

## 6. The global taboo of hydrocarbon culture: “There is no climate change”

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**With Nina Tynkkynen**

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This chapter<sup>1</sup> looks at how the Russian hydrocarbon culture positions itself regarding the question of global climate change. In this chapter, I argue that the Putin regime’s increasing dependence on hydrocarbons makes a serious climate mitigation policy an impossibility. The inability to address the negative consequences of the chosen fossil fuel-based economic policy, and the social contract to which this economy is tied, pushes the regime to build a narrative that turns a problem into a social taboo. The switch towards a climate denialist narrative is documented in the following, but a more important question remains unanswered: which individuals, companies and institutional players in the Russian society are the masterminds behind a clearly changed discourse on the changing climate? Or is this just an outcome, the ‘collateral damage’, of a social contract related to the hydrocarbon culture espoused by the Russian people and the elite alike? In either case, the recorded discursive change shows that the Putin regime is a step further away from becoming an Ecological Great Power, a possibility that is discussed in the concluding chapter. Now, Russia’s global Messianic role as a conservative and authoritarian Energy Superpower and hydrocarbon culture is the anti-thesis of a resilient and sustainable Russia.

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In 2005, the Russian Academy of Sciences signed, together with major international academic institutions, a joint statement endorsing the consensus that climate change is caused by anthropogenic greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, and that climate change mitigation and adaptation measures are needed on a global level (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, Medicine 2005). For Russian academia, it took a relatively long time to reach this majority consensus. Joining the consensus was linked to Russia's pivotal position<sup>2</sup> in climate negotiations that eventually led to the ratification of the Kyoto Protocol in 2004 (Wilson Rowe 2012, pp. 712–13). Five years later, in 2009, Russia adopted a policy document entitled 'Climate Doctrine' (*Klimaticheskaya Doktrina Rossiiskoi Federatsii*; see President of Russia 2009), which, due to its declarative and non-binding character, has been criticized by the Russian greens in particular as a soft power effort (Kokorin and Korppoo 2013). Yet, by adopting the Doctrine, the Russian leadership recognized that climate change is a human-generated problem requiring policy measures. To amplify this message, then President Dmitri Medvedev stated in 2010 that climate change was a serious threat to Russia (Laruelle 2014b, p. 85).

In Russia, a strong public discourse of climate change denial emerged as the same time as academic and political consensus on climate change was finally reached (Henry and MacIntosh Sundstrom 2012, p. 1302; Kokorin and Korppoo 2013, p. 6; Korppoo et al. 2015, pp. 28–9). Even evidential events, including the forest and bog wildfires during the drought of 2010, indicating the intensification of climate change and its negative impact on Russia, did not significantly change public discourse or convince the national media to endorse climate change as a scientific fact (Laruelle 2014b, p. 82). On the contrary, climate change denial voices seem to have strengthened since Putin's new term as president, starting in 2012. Presumably, Putin's new term and the related political changes give voice to actors and opinion-makers in Russian society who emphasize sovereignty rather than international cooperation and Russia's (short-term) economic interests rather than international image.

According to a poll, after a heatwave that led to extensive forest, farmland and bog fires in Central European Russia in 2010, the proportion of Russians worried about climate change increased from a pre-2010 figure of 46 per cent to 55 per cent. By 2013, the figure in Moscow had

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<sup>2</sup> Russia's ratification of the Kyoto Protocol was decisive for the enforcement of the Protocol, because without Russia the requirement that GHG emissions of the Protocol members have to cover at least 55 per cent of the GHG emissions of all industrialized countries for the Protocol to enter into force, could not have been met.

risen to 70 per cent.<sup>3</sup> Our hypothesis is that the 2010 smog, together with the 2011 demonstrations against Putin's return to presidency, redefined the Putin regime's stance on climate change communication. Concern over climate change became a potentially destabilizing threat for the regime, which, as a response, started to feed the public discourse with climate denialist arguments.

In this chapter we are interested in looking at how this turn is visible in the public discourse on climate change and, furthermore, in assessing how the Russian case fits the general theory of climate denial elaborated by Jacques (2012), who argues that the main impetus for climate denial is the threat it poses for those wishing to maintain the (economic or political) status quo (see also Norgaard 2011). Accordingly, we analyse Russia's public discussion on climate change in the period 2011–13, after Putin's return to power; specifically, how the arguments and topics of public discourse on climate change in general, and its denial in particular, are tied to the Russian context: the prevalence of and change in historical cultural categories, including certain 'sacred objectives' (Kivinen 2002, pp. 215–22) of the Russian modernization agenda (see later), the importance of fossil energy for the Russian economy and society, and the power vested in political and economic positions related to energy. The overall aim is to gain an insight in the implications of these discourses for Russia's future climate policy.

We aim to understand recent public discussion on climate change by looking at newspaper articles and popular science books on climate change as well as documentaries and talk shows on national television channels focusing on the climate issue. While we note that there exists another, less official, public discourse on climate change, advocated by environmental activists through alternative media and social networks in Russia (Smyth and Oates 2015), the discourse that we address here as 'public' refers mainly to national media discourse. We focus on this particular discourse because we are interested in the discourse 'construction efforts' of those in power, and because alternative public discourse(s) is (are), according to our observations, much weaker and more fragmented than the national media discourse. One reason for the weakness of the public debate on climate change in Russia is, as noted by Poberezhskaya (2015), the relatively limited media attention to the issue; that is, the omission of the topic altogether rather than biased coverage.

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<sup>3</sup> *Rossiiskaya Gazeta*, 21 August 2013, available at: <http://www.rg.ru/2013/08/21/prichiny-site.html>, accessed 29 March 2018.

