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## Great Game or Great Confusion: The Geopolitical Understanding of EU-Russia Energy Relations

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### ABSTRACT

This article explains why a considerable part of the International Relations literature frames highly complex energy relations between the EU and Russia in terms of simple, exclusive geopolitical intentions. Drawing on Construal Level Theory, it addresses the gap between immediate interaction between various private and public actors with their own agendas and individual intentionalities and assumed collective geopolitical intentionalities. Because of the degree of abstraction, collective motivations are attributed to actors like Russia and the EU. This attribution risks to be subject to bias. It is argued that higher psychological distance increases the likelihood of more radical and ideologised framing. These abstract schemes do not follow from the endogenous energy dynamics but are function of a broader logic of competition which has characterised EU-Russia relations.

### Introduction

This article seeks to explain the gap between hugely complex EU-Russia energy realities and policies on one hand and its simple framing as a one-dimensional geopolitical issue in a large part of the literature on the other. Over the past decade, in particular since the 2006 gas spat, energy relations between Russia and the EU have been framed strongly in geopolitical terms. In a considerable part of the International Relations literature – though much less in specialised literature – energy relations and dependence have frequently been formulated in terms of power, interests and security. Often they have been presented as pure geostrategic issues, as if the arms race of the Cold War had simply been replaced by a race for scarce energy resources. However, contributions of this type approach energy relations in a reductionist way. The daily reality of energy relations is extremely complex. It is made up of a panoply of actors: producers, consumers, governments, regulators, etc. Each of these actors comes with their own specific motivations, preferences, interests, perceptions, and logics. Their choices and behaviour are not determined by one overarching ‘Russian’ or ‘EU’ frame but depend on the specific context in which each of them operates.

The metaphor of a new ‘great game’ has also been used regularly to refer to competitive energy relations at global level and how new players – like China – or strategic decisions may change power constellations.<sup>1</sup> As a result, events like the gas deal between Russia and China in 2014 are easily seen as a rebalancing of forces between major contenders in a global competitive context. Again the metaphor of the great game obfuscates a hugely complex world. Energy relations are as much about commercial profit, regulation, interests of individual countries and companies, as they are about security of supply or strategic interests.

Particularly in the case of EU-Russia relations, a geostrategic framing of energy relations has become widespread despite being contested by a considerable number of energy experts. Levels of energy dependence tend to get overstated and geostrategic objectives tend to be read into energy policies. The central research question of this article can be summarised as follows: how can the tendency to frame EU-Russia energy relations in exclusively geopolitical terms be explained? The answer to this research question will be driven by Construal-Level Theory (CLT), a theory from Social Psychology. In essence this theory will help us to understand how at an abstract level one tends to overlook the enormous complexity of day-to-day energy relations and to replace it by simple, in this case geopolitical, explanations. When studying the behaviour of one specific energy actor (say an energy company) in a given case, we can analyse their behaviour at a fairly low level of abstraction. In contrast, when we analyse EU-Russia energy relations in its entirety, we have no choice but reducing these relations (with its multitude of public and private actors, all with their own agendas) to a higher level of abstraction. As a result, we attribute ‘collective intentions’ to understand Russia’s and the EU’s energy behaviour. It is at this point that there is a tendency to read simple collective geopolitical intentions into extremely complex energy relations, as if the latter were all driven by a grand geopolitical strategy. By applying this theory to the field of energy studies, this article makes a new theoretical contribution. It contributes to the field by dissecting how the motivations and intentions of individual energy actors relate to the collective intentions which we tend to *assume* in the behaviour of actors like the EU or Russia. While essential to the field, this aspect – how we come to understand collective intentions amidst a multitude of diverging individual intentions – has hardly been the focus of any research on energy policies (with Aalto 2014 as a notable exception, see below).

It logically follows that the focus of the article is on the *framing* of energy relations and not on actual policies, which should be examined in all their complexity and multi-dimensionality. It will be argued that this widespread tendency to frame EU-Russia energy relations as driven by collective geopolitical motivations is one-sided. It is reductionist, because it reads exclusive geopolitical motivations into energy policies (and overlooks commercial motivations for example). It will be argued that this one-sided framing of

energy relations is a reflection of a more general understanding of relations between Russia and the West as driven by geopolitical considerations and competition rather than the result of endogenous energy dynamics.

### **Reductionist Approaches to EU-Russia Energy Relations**

Ever since the gas spats between Russia and Ukraine in 2006 and 2009, a large part of the International Relations literature has approached EU-Russia energy relations as issues of high politics<sup>2</sup> or even security.<sup>3</sup> This focus on energy as geostrategic and security issue has led to a tendency to aggrandise power-related motivations.<sup>4</sup> The one-dimensional explanations of these contributions stand in sharp contrast with energy realities, which are characterised by complexity and high degrees of differentiation.

