



Research Article

Russia's political discourse on the EU's energy transition (2014–2019) and its effect on EU-Russia energy relations

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ABSTRACT

Four interpretations of the EU's energy transition can be identified in Russia's political discourse in 2014–2019 based on the matrix that combines realist and liberal approaches to energy relations and the denial or recognition of climate change. The cross-cutting idea of these interpretations is that Russia follows the market logics, whereas the EU either politicises energy relations or chooses economically unreasonable options. Most Russian actors advance all four interpretations in parallel. A liberal interpretation, which recognises climate change, became dominant towards the end of the examined period. Two main policy options are shaped by Russia's political discourse on the EU's energy transition: maintaining the status quo in EU-Russian gas trade and diversifying Russia's export markets. Russia's political discourse reveals a strong ideational difference with the EU on future energy policies, and Russia poorly engages with the EU's post-2030 planning. It is recommended that the EU improve its energy transition communication with Russia, and Russia is advised to enlarge the range of its policy options by better engaging with the EU's long-term energy planning. Russia and the EU also must examine energy transition in the broader context of their relations. Practical project-based cooperation can contribute to ideational convergence between the EU and Russia on future energy policies.

1. Introduction

The European Union (EU) has long promoted the development of renewable energy sources (RES), energy efficiency and reduction of greenhouse gases (GHG), which became key components of its energy transition. Binding targets have been gradually increased (European Commission, no date a,b). Controlling GHG moved into the forefront in 2014, and a 40% reduction was fixed as the key target for 2030, to which obligations for RES and energy efficiency were linked (32% and 32.5%, respectively, as of 2018). The EU's vision for 2050, outlined in 2018, presupposes further reductions of GHG, improvement of energy efficiency and an increase in RES (European Commission, 2018a). In addition, the Green Deal is projected to further tighten the EU's targets with a goal to achieve climate neutrality by 2050 (European Commission, 2019).

A 2018 European Commission document emphasises that 75% of GHG originate in the energy sector, and key measures to reduce GHG emissions must be taken there. The Commission study, therefore, projects that the EU's energy import dependence will fall from the levels of 55% to 20% by 2050 as a result of 'the transformation to a climate neutral economy', whereas 'expenditures on fossil fuel imports will

decrease from the current €266 billion ... by 70%' as a result of reduced import and a fall in fossil fuel's prices, resulting from RES availability. The Commission further continues that while natural gas will remain important until 2030, its import will fall by 60–92% by 2050, leaving 'the long-term use of existing import capacities ... an open question' (European Commission, 2018b: 214–216). The upcoming EU gas package is now referred to as the 'gas decarbonisation package' (Van Renssen, 2019).

While this EU policy choice remains the subject of debates (Van Renssen, 2019), the goal of this article is to examine how Russian political actors interpret the EU's energy transition and its implications for Russian energy exports to the EU. Like all suppliers, Russia is a 'policy-taker' and must adapt to EU decisions (Overland, 2018: 73). What policy choices Moscow identifies can be deduced from its political discourse. Russia's views on the EU's energy transition and relevant policy choices are of crucial importance because the EU remains Russia's key export market for both oil and natural gas. Related revenues accounted for 26% of the total budgetary receipts in 2015; it is estimated that they can fall to 12% by 2040 due to the EU's energy transition (Makarov et al., 2019: 12). Furthermore, Russia has always linked its international status with its hydrocarbon export (see for example

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Russian Federation, 2016). Finally, since the 1970s, trade in oil and gas has constituted a safety net for the relations between the Soviet Union/Russia and Europe. Its disappearance will further destabilise the EU-Russian relationship.

Russian independent energy experts are well aware of the problem, warning that the development of RES and non-traditional hydrocarbons as well as importers' quest for self-sufficiency will lead to fundamental changes in the world energy trade (see for example [Bushuev et al., 2016: 31](#)). They stress that it will be impossible to maintain Russian energy exports at the current level and in present forms, and therefore a fundamental transformation of the Russian economy and energy is required (*Ibid.*: 91). The export of oil from Russia is projected to decline by the mid-2020s, with some reorientation to Asian markets and fierce competition in Europe ([Makarov et al., 2019: 149](#)). Natural gas prospects are more positive until 2040; yet Russia is expected to at best maintain the present share in the EU's market (*Ibid.*: 153). Although Europe will remain Russia's biggest export market until 2040, its share in the Russian export of natural gas is projected to decline from 73% in 2018 to 54–56% in 2040 (*Ibid.*: 134). As a result, Russia's average GDP can fall by 0.9–1.7% annually until 2040 (*Ibid.*: 164; see also [Makarov, 2016](#)), and budgetary receipts will be negatively affected.

To achieve the goal of this article, critical discourse analysis is applied to Russia's key conceptual documents (Energy Strategy, Energy Security Doctrine and Foreign Policy Concept) as well as public statements, presentations and interviews of Russia's president, representatives of the Russian government, ministries, parliament and major energy companies. The timeframe for this research is 2014–2019. The year 2014 was chosen because the EU's energy transition intensified in that year, and 2014 events in Ukraine deeply affected all aspects of EU-Russian relations. The end date (2019) results because Russia changed its conceptual documents (Energy Security Doctrine [[Russian Federation, 2019](#)]) and Energy Strategy to the year 2035 ([Ministry of Energy, 2020](#)) and ratified the Paris Climate Agreement.

Russian discourse is gauged against the realism vs. liberalism dichotomy. This dichotomy is used to expose the plurality of interpretations of the EU's energy transition in today's Russia. Russia's interpretations are further differentiated based on whether climate change and the need for relevant policies are denied or accepted. As a result, a matrix of four different interpretations of the EU's energy transition in the Russian political discourse is developed. This matrix exposes both the complexity of Russia's perception of the EU's energy transition and the limited range of policy solutions that Russia contemplates. While Russia wishes to preserve its energy interdependence with the EU, its policy choices are limited by its politico-economic system, resource curse and path dependence. Russia's political discourse also reveals a strong ideational divide with the EU in how they understand energy policy in the twenty-first century.