Our research material and analysis are limited in one critical aspect, namely assessing how widely climate change denial discourse is accepted by the Russian public. Discussions in the state-controlled media do not reflect the attitudes of Russian people, nor do they necessarily predict the moves that Putin's Russia will make in the framework of international climate negotiations (Korppoo et al. 2015, pp. 44, 47; Smyth and Oates 2015, p. 302). The fact that the state-controlled media does not necessarily reflect the views of the Russian people does not, however, reduce the importance of the analysis: any attempt to frame the issue via state-controlled media may have long-term political ramifications affecting energy and environmental policies, as the Russian populace by far relies on state-controlled media as the primary source of information (Poberezhskaya 2015).<sup>4</sup>

## CLIMATE DENIAL IN THE LITERATURE

There is a rich body of research concerning public perceptions of climate change internationally (Demeritt 2006; Hulme 2009). Significant research has been conducted to understand actors and interests behind climate change denial discourse (Goeminne 2012; Jacques et al. 2008), including those studying climate-denial discourses beyond the linguistic analysis (Kolk and Levy 2001; Lahsen 2008; McCright and Dunlap 2003; Nerlich 2010). What is interesting within this body of literature is, from the viewpoint of this chapter, the way in which Jacques (2012) argues that the main impetus for climate change denial is because it is serious and threatening to those wishing to maintain the (economic or political) status quo. Norgaard (2011) argues, on the basis of her case study on Norway, that while the perception of threat posed by climate change is tied to psychological processes in an individual, it is also related to culture and the political economy of a particular context. Dunlap and McCright (2011) emphasize that climate change denial has to do with individual and collective economic interests – for example, the oil industry and actors dependent on its funding – but even more so the denialist position is linked with groups with conservative political views, as governmental, and especially global, climate mitigation governance is viewed by these

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<sup>4</sup> Our understanding of the term 'discourse' is defined as a shared way of apprehending the world (Dryzek 1997, p. 8). Discourses (re)produce specific ideas, concepts or statements and affect those who produce them or their context. Discourses carry legitimacy and power. Thus, it is important to study how discourses are produced and maintained by intended practices aiming to define the truth by those in positions of power (Foucault 2008, p. 35).

groups as a threat to economic and even civic liberties. These cultural–political approaches, emphasizing the role of culture and political economy, inform the contextualizing approach we adopt here.

We understand climate change denial discourse in a way that includes both the rejection of the theory that climate is changing as a result of anthropogenic emissions, and that this process may also bring negative societal and environmental effects, along with the idea that this phenomenon should be addressed by redefining the political agenda. Thus, denialist discourse can take the form of outright dismissal of the anthropogenic climate change theory, and emphasize either that the climate is not warming or that the climate is cooling instead. Another denialist viewpoint includes accepting that the climate might be warming, but that this has natural origins (the Sun, changes in the Earth’s orbit, for example) and that all that governments and nations can do is adapt to the phenomenon; there are no grounds to implement mitigation measures. This is a relatively clear framing of the climate issue. Denial discourse also includes a midway position that Wilson Rowe (2009, p. 598) describes as ‘causally agnostic’: climate change might be of anthropogenic origin, but the issue cannot be resolved by scientific means.

In Russia, this agnostic position seemed, from the early to the mid-2000s, to mean accepting, without further scientific evidence, that mitigation measures were justified regardless of the origin of climate change. Politically, this tallies with what Henry and MacIntosh Sundstrom (2012) described as Medvedev’s (2008–12) modernization agenda effect: climate mitigation was considered as a positive goal insofar as it pushed forward energy efficiency measures important for the modernization agenda of the former president (see also Korppoo et al. 2015, p. 27). Also, energy efficiency as an economic problem was topical right after the economic crisis that affected Russia in 2008–9 (Laruelle 2014b, p. 86).

While Russia’s climate policy per se and its links to international and domestic climate science are well covered by research (Henry and MacIntosh Sundstrom 2007, 2012; Korppoo et al. 2015; N. Tynkkynen 2010; Wilson Rowe 2009, 2012) as well as the media coverage of climate change in Russia (Poberezhskaya 2015), our scrutiny of the denial discourse, closely tied to the domestic policy context, is original and necessary to an understanding of the dynamics of Russian climate politics and their impact on global climate negotiations.

## THE CHANGING POLITICO-ECONOMIC CONTEXT DURING PUTIN 2.0

The re-election of Vladimir Putin as President of the Russian Federation in 2012 marked a further expansion of autocratic elements in Russia's political system (Gel'man 2015; Ross 2015; Wegren 2013). President Putin's increasingly authoritarian stance is visible in domestic and foreign policy issues alike. A range of actions indicate an emphasis on sovereignty rather than international cooperation (Palosaari and Tynkkynen 2015), among them, limiting the freedom of expression and LGBT rights, forcing foreign-funded institutions to register as 'foreign agents', taking a unilaterally tough position on the Syrian crisis, annexing Crimea in 2014 and supporting a hybrid war in Ukraine with a consequent souring of relations with the EU, and arresting Greenpeace activists in the Arctic.