There are three ways in which the complexity of energy relations is reduced in this literature to simple schemes of inter-state competition over scarce resources. First, the field of energy relations is largely limited to the production and transmission of energy resources. The crucial prism through which energy policies are understood is ownership of or control over resources and pipelines. Other aspects like regulation, price setting, commercial competition, etc., get a priori a secondary role in explaining policies. This tends to marginalise factors which are crucial to understanding EU-Russia energy relations, such as market access and regulation.

Second, agency is reduced and confined to a specific set of actors, most notably governments or companies which are seen as closely intertwined with the government, such as Gazprom. Other actors receive little attention, such as diverse private companies, consumers, retailers, regulators, international organisations, etc. As a result, energy is seen in a reductionist way as a purely intergovernmental matter.

The third form of reductionism has to do with the way in which motivations are studied. With a focus on state actors, motivations are narrowed to state 'interests', embodied by the selected government or government-related actors, in the limited field of resource and pipeline competition. As they embody high politics, this leads to a one-sided understanding of their policies as security or strategically driven. This leaves other motivations, such as profit, out of the scope. Moreover, actors in the energy field are not only assumed to be driven exclusively by their interests, but also to dispose of complete and undistorted information. They are assumed to act in a rational way, without distortion of their view of the context in which they operate. Finally, they are assumed to be driven by a collective set of motivations, rather than dispersed and contradictory motivations.

Before we move to the theoretical section, however, it should be underlined that many specialists in the field of energy have criticised reductionist approaches to EU-Russia energy relations and pleaded for more nuanced

approaches. Some studies have questioned the absence of economic motivations to explain differences in behaviour between Russia as producer of energy and the EU as consumer.<sup>5</sup> Others have questioned the degree of asymmetrical dependence<sup>6</sup> or the assumption that Russia can use its energy sources as a political weapon.<sup>7</sup> Still others have focused on regulatory and institutional issues and how they have impeded market access.<sup>8</sup> A growing body of literature also takes into account the organisational complexity of energy markets and policies or the variety of motivations underlying policies.<sup>9</sup> In this respect Goldthau and Boersma have highlighted the ‘gap between the policy world and the realities of energy markets’.<sup>10</sup>

The existence of different aspects and drivers of energy policies has definitely been recognised in literature. It is conventional to distinguish between economic, ecological and political/security drivers of energy policies.<sup>11</sup> A Clingendael report for the European Commission made a distinction between a scenario of ‘markets and institutions’ versus a scenario of ‘regions and empires’.<sup>12</sup> However, it considers both scenarios as mutually exclusive rather than coexisting. What is largely lacking is a genuine interdisciplinary approach, which studies diverse strategies of a multitude of actors for a legal, economic, environmental, security disciplinary perspective.

### **Intentionalities, Construals and Attributional Bias**

This section introduces a theoretical model that helps us to understand how we tend to frame EU-Russia energy relations in terms of collective geopolitical understandings. As a first step, the social structurationist model of Aalto et al. is introduced, explaining the link between what they call individual and collective ‘intentionalities’.<sup>13</sup> In a second step we move beyond this model and its assumption that individual intentionalities stabilise into a ‘collective intentionality’.<sup>14</sup> Drawing on CLT, we instead try to understand how simple collective geopolitical intentionalities are read into extremely complex energy policies. In a third step the concept of ‘attributional bias’<sup>15</sup> is introduced to explain the tendency to attribute behaviour of the political out-group to bad intent, while that of the in-group is understood in terms of environmental constraints.

In an attempt to mend the lack of interdisciplinary approach, Aalto et al. attempt to set up ‘a new analytical model that facilitates collaboration across a wide range of disciplines to study the formation of energy policy’.<sup>16</sup> Their social structurationist model focuses on the processes in which energy policy takes form as actors try to understand and react to the environment around them. The information they dispose of is imperfect and ‘their ability to realise their interests depends upon the practices by which they acquire information of those environments’.<sup>17</sup> The diverse actors operating and contributing to energy policies – producers and consumers, regulators, institutions, private

companies, etc. – all have their own ‘individual intentionality’. The latter is not determined by ‘objective’ interests following from an actor’s position, but are determined by how an actor frames and makes sense of a situation and links its intentions to it.<sup>18</sup> As a result, incompatible frames can and are likely to appear. Collective intentionality will be the product of different individual intentionalities, when they stabilise into a policy (but continue to evolve). On the basis of two case studies Aalto et al. conclude that the sequence of choices made by diverse actors about their actions suggests that Russia’s energy relations are guided primarily by business and profit interests rather than geopolitics or energy economics, as currently often perceived.<sup>19</sup>

