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Resource nationalism among Russian academics: A centre-periphery pattern?

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Email: alessandro.tinti@uniroma1.it**Abstract**

Under Putin's tenure, the geopolitical representation of Russia as an 'energy superpower' has become a powerful mainstay for the restoration of a global status and a revanchist foreign policy. This article seeks to assess the extent to which such a nationalist narrative is prevalent among Russian academics in the oil and gas sector. Using a survey administered to research and teaching staff in selected industrial universities in 2021, we found partial confirmation of the relevance of centre-periphery relations and that nationalist attitudes are aligned with a state-centric approach. However, this perspective does not necessarily entail opposition to industry privatisation or foreign partnerships. These findings highlight the inadequacy of a simplistic privatisation/nationalisation dichotomy in capturing the hybrid nature of resource governance in petro-states. Additionally, our study suggests that resource nationalism plays a role in shaping experts' support for the government's energy policy. These findings contribute to the literature on resource nationalism and suggest potential avenues for future research exploring the role of higher education institutions in shaping resource governance.

KEYWORDS

energy superpower, epistemic community, oil, resource nationalism, Russia

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1 | ENERGY POLICY AND EPISTEMIC COMMUNITIES

Throughout Putin's term, the geopolitical depiction of the 'energy superpower' has become a potent mainstay for the restoration of Russia's global stature, which had waned with the dissolution of the Soviet Union (Bouzarovski & Bassin, 2011; Domjan & Stone, 2010; Rutland, 2008, 2018). First introduced by Hill (2002), the expression was afterwards picked up and expanded upon by Russian officials themselves. In the nationalist narrative nurtured by the government, might, prosperity and prestige are predicated on energy wealth: Since the beginning of his presidency, Vladimir Putin and the circle around him have made it clear that the renewal of national greatness would have passed through the nation's vast hydrocarbon riches. That was by no means a long shot. After collapsing in the '90s, when oil output plummeted dramatically by about 40% and the price slump hit hard the markets, the Russian petroleum industry has regained its place. Nowadays, Russia is the world's top net exporter of oil and gas combined, vying with Saudi Arabia and the United States to be the biggest oil producer and holding nearly one-fifth of global natural gas proven reserves (British Petroleum, 2021). Oil and gas revenues from extraction taxes and exports have made up between one-third and half of the federal budget from 2005 to the present, depending on price fluctuations and other market conditions, hence supporting the comeback of strong state institutions along with high military spending (Gustafson, 2012).

Despite this, the energy-based nationalist narrative is not without criticism. A mass survey found that two-thirds of the population (64%) agreed with the statement that Russia is an energy superpower (Rutland, 2015). Nonetheless, roughly the same proportion of respondents (63%) expressed concern about raw material dependency. Returning to the energy superpower debate, the distribution by region reveals a more lukewarm response in the Northwest (40%), the Urals (57%), Siberia (46%) and the Far East (59%) than that of Central (79%) and Southern (74%) districts. Regional differences are even more striking when the location of oil and gas fields is considered, implying a problematic dynamic between the centre and the producing periphery. Overall, the survey results indicate that the general population is less cohesive than one might imagine. Ordinary citizens are aware and alert to the addiction to highly volatile commodity markets. This is not surprising given that, despite the power of nationalist framing, extractive processes are frequently riven by disagreements over the allocation of costs and rewards (Kohl & Farthing, 2012). Furthermore, despite recent attempts by the elites to reshape the country's geopolitical identity around it, the petroleum industry was never central in the Soviet Union's symbolic repertoire (Rutland, 2015), which is likely to have an impact on general acceptance of resource nationalism.

Against this background, this article investigates the perspectives of Russian academics on the nationalist narrative centred on hydrocarbon wealth. Based on a closed-ended survey administered to research and teaching personnel at selected industrial institutions, we examined what energy professionals in higher education think about resource nationalism and its policy implications, on both the domestic and international levels. Previous research (Tinti & Cilento, 2023) demonstrated that academic circles are relevant actors in energy policymaking in Russia. Technical universities have built very tight partnerships with all major Russian companies, especially in extractive regions. Knowledge transfer, joint research projects, specialised training, scholarships and internships and revolving doors between academic and corporate careers are evidence for relevant intersections, which are however underexplored in the literature. Higher education offers not only a skilled pool of future employees but also wider opportunities of collaboration that extend into applied research and business ventures. In line with the triple helix theory (Etzkowitz, 2008; Etzkowitz & Leydesdorff, 1998, 2000), we discovered that flagship universities serve as key nodes in regional innovation systems. Our research on university–industry relations revealed the importance of technical universities' missions and organisational cultures in shaping the pace and content of collaboration with companies. We also discovered that academics working at the same university held many of the same beliefs regarding energy policy (for example, about privatisation and state involvement). This aroused our curiosity in their general attitudes towards the energy superpower discourse propagated by the government.

