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# Norms as instruments of non-violent rivalry? Russian views on the promotion of renewable energy

Anne Crowley-Vigneau<sup>1,2</sup>  · Andrey Baykov<sup>1</sup> · Yelena Kalyuzhnova<sup>2</sup>

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## Abstract

Constructivists argue that international norms represent shared understandings of appropriate behaviour which become universally accepted after their successful internalisation. However, studies of norm contestation, localisation and death suggest that many norms having originated in the West are perceived elsewhere as instruments used by states to promote their interests abroad. This paper examines whether norms can be a vehicle for non-violent rivalry between states based on a study of the norm on the sustainable energy transition from fossil fuels to renewables. Interviews with representatives of the Russian government, O&G industry and media show that there is a lot of scepticism surrounding this norm because it is geopolitically advantageous to the West and damaging to Russia. The theoretical findings reveal that although grafting a diplomatic initiative onto a mature norm could be effective, this does not mean that norms can easily be created to gain the upper hand in punctual disputes.

**Keywords** Rivalry · Norms · Constructivism · Soft power · Energy transition · Russia

## Introduction

“Persuasion is often more effectual than force”. Aesop expresses in this quote the core idea that constructing a common understanding can be more effective than deploying violence in trying to attain a goal. While constructivists have shown that norms, seen as shared understandings of appropriate behaviour, can change outcomes on the international stage, realists have long questioned whether norms were not just another expression of state interests. Rivalry in international relations could

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✉ Anne Crowley-Vigneau  
vigneau.a@my.mgimo.ru

<sup>1</sup> MGIMO University, Moscow, Russian Federation

<sup>2</sup> University of Reading, Reading, UK



be defined as a situation whereby states compete for the same objective or for superiority in a given sphere. While rivalry is frequently characterised by bouts of warfare, this special issue considers the ways states can advance their interests without resorting to violence. One of the most effective means for state A to ensure a rival state B acts in a way that is advantageous to state A is without doubt to convince the government of B that it is in fact forwarding its own interests. The best way to frame interests is to claim that they are universally shared and represent common values. International norms appear in this light to present many opportunities for states, particularly as there is an increased pressure to solve rivalries by non-violent means.

These considerations beg the question whether norms can be employed as instruments of non-violent rivalry by states. This paper explores the notions of norms and rivalry, placing them in the context of the relevant scholarly literature and undertakes an original case study to understand to what extent norms can help secure foreign policy goals. The research focuses on the norm of the transition to renewable forms of energy, first exploring how it came about and was diffused in the European Union and globally, then presenting how it is perceived by the EU's most obvious rival, Russia. The question of whether the EU supports the transition away from fossil fuels for political (gaining energy independence) or ideational (combatting climate change) reasons is less important in the context of the rivalry than how the norm is perceived in Russia. A qualitative study based on 32 expert interviews conducted between December 2021 and August 2022 with Russian scholars, students, representatives of the oil and gas industry, the media, social society and the Russian government enquires into how the green energy transition is viewed in Russia.

The findings reveal that Russia, once involved in decarbonisation initiatives with the EU, now sees the West's green transition agenda as highly politicised and rejects the norm not only for economic reasons but also for political ones. On the basis of the case study, the authors also offer some new generalisable insights into norms and rivalry: although grafting foreign policy on international norms can be an effective way of legitimising the exercise of power globally, norm creation is too costly and time-consuming to be an effective short-term political tool. The politisation and instrumentalisation of norms presents the risk, not only that the political initiative of the state will backfire, but also that the credibility of the international norm may itself be undermined.

## Norms and rivalry

Constructivism in the 1980s opened the way to the study of norms as standards of acceptable behaviour for people with a shared identity (Katzenstein et al. 1999). Unlike in legal theory, norms are not facts but rather social constructions that depend on common perceptions to exist. In the literature, the focus was first put on studying how liberal norms led to global changes in the international system, with models explaining their emergence, diffusion and internalisation (e.g. Finnemore & Sikkink's 1998 norm life cycle, Nadelmann's 1990 evolutionary pattern, Risse et al. 2009 spiral model). The initial bias of selecting mostly uncontroversial cases, where norms successfully moved from stage to stage and led to an increase in global



wellbeing, was corrected in the 2000s with studies highlighting the challenges faced by norms and their nonlinear evolution. The identification of an implementation gap in the adaptation phase to international norms led to new scholarship on localisation mechanisms, highlighting the ways in which international norms are locally adapted and reconstructed during their local implementation (Acharya 2004). The assumption that mature norms would automatically become robust and acquire "a taken for granted quality" (Keck and Sikkink 1998) was challenged by a large body of empirical studies revealing that even institutionalised norms may be challenged.