This leads to the question of why the collective intentionality behind EU-Russia energy relations is predominantly *perceived* in geopolitical terms rather than the business intentionality found by Aalto et al. Building on their approach, we explore how general *framing*<sup>20</sup> of EU-Russia political relations (and the negative images they hold of each other) impacts on the framing of energy relations and the interpretation of each other’s energy behaviour. In other words, it is argued that framing of general EU-Russia political and strategic relations as competitive and driven by geopolitical interests is likely to be reproduced in a similar framing of their energy relations. ‘Building on Wendt, competing frames can become more consequential to the extent that international cultures connoting deeper “enemy” type structures resonate with actors’ interpretations of “events”’.<sup>21</sup>

In this article we will explore this link between deeper enemy type structures and the framing of energy relations by drawing from theories of social psychology on abstraction of mental representations and on the attribution of negative intentions to out-groups. The abstraction of mental representations is the specific focus of CLT,<sup>22</sup> which begins with the observation that how and what we think is a function of the self and the immediate. In order to think about something, we need to transcend the self and immediate. This we do by ‘construals’ – forms of mental representations. The core of CLT is that the higher the distance is to our direct experience, the higher the level of construal will be, i.e., the more abstract the mental representation will be. Distance can take different forms: spatial, temporal, social or hypothetical. Distance will affect how we evaluate things and our decisions on the action to be taken.

High-level construals are thus ‘relatively abstract, coherent and superordinate mental representations’,<sup>23</sup> in contrast to more concrete, immediate and specific low-level construals. Take the example of an exam one has to take. If the exam is at a distant point in the future, one is likely to think of it in abstract terms of performing well or gaining knowledge. When the exam gets close, one thinks in specific terms like finishing a chapter from the textbook or even finding the venue of the exam. Thus, ‘CLT contends that people use increasingly higher levels of construal to represent an object as the psychological distance from the object increases. This is because high-level

construals are more likely than low-level construals to remain unchanged as one gets closer to an object or farther away from it.<sup>24</sup>

Abstract, high-level construals are less likely to change over time. The other way around, holding perceptions constant, requires abstraction. High-level construals are not necessarily more vague, but may lead to more radical choices: 'People seem to appreciate proximal outcomes for their low-level aspects and distal outcomes for their high-level aspects. Although they often know less about distant than near outcomes, their evaluation of the distant outcomes might be more extreme when high-level construal of the outcomes have strong evaluative implications.'<sup>25</sup>

When translated to political action and choice, values and ideologies are typically abstract structures and their chances of being used are much higher in case of situations of psychological distance. 'CLT predicts that when an attitude object is psychologically near, evaluations will be attuned to a particular social context and therefore more likely to be affected by incidental attitudes of others in the social situation rather than by one's ideology. Conversely, when the attitude object is psychologically distant, it will be abstracted away from its local context, and evaluation will therefore be less affected by the incidental attitudes of salient others and, instead, reflect one's ideology.'<sup>26</sup>

Translated to the different energy realities in this article, this implies that in daily commercial interactions in the energy sector, the level of construal tends to be lower. Businessmen or technicians are likely to think about energy in more immediate terms. In the case of energy security and energy diplomacy, the psychological distance is much bigger and there is a strong inclination to think in abstract terms. These will be 'abstracted away from its local context' and are more prone to be represented in broad ideological schemes. As a result, choices for action in the case of hypothetical distance (in the possible case of a gas supply crisis) and at temporal distance (at an undetermined point in the future) tend to be more extreme. Linking this to the idea of intentionalities,<sup>27</sup> there is a tendency to lose sight of the specifics (the individual intentionalities) and to reduce the complexity to stable collective intentionalities.

Extending this to the images we construct of the Other, CLT uses the concept of correspondence bias, 'a tendency toward a high-level construal of behavior in terms of abstract, decontextualized dispositions'.<sup>28</sup> This concept is paralleled by a second concept from social psychology: the concept of 'attributional bias'.<sup>29</sup> The starting point is 'that the ordinary function of human cognition cleaves the social world into "self" and "other" categories of agency'.<sup>30</sup> Categories of in-group and out-group are created on the basis of simple divisions between groups, which are linked to divergent identities. As 'political categories become more salient',<sup>31</sup> the parties will exaggerate the identities both of the in-group and of the out-group.



Kowert argues that there is a tendency ‘to exaggerate differences between political groups and to underestimate differences within these groups’.<sup>32</sup> The coherence of the in-group is overrated and contrasted with the out-group with which the differences are exaggerated. Moreover, there is a tendency ‘to attribute the behaviour of political out-groups to the intent or desire of those groups; in-group behaviour, however, will more often be attributed to the influence of environmental constraints. Perceived increases in the power of out-groups will strengthen the tendency to assume intent (attributional bias).’<sup>33</sup>

Linking this to CLT, the attributional bias is more likely to occur in situations of high-level construal. Complementary to Aalto et al.,<sup>34</sup> it is claimed that competing frames are more likely to occur in the abstract, high-level construal of energy security, than in the low-level construal of daily commercial or technical interaction. Abstracted from the immediate, local context, high-level construals of energy relations are more prone to be embedded in ‘deep enemy like structures’.

