily subsidizing the gas exports to Ukraine, allowing it to pay much lower prices than its European customers. Already in 2001, talks
of terminating this preferential treatment and moving towards ‘normal’ bilateral relations in the field of energy circulated among Russia’s political elite. The “attempts to integrate the region of the CIS came at a very high price” for Russia, stated then Secretary of the Security Council Sergey Ivanov (Tsygankov 2015, 4). In 2006, Gazprom finally announced that it would increase the prices from $50 to $230, shifting to market rates for gas supply. The Ukrainian side refused to sign such a contract, resulting in the temporary suspending of gas supplies to Ukraine on 1 January 2006. Three days later, Gazprom and Naftogaz Ukraine agreed to a subsidized price of $95, in exchange for lower transit tariffs for Russia. The contract was supposed to be renegotiated each year.

In the winter of 2008/2009, another, more serious crisis flared up and led both to a supply halt to Ukraine and transit problems to several European countries. Not only was there disagreement about pricing, the Ukrainian gas company Naftogaz also failed to pay off its debts to Gazprom for earlier supplies, as was previously agreed. Therefore, no contract could be signed and there were no legal grounds to provide gas deliveries in 2009. It took several weeks for the parties to reach an agreement on their supply and transit issues. The supply price of gas to Ukraine would amount to 80% of European market prices in 2009 and 100% by 2010, while Gazprom would pay a higher tariff for Ukraine’s transit services - also corresponding to European prices (Kropatcheva 2011). After a number of renegotiations in 2010, the Russian government agreed to provide a discount of $100 per 1,000 cubic meters to Ukraine, in exchange for a twenty-five year extension for the lease of Russia’s naval base in Sevastopol. Contrary to previous arrangements, this contract would be valid for a period of 10 years, expiring at the end of 2019.

The 2014 gas dispute

Starting from September 2013, Naftogaz Ukraine once again found itself in debts for large amounts of imported Russian gas. In December 2013, President Putin and then president of Ukraine Viktor Yanukovych signed the so-called Russo-Ukrainian action plan, which was meant to support the difficult economic situation in Ukraine and lowered the gas price to $285 per 1,000 cubic meters for a period of three months. After the ousting of president Yanukovich, the new government led by Arseniy Yatsenyuk took up negotiations with the Russian side. However, the actual dispute did not start until April 2014, when Russia announced that it wanted to return to the 2009 contract, thus cancelling all $100 discount. Moreover, the three-month period of the December 2013 discounts came to an end,
brining the price up to $485. Gazprom also took a harder line on the repayment of debts, demanding a clearance of all deficits before any new price arrangements could be discussed (Pirani 2014). Trying to prevent any negative effects on the transit to Europe, like during the 2009 dispute, The European Commission joined the Russo-Ukrainian gas negotiations as a third party (Ibid.). Failing to reach an agreement, deliveries were halted to Ukraine on 16 June 2014, while both Gazprom and Naftogaz filed suits against one another at the Stockholm International Court of Arbitration. After several rounds of talks it was not until the end of October 2014 that an interim winter deal was finally mediated. The agreement stated that Gazprom was to receive over three billion dollars of Ukraine’s gas dept by the end of 2014, as well as a prepayment for the new deliveries until March 2015 (Stulberg 2015). In return, Gazprom proposed a flexible installment plan for the repayment of earlier debts made throughout 2013 and accepted reduced prices for gas supplies for this period, which were 20% less than those announced earlier that year (Ibid.).

The next chapter will now discuss the results of the conducted discourse analysis, describing the above policies in more detail and showing how these events were perceived in the official communication outings of both Russia and Ukraine.

4. Results

The previous sections of this thesis have provided both the theoretical and the methodological basis for this research, showing that it is important to determine what meaning Russian and Ukrainian actors assign to each other and to their mutual gas trade. In order to provide an answer to the research question, this chapter will now focus on the results of the conducted discourse analysis, starting with the discussion of the Russian research materials.