This is noteworthy, in our opinion, because Russian academics in specialised institutions constitute an epistemic community with some clout on energy policy due to their embeddedness in corporate strategies and production of

policy-relevant knowledge. Haas introduced this notion to describe 'a network of professionals with recognized expertise and competence in a particular domain and an authoritative claim to policy-relevant knowledge within that domain or issue-area' (1992, p. 3). In his understanding, epistemic communities are internally cohesive as a result of mutual socialisation and shared beliefs (Mai'a K, 2013). In issue-areas marked by technical complexity and uncertainty, knowledge-based experts can help policymakers in defining state interests, framing complex issues and formulating policies. In this way, epistemic communities can participate in the policy process as authoritative advisors and have indirect influence over it. Since Haas' landmark work on the role of transnational experts in international policy coordination, the epistemic community framework has been applied extensively to numerous policy areas—from nuclear policy (Adler, 1992; Mitchell et al., 2007) to environmental governance (Gough & Shackley, 2001; Mabon et al., 2019). However, energy policy has received remarkably little attention in the literature. While the fact that energy policy is a core dimension of national security may explain why scholarly attention to epistemic communities has been limited, it remains an overly uncertain and technically complex domain in which scientific knowledge supports policymaking and sets the bandwidth of political action. Even inside an authoritarian and centralised petrostate, energy governance is far from monolithic. While the purpose of this study is not to determine the extent to which epistemic communities influence policy output, it is assumed that learning interactions with policy elites are not negligible. In this sense, we aimed to provide a first-hand and novel understanding of resource nationalism from the vantage point of specialised academics.

2 | A CRITICAL REVIEW OF RESOURCE NATIONALISM

Resource nationalism is a popular term for the assertion of greater public intervention in the extractive sector that has featured many resource-rich countries across the globe since the commodity boom in the early 2000s, which sparked the resurgence of protectionist measures to maximise the government take from higher raw materials pricing. In the West, the rising tide of nationalistic policies in the natural resources sector has been widely viewed in a negative light as a challenge (if not a threat) to the operations of private enterprises (Bremmer & Johnston, 2009). Tellingly, resource nationalism is identified as the top business risk for the mining industry in several Ernst & Young's annual reports. The scholarly debate situates it within the overall faltering of the so-called Washington Consensus and contestation of neoliberal imperatives in extractive peripheries, especially in Latin America, where left-wing governments in Venezuela, Ecuador and Bolivia flagged the governance of natural resources as the most pressing political struggle. According to this perspective, national claims over resource ownership are frequently framed in opposition to foreign capital or third-country interference (Emel et al., 2011) and are historically associated with the nationalisation waves that upended the concessionary regime, on which the global petroleum industry was based, in many newly independent countries between the 1950s and 1970s (Marcel, 2006).

Actually, the recent rebalancing of control in favour of the state has occurred in a very different scenario than that of national expropriations of foreign oil companies, first enacted in Mexico by Cárdenas in 1938 and then spread in those countries still under colonial rule, the foundation of OPEC in 1963, or the first energy shock 10 years later, when Western commentators expressed anxiety about the energy weapon wielded by oil holders in the Middle East. Despite the fact that self-determination is frequently used to fuel the expansion of nationalist fervour into the economic domain, contemporary resource nationalism is more than the 'response by extractive peripheries to the persistence of colonial control or the domination of foreign (monopoly) capital over their rich natural resource bases' (Kaup & Gellert, 2017, p. 277). The view that simplifies the opposition between resource nationalism and free market principles by equating the former with a return to mercantilism is fundamentally flawed and lacks proper focus. Furthermore, rent capture policies can be seen in market-oriented countries in the global North such as Canada and Australia. These considerations call for a more cautious approach to the topic.