Despite the seemingly drastic changes in Russia's domestic and foreign policy brought about by Putin's third term – developments that, according to our analysis, explain the changed tone on climate change – we argue that there are continuities in the Russian political culture that frame major societal challenges facing Russian regimes. As Kivinen (2002) notes, political decision-making regarding the modernization agenda of basically all Soviet as well Russian leaders has allegedly been based on the 'sacred' objectives of science, that is, promoting progress and modernization, and producing economic growth and well-being via expanding industrial production. This consecration has unintended results that are turned into a 'negative sacred' that cannot be addressed in the political and public arenas (Kivinen 2002, pp. 215–22). The 'negative sacred', especially three such taboos – the demonization of reality, chaos and consumption – are pivotal in understanding Russia's stance in global climate politics. The strengthened authoritarian stance presumably indicates that the 'negative sacred' has also gained force in recent years; constraining government effort to justify political decisions to domestic and international audiences (Gel'man 2016; Pomerantsev 2014).

Accordingly, Putin's return has not contested the policy objectives of modernization and efficiency set during Medvedev's presidency (e.g. Gustafson, 2012): it is the reasoning behind these measures that has changed. During Medvedev's term, energy efficiency and modernization were justified not only on economic grounds but also by foreign policy gains (Henry and MacIntosh Sundstrom 2012; Korppoo et al. 2015). Since Putin's re-election, the motivation behind modernization features a

more economic bias, in addition to emphasizing harsh geopolitical objectives and sovereignty instead of international cooperation (Gel'man and Appel 2015).

Studies such as that of Gustafson (2012) hint that Putin's agenda rests not on diversification of the Russian economy, but on granting the hydrocarbon sector an even greater role in paving the way for Russia's future success. Russian economy and society as a whole are dependent on the extraction, transport, refining, consumption and export of fossil energy. Fossil energy is central to Russia's economy: more than half of Russia's budget revenue and 70 per cent (in 2014, compared to 54 per cent in 2000) of exports are accounted for by oil, gas and coal; the oil and gas industries alone account for a fifth of national GDP (Federal State Statistics Service 2015; Kurdin 2016). Moreover, the interests behind Russia's national gas programme, run by the parastatal gas giant Gazprom, are at odds with regional interests aiming at energy self-sufficiency via regional renewable sources of energy (Tynkkynen 2014, 2016b).

In short, Putin's changes of political emphasis have given impetus to the strengthening of Russia's status as a 'hydrocarbon superpower' (Bouzarovski and Bassin 2011). An energy superpower is a country that is able to influence political choices of other countries via energy exports, by producing dependencies through energy infrastructures (coercive) and economic benefits produced by the energy trade (alluring). Discussion on whether Russia is an energy superpower culminates in the question of how Russia has used energy as a foreign policy tool vis-à-vis its neighbours and the EU, the main customer of Russian energy. Thus, energy wealth and power have been turned into an identity-construction tool. In this story President Putin is the person responsible for bringing energy assets back to the state and the people from the hands of the oligarchs (Grib 2009). Yet, recent studies indicate that elites and the public have an inconsistent and at times contradictory attitude to the idea that hydrocarbons form the fundamental basis of Russia's superpower status or national identity (Levada Centre 2014; Rutland 2015). Therefore, in case Putin's entourage wants to strengthen Russia's hydrocarbon-superpower status in real terms, the above-mentioned identity-construction tool based on energy and power needs to be used even more aggressively, as well.

At the same time, global hydrocarbon markets have changed significantly during the last couple of years, mainly due to shale gas and oil entering the market. This change is clear in the gas market, as the 'shale gas revolution' that started initially in the United States is reconfiguring the global gas trade. Production of shale oil is also growing, with a

negative impact on the traded volumes of Russian hydrocarbons and on future export prospects (Sharples 2013). The Russian leadership and major energy companies came to grips with the new energy market situation in the period 2011–12. Dwindling energy export prospects in Europe, coupled with anti-monopoly measures by the European Commission and price cuts demanded for Russian pipeline gas (Riley 2012), were a powerful inducement for the Russian political elite to look for greater export prospects elsewhere, especially in North and Southeast Asia (Bradshaw 2014), instead of relying on European energy partners that are institutionally incompatible and demand ethical standards from energy producers. In 2000–4, the EU–Russia Energy Dialogue had an explicit environmental component to curtail pollution related to oil and gas extraction and transport, but ecological aims were pushed aside and an economy-driven agenda prevailed from 2004 onwards (European Commission 2011b, pp. 16–19), at the same time as the price of oil and gas increased, and Russia’s economy boomed. Thus, we argue that during Putin’s third term, the need to pay lip service to international environmental objectives has diminished and Russia’s image as a responsible energy producer is of less concern to the leadership than before. Ultimately, with a general public and a leadership that see themselves intertwined with the cultural meanings, materialities and wealth creation of fossil fuels (Kalinin 2014; Tynkkynen 2016a), the impetus to act in the forefront of climate politics is minimal.

## RESEARCH MATERIAL

We analysed climate change discourse in Russia by collecting newspaper articles published in *Rossiiskaya Gazeta* and *Izvestiya* between January 2012 and December 2013. This time frame specifically excludes the distorting feature of the Ukrainian crisis, which erupted in early 2014. These two newspapers have a conservative tone and are considered close to the official view of the Russian political and energy elite (Makeenko 2013).<sup>5</sup> *Rossiiskaya Gazeta* is the official newspaper of the Russian state, whereas *Izvestiya* positions itself as an independent newspaper with a readership of educated elites.<sup>6</sup> Both newspapers have a relatively limited

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<sup>5</sup> *Media Atlas of Russia*, 2015, available at: <http://www.media-atlas.ru/>, accessed 26 November 2015.

<sup>6</sup> *Media Atlas of Russia*, 2015, available at: <http://www.media-atlas.ru/>, accessed 26 November 2015.

circulation, which is quite typical for newspapers in Russia: 234 500 for *Izvestiya* and 400 000 for *Rossiiskaya Gazeta*. Of course, they can also be followed online.