### Reductionist Schemes of Excessive Dependence

Before applying this theory to EU-Russia energy relations, the point needs to be made (or rather reiterated) why a considerable part of the literature is reductionist in ascribing geopolitical and security motivations to understand collective intentions behind energy policies.<sup>35</sup> As argued above, this literature reflects a widespread tendency to analyse EU-Russia energy relations in terms of high politics and/or security, in which actors determine their strategies in function of their geostrategic interests. A key word in this literature is *dependence*. It is assumed that asymmetrical energy interdependence<sup>36</sup> is excessive, therefore leading to concerns about shifting power relations (in the cases of political approaches) or fears about threats to survival (in the case of security approaches). While acknowledging that there is asymmetrical energy interdependence between the EU and Russia, reducing energy relations and motivations underlying energy policies to this dependence is one-sided. There are four main reductionist elements, which have been described in literature.<sup>37</sup>

First the ‘power factor’ in energy relations is isolated from other fields. Power relations are predominantly assessed in function of energy dependence, leaving other fields of interaction out of the equation. The dependence of EU countries on Russian gas comes to be seen as the main determinant of power relations. For example, the fact that the Russian economy – before the Ukraine crisis – represented only one tenth of the EU’s economy is not taken into account.<sup>38</sup> One could also argue that this interpretation uses a one-sided concept of power. In terms of the taxonomy of power of Barnett and Duvall,<sup>39</sup> it reflects compulsory power, the capacity of one actor to control



the other. Zero-sum interpretations of power fit this relational category. In the energy field this may refer to the control over energy supplies. Other forms of power, like institutional power are not taken into account. In this case power is diffuse, indirect and area-specific. Rather than referring to direct control over an actor, institutional power is about indirect control over the conditions under which an actor can act.<sup>40</sup> This may refer to the constraining impact of institutions. It goes without saying that this is of particular importance in the energy sector, where control over law, regulatory mechanisms or technical standards may involve institutional power over the conditions in which other actors operate.

Second, dependence tends to be reduced to supply dependence. The 'control over outcomes' which is generated by the asymmetry of interdependence is assumed to exist for supply dependence only: the dependence of EU states on the supply of Russian gas. The fact that Russia is strongly dependent on demand for Russian gas in the EU is largely ignored (although see the contribution by Sharples to this special section). Also, what is called 'dependence' is often assumed to automatically entail – in the terms of Keohane and Nye – dependence vulnerability, implying heavy costs in the longer term. However, if alternative sources of supply or demand exist, the real effects may only be short term. In such cases there should be a sensitivity to levels of dependence rather than necessarily viewing them in terms of vulnerability.

Third, the way dependence is assessed in a considerable part of the literature, is itself problematic. Supply dependence is often simply reduced to *import* dependence. The share of Russian gas in EU gas imports is wrongly seen as an indicator for the degree of dependence. This leaves endogenous production of gas within the EU out of the equation. While Russia's share in EU gas imports is around one third (31.5% in 2008), its share in EU gas consumption is lower at one quarter (24.4% in 2008). If we consider the total energy mix, Russian gas accounts for 6.5% of the primary energy consumption in the EU only.<sup>41</sup>

Fourth, the widely held perception that the EU has seen an exceptional and excessive growth in levels of dependence does not match reality. Today the EU imports proportionally less gas from Russia than it did at the end of the Cold War. In 2008, just before the financial crisis, the Russian share in gas imports of the EU-27 was 31.5%. In 1990, in the late days of the Soviet Union, the Russian (not Soviet) share in gas imports of these 27 countries was 75%.<sup>42</sup> Dependence has thus decreased, rather than increased.

Since the last gas spat between Russia and Ukraine in 2009, higher intensity energy conflicts involving the EU and Russia have actually decreased. Driven by concerns over its credibility as a reliable supplier of energy, Russia and the EU have signed a Memorandum on an Early Warning Mechanism on energy supply disruptions after the 2009 gas crisis.<sup>43</sup> This mechanism has been effectively invoked and gas conflicts between Russia and

third parties (Ukraine, Belarus) have not provoked major disruptions for EU states since then. The asymmetry of energy interdependence has been further reduced through the EU's diversification strategy. Not only have EU states diversified the energy sources and the countries of origin, progress has also been made in building more interconnections between national gas networks and solving the issue of energy islands. Moreover the EU has invested in reverse flow technology to allow gas to be redirected from west to east rather than the conventional east to west transit direction for Russian gas. This energy security strategy predates the current conflict over Ukraine, but has been accelerated in function of it. All this has prepared the EU better for gas interruptions under different scenarios.<sup>44</sup>