Contestation has been defined as "a range of social practices that discursively express disapproval of norms" (Wiener 2014, pp. 1–2) and has been classed in several categories based on its forms and goals. Contestation linked to the ways a norm is being implemented ("proactive contestation") has been set apart from fundamental disagreements with the core principles underlying a norm ("reactive contestation") (Wiener 2014). Understanding the level of disagreement and whether the resistance is implicit or explicit helps to determine the risks it poses to normative development. Low-level contestation has been associated with a search for compromise and sometimes an improvement in norms design, leading to greater acceptance and an increase in norm robustness (Deitelhoff & Zimmermann 2020). Reactive contestation is more likely to be damaging: frequent violations that are not accompanied by general reproach can fragilise a norm, leading in extreme cases to norm death (Kutz 2014). Successful norm creation, diffusion and implementation has been associated with the actions of norm entrepreneurs, Transnational Advocacy Networks and Transnational Expertise and Experience Networks (Finnemore & Sikkink 1998; Crowley-Vigneau et al. 2022a, b). Norm contestation is ignited and spread by different categories of actors from norm antipreneurs to revisionists and saboteurs, each undermining in specific ways the norm and the standards that underpin it (Clark 2007; Bloomfield 2016). While contestation was initially considered to reflect a mismatch between the international and the local, attention has recently been shifted onto conflicts between different norms at the international level. Norm overlaps are not just objective facts but stem from deliberate intentions to link different issues, to put them under the same umbrella (Fehl 2018). International norms are dynamic and may evolve when they conflict or overlap with other norms. Regime theory shows that "regime collisions" frequently in one norm taking ascendancy over another and parallel regimes can serve to reinforce each other through "nesting" and division of labour (Aggarwal 1998; Blome et al. 2016). Both synergies and clashes between norms are frequently attributed to their natural characteristics, to the gains or losses for one norm resulting from the implementation of another. Fehl (2018) argues that interactions between norms do not result from unavoidable, exogenous factors but, on the contrary, that linkages are socially constructed and that most norms are malleable and vague enough in their formulation to be deliberately framed as supporting or conflicting with another. New norms are typically "nested into" mature regimes to ensure their successful diffusion (Lantis & Wunderlich 2018).

Realists view norms as instruments in the hands of powerful states. In their worldview, norms have little staying power as they get cast aside as soon as they run against the interests of Great Powers. Rationalists emphasise the role of state interests in shaping the international system and reveal that governments can



"strategically create and exploit regime complexity" but also "use norms to craft public justifications" (Fehl 2018, p. 4). The idea that norms can be used under specific circumstances to serve state interests and that linkages between norms can be constructed to weaken or reinforce governmental initiatives questions the liberal universal perception of norms as a motor of global social progress. Brooks and Wohlforth (2005) also showed that states may use their material power to make their preferences appear as legitimate on the international scene. Interestingly, constructivists also recognise that norms can be manipulated and may end up furthering national rather than universal interests. When considering means of non-violent rivalry between great powers, it is necessary to investigate whether norms could be used as an effective form of "soft power" allowing states to further their interests.

Rivalry in international relations can be defined as a situation whereby states compete for the same objective or for superiority in a given sphere. Characterised as the opposite of cooperation, rivalry is associated with feelings of mistrust, resentment and fear (Prins and Daxecker 2008; Yamburenko 2016; Graham 2022). The existing literature has thoroughly explored the links between rivalry and warfare, the stages of its evolution, the opportunities to terminate rivalry and how liberal institutions impact it (Goertz & Diehl 2000). In order to overcome the distrust felt by long-time rival states, scholars have suggested that building forums and institutions not only help regulate negotiations but also offer some guarantee that each side meet their commitments. The lack of mutual trust can be improved by third party participation and global accountability. An analogy with rivalry in other spheres, such as between siblings or in competitive sports reveals the two sides of the concept of rivalry: the desire to outperform at all costs but also a degree of readiness to play by established and mutually respected rules. Rivalry, in regulated circumstances, have been found to increase motivation and performance (Milstein et al. 2022). Rivalry in all spheres may encounter bouts of violence, or exceptions to the consensual order. In a context of "contained rivalry", two states could theoretically in parallel strive towards a common, non-mutually exclusive goal (e.g. environmental protection).

In practice, states usually have incompatible objectives and vie over contested material resources. Non-violent forms of rivalry push states to use all instruments at their disposal to gain superiority over their opponent. Soft power, defined as a state's capacity to use persuasion rather than coercion to achieve its goals (Nye 2009, p. 8) appears as a way states can rival non-militarily. The idea of soft power is to shape another country's preferences and make them more in line with your own. Through soft power, "a state gains a unique capacity to promote its interests by ensuring that that country will offer it its political support" (Li 2018, Crowley-Vigneau 2022a). The widely accepted idea among constructivists that norms "can be subject to strategic manipulation" (Keating 2014, Fehl 2018 p. 7) reveals that states are an active component of the social structure. As such, they are part of the norm socialisation process but also capable of strategic planning and attempts to manipulate norms (Hurd 2007). States frequently justify their actions and condemn those of other based on international law but also international norms. Norms are also subject to interpretation and the most powerful states may be the most successful in diffusing their normative implementation guides. Legitimacy



is a source of power that rivaling states may struggle over when determining the practical implications of norms (Hurd 2005).

States not only have an impact on norm design, on framing and diffusion processes but they can also use linkage mechanisms to justify the validity of foreign policy decisions. If "norms circumscribe legitimate political actions" (Fehl 2018, p. 7), then the benefits of using them to back up a state's policy steps in the context of a rivalry could be decisive. The ultimate winner of a non-violent rivalry may not be the strongest or the richest, but the state that has the backing of the international community because it is in line with generally accepted patterns of behaviour (norms). However, the states that can ensure that strategic norm linkage is in line with their own interests are frequently the most powerful ones and weaker states are more likely to be manipulated into accepting a normative order that may disadvantage them (Fehl 2018).

The literature suggests that being in line with international norms offers a strategic advantage. However, the main question remains how norms can be used by states in non-violent rivalry. Is it possible to create from scratch a norm to meet one's interests and convince the entire international community not only to willingly embrace it but to actually believe it is in their own interest to adopt and internalise it? Or do countries choose their foreign policy course in order for it to match international norms and thus not clash with international public opinion? The third option would be that the state through a dual strategy corrects (or puts varnish on) its foreign policy decisions and offers new interpretations of international norms in order to ensure there is no mismatch between the two. While most of a state's conduct may naturally be in line with international norms as they are standards of acceptable behaviour, in the case of rivalry, the need to outperform the opponent raises the likeliness of unacceptable or provocative behaviour. Some states are more effective than others in ensuring their policy decisions appear to fit in with international norms and in grafting their foreign policy decisions on mature norms by creating logical (or even in some cases far-fetched) linkages. The main research question underlying this paper is whether norms can be instrumentalised to provide a state the upper hand in a non-violent rivalry. In short: Can norms be used as instruments of non-violent rivalry by states?

