



Politicising Government Engagement with Corporate Social Responsibility: “CSR” as an Empty Signifier

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Abstract

Governments are widely viewed by academics and practitioners (and society more generally) as the *key* societal actors who are capable of compelling businesses to practice corporate social responsibility (CSR). Arguably, such government involvement could be seen as a technocratic device for encouraging ethical business behaviour. In this paper, we offer a more politicised interpretation of government engagement with CSR where “CSR” is not a desired form of business conduct but an element of discourse that governments can deploy in structuring their relationships with other social actors. We build our argument through a historical analysis of government CSR discourse in the Russian Federation. Laclau and Mouffe’s (Hegemony and socialist strategy: Towards a radical democratic politics, Verso Books, London, 1985) social theory of hegemony underpins our research. We find that “CSR” in the Russian government’s discourse served to legitimise its power over large businesses. Using this case, we contribute to wider academic debates by providing fresh empirical evidence that allows the development of critical evaluation tools in relation to governments’ engagement with “CSR”. We find that governments are capable of hijacking CSR for their own self-interested gain. We close the paper by reflecting on the merit of exploring the case of the Russian Federation. As a “non-core”, non-western exemplar, it provides a useful “mirror” with which to reflect on the more widely used test-bed of Western industrial democracies when scrutinising CSR. Based on our findings, we invite other scholars to adopt a more critical, politicised stance when researching the role of governments in relation to CSR in other parts of the world.

Keywords Corporate social responsibility · Government · Russian Federation · Hegemony · Empty signifier

Introduction

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), or the idea that business organisations should go beyond a certain financial performance and legal compliance to contribute to social welfare and environmental protection through their operations (Crane et al. 2013; Dahlsrud 2008) has increasingly become an area of government involvement. A growing body of literature reveals that national governments across the world are employing diverse practices to promote CSR

(Albareda et al. 2007; 2008; González and Martínez 2004; Podsiadlowski and Reichel 2014; Rossouw 2005; Vallentin 2015a; Waagstein 2011). However, governments’ motivation for engagement in and with CSR has not received extensive critical attention.

Much of the past and recent critical academic research into CSR has focused on the roles of business as political actors (e.g. Ehrnström and Fuentes 2016; Fooks et al. 2013; Néron 2013; Scherer and Palazzo 2011; Scherer et al. 2014; Scherer 2018; Whelan 2012), leaving the issue of the role of government actors relatively underdeveloped or neglected as a research field. Most existing studies that examine government engagement with CSR tend to focus on the form that the government intervention takes or should take (e.g. Albareda et al. 2007, 2008; Vallentin and Murillo 2012; Keskitalo et al. 2012). That said, some of those studies do provide nuanced accounts of government policies and mechanisms, and some do adopt political and critical approaches. For instance, Vallentin (2015a) and Vallentin and Murillo

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(2012) demonstrate that a single government's CSR initiatives can be informed by different and often contradictory ideological understandings of CSR, each with its own set of assumptions and exclusions promoting a specific "truth" about CSR (Vallentin, 2015a, p. 40).

However, to date, the underlying logic of a government's engagement with CSR has received limited analytical scrutiny. Overwhelmingly, the existing literature implicitly or explicitly assumes that the role of governments in this policy area is underpinned by a sense of accountability to the electorate and an attendant obligation to address certain social goals, meet environmental protection standards and/or particular economic growth objectives. In this context, governments are largely understood as socially- and/or business-oriented actors and are not considered to be "political" actors with their own interests: they are thought to be merely serving or assisting the public good.

Moreover, business-government relations, specifically in the CSR policy area, are not typically seen as being politically confrontational but mainly as cooperation and collaboration designed to build "acceptable" regulatory environments and achieve common aims (e.g. Midttun 2005). We suggest that these assumptions need to be examined critically, particularly if we are to provide explanations of government (in)effectiveness in promoting ethical business behaviour and in order to have the tools to question the legitimacy of government activity (Edward and Willmott 2013). Accordingly, the primary purpose of this paper is to expound a particular political understanding of government engagement with CSR and develop an approach that permits a critical interpretation and evaluation.

Our thinking is informed by the writings of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, in particular, their social theory of hegemony (Laclau and Mouffe 1985; Mouffe 2013). The "political" is central to Laclau and Mouffe's understanding of social relations and it is conceptualised as requiring two components—antagonism and hegemony. They understand the "political" as an antagonistic relationship between social actors where the identity of a given social actor is both constituted through and threatened by the presence of others (Mouffe 2013). Political action is, therefore, seen as an articulatory, discursive process where social actors attempt to formulate and convey their own and others' identities in competing ways. Successful articulations erase antagonisms and establish a (temporary) dominance of one discursive ideological structure. Such articulations are termed "hegemonic" (Laclau and Mouffe 1985). Consequently, society as a whole is seen a product of hegemonic articulations (Mouffe 2013).

This approach to the "political" differs from the existing "politically embedded accounts" (Vallentin and Murillo 2012, p. 828) of government roles in CSR, where, for example, an institutional or national business systems approach

sees governments in different nation states as the regulatory backdrops that shape the prevailing CSR understanding and practice but do not occupy antagonistic positions in relation to other social actors (see for example, Jamali and Karam 2018; Kang and Moon 2011; Matten and Moon 2008). It also differs from Scherer and Palazzo's (2011) "political CSR" that defines CSR as the corporate contribution to global governance and the provision of public goods through deliberative and democratic collaboration with other social actors.

More significantly, another key difference is in the understanding of the ontological status of CSR. Laclau and Mouffe's framework allows the treatment of government engagement with CSR as a political activity by understanding "CSR" not as a set of desired organisational behaviours but as an element of discourse with particular constitutive functions. The notion of discourse is central to Laclau and Mouffe's conceptualisation. Discourses are broadly defined as structured complexes of textual and non-textual practices—utterances, images—that can be employed, consciously or unconsciously, by various social actors to produce certain meanings, legitimise certain positions and marginalise others (Howarth 1998; Spicer and Fleming 2007; Walton and Boon 2014). For example, Laclau and Mouffe (1985) suggest that established terms such as "order" or "democracy" can function as "empty signifiers" or discursive elements that are themselves devoid of meaning but can be employed to erase social antagonisms and establish certain discourses as hegemonic. Similarly, other scholars have demonstrated how notions such as "sustainability" and "environmental protection" can function as empty signifiers that help articulate particular business practices as aligned with environmental concerns (Archel et al. 2011; Brown 2016; Davidson 2010; Methmann 2010; Stavrakakis 1997). By these means, business actors can associate themselves, or are associated by others, with environmental concerns without establishing a single understanding of either the nature of environmental concerns or the actions needed to address them. If and when the meaning of "sustainability" and "environmental protection" is substantiated, it remains conditional, resting on the particular circumstances of individual social actors. Crucially, the studies above politicise the notions of "environmental protection" and "sustainability" by presenting them not as mere denotations of technical mechanisms and processes and but as vehicles of power in themselves that allow social actors to create hegemonic discourses (Laclau 2007; Howarth 1998; Methmann 2010; Swyngedouw 2011). Reflecting on whether "CSR" may similarly function as an empty signifier allows us to view it as a discursive device that governments can deploy to buttress particular political positions whilst not necessarily pursuing responsible firm behaviour as a primary objective.

We support our contention about the politicisation of government engagement with the "CSR" notion by analysing

the government discourse in one country, the Russian Federation, during one particular historical period, 1991–2012. Our analysis indicates that the office of the President of the Russian Federation used “CSR” as a discursive device that helped it locate large Russian businesses as subordinate to the government and legitimise the government coercion of those business organisations. Accordingly, we proffer a theoretical understanding of government use of the CSR notion not only as a technical or technocratic exercise in achieving particular social and economic goals, but also as a political activity where governments can employ the signifier “CSR” in power struggles to position themselves in certain ways vis-à-vis other social actors.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows: we start by discussing three main established interpretations of government engagement with CSR. We then show how these explanations implicitly presume that government actions are driven by social accountability and the cooperative pursuit of common goals. Next, we explain how Laclau and Mouffe’s (1985) social theory of hegemony may help assemble a more critical understanding of government involvement with CSR. After outlining our methods, we present our analysis of the Russian government’s engagement with CSR through the lens of Laclau and Mouffe’s social theory of hegemony. The article closes with a summary of our findings and a discussion of how we see the contributions of our study in relation to the existing scholarly discussions on governmental engagement with CSR.

Accounting for Government Engagement with CSR: Some Alternative Explanations

It is possible to identify several main interpretations of how and why governments may involve themselves in CSR, ranging from the perceived decline of states to the putative failure of a voluntary approach to CSR and to the consequence of insufficient business resources or the government as a self-interested political actor. We now turn to discuss each of these understandings in turn so as to provide the context for subsequent empirical and theoretical sections of this paper.

A Consequence of State Decline?