4.1 Russian texts

The predications identified in the chosen speeches, interviews and transcripts have been divided in three groups: those assigned to Russian actors, Ukrainian actors and to the current Russo-Ukrainian gas relations, including the policies regulating them. Therefore, this section will discuss each category individually, outlining the most notable and regularly recurring themes.
**Representation of Russo-Ukrainian gas relations**

One of the first things that stand out in the official discourse surrounding the Russo-Ukrainian gas relations in general is the heavy emphasis on the importance of official contracts and agreements. As argued by Alexei Miller, the head of Gazprom, “the gas market is built on the basis of long-term contracts”, which offer assurances for both the buyer and the supplier (Miller 2014). This is supported by multiple mentions of the fact that Russo-Ukrainian gas relations are currently regulated by the 2009 contract, which was signed for a period of ten years and is therefore still valid. Furthermore, it is regularly stressed that all Russia’s policies in the gas sector are carried out in strict correspondence with these earlier conducted documents and are therefore neither unexpected nor illegitimate. The price discounts provided at the end of 2013 were of a temporary nature and had to be renegotiated quarterly. In order for the discounts to be prolonged for another three months, Ukraine had to pay off its debts for the previous year and provide timely payments for current gas supplies. According to the Russian Prime Minister Dmitri Medvedev, the reason this did not happen can be fully attributed to Ukraine’s behaviour and can be supported by the following argument:

“*Those who do not pay for supplied goods need to understand that they will have to deal with all the negative consequences hereof, including the abolition of the previously reached agreements on preferential forms of supply*” (Dmitri Medvedev & Miller 2014).

The cancellation of gas discounts for Ukraine is therefore referred to as “purely automatic” due to the end of the three-month term, “absolutely legitimate” and “in accordance with the conditions of the contract” (Miller 2014; Dmitri Medvedev & Miller 2014). In a message to the leaders of several European countries on the 10th of April 2014, the Russian President Vladimir Putin made a similar argument concerning the transition to the prepayment terms for gas supplies to Ukraine:

“*In such conditions [when Gazprom does not receive any payments for the gas supplied to Ukraine], in accordance with Articles 5.15, 5.8 and 5.3 of the contract, Gazprom is compelled to switch over to advance payment for gas deliveries, and in the event of further violation of the conditions of payment, will completely or partially cease gas deliveries*” (Putin 2014a).
The change in Russia’s policies in its gas trade with Ukraine is thus attributed to the non-compliance with existing contracts and agreements that was repeatedly shown by the Ukrainian side. Moreover, it becomes clear from the discourse that taking such measures to regulate the Russo-Ukrainian gas trade is not considered to be business as usual, for the situation between the two parties is referred to as “critical”, “difficult” and “not normalized” (Putin et al. 2014a); (Putin 2014b). Throughout the dispute, it is repeatedly pointed out that Ukraine’s debts are accumulating and that there is no improvement in the issues concerning the payments for Russian gas. Still, Russian government officials recognize that the policies they have to take towards Ukraine are “extreme” and “harsh” (Putin 2014a); (Putin et al. 2014b). However, as becomes clear from the following statement made by Dmitri Medvedev on the 12th of May 2014, they are perceived as necessary:

“All other possible ways to resolve the situation in a different way were taken by Gazprom. We tried appealing to them [the Ukrainian side], consulted with them multiple times … but we are not being heard” (Dmitri Medvedev, Novak & Miller 2014a).

The switch towards prepayment terms and the abolishment of price discounts are thus represented as measures of last resort, caused by the unwillingness of the Ukrainian side to discuss a different solution for the payment issue with Gazprom.

Another recurring theme that stands out in the communication outings surrounding Russo-Ukrainian gas relations is the constant reference to Russia’s goodwill during the dispute. Moreover, Russo-Ukrainian gas relations are framed as exclusive, by referring to the preferential status that was granted to Ukraine in Russia’s past policies:

“The price for transit paid to Ukraine by Russia is one of the highest in Europe” (Miller 2014).

“Ukraine became the last post-Soviet republic with whom Gazprom switched to market conditions … exclusively favourable conditions have been created for Ukraine up until 2006” (Dmitri Medvedev 2014).