The article progresses in the following way: Section 2 is devoted to realism vs. liberalism debates in EU-Russian relations and how energy transition can be conceptualised through these lenses. Section 3 briefly outlines critical discourse analysis as the methodology of the study. Section 4 presents research data and the matrix of four interpretations in the Russian political discourse. Section 5 describes four interpretations of the EU's energy transition and discusses the findings, and Section 6 contains conclusions and policy recommendations.

2. Realism vs. liberalism in EU-Russian energy relations

Various dichotomies describe two approaches to energy relations, and they characterise both policy thinking and sector organisation: regions/empires vs. markets/institutions ([CIEP, 2004](#); [Correljé, van der Linde, 2006](#)), geopolitics vs. multilateral governance ([Westphal, 2006](#)), geostrategic approaches vs. market governance ([Youngs, 2007](#)) and geopolitics (neorealism) vs. market forces (neoliberalism) ([Finon, Locatelli, 2008](#)). These dichotomies 'reproduce, often implicitly, a much longer debate between realist-pessimistic and liberal-rationalist strands

of thought in International Relations' ([Stoddard, 2013: 446](#)). Hereafter, these two approaches are referred to as realist and liberal.

The realist approach to energy relations is based on neorealism in international relations, which emphasises the centrality of states and their power politics (see [Waltz, 2003](#), for example). It sees energy 'as a strategic commodity rather than an average good' ([Romanova, 2016: 859](#)) because its supply can challenge the political and economic stability of an actor. Any external dependence is seen as a negative feature, requiring state interference. This approach, therefore, privileges the use of domestic resources or control over the development and transportation of external resources through various political agreements. Producers, in turn, look to manage the exploration, production and transportation of their resources independently or through various political deals while portraying themselves as guarantors of energy security. They also secure deals with consuming countries at the political level. Transnational market relations are not the preferred choice for either consumers or producers. Who establishes transnational rules and ensures their application is crucial. International deals can be both ad hoc and long term, but they are concluded with the substantial participation of state institutions. That leads to the centralisation and obscurity of the decision-making in both specific projects and in the overall management of the sector. Diversification of export markets and suppliers is an important way of managing uncertainties ([Casier, 2011](#); [CIEP, 2004](#); [Correljé, van der Linde, 2006](#); [Finon, Locatelli, 2008](#); [Peters, Westphal, 2013](#); [Westphal, 2006](#)).

Many studies on the geopolitics of RES and decarbonisation fall into the realist tradition. First, they emphasise how consumers will become more independent, relying on local resources and turning to new energy centres ([Crieckemans, 2018](#)). Second, they examine how producing countries will manage their stranded assets, as hydrocarbons will progressively become irrelevant, and how their geopolitical influence will decline ([Ansar et al., 2013](#); [CIEP, 2014](#); [Crieckemans, 2018](#); [Dreyer, 2013](#); [Overland, 2015](#); [Scholten, 2018](#); [Stang, 2016](#); [Van de Graaf, 2018](#)). Russia is seen as 'one of the main holders of stranded geopolitical assets' ([Overland et al., 2019: 1, 11](#); see also [Salzman, 2016](#); [Sharples, 2013](#); [Smith Stegen, 2018](#); [Toke, Vezirgiannidou, 2013](#); [van de Graaf, 2018](#)). Third, studies identify new dependencies on land use ([Johansson 2013](#)), on new asymmetries in the grids' management ([Bosman, Scholten, 2013](#); [Scholten, 2018](#)), on technologies ([Crieckemans, 2018](#)) and on rare metals, which are essential for RES production and for energy efficiency ([De Ridder, 2013](#); [Scholten, 2018](#)).

The liberal approach to energy policy is rooted in the neoliberal studies of international relations (for example see [Keohane, Nye, 1977](#)). This approach sees interdependence positively and relies on markets to resolve transnational supply and demand issues ([Casier, 2011](#); [CIEP, 2004](#); [Correljé, van der Linde, 2006](#); [Finon, Locatelli, 2008](#); [Stoddard, 2013](#); [Westphal, 2006](#)). Energy is viewed as a commodity ([Romanova, 2016](#)), like any other; whereas markets present the best way 'to foster win-win games in global energy' ([Goldthau, Witte, 2010](#)). States (or integration entities), according to this approach, provide transparent and durable transnational rules for development, transportation, processing and consumption of energy resources ([Bielecki, 2002](#); [Goldthau, Sitter, 2014](#); [Goldthau, Witte, 2010](#)). This approach favours transnational relations rather than strictly territorial organisation as well as bottom-up solutions and the delegation of responsibilities to business and experts. Companies are expected to adopt optimal solutions for consumers and producers and to transport the demanded amount of energy in the most cost-efficient way.

Decarbonisation, energy efficiency and development of RES are also examined through the liberal lenses. First, costs (including subsidies) linked to RES are addressed; the role of fossil fuels to back up RES and to balance season, day and weather fluctuations is seen as undermining the reliability of RES ([Marusyk, 2019](#)). Secondly, scholars examine new trade relations that could emerge due to some actors being more competitive in producing RES, storing electricity or balancing fluctuations ([Scholten, 2018](#)). Additionally, the role and optimal size of an

Table 1

Matrix of Russia's Interpretations on the EU's Decarbonisation and its Impact on Russian Export.

	Realist approach	Liberal approach
Denial of climate change	Interpretation 1: Energy transition is your politicised decision	Interpretation 2: It's the economy, stupid
Acceptance of climate change	Interpretation 3: Energy transitions is an external political challenge	Interpretation 4: We can assist the EU in the fight against climate change

electricity grid to balance fluctuations are studied (Bosman, Scholten, 2013; Scholten, 2018). Similarly, trade in rare metals or technologies can be addressed in a liberal way through a transnational legal regime. Suppliers are suggested to look for ways to adapt to a new market, which is increasingly tilted towards consumers (Bushuev et al., 2016; Gullberg, 2013; Overland, 2018). Finally, international relations with actors generating energy from RES are more peaceful in the longer term because competition for hydrocarbon resources will be removed (Sweijs et al., 2014); yet a new system of governance might be required, particularly because of climate change (Johansson, 2013; Streck, Terhalle, 2013).