When attempting to account for government engagement with CSR, the first explanation that emerges from the extant literature is the putative decline of states and governmental authority. Many studies of government engagement in CSR observe that the power balance between governments and business has shifted in favour of the latter (Moon 2004). Some authors argue that governments are unable to cope with the increasing complexity of economic and political life, leaving a regulatory void that powerful business actors

exploit for their own ends. In what Santoro (2010, p. 286) calls the “post-Westphalian globalisation narrative”, multinational corporations are seen as particularly powerful (Kobrin 2009; Scherer et al. 2009; Scherer and Palazzo 2011). The lack of enforceable international regulation allows them to seize a leading role in shaping the “global rules of the game” (van Oosterhout 2010, p. 257). Multinationals’ wealth, knowledge, and capabilities are also often so substantial, especially in comparison with those of governments in developing countries where they operate that the citizenry of those countries may well turn towards multinationals instead of their own government as an essential supplier of social goods (Beddewela and Fairbrass 2015; van Oosterhout 2010). In extreme cases, multinational corporations become *de-facto* governments by controlling and maintaining infrastructure, social services, and security forces (Banerjee 2008, 2010). Similar trends can also be discerned in the industrialised world where governments are increasingly withdrawing from administering certain areas of public life such as infrastructure and healthcare through the mechanisms of privatisation and market liberalisation (Moon 2005; Steurer 2010).

In this context, CSR promotion is seen as an alternative method for governments to steer business activity and achieve social and environmental objectives (Standing 2007). With an emphasis on the voluntary commitment of corporations towards ethical behaviour, CSR can be regarded as a form of “soft law” that can assist governments in delivering their social and environmental objectives in areas where “hard law” is absent, impractical or resisted (Steurer 2010). Equally, Vallentin and Murillo (2012) and Vallentin (2015a) herald CSR facilitation as a “governmentality” approach for controlling businesses that relies on reshaping the social norms of business conduct rather than influencing firms through direct regulation.

A Result of Failing Voluntary CSR?

The second reason cited in the existing literature which rationalises and calls for the active government involvement in CSR is the assertion that a purely voluntary approach would fail to deliver responsible behaviour in firms. This perspective, in contrast to the one above, views the nation states as still powerful and significant and holds that the voluntary nature of CSR allows corporations to shape their practices in a way that primarily or solely rewards business owners rather than other stakeholders (Eberhard-Harribey 2006; Fairbrass 2011). In the absence of a powerful societal actor, such as a government, which could counterbalance the dominance of corporations in defining “responsibility”, business interests can hijack the CSR agenda. Essentially, governments act (or need to act) as a “referee” whose role

it is to enforce ethical and responsible behaviour amongst otherwise misbehaving firms.

There is also recognition that market mechanisms may be insufficient to ensure responsible conduct (Aaronson 2007; Fairbrass 2011). This renders voluntary CSR a second-best alternative to government regulation in many areas (Vogel 2005, p. 164). In much of the current capitalist discourse, economic efficiency is more highly valued than meeting the demands of non-shareholder in defining the social legitimacy of the firm (Banerjee 2010). Moreover, many social groups who are adversely affected by corporate activity are simply not powerful enough to challenge such entrenched notions of corporate legitimacy. In any case, consumers and employees may refuse to bear the cost of responsible behaviour in the form of higher prices and lower compensation (Vogel 2005). Furthermore, small and medium-sized enterprises, which are not particularly visible in the public domain, tend not to face the same external pressures as large firms that would otherwise encourage them to act responsibly (Lynch-Wood et al. 2009). Finally, it would be illogical to expect companies operating in countries with weak institutional systems to voluntarily behave responsibly as one of the reasons why they may have chosen to operate in such a location is precisely the lack of government enforcement of responsible behaviour (Newell 2005).

A Consequence of Insufficient Business Resources, Expertise, or Power?

The third strand of literature is conceptually similar to the studies on failing voluntary CSR: it also acknowledges the continuing significance of the nation state (Vallentin and Murillo 2012). However, it does not generally regard voluntary CSR as problematic (Albareda et al. 2007). On the contrary, voluntary CSR is often defined in terms of:

...business opportunities and value surplus as opposed to social problems, government deficits or governance gaps. (Vallentin 2015a, p. 41).

Government-driven or orchestrated CSR is a means of achieving business competitiveness whilst simultaneously contributing to national economic growth and development (Vallentin and Murillo 2012; Porter and Kramer 2006). Business, however, is regarded as potentially lacking the required resources, expertise, and social legitimacy or power to develop and execute voluntary CSR programmes with sufficient effectiveness and, therefore, require the help of more powerful and better resourced actors such as governments. Government intermediation may be needed because firms, while acting responsibly in some areas, demonstrate weak progress in others fields such as labour rights and corruption. Businesses alone may not have the capacity to address the

broad systemic problems or developmental needs of whole countries (Barkemeyer 2009).

To illustrate this further, it should be noted that governments can and do build information portals, provide technical assistance, and organise professional networks (Albareda et al. 2007; Fox et al. 2002). The writings of Vallentin (2015a) and Vallentin and Murillo (2012) are particularly seminal in this area as they explicitly recognise the “positive” as opposed to the “restrictive” role that governments can play in facilitating responsible business conduct. These scholars cite the example of Denmark where the government has initiated information and training programmes targeting small and medium enterprises in order to “mainstream” CSR and “help” SMEs with limited resources “manage social and environmental challenges in the supply chain and comply with demands and expectations from governments, industry and NGOs” (Vallentin 2015a, p. 40). Vallentin and Murillo (2012, p. 826) describe how the Danish government is increasingly working “to help private companies identify/create and act upon strategic opportunities in their environment.”

Specifically in relation to large businesses, Vallentin (2015a, p. 41) found that the Danish government attempted to “inspire” companies to be more proactive in the CSR domain through instituting mandatory CSR reporting that nonetheless does not require the companies to actually engage in CSR. Additionally, the Danish government took a lead in creating an independent forum where government, business, and civil society would come together to address disputes involving business breaches of human rights. Business organisations on their own would not have possessed the legitimacy required for an establishment of such a forum.

Having considered some of the widely discussed explanations for government in CSR, we now move to reflect on the role of governments as “socially responsible actors” with a view to exploring further their motivations and raising some questions about how and why governments engage in CSR.

The Critical Question: Governments as Socially Responsible Actors?

Given the discussion above, it could be implied that government engagement with CSR is motivated by the necessity to address the needs of its own stakeholders: the electorate, the business community, and the economy as a whole. In rare direct statements, Albareda et al. (2008) and Midttun (2005) buttress this understanding by characterising the role of government as a “regulator” and “supporter” of business and as a “provider” of public services and an “aggregator” of collective social interests. According to these accounts, CSR is understood as a goal—responsible business conduct—that the government is attempting to achieve in order to address social, environmental and economic concerns.

This understanding of government engagement with CSR and of the function of CSR in government activity and rhetoric has not been much critically discussed or questioned. Governments may be seen to be benign and disinterested altruistic actors. By contrast, some scholars outside business and management studies do adopt more critical outlook on government activity. For instance, political scientists tend to view governments as potentially self-interested social actors (Caselli and Cunningham 2009). De Mesquita et al. (2005) in their influential text *The Logic of Political Survival* argue that the main goal of any incumbent government and its officers is to remain in that position.

At this juncture, it is important to emphasise that previous and recent CSR studies routinely suggest that business organisations’ primary motivation for engaging in CSR is their own successful continuation. This can take the form of a “business case for CSR” where profit motives underlying CSR activities are regarded as healthy and legitimate. By contrast, other authors critique the “business case” for ultimately prioritising the needs of the owners and investors at the expense of other stakeholders (e.g. Brei and Böhm 2013). The viability of the “political CSR” model underpinned by deliberative democracy (Scherer and Palazzo 2011) has also been questioned in terms of the fundamental self-interest of corporations (Whelan 2012). Vallentin (2015b), in a review of critical perspectives of CSR, writes about the politicised understanding of CSR advanced by critical scholars as one which points to the ultimate self-interests of business actors and to CSR functioning “as an ideological cover-up for modern corporate capitalism” (p. 15). Whichever view is adopted, an understanding of CSR as something other than an authentic business effort to address social and environmental concerns is central to critical CSR literature.

We suggest that a critical attitude should also be extended to include government engagement with CSR, a task that has been largely neglected until now, thus positioning governments as “political actors” and not merely “technical regulators”. We contend that the motivations of governments need to be scrutinised as rigorously as those of business actors. Ultimately, we consider the possibility that from the point of view of governments, the function of “CSR” notion may not be limited to a representation of responsible business conduct: it may serve other less benevolent goals. The next section explains the philosophical underpinnings of our critique.