It should be reiterated here that this article deals with the dominant *framing* of energy relations in the International Relations literature, not with the actual behaviour of Russia and the EU. It may be argued that stronger geopolitical and security rhetoric has appeared in both cases, but this rhetoric hides a much bigger complexity, in which energy relations continued (until the Ukraine crisis) within the Energy Dialogue and (also after the Ukraine crisis) at a technical and commercial level. The EU has put a greater emphasis on energy security particularly since 2006, but policy-makers have always continued to emphasise that interdependence was key to energy relations. While measures were taken to increase the diversification of supply, its policies continued to be driven to a large extent by commercial and technical considerations. Energy relations were constituted at various levels (European and national), by different actors (private and public), from different policy fields (energy, trade, competition, environment, foreign policy). Also in Russia there are complex energy relations and policies behind a more assertive rhetoric and the objective of diversifying energy markets. This appears, for example, from the Russian Energy Strategy until 2030, which covers a wide variety of objectives and strongly reflects other than geopolitical motivations.<sup>45</sup> Also in their case study of the Sakhalin projects, which is often seen as politically driven, Aalto et al. find 'profit interests and business frames best explaining the conduct of the two Sakhalin projects'.<sup>46</sup>

That energy policies are de facto rather isolated from grand foreign policies, is illustrated by the conflict that has unravelled over Ukraine in 2014. The derailing of acrimonious relations into a militarised conflict with a huge potential of escalation seems to have left the field of energy largely unaffected. In other words, energy, for many the perceived 'threat' par excellence during the decade preceding the Ukraine crisis, has not played a significant role in the confrontation between Russia and the EU after arms were taken up. This may seem surprising, given the earlier gas spats of 2006 and 2009. One could have expected that in the much more extreme circumstances of a confrontation over Ukraine and of military build-up, any of the parties would have resorted to energy as an instrument in the conflict. This is

not what happened. Except for oil industry technology, the sanctions imposed by the EU and the US have not directly targeted the Russian energy sector. The other way around, Russia has not used the 'energy weapon' and cut off gas supplies to European states. Moreover, the EU acted as a broker between Moscow and Kyiv in the midst of the crisis – with the Strategic Partnership suspended – and provided financial guarantees in the so-called Winter Package. It seems to be implicitly agreed that energy business will continue as usual, despite the confrontation over Ukraine. This is not to say that there have been no tensions between Brussels and Moscow over energy. There was the decision to suspend the South Stream project. Moscow was also not amused by the European Commission's antitrust case against Gazprom. However, neither of these cases were part of the conflict dynamics over Ukraine. They did not result from the conflict, nor were they stakes within the conflict. Moreover, these disagreements have characterised EU-Russia relations for many years. There is little reason to assume that the level of conflict over energy was higher than before the Ukraine crisis, certainly in comparison to the gas spats of 2006 and 2009.

### **Energy and the Geopoliticisation of EU-Russia Energy Relations**

The previous sections have illustrated how a considerable part of the analysis of EU-Russia energy relations is prone to reductionism. In this type of framing the complexity of energy relations is reduced to a simple all-encompassing scheme of excessive dependence, which is assumed to create challenges for power or for survival itself. The collective intentionality assumed is that of governmental actors driven by their national interests, entangled in a geopolitical competition that is ultimately determined by control over resources and pipelines. Against the background of CLT, this section now seeks to explain how this geopolitical framing became dominant, while it is not reflected in the complexity of energy relations and policies.

As argued above, the interpretation that the collective intentionality behind the energy policies in Moscow and the EU is geopolitical, is not confirmed by evidence.<sup>47</sup> We therefore need to explain why a geopolitical framing of energy relations as driven by a geopolitical collective intentionality became so powerful in literature and sometimes resonates in the policy world itself. In doing so, we make abstraction of different global factors that played a role, such as growing energy demand and prices. Instead the focus is on the endogenous logic of EU-Russia bilateral relations. It is argued that a broader political process of geopoliticisation of EU-Russia relations took place – outside the energy sector – in which both parties started to frame each other's behaviour increasingly in terms of assumed geopolitical agendas. In line with what has been explained above, this is the result of abstract high-level framing or construal. The concept of 'attributional bias'<sup>48</sup> helps to

explain why the framing was characterised by an increasingly negative interpretation of each other's behaviour and producing abstract 'enemy-like structures'. It is this type of abstract structures that have fostered a one-sided negative geopolitical reading of energy relations, obfuscating the underlying complexity.

Drawing on CLT, framing the intentionality behind the energy policy of Moscow or Brussels implies a high psychological distance and thus requires a high degree of abstraction. As argued above, high-level construals are more likely to be affected by broader ideological schemes. In other words, if it is hard to make sense of an extremely complex energy world, one is bound to resort to simple abstract, ideological frames to make sense of energy policies. It is thus the distance between the immediate proximity of manifold micro energy environments and the level of macro energy policies, that explains why we are inclined not to understand energy intentionalities from an endogenous perspective, but to attribute qualities to these intentionalities on the basis of exogenous, broader ideological schemes and interpretations of EU-Russia political and strategic relations in general. CLT thus helps to understand why the field of energy relations is prone to highly abstract, ideologised and more extreme interpretations.