Definitions generally agree upon (i) the increased sovereign control over the extractive process (via the involvement of state-owned companies, the tightening of fiscal regimes and/or the revision of contractual terms for

exploration activities) for the purpose of retaining a bigger piece of the cake at the expense of foreign firms and (ii) the cyclical nature of the phenomenon, whose ebbs and flows appear to be connected with the boom-and-bust cycle of extractive economies for which governments will have greater incentives to govern the domestic resource base (and, conversely, to dampen foreign investments) at times of high commodity prices (Andreasson, 2015; Stevens, 2008; Vivoda, 2009; Wilson, 2011, 2015). However, such mainstream perspective is problematic and partial for a number of reasons.

First, although the access bargain came under strain in many oil producing countries and national oil companies (NOCs) nowadays supply almost three-quarters of global oil production (Bridge & Le Billon, 2017), increases in public shareholding in the industry or the re-negotiation of royalties and taxation schemes have rarely resulted into the radical exclusion of foreign participation. On the contrary, the consolidation of state-based governance over natural resources often goes hand in hand with the attraction of external investors. Rather than on seizing assets, nationalist policies have emphasised revenue capture and redistribution. Riofrancos explains that '[it is] a nationalism amenable to courting foreign capital and deepening global market integration' (2020, p. 15). The conventional distinction between resource-seeking international oil companies (IOCs) and market-seeking NOCs is anything but clear, as evidenced by the proliferation of public-private joint ventures, NOC investment strategies and the initial public offerings of shares of state-owned companies on stock exchanges (Bridge & Le Billon, 2017; also, Pryke, 2017). The inclusion of foreign minority shareholders (Shell, Mitsui and Mitsubishi) in the Gazprom-led Sakhalin 2 project, the operations of state-controlled Rosneft in northern Iraq and the government sale of a 19.5% stake in Rosneft in late 2006 are relevant examples.

Second, mainstream definitions are prone to reproducing a spatial bias that results from assuming a static and isomorphic relationship between sovereignty, nationalism and natural resources. Despite being politically charged, most works do not critically analyse these topics (Koch & Perreault, 2019). Rather, the dominant state-centred perspective appears to be stuck in what Agnew (1994) has termed as 'territorial trap', as a result of which sub-state and trans-state geographies of extraction, which play a key role in the mining value chain, are pushed out of view. Aside from the fact that commodification of natural resources is not just a state prerogative, entrapment in a juridical framework means conflation of the state 'as actor (corporate agent) or arena (territorial space)' (Adamson, 2016, p. 3). Not least, land and subsoil resources are understood as essential properties of the nation-state. In brief, the multi-scalar processes that territorialise resource exploitation are often ignored, while attention is focused solely on a competitive interaction between governments and IOCs, the outcome of which is supposed to fluctuate depending on price dynamics. This hinders a more in-depth knowledge of the various ways in which national claims to territorial resources are discursively enacted and materially practiced. The 'reshoring' of offshore resources (Childs, 2016) or the geopolitical race for the Arctic are cases in point.

Third, the economic approach to resource nationalism downplays its ideological component completely. As Childs puts it, the binary between state versus private control '[reduces] the conceptual range of the phenomenon down to a language of economics alone and overlooks the political dimensions of identity and justice' (2016, pp. 2–3). However, nationalism should serve as a wake-up call, reminding us that ideational forces are just as vital as material ones (Rosales, 2017). According to Jaffe, 'resource nationalism finds its roots in the ideology that the natural resources of a country belong to the nation and exist as a national patrimony and consequently should be used for the benefit of the nation as a whole and not be exploited for private gain' (2011, p. 295). The appeal to a national patrimony to which citizens have a right by birth, and the associated claim of a greater public role in maintaining and sustaining it, is not motivated solely by expediency. First and foremost, it seeks to remake the nation upon resource wealth (Perreault & Valdivia, 2010). As overarching narratives, resource-based imaginaries reshape and organise political space.

Evidence about the mutual constitution of nation-building and resource-based imaginaries abounds in human geography and political ecology literature. Coronil (1997) pioneered the study of 'oil nations' with a masterful ethnography of Venezuela's petro-state. Watts' (2004) study of the governable spaces carved by petro-capitalism in the conflict-torn Niger Delta is another milestone. In those footsteps, a growing body of empirical research has

investigated the reconfiguration of collective identities as a result of the formation of an extractive economy (Childs & Hearn, 2017; Jackson, 2015; Kohl & Farthing, 2012; Lahiri-Dutt, 2016; Perreault & Valdivia, 2010; Riofrancos, 2020; Tinti, 2021). Drawing on Anderson's (2006) thesis of nation as imagined community, Koch and Perreault (2019) rethink resource nationalism as a geopolitical rhetoric through which collective belonging to the national community is produced. This implies, among other things, that resource-based national imaginaries may be challenged and breed political tensions within the national community itself.