Social Theory of Hegemony and “CSR” as a Political Tool

Laclau and Mouffe’s (1985) social theory of hegemony has provided the tools to politicise widely used concepts such as “order” and “freedom” by considering their constitutive

function as elements of discourse as opposed to treating them as denotations of specific social phenomena. The social theory of hegemony explains how certain discursive elements can become devices that make possible the establishment of hegemonies (i.e. dominant discourses that shape sensemaking within societies). A similar re-consideration of the ontological status of “CSR” would permit us to examine it, not as a form of organisational behaviour (that may be either universal or vary from one institutional context to another), but as a political device. This approach leads to an examination of government engagement with “CSR” not only as an exercise in reaching a particular technocratic objective (such as reduced environmental pollution), but also as part of the struggle for political legitimacy and influence in relation to other social actors.

In Laclau and Mouffe’s (1985) framework, discourse has constitutive power. They conceptualise social relations and sensemaking as being constituted through discourse, and define discourse as temporarily and partially fixed systems of meanings that influence “cognitive scripts, categories and rationalities” (Torfing 1999, p. 82). The discourses that come to suppress or incorporate other competing discourses are regarded as “hegemonic”.

The fundamentals of this approach derive from Saussurean linguistics where language is treated as a system of relations between signifiers (e.g. assemblages of letters and sounds that form words) and signified (the meanings). The relationship between the signifier and the signified itself is arbitrary: any signifier can be attached to any signified. As signifiers can be attached to many signified, they are said to be “overdetermined” (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, p. 98) and the links between signifiers and signified are not reified: for example, for some the meaning of “Corporate Social Responsibility” has evolved over time from “philanthropy” to “ethics of core company activities” (Carroll 1999).

In addition, the substance of the identity (also known as a “sign”) that results from the link between a signifier and a signified is not essential but emerges only in a differential relationship with other identities (Torfing 1999). For instance, “CSR” can only be understood in a differential relation to concepts such as “profit” or “shareholder value”. Language, therefore, is an unstable “relational system of differences” (Methmann 2010, p. 351).

In this context, discourse is a structure that includes certain differentially related identities and excludes others, temporarily fixing the relationships between them. This fixing is accomplished through the process of “articulation” that modifies the identities of free-floating discursive “elements” that may have many meanings into fixed “moments” with a specific meaning within a particular discourse (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, p. 105). Articulation involves two contradictory but nonetheless co-existing logics—that of *difference* and of *equivalence*. The logic of difference temporarily fixes

the meaning of elements through emphasising their particular mutual differences. The logic of equivalence seeks to delimit the boundaries of a discursive system by emphasising a “certain sameness” between differentially articulated moments (Torfing 1999, p. 301). For instance, differing political parties in one country can all present themselves as committed to “law and order” even though individually their understanding of what equates to an acceptable form of order and order-keeping differs. The empty signifier “law and order” serves to articulate the diverging parties as equivalent and united in their commitment to “order”. Over-determination of signifiers and the existence of competing discourses, however, prevents a permanent fixing of meanings. Hence, a discourse is always an unstable and “fictitious fixing of meaning” (Laclau 1996, p. 205).

From Laclau and Mouffe’s perspective, political struggles involve different parties attempting to hegemonise their own versions of equivalential or differential relations (Torfing 1999). Hegemonic discourses that emerge as (temporary) winners of political struggles are distinguished by their success in emphasising the equivalence between diverse range of positions and identities, including antagonistic ones (Torfing 1999, p. 101). The integration of diverse positions into one discursive totality simplifies the political space by articulating disparate causes as having similar objectives (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, p. 130). The consequences of such integration can be the formation of a hegemonic discourse in order to realise the chosen goals.

The logic of equivalence that underlies hegemonies is made possible by the presence of a privileged category of signifiers that Laclau and Mouffe (1985) call “nodal points” in relation to which separate elements can be articulated as equivalent. The signifiers that form nodal points are in themselves empty of specific meaning, hence they are also called “empty signifiers”. They are empty because if they had a specific meaning, they would simply become one more difference in a system of relational differences (Laclau 2007). Instead, they have the potential to represent a chain of other signifiers, or to be filled with a variety of meanings, with the different meanings “sliding” under them (Torfing 1999, p. 301; Davidson 2010). They also perform a naming function and create the possibility of diverse groups and positions being united under one label (Contu and Girei 2014; Laclau 2007).

Thus, empty signifiers can temporarily suture social divisions by providing a single point of reference for otherwise diverging positions. For example, Stavrakakis (1997) describes how differing social practices have been allowed to become part of the “green” discourse by simply being named “green.” Empty signifiers represent the “systematicity of the [discursive] system” (Laclau 2007, p. 39). Establishing hegemony involves deciding which meanings are allowed to slide under the empty signifiers (Laclau 2007).

The process of signifiers becoming nodal points is not arbitrary one. They can derive from a variety of “residual institutions”—earlier articulations, existing normative frameworks or broader established discourses—that make them meaningful and legitimate to many actors (Nabers 2009, p. 197; Edward and Willmott 2013; Kenny and Scriver 2012). Long-established signifiers such as “freedom”, “democracy”, and “order” often play a role in the construction of hegemonies.

“CSR” and related terms such as “sustainability” and “business responsibility”, owing to their increasing use, have a clear potential to become empty signifiers. For example, Methmann (2010) describes how “climate protection” functions as an empty signifier and allows various social actors to articulate themselves as environmentally responsible without changing their practices. Brown (2016) similarly shows that essential emptiness of “sustainability” allows diverse social actors to present their activities as sustainable when, arguably, they are not actually sustainable. For example, Davidson (2010) describes how “sustainability” allowed for the development of new partnerships and organisational agendas in urban planning in Vancouver:

[Sustainability]... [b]rought together a divergent group of practitioners via the notion that all are, in some way, involved in sustainability (p. 398).

This allowed different parties to re-imagine existing activities as relating to sustainability and provided them with a sense of coherence and unity. All these examples, however, largely concern the critique of the use of sustainability and related concepts by business actors to support the neo-liberal hegemony that benefits them (Fougère and Solitander 2009). Below, in our paper, we apply the Laclau and Mouffe framework to examine the use of CSR concept by government actors in the Russian Federation.

Methods

We have selected Russian federal government CSR policy as an illustrative case to support our contention that government engagement with CSR should be treated more critically for the following reasons. Firstly, given that the Russian government has not been particularly known for its focus on social and environmental concerns, this is a fruitful situation in which to explore governmental uses of the “CSR” term that may not have been driven by such considerations (De Mesquita et al. 2005). In addition, during the time period that we examine, Russian governments did begin to engage with the subject of non-financial responsibility of business and so could provide us with illuminating data. The form of engagement we observed could be said to resemble the “agora” approach (Albareda et al. 2008; Crotty 2014), that

is the creation of and participation in forums where CSR and related topics were discussed by various stakeholders and certain expectations with regard to responsible business conduct were expressed. Finally, the development of Russian government CSR engagement contained both periods of relative lack of conflict between government and business and also periods of open antagonism. Laclau and Mouffe’s (1985) pre-condition for the emergence of empty signifiers is social antagonism or the existence of opposing discursive positions.

[T]he two conditions of hegemonic articulation are the presence of antagonistic forces and the instability of frontiers which separate them (pp. 134–136).

Thus, periods of antagonism between the Russian government and businesses offers a fertile ground for the examination of “CSR” as an empty signifier. The periods of relative accord and harmony furnish a useful comparison.

At the start of our analysis below, we provide a brief description of the different periods in the emergence of Russian federal government-business relations as a way to contextualise the interpretation of our data. We delineate the temporal boundaries of our research from the establishment of the Russian Federation in 1991 to the mature stage of the international financial crisis in 2012. Whilst pre-1991 and post-2012 events are by no means irrelevant, the demise of the Soviet Union and the 2014 conflict with Ukraine created radically different societal and political relations within Russia, and their analysis is outside the scope of this article.

With regard to the specific data collection and analyses methods, Laclau and Mouffe are famously non-specific (Jørgensen and Philips 2002; Howarth 1998; Walton and Boon 2014). As a result, in translating our theoretical stance into specific research methods we relied on existing publications containing discourse analyses based on the social theory of hegemony (e.g. Contu and Girei 2014; Contu et al. 2013; Kenny and Scriver 2012; Methmann 2010) and on the attempt by Walton and Boon (2014) to explicitly construct a Laclau and Mouffe-inspired discourse analysis methodology.

We constructed our case study by analysing both verbal and written utterances¹ of the Russian federal government and parliamentary officials that included the “CSR” term and related terms such as “responsibility of business”. The English term “Corporate Social Responsibility” translates straightforwardly into Russian as “Корпоративная Социальная Ответственность”. It is, however, often shortened to “responsibility of business” (“ответственность бизнеса”) or “social responsibility” (“социальная

ответственность”) or adjusted somewhat to “social responsibility of business” (“социальная ответственность бизнеса”). These are terms that are less cumbersome to pronounce in Russian but that carry the same broad connotations of business conduct that is mindful of its impact on society and environment.² We employed all these terms in our data search and treated all of them as potential empty signifiers equivalent to “CSR”.