During a speech targeted towards the leaders of European countries, President Putin made several references to these themes when addressing the gas issue with Ukraine. He stated that Russia has invested over $17 billion dollars in discounts in order to maintain “the
stability and credibility of the Ukrainian economy and the preservation of jobs” by offering “cut-rate prices” for gas (Putin 2014a). As mentioned earlier, the change in policies is attributed to the failure of the Ukrainian side to fulfil their contractual obligations, despite this “partnerlike”, “friendly” and “flexible” position shown by the Russian side (Putin et al. 2014b; Novak 2014). Building on the above, it is concluded that Russo-Ukrainian gas relations will have to become “rational” and “pragmatic” (Dmitri Medvedev 2014). Such an approach is said to be the only way for both sides to build economic relations that are “truly businesslike” and “mutually advantageous” (Ibid.). The Russian official discourse thus shows a move towards the depolitization of the gas trade with Ukraine, switching from a preferential treatment to exclusively economic cooperation.

Lastly, an important argument that is visible in the official discourse concerns the claim that the Russian gas market is regulated by the same principles as any other trade sector. This is supported by a comparison of Russian gas policies to those adopted in “the entire gas market, including the European one”, which strengthens the idea that Russia is just like any other country and acts in a similar way to other gas supplying nations (Miller 2014). Moreover, it is argued that Russo-Ukrainian gas relations are subject to the same rules and terms as Russia’s gas trade with its other partners. Hence, when asked about the use of energy for political purposes in an interview with the German newspaper Handelsblatt, the Deputy Head of Gazprom Aleksander Medvedev emphasized that “gas is not a weapon, but a trade commodity” (Aleksander Medvedev 2014). Moreover, he ridiculed the possibility of Gazprom using energy in such a way by mockingly telling the interviewer:

“Why are you not asking me whether I am scared to drive a Mercedes or drink German beer? What if Germany decides to use these products as a so-called transport- or beer weapon?” (Ibid.).

Gas trade with Russia is thus constructed as a purely economic matter, free of any political motives and just as reliable as for example Germany’s car sector.

**Representation of Russian actors**

There are several ways in which the discourse frames the Russian side during the 2014 dispute. Most importantly, Russia’s attitude is presented to be very cooperative and constructive. When describing the position of the Russian side, the texts adopt a rhetoric of cooperation, using predications like: “came to an agreement with our European partners
to hold consultations”, “bears in mind the interests of Ukraine”, “respects Ukraine as an independent state”, “made concessions towards Ukraine” and “has taken steps towards a compromise with Ukraine” (Putin 2014a); (Novak 2014). President Putin for example stated that Russia believes:

“It is vital to hold, without delay, consultations at the level of ministers of economics, finances and energy in order to work out concerted actions to stabilize Ukraine’s economy and to ensure delivery and transit of Russian natural gas” (Putin 2014a).

Through such language, Russia is constructed as a rational actor, actively trying to find a reasonable solution that is beneficial for both sides.

Secondly, the texts adopt a strong commercial focus when discussing the interests of both Gazprom and the Russian government in their gas trade with Ukraine. Among the predications assigned to Gazprom are the following: “does not need any cataclysms”, “is interested in the sale of gas and the generation of profits”, “is only interesting in returning to the previous market-based price formula” and “wants to see Ukraine as a reliable partner and transit state” (Aleksander Medvedev 2014). By these means Gazprom is framed as a reliable trading partner that does not have any hidden motives and is interested in stable, lucrative relations with Ukraine. This is supported by references to the past, in which it is emphasized that Gazprom “has never interrupted gas supplies” and “has always fulfilled its contractual obligations” (Ibid.). The construction of Gazprom as an actor with a long, trustworthy reputation thus implies that the cause of the 2014 gas dispute with Ukraine lies outside its control. Similarly, the Russian government is constructed as a pragmatic actor that has “never used an economic factor to address any political issues” and is “interested in Gazprom acquiring profits for the national economy, not engaging in warfare” (Dmitri Medvedev 2014); (Aleksander Medvedev 2014).

Lastly, the official discourse victimizes Russia in the gas dispute with Ukraine. This is done by referring to the “investments, contributions and expenditures that Russia has shouldered”, the fact that “during the past years Russia has been subsidizing Ukraine’s economy” and that it had to “unilaterally bear this burden” (Putin 2014a). It is claimed that the years of gas discounts provided to Ukraine have had a negative effect on Russia’s budget. The Russian Federation was missing out on $100 per 1,000 cubic maters in its gas
trade; money that according to Aleksei Miller could have also been used for the provision of “pensions, wages and other social expenditures for the Russian people” (Miller 2014). Despite such sacrifices, Russia is still being blamed for the gas conflict with Ukraine and the transit risks for European countries. The official discourse thus frames Russia as an actor that has suffered not only from great financial losses, but also from unjust accusations.