The concept of 'attributional bias',<sup>49</sup> in turn, helps to explain the negative dynamics these abstract, ideologised interpretations have acquired long before the crisis over Ukraine. The core idea behind the concept is that actors do not behave on the basis of actual behaviour but on the basis of images they hold of each other. They redefine each other's identity and tend to aggrandise differences between themselves (the in-group) and the other (the out-group). In a context of psychological distance and diverging preferences, this is likely to result in a situation where one actor reads bad intentions into the behaviour of the other. This attribution of negative behaviour becomes the dominant frame. Each step taken by the counterpart is seen as a negative step, intended to weaken or obstruct the in-group. Self-evidently, this is not a sudden process. As identities evolve in the process of interaction, the attribution of negative intentions grows and gets mutually reinforced, up to the point where it gets detached from actual behaviour. The interaction happens on the basis of the images of what the counterpart has become, not of what it has done.

The 'attributional bias' is at the heart of EU-Russia relations as they have developed roughly over the last decade. Long before the conflict in Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea, both have developed increasingly negative images of each other in a downward spiral. They have come to frame each other's behaviour in terms of the assumed intention to build a sphere of influence at the expense of the other, where there may have been no conscious intention to do so at the onset. A clear instance of this is the reference by Segey Lavrov, Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs, to the Eastern

Partnership as ‘an attempt to expand the EU’s sphere of influence’.<sup>50</sup> His quote is to be seen in a context where Russian leaders had become convinced that the West’s objective was to weaken Russia. There are many similar quotes to be found on both sides, illustrating an escalating logic of competition between the EU and Russia, driven by the attribution of negative geopolitical intentions to each other. The abstract, ideological schemes used are reinforced by the selective reading of certain events, such as the Russia-Ukraine gas spats of 2006 and 2009, which, interpreted through these schemes, only confirm and reinforce them.

We thus enter a logic of competition, where the behaviour of the counterpart is understood as bad-intended steps in a process of zero-sum competition. The result is a spiral of distrust and a further increasing psychological distance. One could argue that abstract geopolitical framing sneaked into foreign policy and was fostered by the increasingly negative images as a result of the escalating logic of competition. In Russia a new discourse of geopolitics became more influential as images gained ground that the ambition of the EU and the West in general was to increase its influence at Russia’s expense. Moscow’s foreign policy got incrementally geopoliticised as the logic of competition developed. Given that Putin’s foreign policy in his early years as president was firmly based on the economisation of foreign policy,<sup>51</sup> it is fair to assume that this was not so much a conscious strategic choice, but more the result of an interactive process of stepwise radicalisation of the images it held of the EU’s intentions.

Though less evident, the same arguably holds for the EU, conventionally seen as less driven by geopolitical motivations. While the objectives of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and Eastern Partnership (EaP) may not have been explicitly geopolitical, they were seen by Moscow to be geopolitically motivated. Rather than seeking direct strategic control or coercion, these regional policies were aimed at extending the EU’s legal and economic sphere by transferring its rules to neighbouring countries in Association Agreements based on Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade. This created an increase in the ‘normative hegemony’<sup>52</sup> of the EU and had the potential to anchor Ukraine in wider European structures. From a Russian perspective this clashed with what it considered to be its vital national interests and ambitions as regional power. While there is an immediate technical incompatibility of membership of the Eurasian Customs Union (now Eurasian Economic Union) and the DCFTA arrangements with the EU, it is the attributional bias that explains why both projects were seen as mutually exclusive and threatening. Moscow and Brussels did not see each other’s regional integration plans as neutral forms of economic cooperation. In a context of negative images of competition, they framed them mutually as aggressive attempts to increase influence and enhance one’s geostrategic interests. It is these abstract negative political images that have proven to

be a fertile ground for one-sided geopolitical interpretations of energy relations, making abstraction of the multi-dimensional complex micro-settings of interaction in the field.

## Conclusion

This article has sought to explain why a considerable part of the International Relations literature tends to frame EU-Russia energy relations in terms of exclusive geopolitical intentions, thus obfuscating very complex and highly differentiated realities of energy relations and reducing them to issues of high politics.

The analysis started from the fact that energy relations and policies are the result of the actions of a wide variety and diversity of actors and their individual intentions. The preferences they hold and the choices they make are determined by the way they understand the immediate energy context in which they operate. While Aalto et al.<sup>53</sup> claim that these individual intentionalities produce fairly stable collective intentionalities, this article argued that the construction of these collective intentionalities is predominantly a function of the broader political framing of EU-Russia relations exogenous to the energy field. In other words, geopolitical competition gets read into energy relations. Geopolitical schemes start to operate as an abstract frame through which collective intentions are attributed and behaviour is explained.