Our data set included a variety of Russian federal government records such as legislature and presidential decrees, policy papers, and national strategy documents publicly available in online repositories. We supplemented the government documentation with a large volume of data on business-government CSR-related interaction from less formal sources such as newspapers and news channels. Our data search was systematic: we ensured that we covered every year between 1991 and 2012, explored documents relevant to every major government body (the parliament and the office of the president), and traced the utterances of key state officials (namely Vladimir Putin and Dmitri Medvedev). We searched for documents that contained “CSR” and equivalent terms and also for those we could reasonably expect to contain them (e.g. policy documents on Russian national sustainable development). As we aimed to explore “CSR” as an empty signifier, we did not look for the use of “CSR” and equivalent terms that was aligned with a specific definition but solely for the presence of “CSR” and equivalent terms such as “responsibility of business” in the text.

As a result, we amassed a large variety of sources: presidential decrees, government reports, news articles, transcripts of parliamentary hearings, records of televised interviews, accounts of meetings with state officials published by business organisations, and video recordings of government officials’ speeches.

Our analysis of the documents focused on articulations and the chain of equivalence produced through the use of the “CSR” (or equivalent) signifier (Howarth 1998). It included two distinct but partially overlapping stages. The first stage involved mapping out the timeline of the Russian government’s use of the “CSR” term and the contexts where it took place. The skeleton for the timeline was provided by the existing publications on the history of the business-government relations in post-Soviet Russia. We coded our textual data, noting how the extent of government references

¹ One of the authors of this paper is a native Russian speaker, which allowed for the analysis of texts that are not normally available in English.

² For example, the terms “Corporate Social Responsibility” and “social responsibility” are used interchangeably in the parliamentary hearings on the subject of “Corporate Social Responsibility in Russia: Aims, tasks, legislative provision” (Federal Council of RF 2007), and the terms “Corporate Social Responsibility” and “responsibility of business” are used interchangeably in the parliamentary hearings titled “Corporate Social Responsibility in the period of crisis: Challenges, experience, possibilities” (Federal Council of RF 2009).

to “CSR” (or equivalent) varies across different historical periods set out in the skeleton timeline. In addition, we identified the different fora (such as formal policy documents, parliamentary hearings) and different relational situations (including the interactions between the president and the business leaders versus the interactions between the parliament and the business leaders) where terms such as “CSR” and “responsibility of business” appeared. This allowed us to develop an overall understanding of the events and the social actors involved that structured our subsequent interpretation and helped us identify patterns in our data (Contu and Girei 2014; Walton and Boon 2014). It also meant that in the second stage of analysis we could employ a logic of deconstruction, in other words we could make visible the contingent nature of “CSR” significations by examining how these significations changed across time periods and relational contexts (Kenny and Scriver 2012; Spicer and Fleming 2007). Finally, an analysis of the ways in which the intensity of the use of “CSR” (or equivalent) varied across temporal and relational contexts contributed to our contention that “CSR” functioned as an empty signifier.

In the second stage, we explored and coded the articulations of “CSR” and equivalent terms such as “responsibility of business” in the government discourse. We also identified the themes that were closely linked to these terms: for example, presidential explanations of why Russian businesses should care about responsibility or the topics that consistently served as background for the discussion of responsibility. Overall, we searched for paradigmatic relationships (a relationship where discursive elements are able to stand for one another) between “CSR” or equivalent terms and other elements present in the government discourse (Contu and Girei 2014). This allowed us to determine the discursive chain of equivalence held together by the “CSR” signifier. From this process we were able to discern the function that the “CSR” played in the government discourse.

While we did not purposefully set out to analyse CSR-related discourses used by social actors other than the government, we could not help but note the Russian business leaders’ articulation of “business responsibility”. This was a side-effect of the fact that many government CSR-related iterations occurred in the context of discussions with the business leaders. A systematic analysis of business articulations was outside the remit of this paper. Nonetheless, the business articulations that we captured do provide a point of comparison that revealed the “slippage” (Spicer and Fleming 2007, p. 521) in the articulations of “CSR” and enriched our understanding of the function of the “CSR” signifier in the Russian governments’ discourse.

The two-phase analysis is reflected in our report of the findings below. We begin by briefly outlining the key periods in the development of the Russian federal government-business relations. We then use this timeline to discuss

the timing of the appearance of the “CSR” (or equivalent) signifier in government discourse. This is followed by an examination of how “CSR” was articulated across different relational contexts and by an in-depth exposition of the “CSR” articulations in the context that emerged as the most important forum: the meetings between the President of the Russian Federation and the leaders of major Russian companies. Finally, we bring all the elements together in a discussion on the function of the “CSR” signifier in the Russian government discourse.

The Case of Russian Federal CSR Policy

The History of Russian Federal Government—Business Relations

Yakovlev (2006), Rutland (2011), Frye (2002, 2006), and Hanson and Teague (2005) provide useful analyses of business-government relations in post-Soviet Russia. Typically, three main historical periods are identified by these authors: the presidency of Boris Yeltsin (1991–1999), the presidency of Vladimir Putin (2000–2005), and the later presidency and prime ministry of Vladimir Putin and Dmitri Medvedev (post-2005). The first period is commonly characterised by the dominance of the business interests over the federal government and the second by a radical shift in this balance of power that created an antagonistic ground for hegemonic political struggle. The third period saw relative stability that resulted from the federal government gaining control over business interests.

The 1990s saw both federal and local government being dominated by business interests to the extent that different federal agencies competed with each other while supporting different business factions. Widespread corruption resulted. While the presidential office served as the only available source of arbitration for large businesses at the federal level, the President and political parties were heavily dependent on the oligarchs as a source of finance for access to the media at election times. Two noteworthy consequences of these business-government relations were endemic tax evasion by businesses and a privatisation process that saw vast quantities of assets, previously belonging to the public, being appropriated and concentrated in a few well-connected hands. To this day, the latter endures in the memory of the Russian people as a traumatic event and perpetuates public mistrust of businesses.

After the 1998 financial crisis, the federal government had to orchestrate a renewal of its own leadership to ensure its continuation. Vladimir Putin was chosen as the new face of the federal power, first as a prime minister and then as Yeltsin’s successor. His urgent concern was building a “vertical of power” consisting of a clearly delineated, legitimate

hierarchy with the president at the top and regional administrations and industry interests below and result in the “rule of law” (Brown 2001; Monaghan 2012). To accomplish this, the federal executive extended support to the army, the national security and law enforcement apparatus. The relationship between the federal authorities and large business was made explicitly more “equidistant”, replacing personal informal meetings (at private country retreats) with official formal engagements (in the Kremlin). The President demanded that business be represented by official associations. The early 2000s saw the rapid growth of business organisations such as the Russian Union of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs (RUIE), which represented established oligarchs mainly from extractive industries.

Open antagonism between the President of the Russian Federation and business leaders such as Boris Berezovsky and Vladimir Gusinsky, who resisted the new order, was typical of the period. A poignant turning point was the 2003 meeting between president Putin and business leaders. At the meeting, the head of the Yukos oil conglomerate Mikhail Khodorkovsky, who funded political opposition and, allegedly, harboured political ambitions of his own, accused the president’s office of orchestrating corrupt acquisitions transactions. The story of Khodorkovsky’s subsequent arrest on tax evasion charges, conviction, and protracted imprisonment featured widely in the global press. The event clearly demonstrated that the Kremlin had tax inspectors, the courts and the security services at its disposal. By 2005, the Russian executive had largely gained control over business. This paved the way for relative stability and the absence of government-business antagonism post-2005.

The Timing of Government-Business “CSR” Discussions

Our analysis shows that most of the federal government iterations involving the “CSR” term were made during the 2000–2005 period when the government-business antagonism was at its peak. Previously, during the Yeltsin years, the government did not employ the terms “responsibility of business” or “CSR” and, at best, engaged in a limited discussion of the role of business in addressing environmental and social problems in Russia. These roles were first mentioned 2 years after the dissolution of the Soviet Union in December 1991. It began with an attempt to develop environmental and social legislation that would support national sustainable development policy. The initial thrust came in the form of a presidential decree on *Fundamentals of State Strategy of Russian Federation on Environmental Protection and the Guarantee of Sustainable Development* (President of RF 1994). This was followed by a number of other decrees. These early documents were mainly concerned with

environmental legislation and depicted business organisations solely as objects of government regulation.

In the 2000–2005 period, the references to “responsibility of business” and equivalent terms in formal policy documents continued to be very limited. The sole document to employ a related term in this period was *Key Points of Russian Sustainable Development Strategy* by the Federal Council³ (Federal Council of RF 2002). It advocated further legislation and promoted the “moral responsibility” of every individual in the country, including those individuals acting as business leaders. The Federal Council also published a report, specifically about CSR, which was designed as information bulletin rather than an expression of government expectations (Federal Council of RF 2005). The scarcity of formal policy and parliamentary debate, however, was more than compensated by multiple verbal pronouncements by the president on the subject of “CSR” in direct communication with business leaders. We will examine them in detail below.