As any academic conceptualisation, the realist-liberal dichotomy is a simplification. No approach is applied in real life in its pure form. Similarly, the results of the energy transition will be complex and will require different policy solutions (Hache, 2016; Paltsev, 2016). Conventionally, Russia is associated with realism, and the EU is characterised by liberalism (CIEP, 2004; Correljé, van der Linde, 2006; Finon, Locatelli, 2008; Westphal, 2006; Youngs, 2007). Yet studies show that the EU also applies a realist geopolitical vision, whereas Russia can be guided by the liberal approach (Romanova, 2016; Siddi, 2018). The analysis of Russia's political discourse on energy transition makes the allocation of the EU and Russia to a particular approach even more difficult. For example, the EU has emphasised how energy transition will decrease import dependence (European Commission, 2018). Russia, for its part, as findings in section 5 illustrate, resorts to liberal arguments. The distinction between realist and liberal approaches, however, will help identify different interpretations of the EU's energy transition in the Russian political discourse.

3. Critical discourse analysis as the methodology

This study primarily draws on the ideas of Cox (1981) that material, institutional and ideational dimensions are considered when analysing international relations. The first dimension characterises the distribution of resources and their ways of transporting and processing. The second one will define structures that allow developing, transporting, processing and trading in these resources. Kratochvil and Tychy (2013) correctly note the relative simplicity of studying these two dimensions, which has attracted numerous scholars of EU-Russian energy relations. The ideational dimension, which is the focus of this study, shapes the understanding of how material and institutional structures function, and therefore what policy solutions are applied and what institutions are set up or reformed.

Critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2013; Wodak, Meyer, 2016) is applied to examine Russian interpretations of the EU's energy transition and its impact on Russian energy export, as well as policy options that are promoted as a result. The discourse is seen as a form of social practice, which constitutes the social world and is being constituted in other social practices (Jorgensen, Philips, 2002). It reflects an actor's normative frameworks, cognitive patterns and views. It also provides meaning to reality rather than being a mere reflection of it. Political actors both shape the discourse and are shaped by it. Furthermore, the

discourse has 'the power to change the behaviour of the actors and the nature and form of the institutions created and shaped by these actors' (Kratochvil, Tichy, 2013: 393; see also Beland, 2007; Schmidt, 2010; Schmidt and Radaelli, 2004). The discourse analysis in turn presupposes exposing the difference between what could be said (in terms of the language used and types of arguments) and what is said to describe a particular subject or topic and to outline possible policy solutions.

The analysis requires narrowing a set of actors whose views and opinions, developed in various speeches and documents, are worth examining. Actors are limited to those who can have an impact on the outcome of the discussions and on related policy choices (Van Dijk, 1998). Today's Russian energy discourse is shaped by the president, the government (including the Ministry of Energy and Ministry of Foreign Affairs) and its parliament, as well as major energy companies. The four biggest energy companies were selected for this study: Gazprom (Russian gas monopolist); and Rosneft, Gazpromneft and Lukoil (key oil companies with interest in the EU's market). In view of the relative plurality of those who shape the Russian energy discourse (for the explanation of major Russian energy and foreign policy actors, see Godzimirski, 2010; Romanova, 2016; Sergunin, 2016), it is particularly interesting to examine whether their interpretations of the EU's energy transition and its impact differ and what emerges as a preferred response to the changes in the EU's market.

Finally, a common critique of the discourse analysis is that there is frequently a discrepancy between what is said and what is done (Searle, 1979). Hence the question is whether it makes sense to study any discourse. However, discourse analysis helps examine how a particular state (or organisation) and its representatives (referred to hereafter as political actors) see a problem, what principles and beliefs drive their behaviour, and how they would like their partners to see that problem (Hajer, 2006; see also Kratochvil and Tichy, 2013). In addition, discourse analysis allows for revealing various inconsistencies (Fierke, 2002; Tichy, 2019).

4. Research progress and research data

This research developed in the following way: First, a set of documents was identified through the automatic and subsequent manual analysis. Second, four interpretations of the EU's energy transition and its implications for Russia were identified; they resulted from two dichotomies. The first dichotomy (realism vs. liberalism [markets]) is outlined in section 2; the second one responds to whether Russia's political actors accept or deny climate change and relevant energy transition. It derives from the Russian 'agnostic' and 'climate madness' position (Malkin, 2019), which combines Russia's participation in the Kyoto protocol and Paris Climate Agreement with the occasional denial of climate change or its anthropogenic origin (Anpilagov, 2019; Kirillov, 2019; Polevanov, 2019). As a result, a matrix of four Russian interpretations of the EU's energy transition emerged (see Table 1). Finally, selected documents were examined with reference to these interpretations, which were then discussed and policy recommendations were elaborated.

The research data of this study consists of 84 documents that were made public from January 1, 2014 to December 31, 2019. All sources were initially compiled with the help of websites' search software that identified documents containing the words 'European Union', 'EU' or the name of EU member states; and the words 'energy transition', 'renewable energy', 'decarbonisation', 'greenhouse gas' and 'climate change'. The sources were then manually examined and 84 documents were selected. Table 2 summarises the sources, political actors and the media. The number of documents is an indication of the low importance of this issue in the 2014–2019 Russian political discourse.

Table 2
Research data summary.