In mainstream interpretations of resource nationalism, the relationship with identity formation fades into the background. As a partial corrective to macroeconomic approaches relying on bargaining theories, Wilson (2015) introduces political institutions as a key conditioning factor. He contends that 'rentier, developmental, and liberal market institutions pose different political imperatives for states, and thus lend themselves to distinct policy strategies for the capture of resource rents' (Wilson, 2015, p. 404). The type of institutional setting is assumed to have an impact on the policy structure that ultimately determines which form resource nationalism takes: In rentier countries, resource nationalism serves the purpose of securing the political regime through rent capture and distribution policies; in developmental countries, resource exploitation is geared towards socio-economic transformation goals; in liberal market economies, state intervention is usually limited to regulation. The institutional tripartition adds complexity and is useful for cross-national comparisons, but ideological aspects are ignored. Because resource nationalism is mobilised to (re)create a nation-space and engrave a development vision on it, even Wilson's lens translates into a limited understanding of the phenomenon, which instead needs to be explored in its discursive foundations in order to acknowledge the agency of the actors involved, explain change over time and variance between cases and not to overestimate exogenous determinants such as price volatility and foreign interference.

3 | THE RUSSIAN PETRO-STATE: FROM WILD PRIVATISATION TO STATE CORPORATISM

In the literature on resource nationalism, Russia is frequently referenced as a counterweight to Western liberal countries (Bremmer & Johnston, 2009), sustaining an argument that implies poorly veiled criticism of the unsuccessful transition to a free-market economy. However, the mainstream approaches discussed in the preceding section are of little help because the partial re-nationalisation of the oil sector under Putin deviates markedly from the 'textbook model', which entails national governments targeting foreign investors after investment costs have been sunk (Domjan & Stone, 2010). Despite Moscow's pressure on international firms, the re-consolidation of state intervention following the massive liberalisation of the Yeltsin years took a quite different path, driven mostly by local politics.

The history of the oil and gas sector in post-Soviet Russia is full of twists and turns. During the 1990s, more than two-thirds of the oil industry was privatised into a dozen large companies, owned by a new class of tycoons from various backgrounds: well-connected bankers who won extremely favourable terms to lay hands on state assets, sold off through the controversial loan-for-share scheme; rampant industrialists such as Roman Abramovich, Vagit Alekperov and Vladimir Bogdanov who expanded their corporate empires in the same way; former 'Red Directors' of Soviet enterprises who managed to keep their place in the sun; and the 'New Russians' who seized the opportunities presented by the dismantling of the socialist system to accumulate great wealth (Fortescue, 2006; Rutland, 2018). This small group of oligarchs stepped into the void left by the state's retreat and came to dominate the most strategic sector of the economy. On the contrary, the gas industry was unaffected by privatisation, with state-owned Gazprom maintaining a monopoly on production and transportation.

However, devolution of state control to private entrepreneurs was never intended to be lasting or total. The early-2000s rebound in oil output, fuelled by a price increase, prompted the Kremlin to regain ownership stakes via a series of acquisitions through the national champions, Gazprom and Rosneft (Bradshaw, 2009). Direct public control

over 70% of the oil industry was restored by mid-2007 (Rutland, 2018). The confrontation quickly turned sour, as seen by the 'Yukos affair' and the arrest of Mikhail Khodorkovsky. One of Putin's stated goals was to recapture booming rents, and the Russian government had already taken steps in that direction with new tax legislation (Gustafson, 2012). Foreign investments and participation in upstream projects were also discouraged. However, the conflict with oil oligarchs was much more about the survival of the political regime (Domjan & Stone, 2010). Putin was concerned that the rise of rich opponents would threaten his leadership. Because he could bank on popular hostility towards the oligarchs, he changed the rules of the game, but without killing the golden goose (Fortescue, 2006). In this light, rather than being the culmination of a head-to-head between private and public rent seekers, the re-nationalisation of the bulk of the industry was a matter of elites' co-optation in order to reserve the commanding heights of the energy-based economy for Kremlin loyalists. Proof of this is that expropriations did not occur in the mining sector, where no opposition was in sight.