Once the government had gained control over business in 2005, the appearances of the “CSR” and related terms become less frequent in the presidential discourse. They increase again in speeches by President Dmitry Medvedev in 2010 when the effects of the international financial crisis and particularly of the 2008–2009 oil prices crash began to be felt in the Russian oil-dependent economy. In the intervening years, the CSR flame was kept alive in government corridors by the Federal Council. From 2007 to 2009, it ran annual hearings on the subject of CSR⁴ that were attended by representatives from the government, business, and civil society (Federal Council of RF 2007, 2008, 2009). The office of the president also published several documents that engaged, albeit again to a limited extent, with the notion of business responsibility, focusing on environmental and social legislation: the *Climate Doctrine of the Russian Federation* (President of RF 2009), *Action Plan for the Implementation of the Climate Doctrine* (Government of RF 2011), and the *Concept of Long-Term Socio-Economic Development of the Russian Federation up to 2020* (Government of RF 2008).

We suggest that the uneven presence of “CSR” articulations in the government discourse over the three different time periods (summarised in Table 1) points to the fact that the notion of “CSR” is linked with the presidential attempts to establish control over business. “CSR”, “business responsibility” and related terms appear most frequently in the most antagonistic phase where the battle-lines between

³ The Federal Council is the upper of the two chambers of the Russian federal Parliament.

⁴ These hearings were titled “Corporate Social Responsibility and socio-economic development of Russia” (2007), “Corporate Social Responsibility and socio-economic development of Russia” (2008) and “Corporate Social Responsibility in the period of crisis: Challenges, experience, possibilities” (2009).

Table 1 Russian federal CSR policy timeline

Year	Document/event	Presence of CSR/ responsibility of business discourse
1994	4 Feb—Decree by the President of Russian Federation №236 <i>Fundamentals of state strategy of Russian Federation on environmental protection and the guarantee of sustainable development</i> (President of RF 1994)	Marginal
1996	1 Apr—Decree by the President of Russian Federation №440 <i>On the Concept of Transition of Russian Federation to Sustainable Development</i> (President of RF 1996)	Marginal
	8 May—Directive of the Government of the Russian Federation №559 <i>On the Development of the Project of State Strategy for Sustainable Development of the Russian Federation</i> (Government of RF 1996)	Marginal
1997	10 Dec—Decree by the President of Russian Federation №1300 <i>On the Concept of National Security of Russian Federation</i> (President of RF 1997)	Marginal
1998	12 Nov— <i>National Action Plan for Environmental Protection 1999–2001</i> (State Committee for the Environment 1998)	Marginal
2000	28 Jul—First meeting between President Putin and leaders of largest Russian companies (Newsru.com 2001).	Explicit
2001	24 Jan—Second meeting between President Putin and leaders of largest Russian companies (Arutjunova and Bagrov 2001; Putin 2001).	Explicit
2002	31 Aug— <i>Ecological Doctrine of Russian Federation</i> (Ministry of the Natural Resources of RF 2002; Mamedova 2010; Socio-Ecological Union 2001)	Marginal
	<i>Key Points of Russian Sustainable Development Strategy</i> (Federal Council of RF 2002)	Marginal
2003	15 Apr—All-Russia conference “Business Reputation and Social Responsibility of Business”. (Trade and Industry Chamber of RF 2003a).	Explicit
	16 Dec—First All-Russia congress on “The State and Socially Responsible business.” (Rybakova 2003)	Explicit
	23 Dec—President Putin meets with the Trade and Industry Chamber in a meeting titled “On the Social Responsibility of Business in Modern Russia” (Grigorjeva 2003; Trade and Industry Chamber of RF 2003b).	Explicit
2004	26 May—President Putin delivers his “Message to the Federal Council of the Russian Federation” (Federal Council of RF 2007)	Explicit
	23 Jun—Second All-Russia congress on “The State and Socially Responsible business.” (Kondrashova 2004; RBK 2004).	Explicit
	1 Jul—President Putin meets business leaders to discuss CSR (Open Economy 2004; Samotorova 2004; Sitnina and Grivach 2004; Sitnina 2004)	Explicit
	16 Nov—XIV RUIE Summit (Frumkin 2004; Grigorjeva 2004; Putin 2004; RUIE 2004)	Explicit
2006	30 Mar—President Putin meets business leaders (Business Russia 2006; Pchelkin 2006).	Explicit
2007	15 Mar—Parliamentary hearings on “Corporate Social Responsibility in Russia: Aims, tasks, legislative provision” (Federal Council of RF 2007).	Explicit
2008	2 June—Parliamentary hearings on “Corporate Social Responsibility and socio-economic development of Russia” (Federal Council of RF 2008).	Explicit
	17 Nov— <i>Concept of Long-Term Socio-Economic Development of the Russian Federation up to 2020</i> , Directive of the Government of the Russian Federation №1662-p (Government of RF 2008)	Marginal
2009	23 May—Parliamentary hearings on “Corporate Social Responsibility in the period of crisis: Challenges, experience, possibilities” (Federal Council of RF 2009).	Explicit
	17 Dec— <i>The Climate Doctrine of Russian Federation</i> (President of RF 2009)	Marginal
2010	11 February—President Medvedev speaks at the 9th meeting of the Commission on Modernisation and Technological Development of Russian Economy (Medvedev 2010)	Explicit
	1 June—Prime Minister Putin meets with the Federation of Independent Trade Unions (New Politics 2010).	Explicit
	14 Oct—President Medvedev meets with the participants of the Third Summit of Social Teachers and Social Workers (Granik 2010)	Explicit
2011	21 Apr—Meeting between Prime Minister Putin and RUIE representative (CSR Journal 2011)	Explicit
	25 Apr— <i>Action Plan for the Implementation of the Climate Doctrine</i> (Government of RF 2011)	Marginal
2012	9 Feb—XIX Summit of RUIE (Putin 2012)	Explicit

Source: Authors

Presidential decrees are a commonly used policy instrument in the Russian Federation. The decrees are legally binding legislative acts that are secondary in power to the Constitution of the Russian Federation and the Russian federal laws

the two groups, government and business, are most clearly drawn. President Yeltsin did not engage in discussions of “CSR” and did little to establish control over Russia’s oligarchy. By contrast, president Putin whose initial foremost objective was to establish the “vertical of power” referred to “CSR” (or equivalent) extensively in the early years of his presidency and held multiple discussions on the subject with the business leaders. It is significant that his use of “CSR” wanes around 2005, a period that many commentators (Yakovlev 2006; Rutland 2011) identify as the end of the initial government-business power struggle. It is also striking that the initial concern about CSR comes from the office of the President and not from the Parliament that had an essentially “revolving door” relationship with the industry. This provides further supporting evidence that such signifiers are used by actors who are engaged in antagonistic relationships. In this case, the hostility existed primarily between the President and the business actors.

The Relational Context of Government-Business “CSR” Discussion

The variability in “CSR” articulations in different relational contexts similarly indicates that it was linked to the presidential struggle for control over business. There were three main fora where the “CSR” articulations appeared: formal policy documents, parliamentary hearings, and presidential discussions with the business leaders, the key one being the RUIE forums that occurred once or twice a year.

As described in the previous section, the formal social and environmental policy documents contain very few references to “business responsibility” in addressing social and environmental concerns. For instance, the *Climate Doctrine of the Russian Federation* (President of RF 2009) focuses on the development of legal frameworks to support the environmental agenda. The subsequent *Action Plan for the Implementation of the Climate Doctrine* (Government of RF 2011) contains practical points relating to legislation development. The closest the *Climate Doctrine* comes to discussing business engagement with climate change concerns is the call for a dialogue between all social actors and for government incentives that would support environment-friendly business modernisation. A comparable document that deals with social development is the *Concept of Long-Term Socio-Economic Development of the Russian Federation up to 2020* (Government of RF 2008). Similarly, it says little about the responsibilities of businesses, but calls for public–private partnerships to support social development.

Having observed in the section above that the early interest in CSR comes from the office of the President and not from the Parliament, it is important to note that subsequently Parliament did become concerned with CSR. Later parliamentary discussions made much greater use of the “business

responsibility” notion. The participants of the 2007, 2008, and 2009 Federal Council hearings that were specifically dedicated to CSR generally agreed that “CSR” was a form of business engagement with a variety of stakeholders, that it was important for business legitimacy within Russia, but that it should not take the form of using private funds to plug government budget gaps. Instead, companies should be equal partners in the public–private partnerships. Most of the discussion focused on social reporting which was heralded as vitally important for the competitiveness of Russian companies abroad.

A common theme in the parliamentary discussions was a reluctance of the participants, representing government and business, to make CSR an object of government intervention. For instance, while noting that “the absence of standards of corporate responsibility” was a factor in weak foreign investment activity in Russia, government officials were professing the inferiority of regulation:

We really understand that legislating, development of regulations [including in the area of CSR] always lags behind life. And, perhaps, not every question can be addressed at the level of legislature, but there are also general rules of conduct. (Federal Council of RF 2008, p. 5).