	2014		2015		2016		2017		2018		2019		Total
	Official websites	Leading mass media	Official websites	Leading mass media	Official websites	Leading mass media	Official websites	Leading mass media	Official websites	Leading mass media	Official websites	Leading mass media	
President	2			1			1	1			1	6	13
Security Council											2		2
Government (Prime Minister, Minister of Energy, Ministry of Foreign Affairs)	1				2		2		4	1	1		11
Federal Assembly						1	1		1		1	3	7
Gazprom		1				1	3		8	4	4	4	25
Rosneft	1						4					3	8
Lukoil	1												1

The data was drawn from three different types of sources. The first group consists of three official Russian documents that define Russia's vision in energy and foreign policies: Energy Strategy (Ministry of Energy, 2020, ¹), Energy Security Doctrine (Russian Federation, 2019), and Foreign Policy Concept (Russian Federation, 2016). The second source grouped official websites of various state institutions (kremlin.ru, government.ru, minenergo.ru, mid.ru) and major oil and gas companies (gazprom.ru, gazpromexport.ru, rosneft.ru, gazprom-neft.ru, lukoil.ru). Statements of other companies (nuclear power, electricity generation) and business associations as well as documents of the EU-Russian Gas Advisory Council (https://fief.ru/WS2_meetings.htm) were also examined. This corpus of documents is comprised of official statements, press conferences, interviews, public speeches, presentations, documents of companies' experts and articles in corporate journals. The third group incorporates major Russian newspapers (*Rossiiskaya gazeta*, *Izvestia Vedomosti*, *Kommersant*, *Nezavisimaya gazeta*) and energy-specific journals (*Neftegazovaya vertical*, *Neft Rossii*), which present the arena for public statements, articles and interviews of relevant Russian political actors.

5. Results and discussion

5.1. Interpretation 1: energy transition is your politicised decision

Both the first and the second interpretations question climate change, which undermines the very need for energy transition in the way the EU advances it. The first interpretation stresses that Russia is a 'guarantor of world energy security' (Putin, 2018) and has a special position in the 'functioning of the world energy markets' (Ministry of Energy, 2020). Russia's role of key energy supplier is projected to remain in place (Ibid). Climate-change rhetoric in turn is conceptualised as a 'factor of geopolitical pressure on states that possess considerable resources and substantial production facilities' (Kirillov, 2019: 7). This policy is traced to 'the loss' of 'the imperial control over colonies' and of 'transnational corporations' access to key resources' with the logical wish of the West to strip hydrocarbon resources of their value (Ibid: 9) for fear of international competition. Energy transition with climate policy in its centre is even labelled 'anti-scientific' (Anpilagov, 2019; Kirillov, 2019; Polevanov, 2019).

¹ The author initially used its draft version, which was updated in 2019. The text was finally approved in June 2020 when the article was under review; the 2019 and 2020 versions are identical.

The growth of RES is seen as 'an external economic challenge', whereas relevant RES and energy efficiency technologies present 'a cross-border energy security challenge' (Russian Federation 2019). Russian actors conceptualise EU efforts to decrease its consumption of Russian oil and natural gas as being 'politically motivated' (Sechin, 2014) and conflicting with the market logics and competition (Konoplyanik, 2019a, 2019d). The EU's coupling energy transition with the decrease of dependence on Russia (European Commission, 2018b: 214–216) is cited to reinforce this realist interpretation (Konoplyanik, 2019a, 2019d).

The EU's efforts to fight climate change are further compromised in the eyes of Russian actors by the parallel construction of liquefied natural gas (LNG) terminals. Russian representatives therefore reproach the EU for changing the regulation solely to create favourable conditions for the US LNG export at the expense of Russian export and when US prices are higher (Sechin, 2014). The drive to 'isolate Russia' is recognised as a 'serious mistake' of the EU, which also has detrimental effects on the EU's economy (Sechin, 2019b). The deputy secretary of Russia's Security Council laments that 'Russia is really interested in ... a strong and stable Europe ... where states do not just transmit alien interests but rather build relations ... on the basis of their own national priorities and interests of European security' (Venediktov, 2019).

Russia is portrayed as having to deal with the EU's choice, despite being a stable supplier (the blame for any interruption in the supply has always been shifted in the Russian discourse to transit countries, particularly Ukraine). Russia's supply will, however, be preserved. Yet both the Energy Strategy to the year 2035 (Ministry of Energy, 2020) and the Energy Security Doctrine (Russian Federation, 2019) expect the share of the EU in Russia's oil and gas export to decline and signal diversification of export markets towards Asia as the second policy option. The share of Asian markets in the Russian export of oil and gas is expected to increase to 22–25% and 19–20%, respectively, by 2035 (Ministry of Energy, 2020). Thus, Russian policy is presented as a response to the EU's perceived realist approach but also takes into account growing consumption in Asian countries.

This interpretation is mostly advanced in Russia's Energy Security Doctrine by Igor Sechin, the CEO of Rosneft, and by Gazprom experts. There are also related statements of various Russian officials, particularly the president, deputy minister of energy, and deputy secretary of the Security Council. The emphasis on Russia's special position of a guarantor, on political motives of the EU and on Russia's strategy of minimising dependence through diversification make this interpretation realist.

5.2. Interpretation 2: It's the economy, stupid

The second liberal interpretation is voiced more frequently. The Energy Strategy stresses the need to reflect Russian interests in the 'global energy markets', arguing for their 'predictability and stable functioning' (Ministry of Energy, 2020). Moreover, 'Russian pipeline infrastructure' is projected to become 'the main part of the energy bridge between Europe and Asia, and Russia will be the key centre for the management of this system' (Ibid). This approach is geared to persuading listeners that traditional sources of energy have a series of competitive advantages over RES, that Russian gas is 'price-flexible' and 'comfortable for commercial consumers' (Sorokin, 2018) and that 'the news about the death of oil are exaggerated' (Sechin, 2017b; see also Sechin, 2019b; Vakulenko cf. Orlov, 2016). Therefore, Russia will develop export gas pipelines to Europe (Miller, 2018), giving preference to economic logic over climate concerns.