CLT was used to understand how abstract schemes came to dominate the framing of EU-Russia energy relations. In a situation of high psychological distance, the likelihood of more radical and ideologised abstract schemes increases. This explains the gap between the immediate interaction in the energy sector at the level of individual intentionalities – where experience is direct and decisions are less prone to major ideological schemes – and the abstract level of *assumed* collective intentionalities, where the framing is subject to more radical and ideologised schemes.

On this basis it was argued that the assumed geopolitical collective intentionality of Russian energy policies and actions (which Aalto and many authors find problematic), follows from the logic of competition which has developed in EU-Russia political relations over roughly the last decade rather than from the endogenous dynamics of energy interaction. The abstract perception of inevitable competition has led to an incremental geopoliticisation of relations at a general political level, which in turn was reproduced in the interpretation of relations in the energy sector. The concept of ‘attributional bias’, equally taken from Social Psychology, clarifies how the EU and Russia started to hold negative images of one another, attributing their counterpart bad intentions of geopolitical manoeuvring and power aggrandisement. In a process of gradual escalation, these images have radicalised up to the point where the EU and Russia regarded and evaluated each other in



function of the images they had created of each other, rather than on the basis of actual behaviour. As a result, enemy-like deeper structures took the upper hand in framing their relations, including in the field of energy.

This analysis forces us to think about the way we assume collective intentions behind an actor's behaviour in the energy field, rather than accepting that this behaviour is steered by manifold individual and cross-cutting intentions. While this complexity is recognised by a considerable number of experts, this issue – how complex, diverging individual intentions relate to assumed simple collective intentions – has hardly been the subject of analysis. This article suggests that there is a need to rethink this relation by distinguishing between the different levels of abstraction, with individual intentions reflecting a more immediate and concrete level, while collective intentions are framed at an abstract and ideological level that is subject to images and perceptions exogenous to energy relations themselves.

## Notes

1. S. Atal, 'The New Great Game', *The National Interest* 81 (Fall 2005) pp. 101–105; A. Stulberg, 'Moving Beyond the Great Game: The Geoeconomics of Russia's Influence in the Caspian Energy Bonanza', *Geopolitics* 10/1 (2005) pp. 1–25.
2. As noted critically by P. Aalto, D. Dusseault, M. Kennedy, and M. Kivinen 'Russia's Energy Relations in Europe and the Far East: Towards a Social Structurationist Approach to Energy Policy Formulation', *Journal of International Relations and Development* 17 (2014) pp. 1–29.
3. For a critical evaluation see F. McGowan, 'Putting Energy Insecurity into Historical Context: European Responses to the Energy Crises of the 1970s and 2000s', *Geopolitics* 16/3 (2011) pp. 486–511.
4. Examples of geopolitical and high politics approaches include K. Smith, 'Russia-Europe Energy Relations. Implications for US Policy', Centre for Strategic and International Studies, available at <<http://csis.org/publication/russia-europe-energy-relations>>, accessed 21 June 2011; C. A. Paillard, 'Russia and Europe's Mutual Energy Dependence', *Journal of International Affairs* 63/2 (2010) pp. 65–84; Z. Baran, 'EU Energy Security: Time to End Russian Leverage', *The Washington Quarterly* 30/4 (2007) pp. 131–144; CIEP – Clingendael International Energy Programme, *Study on Energy Supply Security and Geopolitics: Final Report* (The Hague: Clingendael 2004); I. Dreyer and G. Stang, *Energy Moves and Power Shifts. EU Foreign Policy And Global Energy Security*, Issue Report No. 18 (Feb. 2014); A. Orban, *Power, Energy and the New Russian Imperialism* (Westport: Praeger 2008); M. Bilgin, 'Geopolitics of European Natural Gas Demand: Supplies from Russia, Caspian and the Middle East', *Energy Policy* 37/11 (2009) pp. 4482–4492; F. Umbach, 'Global Energy Security and the Implications for the EU', *Energy Policy* 38/2 (2010) pp. 1229–1240; M. Bradshaw, 'The Geopolitics of Global Energy Security', *Geography Compass* 3/5 (2009) pp. 1920–1937; E. Kropatcheva, 'Playing Both Ends Against the Middle: Russia's Geopolitical Energy Games with the EU and Ukraine', *Geopolitics* 16/3 (2011) pp. 553–573.
5. For example N. Kaveshnikov, 'The Issue of Energy Security in Relations between Russia and the European Union', *European Security* 19/4 (2010) pp. 585–605.