Business leaders shared this position, for instance, by rejecting the possibility of companies being required to publish social reports. One representative from the Association of Russian Managers (Federal Council of RF 2007, p. 37) argued that CSR was “not a position formulated by intellectuals and lowered from above, it is a position born of practitioners from below”. Regulations such as the Sarbanes-Oxley Act were regarded as prohibitively expensive for companies to implement (Federal Council of RF 2009). The vice-president of RUIE stated that

[We] are categorically against any control. Any activity, including voluntary activity, and we are speaking about the social responsibility of business, should be not be regulated by any laws, any norms. Only from the point of view of motivation, from the point of view of facilitation ... (Federal Council of RF 2008, pp. 12–13).

In the discussions with the office of the president, however, the business leaders’ stance was markedly different. Here, they explicitly asked for the government to adopt a more directive approach to social responsibilities of business. The requests often followed the business leaders’ concern about what they called “shadow social responsibility”. This term referred to an array of irregular dealings between local government authorities and businesses in relation to social programmes. It included government agencies making unjustifiable demands on the businesses (in the eyes of business) to

participate in social programmes and included informally brokered tax break awards to businesses from local authorities for contributions to social programmes.

Social programmes are financed on a local level or on the basis of private agreements that also provide opportunities for tax relief. “As a result, today we have the phenomenon of shadow social responsibility.”... ‘it is time for the government to abandon the thesis that the abilities of the government are limited and those of the business are unlimited.... Today business leaders do not receive clear signals from the government about what and how they need to do ... business is waiting for the government expression of national priorities.’” (News coverage of and quotes from business leaders at the Second CSR Congress, Kondrashova 2004)

In the wake of the business-government disputes (and especially the Khodorkovsky case), business leaders were also desperate to clarify the “new rules of the game” in their relationship with the president (Frumkin 2004). An explicit call for regulatory clarity in the area of CSR is contained in the *Social Charter of Russian Business* that RUIE ratified at its 2004 summit. The Charter detailed the large Russian businesses’ position on CSR, declared that CSR was a way to achieve social and economic goals on the basis of “rational balance” in the interests of varied societal groups and stated that:

The interaction between business and government and business with the civil society must be built on a public regulatory foundation. (RUIE 2004).

President Putin agreed with these requests in principle and also acknowledged the problem of government coercion of business into participating in social projects:

...the joint work of government and business must not lead to extorting business and forcing it into non-production expenses, but this, unfortunately, happens both in the centre and in the regions.... There needs to be a regulatory base for joint [government-business] work on priority projects.... we expect a more active involvement [of business] in social projects. (Putin 2004)

In practice, however, no action was taken to address business concerns. Business involvement in the development projects continued to be negotiated on a haphazard project-by-project basis and the business leaders continued to express concern about it years later. For example, in a 2012 RUIE summit declaration it was stated that:

We need to perfect the regulative foundation of the social partnership systems on the basis of commonly recognised principles that exclude direct or indirect

coercive involvement of employers in social partnerships or economically unjustified responsibilities (RUIE 2012, p. 9).

To summarise, both the legislative and executive branches of the Russian government were reluctant to issue any formal policy or definitive guidelines on matters such as business participation in social development projects or non-financial reporting. Business leaders, however, reacted to this reluctance differently in different relational contexts. They were in full agreement with the parliament, but in the discussions with the president, they perceived the lack of formal guidelines as a threat and explicitly requested a “regulatory foundation” to be developed that would clarify their responsibilities and how they were to be fulfilled. This happened even when business leaders brought up the same problems in parliamentary and presidential discussions that they saw as related to CSR (such as government agencies using the notion of social responsibility of business to effectively extort funds from businesses to cover their own social budget deficits). This inconsistency suggests that, despite the same terms being used, “social responsibility of business” was articulated differently and played different roles in the parliamentary and presidential contexts. This also meant that different contexts saw different articulation of government and business.

In the next section, we focus specifically on the presidential articulations of “social responsibilities of business” and other themes that appear alongside the terms “CSR” or “responsibility of business” in Mr Putin’s and then Mr Medvedev’s iterations.

Filling the Empty Signifier of “CSR”

Our analysis revealed that three themes consistently appeared in the presidential iterations on the subject of business responsibility: (1) the social responsibility of business reflects contemporary social and economic concerns, (2) the “devastating privatisation” of the 1990s, and (3) the presentations of business responsibility as a personal responsibility of business leaders. Below we suggest that this variety of articulations indicates that “social responsibility of business” functions as an empty signifier in the Russian presidents’ discourse. We argue that the three themes are held in a chain of equivalence by the empty signifier of “social responsibility of business” that the Russian presidents then use to articulate leading Russian businesses as being legitimately subordinate to the government.

Taking these iterations on order, firstly, the Russian presidents’ articulations of “social responsibilities of business” consistently related to the most pressing economic and social national concerns of the day. In the early Putin period, Mr Putin’s speeches on the subject of social responsibilities of

business, particularly in the RUIE summits, were chiefly concerned with ensuring business compliance with tax regulations (Grigorjeva 2003; Putin 2001). In a 2003 special meeting of the Trade and Industry Chamber of the Russian Federation entitled “*On the Social Responsibility of Business in Modern Russia*”, Mr Putin spoke of the social responsibility of business as “resolution of social problems” such as poverty, low quality living conditions of workers, guarantee of labour rights, elimination of black market employment and investing, together with the government, in education, healthcare, the environment and the army (Trade and Industry Chamber of RF 2003b). In one early meeting with the business leaders, Mr Putin started his talk about business responsibility with a request that the business leaders contribute around 1.5 bl. roubles (~\$53 mil. at the time) for a fund in support of the military personnel who served in Russia’s conflict regions (Putin 2001). These articulations of responsibility clearly reflected the primary concerns of the 1990s and early 2000s: endemic business tax avoidance, economic depression, and military conflict in Chechnya.

In the later Putin/Medvedev period, the expressed understandings of “responsibility” changed to reflect the central post-2008 international financial crisis and oil price decline issues. For instance, at a meeting of the Commission on the Modernisation and Technological Development of the Russian Economy in 2010, Mr Medvedev linked the social responsibility of business to investment in innovation as being crucial for Russia’s international economic competitiveness:

... big money presupposes big responsibility. We [government and business], together must make all possible effort to turn our economy in the direction of modernisation.... This means re-thinking the formula or social responsibility of business. It is not just philanthropy, and definitely not the payment of taxes that all naturally must pay. It is indeed the practical focus on innovation and, ultimately, the effective work of companies... (Medvedev 2010).

Mr Putin also equated the social responsibility of business with the business contribution to Russia’s international competitiveness in a 2011 meeting with RUIE (CSR Journal 2011). The press reported that, while giving a speech on the social responsibility of business, Mr Putin pointed out that low labour productivity was among the key factors underpinning Russia’s low national economic competitiveness. He argued that it was inappropriate for business to economise on labour protection and workplace justice measures that could increase productivity, and that the government would plan out initiatives in this area that would be financed by business.

Viewed in combination with the presidents’ refusal to address the business leader’s requests for clearer official

guidelines on the social responsibilities of business, the shifts in the presidents’ articulations of “business responsibilities” indicate that it functions as an empty signifier. The absence of official guidelines leaves the “social responsibility of business” signifier open to be filled with different meanings, such as innovation and job provision, depending on the current priorities, which is exactly what the Russian presidents did do.

The second theme that consistently appears alongside the notion of social responsibilities of business in post-2000 presidential iterations is the 1990s problematic privatisation. The actual word “responsibility”, in relation to the non-financial obligations of business, first appears in government discourse in January 2001 during the second meeting between president Putin and the leaders of the largest Russian companies. This and the first meeting in the summer of 2000 were held in the atmosphere of uncertainty about the nature of the relationship between the new president and the business elites. The business leaders were concerned about a potential review of the 1990s legally murky privatisation process, despite president Putin denying it as a possibility. In the second meeting, Mr Putin categorically announced that the business “fear of the government” (i.e. fear of privatisation review) must be replaced by “the sense of responsibility for the people and the country” (Newsru.com 2001; Putin 2001). The link between the “social responsibility of business” and the corporations’ ability to keep control over their assets was particularly clear in the 2004 meeting between RUIE and president Putin where the *Social Charter of Russian Business* was presented. Prior to the meeting, RUIE members were reported to say:

[I] am expecting that the president will address fundamental questions. How, for instance, does he understand “social responsibility of business”? ... And what does he think about the societal hysteria about oligarchs and rich people in general? (Sitnina and Grivach 2004).

Vladimir Putin privately feels that the privatisation processes of the 1990 were unfair. As a result, there is a conviction that large business must take initiative in erasing its guilt before the society and the government. (Sitnina and Grivach 2004).

... oligarchs who created their empires in the time of Boris Yeltsin are trying to ask the government where and to what extent they must be “socially responsible” so that the government leaves them alone. (Frumkin 2004).