The most frequent critique of RES is the cost. President Putin stresses 'unjustified subsidisation ... of RES', which is a 'market distortion' that 'damages the competitiveness' (Putin, 2014); and natural gas is characterised by 'economic expediency' (Medvedev, 2019; see also Sechin, 2014). Russian representatives recurrently reiterate that RES is supported by taxes on fossil fuel, which makes the production of RES more expensive 'according to the Hamburg score' (Sechin, 2019a; see also Kuznetsov, 2017; Sechin, 2017a; Shafranik, 2015). Electricity batteries required for RES to store electricity and to balance various fluctuations are portrayed as 'increasing the costs of "green" energy by three times' (Orlov, 2016). EU authorities are reproached for 'understating the costs that the society bears' for the sake of energy transition (Sechin, 2014). The EU is advised to re-examine its development of 'low-efficient generation technologies' in favour of gas to bolster its economic growth and competitiveness (Sorokin, 2018).

Furthermore, Russian representatives argue that energy transition reverses progress that has already been achieved. President Putin has been vivid, stressing that Germany's refusal to use nuclear power makes the use of hydrocarbons inevitable (Putin, 2016), and rejection of traditional hydrocarbon resources 'will bring humanity back to the caves' (Putin, 2019a).

Finally, the sustainability of a renewable energy economy is challenged. For example, when discussing electro-cars, Putin maintains that to have electricity in the battery, one must generate it from a primary fossil source (Putin, 2017; see also Sechin, 2017a). Hence, he expects that RES will move to the forefront of the energy balance 'in 30 years at the earliest'; moreover, as technologies for conventional fuels are perfected, the share of fossil fuels in the energy balance is expected to be preserved (Ibid). Similarly, then Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev argued that the EU still needed natural gas because RES 'are not reliable enough' (2019); their production is volatile and related disruptions are to be covered by traditional sources of energy (Aksyutin, 2018; Sechin, 2017b). Thus, there are 'important negative technological aspects of quick integration of renewables' (Gazpromexport, 2017), and their very nature demands 'the return of natural gas' (Konoplyanik, 2018).

In sum, Russian actors articulate that conventional resources will dominate due to economic and technical reasons. Therefore, in Russia's view, it must continue the development of its resources and construction of pipelines. In some cases, Russian representatives make use of outdated information (i.e., RES costs and subsidies or the difficulty of substituting phased-out nuclear energy) to reinforce the argument for maintaining the status quo. Rarely do Russian actors suggest that Russia 'transforms its economy'; and even when it is discussed, they suggest intensifying the development of Russia's oil and gas resources while RES and nuclear energy are gaining strength (Zavalny, 2019). Another policy response is to more efficiently use the existing, traditional energy resources to contain the demand for new primary resources and to further decrease costs of gas production and transportation to be more competitive vis-à-vis RES (Konoplyanik, 2016).

Numerous political actors promote this interpretation: Russian

President Putin and former Prime Minister Medvedev, Deputy Minister of Energy Sorokin and State Duma member Zavalny, as well as numerous company representatives ranging from CEOs to freelance Gazprom experts. This interpretation relies on short-term forecasts (Busuev et al., 2016; Makarov et al., 2019; Maslova, 2018; Solovieva, 2018; Zubareva, 2019) but does not take into consideration long-term scenarios. This interpretation is firmly rooted in the liberal approach because it emphasises positive interdependences, the role of markets and competition.

5.3. Interpretation 3: energy transition is an external political challenge

Both the third and fourth interpretations recognise climate change but differ in how they see the EU's energy transition in this context. The realist interpretation views climate change policy as 'an external political challenge' (Russian Federation, 2019). Although Russia is portrayed as supporting international climate change efforts, it 'considers [it] unacceptable when climate change and environmental protection are examined in a prejudiced way [and] infringe upon the interests of energy producing countries' (Ibid). The document further conceptualises changes in regulation, which discriminate against Russian energy producers, 'including under the pretext of the realisation of climate and environmental policy and diversification of energy sources' as an external political and economic threat (Ibid). Consequently, accepting the idea of climate change and the need to act, Russian actors challenge measures that lead to unfavourable consequences for Russian hydrocarbon export.

Conceptualising the EU's energy transition as the 'politicisation of environmental problems', Russia contrasts it with its support for 'scientifically-grounded approaches to environmental protection and deepening of cooperation among all states' (Russian Federation, 2016). The EU's approach is seen in the light of increased politicisation of international relations (Abelin, 2019) where the EU 'in order to please an extra-regional player "cuts its own throat", destroying' existing energy relations (MFA, 2016).

Allusion to the EU's alleged hypocrite strengthens this interpretation. In particular, a Gazprom expert argued that under the aegis of decarbonisation, the EU looks for an alternative to Russian natural gas; although the latter is the 'cleanest' fuel, it can temporarily be 'more expensive' compared to 'dirtier but cheaper (imported, mostly American) coal' (Konoplyanik, 2014: 18). This approach is also called 'fighting with no rules' and reflects the 'phantom pains of 2006 and 2009 transit crises and ... the [2014] anti-Russian sanction campaign' (Konoplyanik, 2019b: 102). Moreover, Russia's then representative for climate negotiations blamed EU sanctions against Russia for the 'negative "green footprint" ... as they limit the development of natural gas, which is the cleanest fossil fuel' (Bedritsky, 2015).

Furthermore, representatives of Gazprom warned the EU that because of its policy, Brussels can face new dependencies. These include rare metal dependencies, 'dependence on energy storage systems' to ensure 'continuity of electricity generation', and 'dependence on climate change', which provide 'shaky foundations for RES' (Aksyutin et al., 2018; see also Aksyutin, 2018; Gazprom, 2018). These new dependencies are contrasted with the economic benefits of relying on well-known natural gas for a smooth and cost-effective decarbonisation (Ibid).