The 101 articles analysed – 75 published in *Rossiiskaya Gazeta* and 26 in *Izvestiya* – were chosen using the search phrase ‘global warming’ (*global’noe poteplenie*). We preferred this term to ‘climate change’, mainly because of the relatively reasonable volume of articles: in *Rossiiskaya Gazeta* alone, 1400 articles published in the period 2012–13 contain the term ‘climate change’ (*izmenenie klimata*), which in Russian is a broad term that can refer to various phenomena, including the business climate. However, focusing on ‘global warming’ instead of ‘climate change’ had its own problems. First, it is a more politicized term, as warming refers to one-directional change without acknowledging regional changes that can lead to both warming and cooling. More to the point, ‘global warming’ by definition excludes the idea, widely supported by Russians (Wilson Rowe 2009), that, as a result of climate change, the climate might actually be cooling as a whole, not warming – a crucial argument for climate denial. As we found out during our research, the keyword ‘global warming’ also brought up many articles on global cooling. Usually the articles that discussed cooling also mentioned the international mainstream understanding of warming in order to contradict it. Even though choosing the term ‘climate change’ might have led to a more neutral tone concerning the phenomenon, it would have excluded from our sample documentaries and products of popular culture, such as cartoons, which hold the keys to understanding the breadth of climate denial discourse.

The second set of research material analysed consists of television documentaries and popular talk shows and programmes broadcast on national television between 2010 and 2013. Because the electronic media – television and internet – are the major sources of information for Russians today (e.g. Smyth and Oates 2015), we also included popular television documentaries and talk shows discussing ‘global warming’ that had been downloaded on YouTube (see the list in the Appendix). With this choice we found programmes on the topic that reached both traditional television viewers and younger generations who use the internet and social media instead for news, information and entertainment.

In addition, we included in our research material two Russian books on climate change, sold in central academic bookstores in Moscow (*Biblio Globus*) and St Petersburg (*Dom Knigi*) in 2011–13. During these years we managed to find a few translated international academic books on climate change for sale in these bookstores, but these two books were the

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only ones intended for a wider public and written by Russian authors. The books are: *Myths of 'Sustainable Development': 'Global Warming' or 'Creeping Global Takeover'* (Pavlenko 2011) and *Climate Paradoxes: Ice Age or Burning Heat?* (Karol' and Kiselev 2013).

We chose this combination of material – the two newspapers, national television and the two books – in order to gain a systematic understanding of climate change discourse in Russia. Thus, focusing on the role of newspapers and television as official and semi-official sources of information allowed us to uncover the discourse construction efforts led by state-owned and controlled media. As the books were aimed at a wider public, their intended audience differs from that targeted by the newspapers and television, ultimately complementing our research material on the selected topic.

## METHOD: BENCHMARKING AND CATEGORIZING CLIMATE DENIAL ARGUMENTS

Our analysis developed in two phases. First, we set out to discover the nuances of Russian discourse generated by the Russian elite to influence public opinion on climate change and to identify main elements of that discourse. At this stage, only the newspaper material was used because going through all the material (TV documentaries, cartoons, etc.) and categorizing all arguments in that material would have been time-consuming. Focusing on extensive newspaper material enabled us to provide an overview of the discussion and to identify the main elements of climate change discourse in Russia. We categorized all the articles according to their main stance towards climate change, using four arguments. The first argument was 'denial of mainstream climate science', which denied the anthropogenic nature of climate change or claimed that no mitigation measures are needed. Second, 'naturalizing climate change', exemplified by the argument that climate change is a completely natural phenomenon and all societies can do is to adapt. The third argument notes that 'climate change is beneficial', regardless of its origin. Finally, a fourth argument – climate change is real and negative – appeared to be consistent with international mainstream climate science, as it claims that climate change is an anthropogenic problem while remaining a natural phenomenon with a negative impact.

These categories are not mutually exclusive: individual media publications may include up to three of these arguments: it is not uncommon to find articles in which climate change is viewed as non-human-induced that also argue that mitigation is useless, but that the changing climate

brings beneficial effects (for Russia). As Aleksey Aronov, a *Rossiiskaya Gazeta* journalist, puts it:

The truth is, the human factor in it [climate change] is clearly exaggerated. All that we ‘messed up’ in 100 years, all our emissions are ‘covered’ many times over by a sole change in sun’s activity or by a catastrophic eruption of a volcano. ... In all: changes are not going to be unambiguous but, as I said, in sum Russia is winning ... That is, [our] harsh (cold) climate causes (economic) losses in the energy sector.<sup>7</sup>

The categorizations are shown in detail in Table 6.1. After choosing the categories, we conducted basic statistical analysis to gain an understanding of how much each category was supported in the newspaper material. The results of this analysis are presented in the next section.

In the second phase of our research, the focus of analysis shifted to identifying the elements of denial discourse. At this stage, all the material – the newspaper articles, television shows, documentaries and the two books – was used. For consistency, one of us focused on denial arguments and benchmarked them in the material, applying climate change denial categories identified by Washington and Cook (2011) (see also Berger 2013, pp. 35–62). These categories are as follows: first, circulating conspiracy theories (‘Climategate’); second, publicizing fake experts (‘There is no consensus’); third, burdening scientists with impossible expectations (‘Climate models are unreliable’); fourth, relying on misrepresentations and logical fallacies (‘The climate changed in the past’); and fifth, cherry-picking (‘Measurements are unreliable’; ‘Warming stopped in 1998’; ‘It’s the sun’; ‘Global warming is good’). We highlighted articulations that best crystallized the category in question: these articulations will be described later in this chapter as examples of the categories in question. Accordingly, the method applied can be characterized as thematic analysis (see, for example, Guest et al. 2012) in which themes (that is, categorizations) were, at the first stage, derived inductively from the material and, at the second stage, dissected with the help of further categories identified by Washington and Cook (2011).