President Putin, in his 2004 RUIE meeting speech, assured the business leaders that no privatisation revision would take place and, in the next sentence, started to outline his vision for the social responsibilities of business:

Overall, the government must [not ‘will’!] guarantee the immutability of the privatisation outcomes and of the protection of private property rights as one of foundations of the market economy. Civil servants must protect private property as much as the government property. From you [the business leaders] we expect higher investment in social projects, science, education and in the development of the so-called ‘human factor’ in general. Let us discuss this in more detail: We have already, more than once, spoken about the importance of a systemic understanding of the social responsibility of business..... (Putin 2004).

Despite these assurances, privatisation continued to surface in the discussions of social responsibilities of Russian business later. For example, at the 2010 meeting of the Commission on the Modernisation and Technological Development of the Russian Economy mentioned above, Mr Medvedev followed up his characterisation of the “social responsibility of business” as innovation and modernisation with a depiction of this responsibility as something that large companies owed the government for past privatisation support:

I think that it is a duty of all large private companies created in our country in recent years to make a serious contribution to the formation of a modern model of Russian economy, to Russian economic growth. All companies represented here at some point in the past received, in essence, definitive government support at different growth stages. This was connected with the re-distribution of resources in the 90s, and, recently, in the period of a crisis. (Medvedev 2010)

We conclude that the Russian government uses the empty signifier of “social responsibility of business” to portray its own coercion of business into compliance with its varied demands as being legitimate. The coercion of business into performing particular activities takes form of a request for responsible behaviour. Responsible behaviour is articulated as something that businesses owe to the state (i.e. business leaders should not fear the re-evaluation of privatisation results as long as they pay the debt to the state and behave responsibly in a way that the government prescribes). Acquiescence to government coercion is effectively labelled as “social responsibility of business”.

The third theme consistently associated with the “social responsibility of business” in presidential articulations is the notion of responsibility as a desirable individual trait of the business leaders as opposed to an organisational characteristic or practice. For example, Mr Putin in a 2004 speech on the “systematic understanding of social responsibility of business” called on Russian businesses to develop a “healthy patriotic instinct, responsibility for own country” (Putin 2004). Earlier, we mentioned that Mr Putin asked

Russian businesses to develop a “sense of responsibility”. Words such as “instinct” and “sense” are more suitable for describing an individual state of mind as opposed to organisational practice.

Later, both president Medvedev and prime minister Putin spoke about responsibility as a personal attribute of business leaders. In a 2010 meeting with the *Federation of Independent Trade Unions*, Mr Putin praised business owners for using their personal assets to save their companies during the financial crisis and stated that this signified a “maturing responsibility of business” (New Politics 2010). Similarly, Mr Medvedev, during the 2010 Summit of Social Teachers and Social Workers told his audience in a conversation about pension provision:

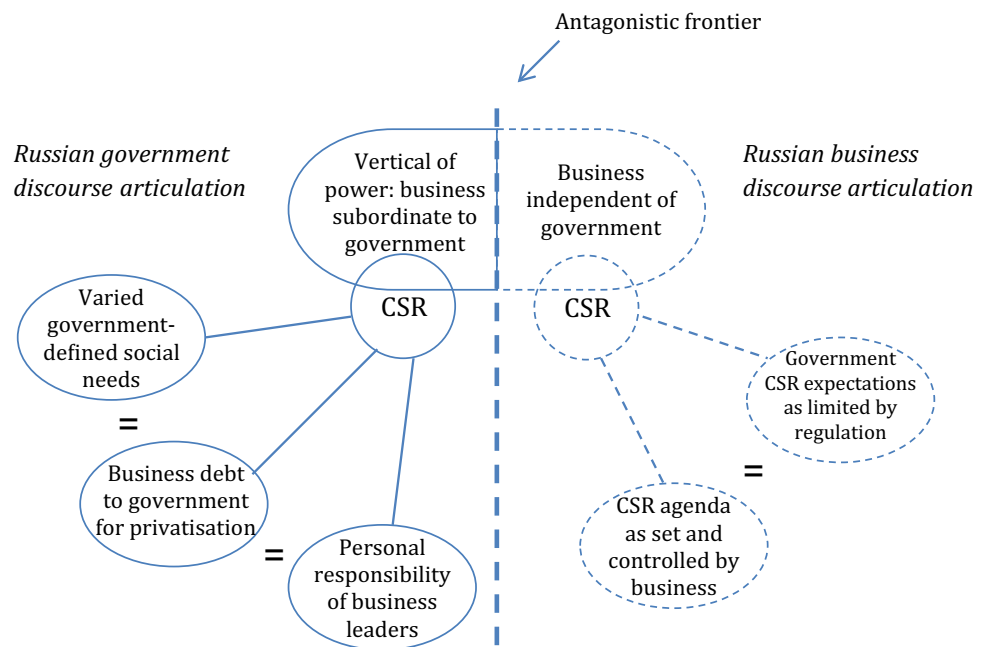
In my opinion, care for aged people is not only the responsibility of the government and the relatives, it must be the responsibility of all successful people. Those who reached success must make their contribution. But it does not mean that money should be extorted from them, of course not. It rather must be a moral need on their part. (Granik 2010)

The speech of Prime Minister Putin at the XIX RUIE summit in 2012 (Putin 2012) brought up the “fundamental question” of the lack of business legitimacy in Russia caused by questionable privatisation process. As a measure to improve business legitimacy he proposed an individual tax on luxuries that would be “a moral and ethical measure”, which would encourage a “responsible approach” among business leaders, and would be a “socially recognised payment for the refusal to invest”. As the proposed tax applies to individuals and not organisations, Mr Putin presents responsibility as an individual and not an organisational practice.

“CSR” as a Nodal Point in a Hegemonic Government Discourse

We now bring all three strands of our analysis together: (1) that most of the government business “responsibility” iterations occur in the time period characterised by antagonism between government and business, (2) that most of business-responsibility government iterations happen in the most antagonistic institutional context (i.e. the interactions between the office of the president and the leaders of large Russian companies), and (3) that the Russian presidents fill the signifier of “social responsibility of business” with three key themes (economic/social concerns of the day, questionable past privatisation and personal responsibility). We contend that the timing, the context, and the nature of the presidential interpretations of the “social responsibility of business” indicate that the “social responsibility of business” (and equivalent terms) functioned as an empty signifier in the Russian presidential

Fig. 1 Russian government and business CSR discourse articulations Source: Authors, adapted from Walton and Boon (2014)



discourse and facilitated the establishment of a hegemonic discourse that would articulate and fix large Russian business as subordinate to government.

The Russian government does not define “social responsibility of business” in a stable manner. It articulates it differently in different time periods and different interaction contexts. Russian presidents go as far as ignoring explicit requests from the business leaders for an official definition of their social responsibilities. The multiplicity of shifting articulations indicates that “social responsibility of business” functions as an empty signifier within the government discourse. The use of the “social responsibility of business” notion also allows the Russian presidents to label their coercion of business leaders (through the threat of privatisation re-evaluation) as a request for responsible behaviour. This labelling helps legitimise the government’s coercive practices and articulates business as being subordinate to the government. The fact that most of these articulations occur in the temporal and relational context characterised by antagonism between businesses and the Russian executive further points to the fact that they constitute part of the Russian presidents’ attempt to establish a hegemonic discourse where business subordination of government would become normalised. The individualisation of social responsibility of businesses by articulating it as a personal trait of the business leaders as opposed to an organisational practice further serves to legitimise presidential coercion of individual business leaders such as Mikhail Khodorkovsky. Again, this function of the “social responsibility of business” feeds into the government bid to fix the identity of business

as subordinate to government, effectively supporting the “vertical of power” agenda.

Returning to our aim to politicise and critically question government engagement with CSR, we suggest that our analysis of the Russian federal government CSR discourse provides an example where the function of the “CSR” (or equivalent) term in the government officials’ discourse is not limited to the facilitating of more ethical business conduct. Instead, the use of “CSR” or the “social responsibility of business” has the effect of legitimising the presidential coercion of individual business leaders. It is used as a political tool that aids the government in articulating disparate elements such as the various pressing social needs, the debt that large Russian businesses supposedly owe to the government for turning the blind eye to privatisation irregularities, and the responsibility of business leaders as individuals as equivalent moments under the umbrella of the “social responsibility of business”. All three of these now fixed moments come to represent aspects of the “social responsibility of business”. The “social responsibility of business” systematises government discourse. The established chain of equivalence articulates business responsibility in a way that naturalises business subordination to the government. The outcome is the cancelling out of the antagonism between government and business and suturing of the Russian political landscape.

Figure 1 is a graphical representation of our findings. The left half illustrates the structure of the Russian federal government “CSR” discourse. The right side is a proposed representation of the alternative discourse offered by the Russian businesses. As mentioned in the discussion of our

methods above, business discourse was not our object of study. However, given that most of the government utterances that we analysed were made in the context of meetings with business leaders, we could not avoid noting some aspects of business articulations of their social responsibilities. The nature of business articulations is represented by the dashed line.