In order to build up on the best insights from both realism and constructivism, this study uses the realist constructivist framework developed by Barkin (2003). This inter paradigmatic approach offers unique opportunities to interpret normative behaviour in the light of state interests and allows for a multidimensional understanding of power, which ranges from the ideational ability to influence the identity and interests of other states to the military or economic capacity to force other states to comply. These perceptions of power are not envisaged as mutually exclusive, but as complementary and evolving on different timelines. International norms can influence the position of states in the international system and change the structure of international politics by redefining identities. Norms participate in the mutual constitution process as they are shaped both by societies and states, but also contribute to changing their identities, and in doing so, their material capabilities.



## The norm of the energy transition

After presenting a theoretical perspective on the role norms can play in non-violent rivalries between states, we consider the context of the transition to green energy and show to what extent it has become an international norm.

Climate change, once a marginal concern brushed aside by climate sceptics, is now the focus of governments around the globe trying to keep in check the rise in temperatures (Hornsey et al. 2021). In order to ensure their security and survival, a number of countries have come to reject a capitalist model driven by unlimited economic growth and fossil fuels, to refocus on sustainability (Dalby 2015; Toganova 2016). The Sustainable Development Goals were adopted by all the members of the United Nations in 2015 and state that global carbon output should be reduced by creating clean forms of energy, all the while allowing for the development of emerging economies and the eradication of poverty. The openly proclaimed goal is to design and put in place a low-carbon energy system by cutting down on the use of fossil fuels and expanding the production of renewables. The "green transition" is one of many energy transitions that have taken place historically, as humanity moved to biomass, to coal and then oil & gas (Smil 2016). However, rather than being brought about by market mechanisms or immediate necessity like the previous transitions, the turn towards green energy is government-led and carries an immediate economic and social cost (Pearson 2018). The current transition rests upon the anticipated need to protect the planet against a global challenge that people have started to experience in their daily lives through harsh weather conditions and a reduction in biodiversity, but that scientists still struggle to fully understand and predict the long-term impact of.

The decarbonisation agenda, although it is widely agreed upon the world over, is dealt with and prioritised differently from region to region. While the Paris Agenda and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development emphasise the need to support developing countries in their target to mitigate their environmental footprint and reduce their CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, there is a widening gap between the West and the Global South in achieving their net-zero targets. In the West, the decarbonisation agenda is coupled with the need for a just and participative energy production and distribution system. It is also closely related to the need for energy independence and the negative association with being dependent of foreign fossil fuel imports. Western countries, particularly members of the European Union, have expressed readiness to sacrifice their economic growth and social wellbeing in order to accelerate the replacement of fossil fuels by renewables (Borovsky & Shishkina 2022). Countries of the Global South are however in some cases struggling to finance the transition away from traditional unprocessed biomass and the prevalence of energy poverty means the governments prioritise access to any form of cost-effective energy, including imported fossil fuels (Cantarero 2020). Developing countries appear, however, as essential in the energy transition as they have a huge potential for developing renewables and the demand for electricity in their growing economies is expected to sharply increase over upcoming decades (Downie 2020). Additionally, if countries were to meet their climate





targets in isolation, it would serve little purpose as an increase in CO<sub>2</sub> emissions from the Global South could easily counterbalance positive results achieved by other states (Holland et al. 2019).

The green energy transition appears as an international norm, understood in the constructivist sense (see Sect. “Norms and rivalry”) as a global standard of appropriate behaviour. Climate change was first identified by scientists who argued in the nineteenth century that greenhouse gases of anthropogenic origin could change the planet’s energy balance. In the 1960s epistemic communities diffused the idea that the planet Earth was warming and in the 1990s the consensus over the negative impact of man-made emissions expanded, leading to the creation of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change in 1988. Alongside the formal meetings of heads of states, non-governmental organisations ensured an increase in popular awareness of the need for decarbonisation of the economy. The norm on the energy transition was formalised by the United Nations and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and supported by a strong advocacy network, naming and shaming wrongdoers for non-compliance. The norm appears as mature as it has been institutionalised by a large number of countries: indeed, even a majority of fossil fuel-producing countries have an agenda for their gradual replacement by cleaner forms of energy. The norm was also designed as truly international as it is based on the principle of shared responsibility, requiring a multistakeholder approach (Fukuyama 2020). In order to ensure its wide acceptance, the norm emphasises the need for “inclusivity” and for a just transition where no one loses out (Barry & Eckersley 2005). The norm also implies the need to examine the causes and consequences of different policy measures, and to prioritise long-term outcomes over short-term gains, suggesting that the transition requires sacrifices to be made in order to protect future generations (Gharavi 2011). Within states themselves, collaboration is needed inside a government and between governmental institutions in order to select viable decarbonisation scenarios (Määttä 2021, Caudle 2010). The literature suggests that environmental policy-making is not a separate field of policy and should be integrated in the activities of all the main ministries. The norm on the transition to renewables goes beyond the requirement to decarbonise and move away from fossil fuels. The norm implies a new type of democratic and participative organisation of energy. The Whole-of-Society approach to energy and the notion of collaborative governance underline the positive outcomes of collective actions and of deliberation and contestation processes (Devaney et al. 2020). They do however neglect a number of risks including the economic ineffectiveness of the bargaining process between under-informed participants, the tendency to reject radical change and the manipulation of individuals by private or state interest groups (Ansell 2020). While the Whole-of-Society approach generally neglects questions related to conflict management by focusing on the positive outcomes of collective action, the literature on energy governance shows that deliberation and contestation can help improve policy measures).