As a result, the policy choices that are advanced are three-fold: First, diversification of Russia's export markets towards Asia (Russian Federation, 2019; Vedomosti, 2018); second, Russian actors profess self-sufficiency in energy technologies to avoid the situation when resources cannot be developed due to the shortage of technologies (Russian Federation, 2019; see also Mitrova and Melnikov, 2019); and third, Gazprom experts use this interpretation to encourage the EU to a more market-based interaction in line with Interpretation 4 (see the next section).

This interpretation is advanced at two different levels. The first is

with Russia's official documents (2019 Energy Security Doctrine and 2016 Foreign Policy Concept). The other is through various public speeches, presentations by Russia's officials (but not top political figures) and Gazprom employees and experts. As a result, it is a curious combination of conceptual statements and technicalities. This interpretation is rooted in the realist tradition due to the contestation of the way in which rules are applied, the accusations of the politicisation of climate issues and the emphasis on negative dependencies and self-sufficiency.

5.4. Interpretation 4: We can assist the EU in the fight against climate change

This final interpretation recognises climate change and the need for energy transition, but it relies on markets. It emphasises existing links and institutions. The 2020 Energy Strategy talks about the development of a Eurasian gas pipeline system. President Putin recently argued that 'Russia's energy structure is one of the "greenest"' because it relies on hydropower, nuclear energy, and particularly gas, which remains 'the cleanest fossil fuel'. Hence, Russia must use 'its competitive advantage' (Putin, 2019b). Similarly, then Minister of Energy Novak stressed that given the predicted growth in energy demand by 30% by 2040, 'the role of gas will be the leading one, on a par with renewable sources' or even more important (Novak, 2018; see also Zavalny, 2017). A Russian official from the Ministry of Energy underlined that 'providing energy security, including its climate aspect ... is a joint task for Russia and the European Union' (Kulapin, 2017). Similarly, State Duma member Zavalny reproached EU officials for being the only ones not accepting the necessity of natural gas for the EU's decarbonisation (Zavalny, 2018).

Gazprom and its affiliated companies are also very vocal defending this interpretation. In its reply to the [European Commission's 2018 consultations on decarbonisation](#), the Russian gas giant stressed that the fastest way to emission reduction is to shift 'coal-fired installations to gas' and to use gas as a car fuel (Gazprom, 2018; see also [Gazpromexport, 2018a, 2019](#)). The resulting losses to Russian coal companies are taken as inevitable, but they are to be offset through exports to other regions (Eenergy, 2019). [Gazprom \(2018\)](#) also underlined its intention to explore ways to produce zero-carbon hydrogen from gas, the ability of gas to demonstrate its potential in meeting climate targets, and the clear benefits that can be gained by using the existing infrastructure (Ibid). Similarly, Nord Stream 2 management stressed how important the pipeline under construction is for the EU's Green Deal (Nord Stream, 2019). Gas is therefore presented as 'the basis for the future low carbon energy' sector (Gazpromexport, 2018b; 2019; see also [Leonov, Sudarev, 2016; Tankae, 2017](#)). Nevertheless, the possibility of reduction of Gazprom's share in the EU's market is recognised (Loginov, Koloshkin, 2019; Romanov, 2016).

A member of Gazprom Management Committee, Oleg Aksyutin, came up with a three-step formula outlining how Gazprom can participate in the EU's decarbonisation. The first stage consists of the EU moving from coal to natural gas with the assistance of Gazprom. At the second stage, methane hydrogen fuel, whose production leads to some GHG emissions, will be used in energy and transport. The final stage guarantees a full transition to 'hydrogen energy based on efficient low-emission technologies of hydrogen production from methane' (Aksyutin, 2018; see also [Konoplyanik, 2019b,c,d](#)). This approach is presented as mutually beneficial because it allows the EU to make use of existing infrastructure while Russia continues to 'monetise its gas resources' (Konoplyanik, 2019b: 105). Hydrogen production from gas is so frequently discussed at Gazprom these days that its employees refer to the company as 'Vodoprom'² (Melnikov, 2019).

² It is a hybrid of the Russian word *Vodorod* for hydrogen and *-prom*, the part of the word that is left from Gazprom.

Understanding the need for Russia to adapt to changing circumstances in the EU's market can also be found outside of Gazprom. The Energy Strategy stresses that at its final stage of implementation, 'Russian gas industry will develop in different conditions' as a result of the transition to 'high energy efficiency' and 'larger use of non-carbon sources of energy'. Therefore, more attention must be paid to gas chemicals and synthetic fuels based on gas (Ministry of Energy, 2020). State Duma member Zavalny argued that hydrogen technologies are around the corner; and Russia 'has to get ready for them' (Zavalny, 2016). Hence, some innovative solutions are voiced although they do not dominate Russia's political discourse.

In addition, Russian actors argue that RES are not as environmentally clean as they are presented. A car fuelled by natural gas is seen as 'greener than just an electro-car' (Putin, 2017); and, overall, it is 'strange' to deny such clean sources as natural gas (Putin, 2019a) or nuclear energy (Kirienko, 2016). It is also argued that electro-cars demonstrate problems with both 'efficient storage of electricity and environmental problems of batteries' storage and further disposal' (Sechin, 2017a; see also [Konoplyanik, 2016; Sechin, 2017b](#)). Additional detrimental consequences for nature are also cited: 'birds die' because of wind mills, 'worms get out of the earth' and the environment is destroyed by wind turbines (Putin cf: [Vavina, 2019; see also Aksyutin, 2018](#)). Hence, RES, which are crucial for energy transition and climate change limitation, are discredited compared to conventional sources of energy. More recently, CEOs of Rosatom, a Russian nuclear energy corporation, have intensified their efforts to market nuclear energy as the cleanest source in terms of GHG emissions (Kumanovsky, 2016; see also [Komarov, 2017; 2018; Likhachev, 2017](#)); it comes out as yet another technological solution that Russia can advance in view of climate change and EU's energy transition.