Discussion

In this section, we summarise our findings and provide a brief discussion of how we see the contributions of our study in relation to the existing scholarly discussions on governmental engagement with CSR. We will also reflect on the generalizability of our results to contexts other than Russian Federation.

We have provided an empirical example that supports our contention that government engagement with CSR should be treated with the same critical consideration as business engagement. We drew our example from a historical analysis of the federal government's CSR (social responsibility of business) discourse in the Russian Federation. Laclau and Mouffe's (1985) social theory of hegemony provided a philosophical and methodological framework for analysing and theorising CSR in that context. Most importantly, this approach allowed us to view "CSR" from a different ontological perspective, not as a feature of corporate behaviour, but as a rhetorical device that enables the construction of hegemonic discourses that then legitimise and normalise particular meanings, the positions of social actors, and the forms of social relations. After considering the thematic content of the government utterances, their timing, and the relational contexts in which they appear, we conclude that "CSR" (and equivalent terms such as "social responsibility of business") functions as an empty signifier in the Russian government's discourse, permitting the Russian presidents to legitimise their coercion of individual business leaders and position business as subordinate to the government.

Our key contribution is the development of a political understanding of government engagement with CSR that does not presume that governments are the civically minded regulators of business. We argue that "CSR" can be fruitfully viewed as an element of discourse that allows government actors to structure social realities in particular ways, legitimise their positions, and protect their interests. We build on and extend a body of previous post-structural studies that critically examine the socio-cultural effects of signifiers such as "environmental protection", "climate protection" and "globalisation" in the discourses of various social actors (Methmann 2010; Spicer and Fleming 2007; Stavrakakis 1997; Swyngedouw 2011).

Nonetheless, we conclude that our political understanding of government engagement with CSR as being complementary to (rather than contradictory) current notions of "political CSR". For instance, we find that some of the Russian government's articulations of "social responsibility of business" were not far removed from what Scherer and Palazzo's (2011) termed "political CSR": the Russian government referred to the "social responsibility of business" as being a type of business-partnering with other social actors such as local authorities in production of public goods. Treating "CSR" as an element of discourse, however, allows for a deeper and richer analysis of power dimensions in such government-business deliberations about the production of beneficial social outcomes (Fairbrass and Zueva-Owens 2012; Whelan 2012).

In addition, similar to Vallentin's (2015a) findings in connection to the Danish government, we reveal that the Russian government's articulations of "social responsibility of business" varied at different points in time. However, while Vallentin (2015a) explored the ideological understandings that underlay the government's articulations of CSR, our focus is on the role that the term "CSR" can play in broader government discourses, itself supporting and legitimising particular ideological positions. Overall, our work offers a new perspective to an existing conversation about political aspects of government engagement with CSR and opens up further possibilities for a more nuanced examination of government engagement in CSR policy and policy-making.

Clearly, our example of the Russian Federation concerns only one specific country and one specific historical period and therefore is not wholly generalisable to other contexts. Some may consider the case of the Russian Federation to be extreme as it involves a socio-political situation that is discernibly different from the Western case studies that most frequently serve as a test-bed for the study of CSR. Arguably, our findings make a minor contribution to the institutional CSR literature (e.g. Jamali and Karam 2018; Kang and Moon 2011; Matten and Moon 2008) by describing Russian government's articulations of "CSR". Some of these articulations are broadly consistent with the "developmental" (i.e. focused on national development) type of CSR found by Kang and Moon (2011) in state-led market economies. Simultaneously, however, some of the Russian government's "CSR" articulations and their evolution over time are similar to the Danish government's articulations as identified by Vallentin (i.e. where there was an initial focus on employment issues and subsequent focus on national development through increased business competitiveness). Nonetheless, our key objective is not to evaluate the activities of the Russian government or to discover the meaning of "CSR" in the Russian context. This would involve a different ontological treatment of "CSR" to the one we adopted here. Instead, we develop an alternative, political perspective about the

governmental use of the “CSR” notion. We contend that our findings expose the politicisation of government’s use of “CSR” and that these results will trigger critical studies across a range of different national contexts.

While we acknowledge that it is unlikely that our case-specific findings will be replicable in other national or regional contexts, we contend that the analytical generalisation of our broad conclusions is possible. Analytical (theoretical) generalisation involves building theory on a basis of empirical observation (Yin 1994). We are aware it is uncommon in management research or political science to use findings from the so-called “peripheral” (non-Western) countries to build theory that may create new understandings in other parts of the world. Postcolonial theorists have long noted that the research conducted in the Western “core” has potential of gaining a place in the global scholarly conversation whereas findings from non-Western contexts are generally regarded as having local applicability only (Hoffman 1977; Tickner and Wæver 2009). This may well apply to Russia, which for centuries has served as the constitutive “other” to the West, regarded both in the West and by some internal factions as either a “barbarous state” or as a “learner” who is yet to absorb Western traditions (Browning 2003; Jensen 2017; Morozov 2015). Neumann (1999) and Kuus (2004) observe that while the rise of postcolonial scholarship has led to reflection on how historical circumstances contribute to the modern representations of nations outside the core “West”, such reflexivity rarely extends to discussions of Russia.

However, those scholars who are working in the post-structural international relations literature increasingly challenge this *status quo* and argue that

...discourses in the periphery can offer a penetrating critique of the assumptions, norms, and practices governing the social models in the core (Makarychev and Morozov 2013, p. 334).

Knowledge from the periphery can help challenge the parochialism and assumed universal applicability of the knowledge from the “core” and itself contribute to new internationally applicable understandings (Jack and Westwood 2009; Tickner 2013). The latter aim, in particular, could be accomplished by paying attention to the possible similarities between different national systems as opposed to consistently “othering” the non-West. As mentioned at the start of this paper, some authors see all governments (whether in the West or not) as driven by the need to stay in power and therefore at least partly self-interested (De Mesquita et al. 2005). Others note while nations with different governmental systems may differ in how they score on certain parameters (such as levels of corruption, property rights protection), the development of such parameters in different nations over time often follows similar trends (Besley 2006), suggesting

that cross-fertilisation of research from different locations is possible. We suggest as much for the possibility of analytical generalisation from our findings from Russia.

At a more basic level, our findings highlight the possibility of governmental self-interest (De Mesquita et al. 2005) in the use of CSR discourse. The case of the Russian Federation demonstrates that the primary function of terms such as “CSR” and “responsibility of business” in the government discourse may not always be to promote socially and environmentally responsible business conduct. This warrants a more critical stance towards government engagement with CSR in different parts of the world. “CSR” could function as an empty signifier in the discourse of the diverse nation states with authoritarian-type governmental systems because such governments are likely to have antagonistic relationships with other social actors (De Mesquita et al. 2005). Governments in developed liberal democracies may draw on “CSR” and related concepts because of their established social visibility and legitimacy. Existing studies already indicate that the use of notions such as “climate protection” by large international governmental organisations (for example, the WTO and the OECD) performs a political function, specifically leading to the re-branding of “business as usual” as being environmentally progressive (when it may not actually be) and stifling progress on the climate protection front as a result (see for example, Methmann 2010).

At a broader level, the treatment of “CSR” as an element of discourse, as opposed to a desired form of organisational behaviour, creates opportunities for examining the different forms of power relations that may exist between different social actors and exploring how these power relations are established and reproduced through the use of “CSR” and related notions. The social actors in question may be different in any given context and so may be the forms of power relations involved, but their scrutiny is made possible by a theorising of “CSR” as a vehicle of power within discourse. As a result of its residual institutional heritage, built up over the last few decades, “CSR” has the strong potential of becoming an empty signifier and therefore a device employed by various social actors in a variety of political interactions (Nabers 2009). This may be particularly the case in developed countries where the “CSR” term has been in use for a long period by a wide variety of social actors and, therefore, attained significant social legitimacy.

Conclusion

The aim of our research was to question the predominant understanding of government as a benign actor in the literature on government engagement with CSR. Drawing on Laclau and Mouffe’s (1985) social theory of hegemony has enabled us to consider “CSR” from a different ontological

perspective and to treat it as a constitutive element of discourse rather than a denotation of particular organisational behaviours. Our analysis of the government's use of "CSR" in the Russian Federation demonstrates that "CSR" can function as an "empty signifier"—a privileged discourse element that serves to establish hegemonic discourses that erase antagonisms between different social actors. In the case of the Russian Federation, viewing "CSR" as an element of discourse has allowed us to demonstrate how it has served to legitimise the dominance of the Russian government over large Russian business organisations. Ultimately, we suggest that it is not only businesses but also the governments that can hijack the notion of CSR to promote agendas other than social development and environmental protection. We therefore call for more detailed and critical study of government engagement with CSR across a range of types of politics and economies worldwide.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

Ethical Approval This article does not contain any studies with human participant performed by any of the authors.

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