The norm on the energy transition has been framed as necessary for the perennity of humanity and grafted onto the mature norms of human rights (of future generations) and environmental protection. While it has a solid scientific basis, the norm transcends the basic notion that decarbonisation is necessary, to recommend a series of new requirements including abandoning fossil fuels and creating participatory



forms of renewable energy. In the following section, we consider, through an original case study, how the norm is perceived in Russia.

## Case study on perceptions of the energy transition in Russia

### Research design and methodology

This paper is devoted to investigating whether international norms can be used by states as a means to further their interests in the context of non-violent rivalry. Although constructivist theory traditionally emphasises that norms are based on a common understanding of what is acceptable, studies of contestation have shown that norms can be redesigned or abandoned because of pressing state interests. The rise of the norm banning torture and its subsequent contestation by the US after 9/11 reveals that powerful states may under certain circumstances be able to redefine standards of what is perceived as wrong or right to serve their interests (McKeown 2009). This paper is guided by the following research question: Can norms be used as instruments of non-violent rivalry by states?

Relations between the EU and Russia have undergone a rapid deterioration. While the illusion that Russia and the West could become partners after the end of the Cold War was abandoned long ago, mutual distrust developed into perceived threats of subversion characterised by mutual meddling in each other's internal affairs (Simonia & Torkunov 2014; Wohlforth & Zubok 2017). "Incompatible understanding of the political character of the historical epoch provokes an intense barrage of propaganda from all sides, with mutual allegations of political subversion and interference" (Sakwa 2021, p. 360). The situation remains one of rivalry, even after the start of hostilities in February 2022 in Ukraine, as the sides have so far avoided a direct military confrontation between Russia and NATO.

A single qualitative case study was designed to explore the different perceptions of the norm on the green energy transition. The case was selected to meet the following criteria: it should be an international norm with a strong uptake, it should be perceived as universal and based on human rights and it should be undergoing some significant form of contestation. This study focuses on the perceptions of the norm on the transition to renewable forms of energy in Russia. The country was chosen as a large fossil fuel producer dependent on income from the oil and gas industry but that has nonetheless taken on environmental commitments to decarbonise. The perception of the norm in Russia can offer a significant insight into whether international norms are truly perceived as universal. Following the constructivist worldview, the authors believe that studying perceptions of norms is a valid way to estimate their strength, and that it offers more insight into their robustness than the assessment of mechanical implementation criteria. This is especially the case when considering norms, as they are inter-subjective (not objective) standards of behaviour that are shared by a community. This paper attempts to provide feedback directly from a community about how they perceive a norm.

The research is based on 32 interviews which were carried out between December 2021 and August 2022 with Russian scholars, students, representatives of the oil



and gas industry, the media, social society and the Russian government (see [Appendix 1](#) for detailed list). The respondents were selected based on their expert knowledge in the sphere of energy and decarbonisation, often linked to their professions and the projects they worked on. The research guide strives to determine with a set of straightforward questions how the green energy transition was perceived in Russia. It enquires into whether there is a true environmental need to reduce the production, sale and consumption of fossil fuels, whether climate change was a daily concern in their lives and what they thought the role of the state should be in developing renewable forms of energy. The respondents were given rapid presentations of the research project and signed consent forms according the ethical best practices for university research.

The empirical study revealed that the norm on the green energy transition is associated in Russia with a need of the West to promote its own interests and weaken its rivals. This overwhelming response suggests that international norms can be perceived by some countries as instruments used by states to promote their interests on the global arena. While the results of a single case study cannot be generalised to all norms, the existence of one case of norm instrumentalisation is in itself significant for norm theory and opens the way for further investigation. One limitation of the study is that it is not because norms are perceived as soft power tools that they actually can successfully be used as such, as will be explored in the discussion section. Another limitation is that, although the sample of 32 respondents was selected to represent people from diverse industries and geographical areas, it cannot be considered to be statistically representative of the population at large. It does however attempt to present a fragmented and diverse set of opinions on a contemporary phenomenon. The information provided during the interviews was fact-checked when possible by the authors by triangulating it with other primary and secondary sources of data, including newspaper articles, academic papers by Russian scholars and official legal acts. However, the goal of this study is to reflect perceptions of reality rather than facts, that could be gathered through other non-qualitative methods.

## Context of the clean energy transition in Russia

Russia formally committed alongside other UN members to the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals thus recognising the need to decarbonise and to accelerate the transition to a green economy. Russia's 2009 Climate Doctrine is a concrete plan to reduce the anthropogenic impact of the fossil fuel sector on climate change, by developing renewables, improving energy efficiency, reducing government subsidies for households and creating carbon-absorption infrastructure.<sup>1</sup> In September 2021, Russia's Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin confirmed that the energy transition was on the top of the policy agenda: "This is already a new reality. We need to prepare for a phased reduction in the use of traditional fuels—oil, gas, coal" (Davidova 2021, p. 1). However, Russia's economy remains strongly dependent on fossil fuel

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<sup>1</sup> Russia's Climate Doctrine (2009). Accessed on 05.10.2022 at <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/6365>.



exports and comes fourth globally for primary energy consumption and CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, with renewables expected to represent less than 1% of the country's energy balance by 2040 (Mitrova and Melnikov 2019).