This fourth interpretation is the most developed in terms of technical details, and by the end of 2019 it became dominant in the Russian political discourse, judged by its frequency in President Putin's speeches and among gas sector practitioners. Yet, it is also meant to reassert the status quo in EU-Russian relations. Therefore the advanced policy options are preserving Russian gas exports, introducing some technical innovations to decrease GHG and shifting to the production of hydrogen from gas in the long run. Diversification of gas use (towards the production of chemicals instead of raw export) is also present in this interpretation, but no further details are provided. The engagement with the EU's energy transition plans and related studies remains modest while RES are mostly discredited.

This interpretation is promoted by top Russian officials (including the president and minister of energy) and Gazprom employees at different levels; it is also reflected in Russia's Energy Strategy. It is a liberal interpretation as it promotes preservation and the deepening of energy trade and, consequently, interdependence between the EU and Russia. Nonetheless, it does not foresee any substantial restructuring of energy relations to maintain this interdependence after 2030 when the EU is set to gradually phase out the use of hydrocarbons.

5.5. Discussion

Four Russian interpretations of the EU's energy transition and its effect on EU-Russian relations are summarised in [Table 3](#). They reproduce the arguments of realist or liberal approaches, which have long been present in EU-Russian relations. When climate change is challenged, the interpretations concentrate on economic and political aspects of RES and LNG. When the inevitability of climate change and relevant policy choices are recognised, debates focus on how to cut emissions using existing energy sources and on discrediting RES as clean sources of energy. The two realist interpretations advance diversification as their main policy solution, whereas the two liberal interpretations focus on preserving the status quo, that is, the EU-Russian gas interdependence (with some adaptations in the fourth interpretation). There is no difference in the messages advanced in Russian and

Table 3
Summary of the interpretations.

	Realism	Liberalism
Denial of energy transition	<p>Interpretation 1: Energy transition is your politicised decision</p> <p>- <u>Key provisions</u></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Russia is a global energy security guarantor 2. Climate change is a means of geopolitical pressure 3. Development of RES is the EU's politicised choice 4. LNG development shows the hypocrisy of the EU's energy transition <p>- <u>Actors</u>: Russian president, Russia's Security Council, Ministry of Energy, Rosneft CEO, Gazprom experts</p> <p>- <u>Policy solutions</u>:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Remain an important supplier 2. Diversify export markets 	<p>Interpretation 4: We can assist the EU in the fight against climate change</p> <p>- <u>Key provisions</u></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Russia is key for the (Eurasian) market 2. RES are expensive and subsidised 3. RES reverse progress 4. RES need fossil fuel to balance their volatility <p>- <u>Actors</u>: Russian president, prime minister, Ministry of Energy, members of the State Duma, CEO, employees and experts of energy companies</p> <p>- <u>Policy solutions</u>:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Remain an important supplier 2. Intensify the production of energy from traditional sources 3. Improve the competitiveness of traditional energy sources
Acceptance of energy transition	<p>Interpretation 3: Energy transition is an external political challenge</p> <p>- <u>Key provisions</u></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Climate change policy is an external political challenge and threat 2. The EU politicises the discussion 3. The EU's policy is hypocritical 4. The EU's policy leads to new dependencies <p>- <u>Actors</u>: Officials through key policy documents, Gazprom senior employees and experts</p> <p>- <u>Policy solutions</u>:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Remain an important supplier 2. Diversify export markets 	<p>Interpretation 4: We can assist the EU in the fight against climate change</p> <p>- <u>Key provisions</u></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Russia shares climate policy objectives 2. Gas is the best option to achieve climate targets 3. RES are not so clean 4. Gazprom is ready to make technical changes to reduce GHG 5. Other ways to use natural gas are examined 6. Nuclear energy is another way to limit climate change <p>- <u>Actors</u>: Russian President, Ministry of Energy, members of the State Duma, CEOs, employees and experts of Gazprom and Rosatom</p> <p>- <u>Policy solutions</u>:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Preserve existing (gas) relations 2. Introduce technological changes to the gas sector 3. Diversify the use of gas 4. Produce more nuclear energy

English, which means that the same interpretations target both domestic and international audiences.

Russian President Putin mostly promotes liberal interpretations. This view also dominates Russia's 2020 Energy Strategy. Gazprom employees at all levels are active in shaping liberal interpretations, particularly the fourth one, which recognises climate change. In contrast, Igor Sechin, CEO of Rosneft and Russia's energy sector's informal leader, frequently advances interpretations that deny climate change. The Foreign Policy Concept and Energy Security Doctrine advance realist interpretations, but these documents by their nature are tilted to realism and security concerns. Moreover, they were prepared earlier in the examined period (approved in 2016 and 2019 respectively), compared to the 2020 Energy Strategy. There also seems to be competition between senior, more conservative officials; and the younger, climate-aware generation of public servants (Kokorin, 2019; Kokorin, Korpoo, 2013); as well as among different lobby groups (Vavina, 2019). Yet political actors frequently combine different interpretations even within the same document.

One cross-cutting feature in all four interpretations is the portrayal of Russia as following the market logics whereas the EU is depicted as politicising energy cooperation and ignoring economic efficiency. By promoting energy transition with the help of the argument to reduce dependence on Russia, the EU furnishes proofs for this Russian interpretation. The presentation of Russia as following economic logics is also the reason why liberal interpretations dominate the Russian political discourse. This presentation signals that Russia wants to preserve its economic interdependence with the EU and, therefore, chooses the language that Brussels and the EU business community understand. The two realist interpretations seem to perform an auxiliary function: they are used to discredit the EU's approach to climate change and energy transition. This coexistence of four interpretations, therefore, should be viewed as tactical rather than schizophrenic.