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<sup>7</sup> *Rossiiskaya Gazeta*, 14 May 2013, available at: <https://rg.ru/2013/05/14/poteplenie.html>, accessed 14 April 2018.

Table 6.1 Narratives on climate change in two Russian newspapers

| Source / category                  | 'Denial'  | 'Natural' | 'Positive' | 'Negative = ICS' | 'Denial and Natural' | 'Denial and Positive' | 'Natural and Positive' | 'Natural and Negative' | 'Natural and Mixed' | All         |
|------------------------------------|-----------|-----------|------------|------------------|----------------------|-----------------------|------------------------|------------------------|---------------------|-------------|
| <i>Rossiiskaya Gazeta</i>          | 17 / 22.7 | 9 / 12.0  | 4 / 5.3    | 7 / 9.3          | 11 / 14.7            | 3 / 4.0               | 5 / 6.7                | 11 / 14.7              | 8 / 10.7            | 75 / 100 %  |
| <i>Izvestiya</i>                   | 10 / 38.5 | 7 / 26.9  | 3 / 11.5   | 1 / 3.8          | -                    | -                     | -                      | 5 / 19.2               | -                   | 26 / 100 %  |
| All newspaper articles+            | 27        | 16        | 7          | 8                | 11                   | 3                     | 5                      | 16                     | 8                   | 101 & 100 % |
| Argument occurrence in newspapers* | 47        | 45        | 17         | 38               | -                    | -                     | -                      | -                      | -                   | 101 / 100 % |

*Notes:*

+The percentage is approximately the same as the number.

\*In this figure all the four main categories found in newspaper articles are considered as individual hits, i.e. the sum volume of arguments 'denial', 'natural', 'positive', and 'negative' is counted. Thus the number of arguments (147) is greater than the number of articles (101).

## CLIMATE CHANGE AND ITS DENIAL IN THE RUSSIAN MEDIA

### Main Characteristics of Climate Change Discourse

As Table 6.1 demonstrates, 26.9 per cent of 101 newspaper articles analysed could be placed in the first discursive category ‘denial of mainstream climate science’, marking a strong denialist position. The category of regarding climate change as a neutral issue with no reference to the origin of this phenomenon was dominant in 16 cases (15.9 per cent). The volume of articles arguing for international climate science was, in turn, very small: only 8 articles out of 101 were categorized as being fully in accordance with the mainstream international understanding of the problem. Moreover, contrary to the popular discourse of the early 2000s (N. Tynkkynen 2010), only 7 out of 101 articles were categorized as presenting climate change as beneficial for Russia.

When looking at the occurrence of different arguments in the newspaper articles, ‘denial’ and ‘neutral’ arguments can be found in nearly half of all the articles, 47 per cent and 45 per cent respectively, whereas ‘negative’ arguments appeared in more than every third (38 per cent) article. The relatively high volume of negative connotations related to climate change may imply that stronger emphasis on the unwanted effects is how the mainstream understanding of the problem is entering and affecting Russian discourse. However, the way the negative effects were discussed, mainly in articles arguing that there is no anthropogenic climate change, emphasized implicitly that in Russia the effects would be much less severe than in other parts of the world.

‘Positive’ arguments related to climate change could be found in only 17 per cent of all the articles, confirming the above-mentioned move away from understanding climate change as a predominantly welcome and beneficial process for Russia. This category sees global temperature rises as a positive development: the melting of the polar ice cap is seen as an opportunity to develop Arctic energy resources that, along with new sea routes, will further strengthen Russia’s role as an energy giant and a territorial Great Power (see also Laruelle 2014b, p. 40; Palosaari and Tynkkynen 2015). As stated in a *Rossiiskaya Gazeta* article: “Global warming and the ongoing melting of the ice is turning the Arctic ... into a giant international promising project of the

twenty-first century, potentially into the largest investment platform of the current era.”<sup>8</sup>

### **Analysis of the Denial Discourse**

The second stage of our analysis, which centred on the arguments concerning climate change denial, revealed that the five categories of arguments defined by Washington and Cook (2011) are also present in the Russian denial discourse. Here, we focused on three categories that drew principally on Russia’s domestic context: conspiracy theories, misrepresentations and logical fallacies, and cherry-picking.

Conspiracies behind both international climate science and international efforts to promote climate mitigation policies were emphasized in *Izvestiya* articles and in all television documentaries and talk shows. In Pavlenko’s book (2011), this argument is taken to the extreme: the author claims that the 2010 heatwave that had dire environmental and health effects was a result of a ‘weather weapon’ (*klimaticheskoe oruzhie*), which the United States used to weaken Russia. The way in which the conspiracy argument is presented brings together the threat of ‘global governance’ to Russia’s sovereignty and alleged Western political and economic interests – embodied by references to former US vice president and Nobel Prize winner Al Gore – lying behind international climate governance:

As crowd is attacking [climate sceptics], Albert Gore gets his peace prize [the Nobel Prize] named after the producer of explosives. ... [to be used] in the battle against global warming that no one has proved, but which has already turned into a vast bird feeder [source of money] for bureaucrats. ... Observations by the public—‘Where’s the warming? Snow is covering Europe now’—are challenged by scientific conclusions: ‘This is a visual proof of global warming.’ And look, straight off there is an institute and another getting funding to prove global warming—yet it is actually global cooling. Peace is war, love is hate. ... We had already read this in Orwell’s books when words like ‘global warming’ were not yet in our swill.<sup>9</sup>

Pavlenko – as the title of his book, *Myths of ‘Sustainable Development’: ‘Global Warming’ or ‘Creeping Global Takeover’*, ultimately suggests – sees the objective of sustainable development and international climate

<sup>8</sup> *Rossiiskaya Gazeta*, 31 May 2013, available at: <http://www.rg.ru/2013/05/31/led.html>, accessed 17 April 2018. All translations are by the authors unless otherwise stated.