Russia's policy focuses primarily on improving efficiency in energy consumption, modernising infrastructure and exploring the opportunities of developing renewables. The development of solar, hydro and wind energy have been subject to strong Local Content policies, seeking to ensure that Russia retains its energy independence when it makes the transition to renewables. The process of weaning the country off oil, gas or coal has not begun. There appears to be a significant gap between the official declarations and the measures being adopted, which can be explained by several factors. First, Russia has an interest in striving to meet (or seeming to) the environmental standards of its clients, primarily the EU before 2021. This discourse did not always lead to concrete measures on the ground. Secondly, there is the problem of capacity. The transition to renewables or to cleaner forms of fossil fuels is strongly dependent on a country's ability to develop a new technological infrastructure and having companies capable of sustaining a strong global industrial competition (Porfiriev 2018). Third, scholars have explored the idea of path dependency, showing that "a resource curse" can prevent countries from diversifying their economies (Tynkkynen 2019).

The 2022 developments in Ukraine appear as a turning point in Russia's attitude to the energy transition. Not only has the country put on hold its environmental agenda, but Western sanctions have also made it difficult for Russia to develop the technological capacity to redesign its energy complex. Russia has decided to roll back on some ecological initiatives in order to mitigate the effects of Western sanctions on businesses: the requirement to comply with the Clean Air Targets has been pushed back by two years and the environmental watchdog Rosprirodnadzor announced that environmental reviews for businesses had been put on hold (Zel'naya 2022).

## Findings

A low level of environmental concern coupled with a lack of confidence in global carbon reduction efforts suggest the norm on decarbonisation is not internalised in Russia. Energy-saving in households, according to respondents, is primarily related to financial concerns, particularly among the less privileged. Environmental legislation, especially the 2009 Federal Law N261 "on Saving Energy and Increasing Energy Effectiveness" which made it compulsory to have electric, water and gas meters in all buildings, led to a decrease in consumption as the population came to understand the link between wasting energy and high bills. Nevertheless, Russian energy consumption per capita remains the highest in Europe.<sup>2</sup> The interview findings also suggest that there is a deep-rooted belief amongst Russians that energy should be affordable. As noted by a Director of the

<sup>2</sup> 100 000 kWh in 2020 based on data retrieved from <https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/per-capita-energy-use> on 17.10.2022.



Union of Oil and Gas producers of Russia: “Cheap or free energy is considered as a natural right by most Russians, as something that comes with the territory. We have different types of poverty but energy is and should not be a concern. [...] In fact, a segment of the elderly and the population with children never pay their energy bills at all with no repercussions”. There are several reasons for this belief that cheap, abundant energy is something that Russians are entitled to, including the country’s abundance of natural resources, the perception that the country’s riches belong to the population, and the country’s Soviet communist past. The expectation that energy should be strongly subsidised by the state remains common and Russian law is protective of vulnerable consumers who do not pay their bills. In 2021, Russians owed 804 billion rubles in utility bills, an amount comparable to other European countries in spite of the much lower energy prices, suggesting a higher debt on consumption ratio (Kuzmina 2021).

The majority of respondents noted the high level of climate scepticism in Russia, ranging from straight-out denial of the impact of humanity on climate change to the belief that we have already reached the point of no-return and that humanity is not capable of jointly working towards a decarbonisation agenda. A Professor from Tomsk State University (Faculty of Geology and Geography) expressed scepticism over whether the anthropogenic contribution to climate change is as significant as is currently represented: “When considering greenhouse gases, the most prominent one is water. CO<sub>2</sub> and methane have their influence too, but the window of their impact is smaller. Humans are responsible only for a small part of the general volume of emissions and it is not possible to determine whether they actually take the planet to a critical threshold”. A Member of the Board of the Russian Gas Society revealed a different angle of discourse, noting “It’s not that Russians don’t believe in anthropogenic climate change, it’s that they don’t believe it can be reversed”.

When asked about environmentally-friendly behaviour, several respondents noted that it would develop if it was associated with economic or other types of benefits. An analyst, at Gazprom (Department of Prospective Development) noted that “Energy-saving is an economic issue for Russians, not an environmental one. Compact fluorescent light-bulbs, water meters, dual-rate electricity meters, car-sharing are about cutting costs”. Another respondent suggested that the uptake in green behaviour among the Russian elite was about mimicking the West and embracing what is perceived as a fashion and should not be mistaken for environmental protection: “The recent trend of veganism, buying organic, green products and electric cars is about status and imitating Western behaviour. It is not motivated by environmental concerns” (Lecturer, MGIMO University, Department of Integrated International Ecological Problems and Wildlife Management).

Russians view the transition to renewable energy as unrealistic in the medium term and the Russian legislation on reducing CO<sub>2</sub> emissions (prior to February 2022) as a limited strategy designed to keep Western customers content. While the Russian government has taken some steps to improve the environmental footprint of the production and distribution of fossil fuels, the initiative was associated by most respondents with the need to satisfy the environmental standards of its clients. A Communications manager from Greenpeace noted that “the government pays lip-service to western concerns and interests but a closer look at the legislation and state



funding of energy projects reveal that Russia has no intention of reducing its output of fossil fuels and continues massive exploration projects in the arctic”.

There is indeed no long-term plan to decarbonise the economy and the possibility of developing renewables is being explored only like a marginal option. The transition to renewables will likely only take place in Russia when it is in the country’s economic interest to “go green”. A Head of Department of the Russian Presidential Administration noted that “A free-market economy will only transition to a new type of energy when it is economically advantageous to do so. This explains why some countries have started developing renewables while others haven’t”.