**Representation of Ukrainian actors**

Although it is repeatedly pointed out that Ukraine is an “important trading partner” for the Russian Federation in the field of gas and is considered as an equal by Gazprom, the overall discourse is overwhelmingly negative when it comes to the representation of Ukrainian actors during the 2014 gas dispute (Putin et al. 2014a). While Russian actors were framed in a rational and cooperative way, Ukraine’s behaviour is referred to as “unconstructive”, “unreasonable”, “destructive” and even a form of “open blackmail” (Dmitri Medvedev, Novak & Miller 2014b). In an interview with Forbes magazine, the Russian Minister of Energy Alexander Novak points out that while it is Ukraine that owes Russia huge sums of money for gas, Ukrainian actors still want to dictate the rules and refuse to pay any debts until they are provided with the gas price they demand (Novak 2014). Such contradictory actions from the Ukrainian side are a recurring theme throughout the Russian official discourse. According to Aleksei Miller, Ukraine demands preferential conditions and “wants to pay prices that are almost as low as the ones paid by countries that are part of the Eurasian Customs Union” (Dmitri Medvedev, Novak & Miller 2014b). Yet, at the same time Ukraine is living under the slogan “Ukraine is not Russia” and is seeking closer ties with the EU and NATO (Dmitri Medvedev 2014). Ukraine is thus framed as some kind of parasite state, eagerly accepting Russia’s money, while stating that it wants to be independent and is looking to distance itself from its Soviet past.

Another important theme that is visible in the Russian texts when discussing the Ukrainian party is that the problems in Russo-Ukrainian gas relations started with the advent of the new government:

“If at the beginning of the year [2014] Ukraine at least partially paid for the supplied gas, there have been absolutely no payments what so ever for the gas deliveries of March and April” (Dmitri Medvedev, Novak & Miller 2014a).
This statement by Aleksei Miller clearly puts the blame for the gas dispute on the new government officials of Ukraine, who are unwilling to pay Russia and fulfil their contractual obligations. This is juxtaposed against the situation in previous years, by emphasizing that Ukraine “had always acknowledged the validity of the 2009 contract”, “had always been paying for the delivered gas supplies” and “did not question the existing contract in any way” (Miller 2014). In addition to that, the Ukrainian actors are represented as the reason that no constructive solution to the dispute can be found, through the use of predications like: “are not listening to Russia’s appeals”, “do not wish to hold talks with Gazprom” and “have not made any specific proposals as how to stabilize the situation with the Ukrainian buying company” (Dmitri Medvedev, Novak & Miller 2014a); (Putin 2014b).

4.2 Ukrainian texts

Having discussed how the Russian discourse motivates the state’s energy policies and represents the parties involved, this section will now focus on the results of the discourse analysis conducted on the Ukrainian texts. In order to facilitate a comparison between the Ukrainian and the Russian perceptions, the same categories will be used to discuss the identified predications.

**Representation of Russo-Ukrainian gas relations**

What is most notable is that the Ukrainian official discourse on Russo-Ukrainian gas relations is steeped in references to politics and national security. It is denied that the 2014 dispute had anything to do with natural gas and that there were any legitimate reasons for the change of policies towards Ukraine. Instead, the gas dispute is presented as a purely political conflict, in which the Russian Federation is making Ukraine pay a political price as a way to “return Ukraine under its sphere of influence” and “tear it away from Europe” (CMU 2014h). On the 4th of April, Prime Minister of Ukraine Yatsenyuk for example stated that:

> “There are no economic reasons for price increases for natural gas: "basic energy products dropped in price to the $99 level. Therefore, the political pressure is unacceptable and a price of $ 500 is not acceptable … $ 285 is an acceptable and balanced price” (CMU 2014c).
Contrary to the Russian official discourse, no references are made to contractual or economic justifications when discussing the price increases for gas. Also, there is no mention of any Ukrainian actions that might have caused the new policies; the blame is therefore completely ascribed to the hostile intentions of Russian side. Overall, the main argument presented throughout the Ukrainian texts seems to be that:

“Gas relations with Russia cannot be considered outside the context of what is happening in the bilateral relations between Ukraine and Russia” (CMU 2014a).