<sup>9</sup> *Izvestiya*, 17 September 2013, available at: <http://izvestia.ru/news/557239#ixzz3u6DTLZH6>, accessed 17 April 2018.

policy as an extension of Western hegemonic power (see also Korppoo et al. 2015, p. 29; Oldfield and Shaw 2006). He argues that global climate policy is diminishing Russia's sovereignty in two ways: via Western-led global governance, and by demonizing the hydrocarbons crucial for Russia's economy, society and culture: "At the same time, what is most important for the economic independence and sovereignty of nations—energy, machinery and metallurgy—is [through global climate governance] included into the league of the most 'dangerous' sectors of the economy" (Pavlenko 2011, p. 106). *Izvestiya* journalist Anatolii Vasserman, in turn, argues:

The aim [of climate mitigation policies] is the massive destruction of developing countries. They do not possess the strength to restructure their [fossil fuel-based] economies, as obliged by [climate change] theory. This way it is possible to perpetuate the economic gap prevailing between developed nations and the rest of the world. More, measures already taken based on this leading—and obviously for any literate physicist—fraud have led to losses equivalent to millions of deaths.<sup>10</sup>

Some versions of the 'eco-conspiracy' argument, evident throughout our research material, claimed that banks funding and corporations producing green technologies and renewable energy are the institutional actors behind this Western-led conspiracy. For example, Pavlenko writes:

Why [are critics of climate change not listened to]? One of the reasons, without any doubt, is related to the economy. A widely known factor is the interest of financial giants, such as J.P. Morgan Chase, Morgan Stanley, Goldman & Sachs ... to engage in trade with greenhouse gas-emissions quotas. ... In the situation of 'catastrophic' [climate change] ... there is a [pressing] need to expand financing of environmental programs. (Pavlenko 2011, p. 103)

With regard to the category of 'cherry-picking', our analysis shows that the arguments 'It's the sun' and 'Warming is good' were used more frequently than other arguments. For example, the main argument presented in the book *Climate Paradoxes: Ice Age or Burning Heat?* by Karol' and Kiselev (2013) can be classified in this category: the authors do not deny anthropogenic climate change, but they fail at the same time to criticize Russia for not taking responsibility for climate policy measures or reducing emissions. Karol' and Kiselev describe the current situation as follows:

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<sup>10</sup> *Izvestiya*, 13 December 2012, available at: <http://izvestia.ru/news/537615>, accessed 17 April 2018.

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In Russia, solar, geothermal and wind power have so far been developed very little. Their intensive exploitation is planned for 2030 ... Maintaining and developing the hydrocarbon sector important for Russia's economy is at odds with the global trend to invest in energy efficiency and saving ... Of course, during the next few years the priority of hydrocarbons in providing the main source of energy [for Russia] is hardly going to be challenged. (Karol' and Kiselev 2013, p. 245)

The arguments prevalent in the 'cherry-picking' category are optimistic about the positive outcomes of global warming for Russia. This tendency can be regarded as a reflection of the history of science in the Soviet Union and Russia, as the mental stance of the High Modern frames all industrial and material progress in an overly positive light (Laruelle 2014b, p. 82). To a very similar extent, the category 'The climate changed in the past' placed in the 'logical fallacy' category by Washington and Cook (2011), can be understood as the intellectual legacy of the global cooling hypothesis elaborated by Soviet scholars during the 1950s–1970s (Wilson Rowe 2009). According to this hypothesis, the Earth's climate is facing a new glaciation period, and that this natural climatic fluctuation over intervals of several thousand years is a more real and pressing threat than global warming. Global warming is therefore a positive development, as it postpones the beginning of a new glaciation.

Arguments belonging to Washington and Cook's (2011) category, 'Relying on misrepresentations and logical fallacies', are central to the denial discourse throughout our research material. These arguments mostly emphasize the climate cooling theory. This theory represents a specifically Russian version of the denial discourse, and its popularity has to do with the fact that the Soviet cooling theory precedes the current mainstream global warming thesis, presented even in the most neutral accounts (including the TV documentary *Rossiia Nauka*) as an equally possible scenario to global warming. In its most populist versions, the theory was taken to its extreme, approaching science fiction with ungrounded apocalyptic visions for the future (the *REN-TV* documentary *Terrotoriya zablizhdenii* (Territory of Misconceptions) and the *NTV* documentary *Holod* (Cold)). The support for the climate cooling theory is indicative of the Russian interest in emphasizing Russia's role as a major hydrocarbon producer which can, by not taking measures to decrease GHG emissions but rather by contributing to global warming, save the world from a global winter. The documentary *Holod* claims, "the fluctuating temperature on Earth is a natural and unavoidable phenomenon. Naturally, it is reasonable to fight against emissions, as the atmosphere becomes purer [free from toxins]. ... but to control the

weather is beyond our power. All we can do is to adapt, if possible.” In the same vein, according to the *REN-TV* documentary:

Scientists are not hesitating: if, instead of focusing on global warming during the last 35 years we [humanity] prepared for a long winter on the planet, we could have resisted the changing temperatures [at this point, the documentary shows footage of the oil refinery smokestacks]. ... [Now] without protection humanity is facing a new Ice Age that threatens us.