Additionally, renewable forms of energy are perceived in Russia as expensive to develop, requiring advanced technical expertise. A Project Coordinator at WWF, while expressing strong support for the rolling out of solar and wind infrastructure in Russia, remarked that it required changing most of the existing infrastructure all the way from the producer to the consumer: “Transferring to renewables requires a lot of investments in complex technologies. We don’t just need to produce solar/wind energy but we also have to adapt our housing, automobile and industrial infrastructure”. The lack of existing capacity in the production of renewables infrastructure could make the country dependent on the import of foreign solar panels and wind turbines should it choose to move away from fossil fuels.

Renewables are also considered to be unreliable and of limited effectiveness, more adapted to meeting modest energy needs in small countries with a warm climate than heating large and cold countries. A Lead Environmental Engineer at Rosneft noted that “Renewable energy is not as powerful as fossil fuels. The specificities of our climate mean that we cannot get by with an electric heat pump or other electricity-powered devices. Think of Oymyakon, the coldest city in the world, where the average temperature over the whole year is minus 50 degrees”. Respondents also emphasise the fragility of renewables infrastructure and the fact that climate change may lead to severe damage to solar panels and wind turbines which are frequently located in vulnerable areas.<sup>3</sup> “Climate change presents new challenges to energy security. The energy mix of the future should be less dependent on weather conditions and not linked to fragile infrastructure like solar panels and wind farms which are typically located in vulnerable areas”, asserted a Member of the Board of Trustees, of Gubkin State University of Oil and Gas. While recognising that renewables are the global powerhouse of the future, some respondents expressed doubts that the accelerated time of the transition away from fossil fuels was allowing enough time for renewables to become efficient. An Advisor on Political Matters at the Russian Ministry of Energy spoke to this effect: “Renewable energy is in its infancy and may hold great potential. But who would rely on an infant to supply the world with energy?”. The economic viability of the transition was also questioned by a Lecturer of Irkutsk National Research Technical University (Siberian School of

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<sup>3</sup> Wind turbines are placed in areas with high winds and climate change is not always sufficiently taken into account when selecting their localisation. See: Wilkie, D., & Galasso, C. (2020). Impact of climate-change scenarios on offshore wind turbine structural performance. *Renewable and Sustainable Energy Reviews*, 134, 110,323.



Geosciences): “The goal is not just changing the source of the energy but the overall business model. The energy industry needs to figure out a resilient business model. It doesn’t want to have to go through this transition stage again in 80 years, it wants to get it right. It is very difficult to figure out a business model that is resilient under technically unpredictable circumstances”.

The push to transition away from fossil fuels is perceived as a strategy to boost the West’s economy and undermine Russian interests. Respondents articulate clearly the idea that western countries are primarily concerned with their economic wellbeing and are attracted by the prospect of being able to meet their own needs by producing renewables. A News Correspondent from Russia Today shared his beliefs that the West is using decarbonisation as a means to put pressure on the Russian economy: “The easiest way to win is by not playing fair. Isn’t it practical that your rival’s main asset is dangerous for the planet and should no longer be used?”. This opinion is shared by a Risk Management Analyst at Tatneft who underlined the political component of the EU’s green policy: “The green transition is not about being green, it’s simply a transition away from Russia. The EU has shown it has no problems reopening coal mines and consuming dirtier fossil fuels so long as they are provided by friendly countries”. The open confrontation with the West in 2022 has led to a reorientation in Russian declared and de facto priorities in energy development. The findings reveal that environmental legislation has been sacrificed in an attempt to limit the recession but also that concern for the environment has decreased. An Associate Professor at the Higher School of Economics remarked that: “Environmental protection has officially been put on hold by the [Russian] government in 2022. Car manufacturers no longer need to respect European ecological standards, many natural reserves have been open up for construction and businesses have a two-year dispensation from the usual environmental impact assessment of their activities. Boosting the economy takes the propriety over anything else”.

The economic downturn brought about by Western sanctions and changes in Russian governmental spending may in time increase the number of people struggling with poverty. In a context of internal political and economic tensions, the government is prioritising social stability and keeping energy flowing cheaply in an attempt to increase the wellbeing of the population. A Head of Department at Gazprom confirmed the idea that social stability was the priority, noting “It is irresponsible to cut back on the production of fossil fuels without having a stable, reliable and cheaper alternative source of energy available. We have oil and gas and we should make the most of these resources to develop our economy which has been battered by recent sanctions”. This was echoed by a Journalist from Kommersant: “In the midst of soaring inflation, the government no doubt feels that the least it can do to keep social peace is to make sure energy is cheap. Even the least fortunate can come home to a warm flat and cook basic food on a stove. [...] The energy transition could not be further from our thoughts”.

The government has stopped paying lip service to what it perceives as western environmental concerns as it diversifies its clients. Russia has entered a stage where it has a limited interest in an energy transition. Investments in projects aimed at supporting Russian renewables are dwindling as other financial priorities come to the fore and many foreign firms operating in the renewables sector in Russia have closed



their activities in the country. The general tone of respondents became more belligerent in interviews carried out after April–May 2022, with a hint of messianism transpiring in some cases. A Lecturer and Scientist from Kazan Federal University concluded his otherwise highly rational interview with the following words: “Nothing is random, we were given natural resources by God and we are meant to use them. Have you never considered that the regions with oil and gas are the ones that need it the most? Russia for heating and the Middle East for air conditioning”.

## Discussion and theoretical contribution

This section considers how the findings on the perception of the norm on the green energy transition inform the discussion on whether norms can be used as instruments of non-violent rivalry by states.