This representation of Russian policies is even extended outside the sphere of gas, as exemplified by the following official statement made by the Ukrainian Cabinet of Ministers in December 2014:

“Any decision taken by the Russian Federation concerning Ukraine is political in nature” (CMU 2014j).

In line with such a construction of Russia’s gas policies is the constant use of military and conflict based rhetoric when referring to energy, apparent in word combinations like “a new nuclear weapon”, “a means of influence”, “a plan to destroy Ukraine” and way to “wage a war against Ukraine” (CMU 2014a; 2014d; 2014e); (Yatsenyuk 2014c). Consequently, Gazprom’s policies in the field of gas are placed in the context of the wider military conflict between Russia and Ukraine, by referring to them as part of the same series of events as other (military) measures taken by the Russian government:

“Behavior demonstrated by the representatives of Russian Gazprom appears a part of the designed plan which started from annexation of Crimea, terrorists in Donbas, weapon deliveries from Russia and transporting of Russian bandits to the territory of Ukraine” (CMU 2014e).

Along with using gas as a direct source of economic aggression against Ukraine, Russia is said to use the revenues from natural gas sales as the primary tool to fund its military actions against Ukraine:

“They sell oil and gas and then take Euros, dollars and pounds - and buy weapons, military equipment and invade into an independent country” (CMU 2014a).

As such, paying Gazprom for its gas deliveries is presented as the same thing as financially supporting the war against Ukraine. The Ukrainian cabinet of ministers thus denies any
agency to Gazprom and constructs its policies solely as a foreign policy tool of the Russian government.

What stands out is that while the Russian discourse framed the harsh policies against Ukraine as extreme measures that were only to be employed if all other solutions fail, the Ukrainian discourse constructs them as a “designed plan” (CMU 2014e). According to Arseniy Yatsenyuk, Russia intended:

“To announce that the temporary price has grown from $268 to almost $500, and then reduce it to $385. Then, in November-December the Russian Government would announce: we have changed our mind. The plan is clear and understandable, they have been preparing it and temporized in order to wait till winter and put us in the same situation they have used to put Ukraine in for two times already” (Ibid.).

By making references to the past Russo-Ukrainian gas disputes of 2006 and 2009, the Ukrainian discourse also suggests that taking measures like politically motivated price increases and supply halts is not unusual for Russia, as it has happened twice before. Moreover, while the provision of discounts was represented as a compromising move and a sign of goodwill in the Russian official discourse, the Ukrainian texts frame it as a “Russian trap” and a way to “fool Ukraine” (Yatsenyuk 2014b). Along with such predications, Yatsenyuk constantly uses words like “so-called” when talking about the $100 discount that was offered by the Russian side, implying that such policies are not what they seem and should therefore not be trusted (Ibid.).

Another recurring theme is that the Ukrainian discourse constructs the gas trade with Gazprom as a direct threat to Ukraine’s statehood. In presenting the government action programme to overcome the main challenges facing Ukraine, Yatsenyuk explained that the question of Ukraine’s independence is clearly related to the energy dependence on Russia (CMU 2014i). Hence, the discourse not only heavily politicizes the issues surrounding the Russo-Ukrainian gas trade, but also makes a move towards securitizing it by constructing it as a threat to national security. On the 21st of March, Yatsenyuk made a statement concerning Russia’s energy policies, saying that:
“They do it [raise the price] deliberately to destroy our industry and worsen Ukrainian life” (CMU 2014a).

Consequently, the policies taken by Ukraine in its gas trade with Russia are focused on diversifying imports and are framed as ways to secure the Ukrainian state and protect the independence of the Ukrainian citizens (CMU 2014d). In addition to that, Ukrainian government officials make multiple appeals to the European Union to take a similar stance towards its energy imports from Russia, arguing that Russia’s gas policies are aimed at first targeting Ukraine and then Europe. According to Yatsenyuk, this means that:

“A common task of Ukraine and the EU is to preserve a peace and stability and to enhance the energy independence of Europe and Ukraine” (Ibid.).