The second (liberal, denying climate change) interpretation has been long dominant at the level of key policy makers (both public and

private), whereas the fourth (liberal and admitting climate change) was reserved to professionals, experts and low-to-medium level officials. The year 2019 was the turning point. Russia's ratification of the Paris Climate Agreement and the EU's perseverance with the Green Deal bolstered the fourth interpretation in Russia. Russia politically admitted climate change and policies to counter it. Its discourse is now dominated by economic and environmental soundness of various energy transition solutions, with natural gas (and nuclear energy to a lesser extent) presented as the best solution.

Russia's discourse therefore reveals a strong ideational divide that exists between the EU and Russia in how they understand today's energy policy, in particular its climate change component (see also Aalto, 2008; Khrushcheva, Maltby, 2016; Kratochvil, Tichy, 2013; Kuzemko, 2014; Szulecki, 2018). Although independent Russian energy experts (Bushuev, 2016; Makarov et al., 2019; Mitrova, 2021a) stress the need to radically change Russian policy to respond to the EU's (and global) energy transition, the four interpretations of energy transition in the Russian political discourse promote continuation of the policy as it is with little regard for RES.

The only interpretation that really engages with the EU's energy transition is the fourth one; yet it hinges on the relative attractiveness of natural gas vis-à-vis other fuels, it is similar to the message that the EU's gas industry advances (Marusyk, 2019; Stern, 2019). Yet, as Stern rightly argues, it is minimalist because it 'has failed to convince governments, NGOs and media commentators that it can help achieve post-2030 decarbonisation targets' (Stern, 2019: 1), and the gas industry therefore has to develop alternative narratives (Ibid). The discussion on hydrogen, produced from natural gas, may be a step in the right direction, but it is modest and void with contradictions (Konoplyanik, 2021).

The Russian political discourse supports short-term (up to 2030) solutions only. Together with the non-engagement with the EU's long-term planning, it leads to a limited range of policy options available to Russia at present. Moscow will seek to maintain its gas export to the EU (probably at the expense of revenues, and with some technical changes).

Russia will also promote further market diversification towards Asia. Post-2030 EU policy plans and relevant experts' recommendations are left without attention at present. The stranded Russian political discourse thus limits Russia using the opportunities provided by the EU's energy transition (Malkin, 2019; Makarov et al. 2019; Mitrova, 2021a; Sidorovich, 2015).

A similar situation was identified in Norway. Overland (2018) asks why Norway has procrastinated on energy transition and identifies two answers: resource curse and path dependency in terms of how public institutions are structured. Both are true for Russia. However, in the case of Russia, the specificity of the politico-economic system also prevents Russia's adaptation to the EU's energy transition for three reasons: First, state capitalism limits the initiatives of oil and gas companies; second, the present Russian political system favours short-termism in profit making and investments; and third, Russia's expert community plays an insignificant role in Russia due to the lack of political competition.

6. Conclusions and policy implications

This article demonstrates four interpretations of the EU's energy transition and its effect on EU-Russian energy relations in Russia's political discourse. The first interpretation rejects climate change and views relevant rhetoric to diminish the power of producers; it therefore advances Russia's diversification from the EU's market as the preferred policy choice. The second one challenges RES as uncompetitive compared to traditional resources, and the continuation of existing (gas) relations as well as market and transit routes' diversification become key policy choices. The third interpretation views decarbonisation as a hostile policy; it privileges markets' diversification and warns the EU about potential new dependencies. The final interpretation defends the role of natural gas in the EU's energy transition and, therefore, foresees the continuation of export with some technical adjustments.

This article illustrates that each interpretation follows its distinct logics, yet they coexist in the discourse of Russian political actors and in key official documents. On the one hand, such coexistence creates a schizophrenic impression. On the other hand, this coexistence reflects the tactical use of realist interpretations, which encourages the continuation of the EU-Russian hydrocarbon interdependence. The fact that liberal interpretations are more developed and dominate the discourse (with the focus shifting from the second to the fourth interpretation) also favours this explanation. The coexistence of interpretation might also reflect competing interests and views of different generations of Russians, and of different interest groups. Yet, and despite its preference for liberal solutions, Russian discourse also demonstrates a profound ideational difference with the EU on what contemporary energy policy is. Russia's political discourse favours two policy options: preserving the export status quo and diversification of markets. The fourth and only interpretation that engages with the EU's energy transition gives poor attention to the EU's long-term planning and related studies. Russia's political discourse on this subject remains short term, and it does not create an opening for any fundamental change in its energy policy.

The first policy recommendation that stems from this research is that the EU should improve its communication on energy transition with Russia to better engage, which is essential to achieving both global and EU climate targets. On the one hand, it is necessary to limit references to decreasing the EU's energy dependence on Russia. On the other hand, the EU's communication should avoid presenting the EU as superior and imposing its policy choices 'as the only correct ones, as a model for the other to follow' (Lavrov, 2020). It clearly annoys Russian policymakers and will only politicise energy transition. Secondly, Russian political actors should closely examine the EU's energy policy planning rather than challenge it; this will allow an increase in Russia's policy options for preserving energy interdependence with the EU. Thirdly, the EU and Russia should consider energy transition in a broader context. Conceptually there is a need to substitute hydrocarbon interdependence that for years has constituted a safety net for EU-Russian relations with a new

mutually beneficial type of interdependence. At a more practical level, energy transition represents an acceptable area for the EU's selective engagement with Russia. It can also lead to additional and much sought-after investments in Russia. The EU and Russia can therefore start 'learning by doing'. Cooperation can include raising public awareness, joint decarbonisation initiatives, development of related technologies and cooperation in international fora. Despite increasingly tense relations, the EU and Russia intensified their expert and business discussions in this area in 2020.³ There are also indications that official EU-Russian talks on modalities regarding cooperation are in progress (Mitrova, 2021b). These initiatives constitute a welcome step; they must be cultivated as they have the potential to foster ideational convergence between the EU and Russia regarding energy policies in the twenty-first century.

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³ See, for example, EU-Russian Climate Conference, <https://www.skolkovo.ru/programmes/eu-russia-climate-conference/> (accessed 18 February 2021).

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