The norm on the need to transition away from fossil fuels and decarbonise was carefully constructed and enthusiastically diffused by transitional networks over several decades. Its large uptake not only in western countries, but globally, and by a wide range of different actors including states, businesses and civil society testify to the norm’s robustness. The norm entrepreneurs were able to overcome strong interest groups such as western fossil fuels companies, forcing them to replan their development strategies and contribute to decarbonisation efforts. Governments have also significantly invested in renewables and led campaigns to increase public awareness. Although the question whether the transition is taking place fast enough to save the planet remains highly debated, major commitments to decarbonise have been made by a large number of states. The norm gains its strength from the scientific evidence it is based on and its grafting onto the more general norm on environmental protection and the rights of future generations to a clean environment. Having reached maturity or its “tipping-point”, the norm should spread rapidly and remaining countries should embrace it naturally.

The norm remains however fragile in states that produce fossil fuels, coming up against resistance in countries which rely on the export of natural resources. Path dependency and the “resource curse” are often blamed for countries’ reticence to switch to renewables. The specific identity of energy superpowers has also been used in the literature to explain Russia’s attitude to international climate norms. Although studies reveal a reluctance to recognise that the country’s power is dependent on its production and export of natural resources, there is nonetheless popular pride in Gazprom’s role in Russian society (Rutland 2015). The conflicting discourses of Russia as an energy superpower versus Russia as a raw-material appendage have been found to have exercised an influence on the country’s relationship with the West and identity factors are considered increasingly important factors when analysing Russia’s attitude towards the energy transition (Kuteleva 2020). The political dimensions of energy flows (Bouzarovski & Bassin 2011) and the difficulties attached to acquiring a new identity disconnected from natural resources (Baev 2010) offer some context to this study’s findings on perceptions of the energy





transition. They reveal how the decarbonisation project may to some degree threaten the heart of Russian self-identification.

Our findings offer a parallel and complementary explanation why the country has taken a step back from the green energy transition. It reveals that the norm is perceived as an instrument to promote the interests of the West, as the next weapon after colonialism to ensure they keep the upper hand in the international system and in their rivalry with Russia. The main argument put forward is that the uptake of the norm is much wider amongst those countries (particularly in the EU) that do not have their own fossil fuels and rely on importing them from abroad. Developing renewables enables them to improve their independence and gain economically from selling the new technologies they have developed. Political considerations started to weigh more strongly in energy decision-making after February 2022, with the goal of stopping fossil fuel imports from Russia becoming a vocal part of the EU's political agenda. The respondents suggest that the energy transition was originally a covert way of strengthening the economy of Western countries and undermining Russia's development potential, but that the cover was blown as the rivalry intensified with the confrontation in Ukraine, leading the West to reveal its true intentions. The replacement of oil and gas by coal, which is locally sourced, is viewed as hypocritical by a number of respondents who note that isolating Russia has always been more of a priority than using clean energy. Russia has also revealed where its true priorities lie, backtracking on environmental measures and abandoning decarbonisation efforts in order to return the country to economic growth, ensure social stability and finance the military. This case study reveals the power but also the limitations of international norms as foreign policy tools in non-violent rivalries. While Western countries may not regard the norm on the energy transition as a vehicle for the promotion of their interests, Russia's perception of it as such makes it unlikely the country will decide to decarbonise its energy production and consumption in the near future.

In order to be impactful, norms have to be seen as reflecting objective realities and to be in the interest of the countries adopting them. The case study presented in this paper reveals that perceptions are as important as reality in determining whether a country will adopt and apply a norm. Suspicions of instrumentalisation can have a detrimental effect on norm diffusion, whether they are founded or not. International norms have for core mission to be global, and contestation mechanisms, even if they are localised, may have powerful effects. If even two thirds of the countries of the world were to make the energy transition, their decarbonisation efforts would be significantly undermined by a natural rise in emissions, linked to population and economic growth, in states having rejected the norm. Although norms have been shown to explain positive changes in the international system, their impact depends on there being a universal agreement with the principles that underlie them. Some norms may be more advantageous to some states than others, but their robustness depends on the shared belief they are right and necessary.

These considerations suggest that, although states could promote more actively norms that play to their advantage and gain from their large diffusion, this is very



difficult to implement in practice. Creating a norm from scratch in order to promote a state's interest is a gargantuan task requiring long-term planning and a calculation of future interests that most democratic governments are not capable of. Norms are mostly too costly and time-consuming to be effective short-term political tools in inter-state rivalries. The process of norm emergence, diffusion and consolidation has been found in several cases to take up to 150 years (Nadelmann 1990). This timeframe makes it difficult to devise a policy agenda through new norms, as the benefits could not be reaped in the lifetime of those in power. It could however be possible to graft political interests onto existing norms, to "appropriate" a norm that already has a wide following and use it to promote self-interests. The norm may however be stunted in its development, experience regress or death as a result.

There are some examples of long-haul attempts to create norms in order to diffuse a particular worldview. The most researched is that of the European Union, which creates on a routine basis, new norms on emerging issues in order to spread its values and protect its interests. The "civilian dimension" of the EU and its common liberal representation as a "force for good" have been criticised by realist scholars who reveal that the regional organisation is used by "its member states as a collective instrument for shaping its external milieu by a combination of hard and soft power" (Sjursen 2006; Hyde-Price 2006, p. 217). The possible effectiveness of its normative power lies in the consistency and apolitical representation of its goals, which suggests that norms are at their most effective when the measures they promote are not only advantageous to a country (or regional organisation) but in line with its values. This allows for long-term political consistency and limits internal contestation. The case of the energy transition shows that the norm, which originated in European countries and was formalised early on by the EU, gained traction because of its consistent promotion by the organisation, which was forwarding its interests by promoting energy independence but was also true to its core belief in the universal necessity to fight climate change.