It is interesting that Russia’s policies are not represented to be exclusively aimed against Ukraine, but against “all countries of the European Union” (CMU 2014g). By these means, Ukraine’s role in the conflict is reduced even further, by framing Russia’s policies as a general act of aggression instead of a response to any concrete action taken by the Ukrainian side.

**Representation of Russian actors**

Not surprisingly, the Russian actors in the 2014 gas dispute are assigned the role of the aggressor. The interests of Russian actors are described using hostile predications, including: “want to create an energy blockade of Ukraine”, “want to freeze Ukraine” and “will do their best to turn off gas supplies” to Ukraine (CMU 2014j, 2014h, 2014d). At the same time, the discourse frames the Russian actors in an uncooperative way, claiming that they are the ones that are unwilling to settle for a compromise. Both Gazprom and the Russian government are assigned predications like: “have not made a single step to settle the dispute”, “view a market based agreement as unprofitable”, “want an escalation of the problem” and “rejected any proposals made the European Commission to resolve the situation” (CMU 2014d); (Yatsenyuk 2014a); (Naftogaz 2014). It is argued that this attitude of the Russian actors is the reason that the tripartite negotiations between Ukraine, Russia and the EU are not leading to any solutions (Naftogaz 2014). Both the Russian and the Ukrainian side thus blame the other party for the disruption of a peaceful settlement of the gas dispute.
Furthermore, the Ukrainian texts discredit Russia as a reliable trading partner to Ukraine and especially to the European Union, using predications like: “is not a member of the Energy Charter Treaty”, “is not a member of the Energy Community” and “has a completely different legal framework than Ukraine and the European Union” (Yatsenyuk 2014a). By emphasizing that Russia has not ratified the Energy Charter Treaty, Russia’s views on international energy governance are constructed as fundamentally different from those of Ukraine and most European countries. The image of Russia as an untrustworthy gas supplier is thus supported by the argument that Russia is not bound to the same legal framework and can therefore take unilateral decisions in the field of energy trade. As such, the Ukrainian official discourse focuses on discouraging European countries from engaging in gas relations with Russia:

"Gazprom will … divide the EU, offer favorable conditions to some countries, try to get some support from them and punish other countries" (CMU 2014d).

“What was done by Russia yesterday, when it reduced 10% gas supply to the European Union countries, is a very important alarm for the European Union” (CMU 2014f).

**Representation of Ukrainian actors**

Contrary to the Russian side, who are said to view gas relations with Ukraine “through a political prism”, Ukrainian actors are said to desire a market-based approach to energy trade (CMU 2014j). This argument is supported by pointing out that Ukraine: “wants to ensure fair and transparent rules of cooperation in the energy market”, “do not ask for any discounts”, “wants to play by the rules” and “requires a market based approach” (CMU 2014g, 2014d). Furthermore, it is repeatedly argued that Ukraine as actively seeking a solution to the dispute with Russia. Already on the 3rd of April 2014, Yatsenyuk emphasized that Ukraine:

"…will employ all of the political, economic, diplomatic and legal methods needed to … sort out the issue of gas supplies" (CMU 2014b).

Moreover, the Ukrainian position is equaled to that of the European institutions, mainly by emphasizing that they share the same interests and have been conducting a common energy policy (CMU 2014g). This is supported by referring to the fact that Ukraine “has ratified the Energy Charter Treaty”, “is a member of the Energy Community” and therefore has
joint obligations with most European countries in the field of energy (CMU 2014d). By constructing Ukrainian actors as partners of the European Union, having a joint position of the gas issues, the Ukrainian side is ascribed credibility in the dispute with Russia. When discussing the tripartite negotiations between Ukraine, Russia and the European Commission, it is repeatedly stated that “Ukraine has agreed to all compromise proposals elaborated by its European partners” and made profitable suggestions to Gazprom that were based on market formulas (CMU 2014e). Ukrainian actors are thus constructed as cooperative and open for a compromise, similar to the way the Russian discourse presented the Russian actors.