6. For example, A. Goldthau, 'Resurgent Russia. Rethinking Russia Inc.', *Policy Review* 147 (2008) pp. 53–63; P. Noël, *Beyond Dependence: How to Deal with Russian Gas*, Policy Brief ECFR/09 (London: European Council on Foreign Relations 2008); T. Casier, 'Russia's Energy Leverage over the EU. Myth or Reality?', *Perspectives on European Politics and Societies* 12/4 (2011) pp. 493–508.
7. For example, K. Smith Stegen, 'Deconstructing the 'Energy Weapon': Russia's Threat to Europe as Case Study', *Energy Policy* 39/10 (Oct. 2011) pp. 6505–6513.
8. S. Boussena and C. Locatelli, 'Energy Institutional and Organisational Changes in EU and Russia: Revisiting Gas Relations', *Energy Policy* 55 (2013) pp. 180–189; A. Goldthau and J. M. Witte, 'The Role of Rules and Institutions in Global Energy: An Introduction', in A. Goldthau and J. M. Witte (eds.), *Global Energy Governance* (Berlin: Global Policy Institute; Washington: Brookings Institution Press 2010) pp. 1–21.
9. For example, Aalto et al. (note 2).
10. A. Goldthau and T. Boersma, 'The 2014 Ukraine-Russia Crisis: Implications for Energy Markets and Scholarship', *Energy Research and Social Science* 3 (2014) p. 13.
11. A. Bressand, *The Changed Geopolitics of Energy and Climate and the Challenge for Europe* (The Hague: Clingendael 2012) p. 4.
12. CIEP (note 4).
13. Aalto et al. (note 2).
14. *Ibid.*, p. 3.
15. P. Kowert, 'Agent versus Structure in the Construction of National Identity', in V. Kubalkova, N. Onuf, and P. Kowert (eds.), *International Relations In a Constructed World*. (New York: M.E. Sharpe 1998) pp. 101–122.
16. Aalto et al. (note 2) p. 2.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 3.
18. *Ibid.*, pp. 7, 11.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 24.
20. Framing here is understood in line with Robert Entman: 'To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described.' R. Entman, 'Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm', *Journal of Communication* 43/4 (1993) p. 52.
21. Aalto et al. (note 2) p. 24.
22. Y. Trope and N. Liberman, 'Construal-Level Theory of Psychological Distance', *Psychological Review* 117/2 (2010) pp. 440–463.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 441.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 441.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 453.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 454.
27. Aalto et al. (note 2).
28. Trope and Liberman (note 22) p. 447.
29. Kowert (note 15).
30. *Ibid.*, p. 106.
31. *Ibid.*, p. 110.
32. *Ibid.*, pp. 108–109.
33. *Ibid.*, p. 109.
34. Aalto et al. (note 2).
35. See the earlier mentioned examples of this literature (note 4).

36. R. Keohane and J. Nye, *Power and Interdependence* (New York: Harper Collins 1969 [1977]).
37. See among many others Noël (note 6); Goldthau (note 6); Kaveshnikov (note 5); Casier (note 6).
38. Based on IMF, World Economic Outlook Database, available at <http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/weo/2015/01/weodata/index.aspx>, accessed March 2015.
39. M. Barnett and R. Duvall, 'Power in International Politics', *International Organization* 59 (Winter 2005) pp. 39–75.
40. *Ibid.*, p. 48.
41. Noël (note 6) p. 5; Kaveshnikov (note 5) p. 597.
42. Casier (note 6).
43. The Memorandum on Early Warning is available at [http://ec.europa.eu/energy/international/bilateral\\_cooperation/russia/doc/reports/2009\\_11\\_16\\_ewm\\_signed\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/energy/international/bilateral_cooperation/russia/doc/reports/2009_11_16_ewm_signed_en.pdf).
44. European Commission, *Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council on the Short Term Resilience of the European Gas System* (16 Oct. 2014), COM 2014 654 final; P. De Micco, *A Cold Winter to Come? The EU Seeks Alternatives to Russian Gas*, European Parliament, DG EXPO/B/PolDep/Note/2014\_183 (2014); J. Sharples and A. Judge, 'Russian Gas Supplies to Europe: The Likelihood and Potential Impact of an Interruption in Gas Transit via Ukraine' (forthcoming).
45. Ministry of Energy of the Russian Federation, *Energy Strategy of Russia for the Period up to 2030* (Moscow: Institute of Energy Strategy 2010).
46. Aalto et al. (note 2) p. 22.
47. *Ibid.*
48. Kowert (note 15).
49. *Ibid.*
50. S. Lavrov quoted in 'EU Expanding its "Sphere of Influence," Russia Says', *EU Observer*, 21 March 2009, available at <http://euobserver.com/24/27827>, accessed Aug. 2011.
51. I. Ivanov, *The New Russian Diplomacy* (Washington: Brookings Institution Press 2002) p. 141.
52. H. Haukkala, 'The European Union as a Regional Normative Hegemon: The Case of European Neighbourhood Policy', *Europe-Asia Studies* 60/9 (2008) pp. 1601–1622.
53. Aalto et al. (note 2).