The limitations of the norm on the energy transition lie in its recent politisation. The 2022 Ukraine crisis and the strong European stance on cutting out Russian energy imports led to the norm on the green transition being "soiled" by political considerations. While there are economic reasons for Russia setting aside decarbonisation initiatives, the association between the EU's political goals and the energy transition agenda have led to the norm losing its credibility among Russian public opinion. Although fossil fuel producing countries never fully embraced the norm, they nonetheless were held accountable for their CO<sub>2</sub> emissions and paid lip service to decarbonisation initiatives. Constructivist scholars have shown that even symbolic commitments can evolve over time into real measures as a result of a functional spill-over and "naming and shaming" if the right conditions are maintained (e.g. Finnemore & Sikkink 1998). Russia went beyond purely symbolic commitments by investing in renewables research, in an attempt to become a technological leader



in this field, which might allow it at a later stage to transition to clean energy, if and when necessary, without becoming reliant on imported equipment. Russia also attempted before 2022 to redefine the decarbonisation agenda on its own terms, by developing its hydropower generation and the country's nuclear power production. It promoted the idea that while decarbonisation was a global goal, countries should be entitled to develop their own strategies, in line with their national interests.

The instrumentalisation of a norm (real or perceived) presents the risk that the credibility of the international norm may itself be undermined. States that are inexperienced at creating from scratch new norms or need short-term results may benefit from grafting their foreign policy on existing international norms as this can be an effective way of legitimising their exercise of power globally and taking the upper hand in a rivalry. For example, China can support the sale of its wind turbines, solar-photovoltaic cells and smart-grid technologies abroad by promoting the energy transition agenda and calling countries to commit to the energy transition norm.

## **Conclusion**

This paper considers to what extent norms can be used as instruments of non-violent rivalry by states by studying the existing literature on norms and rivalry and presenting the results of an original case study. Through 32 expert interviews, the authors explore Russian perceptions of the norm on the transition to green forms of energy that is actively promoted by the EU. The findings show that the norm was effective in getting even recalcitrant countries on board while it was not politicised but that the Russia–Ukraine conflict and Western sanctions led to a peak in the rivalry and to an all-out rejection of the norm in Russia. The authors offer new insights into understanding whether norms can actually be used to further foreign policy goals. The authors show that states can promote norms that are advantageous to them and gain from their large diffusion, but they also reveal how challenging it is to have all the necessary conditions lined up. Although grafting foreign policy on international norms can be an effective way of legitimising the exercise of power globally, norms are too costly and time-consuming to be effective short-term political tools in a rivalry. The politisation and instrumentalisation of norms present the risk, not only that the political initiative of the state will backfire, but also that the credibility of the international norm may itself be undermined.

## **Appendix 1**

### **List of interviews**



Interview number	Interview date	Place of work	Position	Nationality	Interview Language
1	10.12.2021	Gazprom	Analyst, Department of Prospective Development	Russia	Russian
2	11.12.2021	Russian Gas Society	Member of the Board	Russia	Russian
3	13.12.2021	Union of oil and gas producers of Russia	Director	Russia	Russian
4	16.12.2021	Russian Ministry of Energy	Advisor on Political Matters	Russia	Russian
5	13.01.2022	Rosneft	Lead Environmental Engineer	Russia	Russian
6	14.01.2022	Gazprom Neft	Industrial safety engineer of the labor protection, industrial safety group	Russia	Russian
7	14.01.2022	Russia Duma	Member of Parliament, party 'United Russia'	Russia	English
8	15.01.2022	Unigreen Energy	Public Relations Manager	Russia	Russian
9	12.02.2022	WWF	Project Coordinator	Russia	Russian
10	20.02.2022	Greenpeace	Communications Manager	Russia	Russian
11	23.02.2022	Rosneft	Account Manager	Russia	English
12	29.02.2022	Lukoil	Financial Analyst	Russia	Russian
13	01.03.2022	Tatneft	Risk Management Analyst	Russia	English
14	02.03.2022	Gubkin State University of Oil and Gas	Member of the Board of Trustees	Russia	English
15	02.03.2022	Transneft	Oilfield Technician	Russia	English
16	05.03.2022	Transneft	Member of the Board	Russia	Russian
17	09.03.2022	Rosneft	Director of Operations	Russia	Russian
18	01.05.2022	Tomsk State University "Institute of Oil and Gas"	Professor, Faculty of Geology and Geography	Russia	English
19	03.05.2022	Russian Presidential Administration	Head of Department	Russia	Russian
20	04.05.2022	Irkutsk National Research Technical University	Lecturer, Siberian School of Geosciences	Russia	English
21	11.06.2022	Higher School of Economics University	Associate Professor Institute of Economics and Utility Regulation	Russia	English
22	14.06.2022	MGIMO University	Lecturer, Department of Integrated International Ecological Problems and Wildlife Management	Russia	Russian
23	15.06.2022	MGIMO University	Vice-Rector	Russia	Russian
24	17.06.2022	Moscow Times (newspaper)	News reporter	Russia	English
25	17.06.2022	Union of oil and gas producers of Russia	Director	Russia	Russian
26	29.06.2022	Kommersant (newspaper)	Journalist	Russia	English
27	02.08.2022	Bauman Moscow State Technical University	Associate Professor, Power Engineering Department	Russia	English
28	05.08.2022	Gazprom	Head of Department	Russia	Russian
29	20.08.2022	Kazan Federal University "Institute of Oil and Gas"	Lecturer, Faculty of Environmental Sciences	Russia	English
30	25.08.2022	Russia Today	News Correspondent	Russia	Russian
31	28.08.2022	Russian Duma	Member of Parliament, party 'A just Russia for Truth'	Russia	Russian
32	29.08.2022	Rosneft	Financial Analyst	Russia	Russian



## Declarations

**Conflict of interest** On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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