Contrary to the Russian discourse, which presents a return to stable relations between Russia and Ukraine in the field of gas as the desirable outcome of the dispute, Ukrainian actors emphasizes the need to achieve energy independence and to completely switch Ukraine’s energy imports away from Russia (CMU 2014f, 2014g). Ukraine is constructed as a country with a strong “national and patriotic spirit” that does not want to “pay money to the Russians” and instead want to buy gas from its European partners (CMU 2014f). In the end of October 2014, Yatsenyuk proudly noted that:

“Out of the 25 billion cubic meters of gas, which Ukraine was buying in Russia, 15 billion cubic meters were replaced by gas the Ukrainian side buys from European companies . . . this is a significant step forward, but it is not enough” (CMU 2014g).

Hence, the Ukrainian discourse mainly aims to address European countries to start signing supply and transit contracts with Ukraine, seeking closer cooperation with the EU while avoiding any relations with Russia (Ibid.).

5. Conclusion

Having presented the results of the conducted discourse analysis, this section will conclude by answering the research question that was posed in the introduction: “How have Russian and Ukrainian officials perceived their mutual gas trade during the 2014 conflict in Eastern Ukraine?”

Based on the analyzed texts it can be concluded that the Russian discourse on its gas relations with Ukraine adopts a strong economic focus. Natural gas is framed as a trading
commodity and an important source of income for Russia, used with the exclusive goal of acquiring revenues and generating profits. Both Gazprom and the Russian Government are presented as being uninterested in using energy as a means of war and solving political issues. Consistent with the market-based approach to Russia’s energy policies, the discourse thus denies any association between Gazprom and Russia’s foreign policy and emphasizes the strictly commercial duties of the company. When discussing the change in gas policies towards Ukraine, the discourse presents legal and economic arguments to justify Russia’s actions. The cancellation of discounts and the transition towards prepayment terms for Russian gas are attributed to the inability and unwillingness of the Ukrainian side to comply with existing agreements and fulfill the contractual obligations. Furthermore, this switch is presented as a transition towards pragmatic, businesslike gas relations and is contrasted with the many years of preferential, politically motivated policies that were carried out by the Russian side. Rather than constructing energy resources like natural gas as a tool to achieve geopolitical goals, the discourse thus shows quite the opposite: Russian officials are focused on depoliticizing the energy trade and express an interest in moving towards exclusively economic cooperation with post-Soviet countries. Hence, it can be concluded that Russian officials perceive their mutual gas trade with Ukraine as an issue in the economic, rather than political sphere.

In contrast, the Ukrainian discourse presents Russo-Ukrainian gas as an issue of politics and national security. The changes in Russia’s gas policies are denied any economic characteristics, while being presented as political measures against Ukraine’s European choice and attempts to keep Ukraine under the Russian sphere of influence. Consistent with the geopolitical approach outlined in the literature review, energy is thus viewed as a strategic resource and a source of political power. It can be concluded from the conducted discourse analysis that Russo-Ukrainian gas relations are always interpreted against the background of bilateral relations between the two governments by Ukrainian officials. Consequently, the 2014 gas dispute is framed as part of the broader military conflict between Russia and Ukraine, instead of a separate economic disagreement as it was presented in the Russian official discourse. The discourse represents the Russian side as the aggressor, completely attributing the negative change in policies to Russia’s hostile intentions, with no mention of any Ukrainian actions that could have served as a provocation. Therefore, Jervis’ explanation that actors tend to perceive any harmful policy
as an intentional move against them, while diminishing their own role in the conflict, also seems to fit the Ukrainian case. Such hostile perceptions of Russia can even be extended beyond the 2014 gas dispute, to other aspects of Ukraine’s relations with Russia. In fact, any policy concerning Ukraine taken by the Russian Federation is presented to be political in nature. Therefore, these results are consistent with Balmaceda’s earlier discussed argument on the inability of many post-Soviet countries to view Russia’s policies as anything other than political.

Summing up, this thesis has shown that different actors can have a significantly different perception of certain events, depending on the ways in which they ascribe meaning to them. It has shown that claims of Russia’s use of the ‘energy weapon’ do not necessarily have to be based on objective, material factors, but can also originate from a historical sense of hostility towards Russia. A constructivist analysis of inter-state energy relations has thus proven to be a useful method to assess the energy relations between Russia and post-Soviet states like Ukraine.

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