Another line of argumentation representing the above-mentioned category suggests that the observed temperature rise is of natural origin. A *Rossiiskaya Gazeta* article focused on future droughts in Kyrgyzstan and Central Asian countries caused by climate change: “According to scientists, humans, alas, cannot do anything to avoid such nightmarish forecasts from taking place.”<sup>11</sup>

This claim is repeated in an episode – with 7.1 million views on YouTube – of a very popular children’s cartoon, *Barboskiny*.<sup>12</sup> The storyline focuses on the main character, a young boy dog, who hears about global warming on the radio during a summer heatwave. He misses the ending of the news as a tennis ball hits the radio, turning it off. As a result, he assumes that he has caused the ongoing heatwave and global warming by having sent, one cold winter’s day, his sister’s battery-operated hairdryer to the upper atmosphere attached to a bunch of balloons to warm the air. He ties balloons to himself in a quest to find the voyaging hairdryer and rescue mankind from global warming. His big brother (dog) intervenes to stop him from flying off into the atmosphere and, as they struggle, the radio is switched back on to announce, “Scientists are assured that global warming is caused by continuous natural cycle, and Earthlings have not and cannot impact on this process.” There is a happy ending as the hero declares: “It’s the Earth that is warming itself, not me!” That is, the political message of the cartoon is that Russians should not be worried about the effects of climate change and, more importantly, not to push an agenda asking for emission cuts or changes in energy policies, as Russians or people in general cannot impact climate processes.

According to the natural-origin argument, no mitigation policies are needed; on the contrary, such policies are detrimental to the economy of Russia and the developing world. It is therefore a moral obligation for

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<sup>11</sup> *Rossiiskaya Gazeta*, 5 April 2012, available at: <http://www.rg.ru/2012/04/05/resurs.html>, accessed 18 April 2018.

<sup>12</sup> Барбоскины, No. 107: *Глобальное потепление* (Global’noe poteplenie), available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LgkE90RHey4>, accessed 18 April 2018.

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governments not to engage in mitigation policies. An example of this argument is offered by the host of the TV1 talk show *Gordon Kihot*,<sup>13</sup> following the same argument that also appeared in several newspaper articles: "but, on an economic and political 'global court', all possible steps aimed at changing the [global] economy for the benefit of others are taken with the help of organizations like Greenpeace, simultaneously worsening others' possibilities. [This activity is] based on an academic dispute, nothing more."

## DENIAL DISCOURSE (RE)CONTEXTUALIZED

Unlike the internationally prominent community of Russian climate scientists who have adopted mainstream international climate science and dismissed the idea that the Russian context could affect their views on climate science, the three categories of climate change denial studied here – conspiracy theories, 'cherry-picking' and 'misrepresentations/logical fallacies' – underline the specifically Russian political and economic conditions. The extreme version of the denial discourse promotes the Messianic idea that Russia has a special role to play in the global climate system and world history more broadly. In this version, which falls into both the cherry-picking and logical fallacies categories, Russia needs to save the world from global cooling by releasing more GHG into the atmosphere. The milder version makes the case that Russia is actually behaving responsibly when it opposes the Western-led 'green industry conspiracy' and declines to compromise global economic growth, in particular, the right of developing nations to modernize, in the name of climate policy.

As noted, a juxtaposition of Russian and international interests regarding climate change is a constant in our research material. International climate policy is increasingly seen as a Western-led hegemonic project aiming to bypass or overrule the sovereignty of Russia. This juxtaposition is also supported by conspiracy arguments. As our analysis indicates, the denial discourse generates distrust in international climate science and emphasizes the contextual nature of scientific knowledge by claiming, in particular, that the West is trying to monopolize climate science and that global climate governance is a Western strategy to weaken Russia

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<sup>13</sup> Gordon Kihot – Global'noe poteplenie, available at: <https://en.myshows.me/m/view/episode/1111359/>, accessed 18 April 2018.

economically and politically. Similar arguments, with nevertheless different content, were already being voiced in the Russian media in the early 2000s (Korppoo et al. 2015, pp. 28–9).

Accordingly, the temporal overlap of the shift in the tone of climate change discourse and Putin's return indicates that the new discourse serves the domestic political needs of the regime. A possible impetus for this qualitative change came after the 2010 drought and fires, that is, the need to reduce the threat posed by those protesting against the regime, especially as we have not seen much public criticism on climate change politics. Yet, the need to reduce environmentally-toned criticism towards the regime that has not engaged in climate change mitigation and adaptation is perhaps not fully detached from the fear caused by the protests against Putin's third term in major Russian cities in 2011 and 2012.

On top (and as part) of the sovereignty argument and the direct political interests of Putin's regime, we argue that the material-spatial context of Russia in a profound way affects the cultural and political spheres. That is, the collective feeling aroused by the vast space and its seemingly endless resources, explains at least some of the arguments behind climate denial in Russia and, indirectly, the interests of the regime and its supporters in hydrocarbon exploitation. One motive for Russian political and energy actors to oppose mainstream international understanding of climate change, or at least to cast serious doubts on climate change as a human-induced process, could be in both the specific interests of the energy sector in maintaining the status quo in domestic energy policy and in the general interests of Putin's regime in reducing the likelihood of criticism by the Russian people toward the hydrocarbon-based political and economic system.

Furthermore, referring to the literature on identity construction based on materialities of energy in Russia (Bassin 2006; Bouzarovski and Bassin 2011; Grib 2009; Rogers 2012; see also Rutland 2015), we find that climate denial discourse in Russia could be strategically used to strengthen a national identity constructed on the notion of Russia as a 'hydrocarbon giant' or 'energy superpower'. As noted by the above-mentioned scholars, there is the wish of the leadership to strengthen the role of hydrocarbons as the basis for Russia's Great Power status. International understanding of the problem, in particular, its internationally agreed solutions, including diversification of energy sources away from fossil fuels, is thus pictured in the media material as an existential threat to the national identity of Russians.

## CONCLUSION

Russia's climate change discourse is nationally specific, especially with regard to climate change denial, drawing on the self-understanding of the Russian elite concerning their geography and resources, and place in the world.

There exists a cultural code in Russia enabling the use of the 'negative sacred', that is, societal taboos for the benefit of those in power (Kivinen 2002). In the context of climate denial, three such negative 'sacreds' are of particular interest. First, our analysis indicates that the *demonization of reality* is often constructed through the cultivation of conspiracy theories at the expense of scientific facts. Frequently, increased exploitation of fossil energy is offered as a cure both for Russia and the developing world, in direct contradiction to climate change mitigation by reduced fossil fuel extraction and use. According to Jacques' (2012) general theory of denial, its primary cause is that climate change discourse is serious and threatening to those wishing to maintain power and the accustomed way of life. Thus, second, the potential and actual *chaos caused by climate change* is difficult to acknowledge and discuss in the public arena. Moreover, the development of production forces, that is, industrial capacity and the concomitant increase in consumption, is viewed as a linear process producing well-being and reducing poverty. This sacred objective is turned into a 'negative sacred', the third taboo, hiding the fact that the extractive nature of the Russian economy ultimately leads to the *consumption of the future wealth* of the nation through resource depletion and climate change.

When compared to Russian climate change discourse during the 2000s (N. Tynkkynen 2010; Wilson Rowe 2009, 2012), a change in the climate discourse can be identified: pessimistic accounts of climate change have gained dominance over the arguments supporting mainstream climate science. Extreme denialists were influential in Russian climate science even before the ratification of the Kyoto Protocol (Laruelle 2014b, pp. 83–4), but as our analysis shows, they seem to have much wider possibilities for reaching the public via the media compared to scientists and journalists adhering to the mainstream international understanding. The changes experienced recently in Russia's position as hydrocarbon producer and exporter and in Russia's foreign and domestic political situation provide further motivation for the political leadership not to oppose climate denial voices in society, if not to support such forces openly.

Of course, discussions in the state-controlled media do not reflect the attitudes of Russian people, and the discourse is only loosely linked to the choices Russia will make within international climate governance (Korppoo et al. 2015, pp. 44, 47; Smyth and Oates 2015, p. 302). Yet, the less the Russian populace is aware of the problems caused by climate change, and in particular, the less alarmed they are by such problems, the longer those in power can continue to consolidate their position by accumulating wealth through extraction and export of fossil energy while ignoring the threats caused by climate change. Promotion in the state-controlled media of contrarian and rhetorical notions such as ‘undecided climate science’, ‘non-rational climate agreements’ or ‘risk-free climate impacts for Russia’ fits the interests of the energy industry and Putin’s regime to ensure that there is no strong grassroots opposition to Russia’s ‘free rider’ role in international climate change mitigation commitments. Even if public discussion after the Paris agreement in December 2015 is beyond the scope of our research setting here, we can assume that the tone of the discourse has not remarkably changed after Paris, as Russia’s commitments concerning emission cuts under the agreement have not been ambitious.

For the future of Russia’s climate policy, all this comes with major implications. The need for rapid action in the sphere of climate change mitigation may arouse more rejection and denial than agency for change. Because of the ‘negative sacred’, the potential and realized chaos possibly caused by climate change cannot be discussed. More to the point, as the international climate effort is in Russia often seen as a conspiracy to make profit or limit Russia’s sovereignty, the Great Power dimension of national identity makes it difficult to accept the need to forefront climate change mitigation policies and emission cuts. Energy from fossil fuels is seen as Russia’s entrée to Great Power status, and it seems that this ‘sacred’ cannot be questioned any time soon.

#### APPENDIX: THE ANALYSED TV DOCUMENTARIES, TALK SHOWS AND COMEDY SERIES

1. A talk show devoted to climate change aired on national *TVI* on 12 December 2009 (Gordon Kihot – “Global’noe poteplenie”).
2. A television documentary utilizing part of the British climate change denial documentary *The Great Global Warming Swindle* (2007), with added Russian sections and interviews (Istoriya odnogo obmana ili global’noe poteplenie), aired on national *TVI* on 12 December 2010.

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3. A television documentary aired on 26 March 2013 on *REN-TV* (Territoriya zabluzhdenii s Igorem Prokopenko No. 20).
4. A TV documentary viewed on national *Rossiya Nauka* (Russia Science) channel on 14 August 2013 (Nauka 2.0. Global'noe poteplenie ili lednikovyi period).
5. A documentary film *Cold* (Holod) aired on *NTV* in December 2013.
6. A comedy show for adults aired in November 2011 (Odna za Vsekh – Kris i Endzhi – Global'noe poteplenie).
7. A very popular cartoon (more than 7.1 million views on YouTube) for kids on national *TVI* aired in October 2013 (Barboskiny – 107 seriya. Global'noe poteplenie).