In addition, re-establishing Russia as a great power was an equally powerful motivation for increased state participation in the energy sector. Such reasoning is prominent in Putin's strategic doctrine, which places a premium on exercising influence on energy-importing countries. To make energy leverage effective, the Russian government has never lost control of the transportation infrastructure, which is firmly managed by state-owned Transneft and Gazprom. According to Domjan and Stone (2010), the two companies have operated as both rent redistribution agents and proxies in export markets. The economic and geopolitical imperatives of Russia's resource nationalist policies highlight the survival strategies of political elites and informal rent-sharing arrangements, which are heir to central planning and communist-era allocative practices (Rogers, 2016). As pointed out by Hanson (2009), the recent acquisitions can be also interpreted as 're-privatisations' that reward cronies via patronage circuits. As a result, the state-corporate nexus defies straightforward definition. Things become considerably more difficult when the state is disassembled into its various departments, agencies and procedures at various administrative levels.

A different question is being raised here, since we are attempting to understand how resource nationalism is viewed via the lens of academia, but the considerations above are by no means secondary. Furthermore, it is worth noting that the pre-eminence of petroleum history in today's Russia is largely unmatched in history. In fact, for most of the history of the Soviet Union, coal held a dominant position as the primary source of fuel in the country's energy mix, while oil production did not carry a comparable political weight. In other words, 'socialist oil was never the basis for the creation of an industrial-cum-financial elite that could influence, rival, or even take over agencies of a federal state' (Rogers, 2016, p. xiii). Inter alia, this prevented a petro-culture to emerge and spread in the same way as did in the United States (Huber, 2013) or other oil producing countries.

4 | THE WEAKNESS OF THE ENERGY SUPERPOWER

As we write this article, 436 days have passed since Russia invaded Ukraine. The war escalated long-standing tensions between Kiev and Moscow and had a significant impact on energy markets, particularly in Europe, as Russia is a major supplier of natural gas to many European countries. Energy diplomacy has long been a hallmark of Russian foreign policy. Prior to the crisis, Russia supplied 26.9% of oil, 41.0% of natural gas and 46.7% of solid fossil fuel imported by EU member states (Eurostat, 2021). This level of interdependence has provided Putin with the means to translate the market share into geopolitical clout over energy-hungry consuming countries and pursue a more assertive foreign policy (Gustafson, 2020). Russia has used its control of natural gas supplies as a key political tool, occasionally threatening supply interruptions or temporarily cutting off gas exports to exert greater influence, while maintaining its overall reliability as a supplier (Larsson, 2006). The hydrocarbon potential has also fuelled renewed regional ambitions over former Soviet republics, as demonstrated by the creation of the Eurasian Economic Union (Mitrova, 2016). However, the military aggression against Ukraine in February 2022 marked a turning point. Ukraine is an essential transit country for Russian gas exports to Europe, with pipelines running through its territory. Pricing disputes have been ongoing since 2005, with Gazprom cutting off gas supplies to Ukraine in June 2014 following

the annexation of Crimea and payment delays from Kiev. After the EU mediated a flimsy agreement, exports were halted again in November 2015, kicking off an arbitration process that has dragged on since then. With the outbreak of hostilities, the conflict brought EU energy security concerns to a new level and resulted in a price spike on the global markets.

The ongoing conflict appears to validate the idea the profile of an energy superpower capable of leveraging energy exports for geopolitical gain. Not by chance, the oil and gas sector has risen to a dominant position in the country's economy under Putin, more than ever before. According to some, however, this hyper-extractive regime exemplifies the few virtues and many vices of petro-states (Etkind, 2014). As a matter of fact, contemporary Russia portrays all the trappings of a rentier, authoritarian and corrupted country whose fortunes fell in the hands of a caste of greedy oligarchs and whose prospects are even more dangerously tied to price fluctuations. According to a large body of political science literature, oil-dependent countries are cursed to suffer from economic stagnation or under-development (Leite & Weidmann, 1999; Sachs & Warner, 2001), low levels of democracy (Ross, 2001) and higher risk of armed conflict (Collier & Hoeffler, 1998, 2004; Fearon, 2005). Space does not allow for a discussion of the 'oil curse theory' but suffice it to say that Russia is singled out as a confirmation of the rule rather than an exception. Nevertheless, Russia does not fit the picture of a petro-state spiralling out of control: Quite the opposite, 'it remains an industrial power - if an eroded one - with a developed state and a deep-rooted indigenous oil industry' and whose elite has endeavoured to tackle the recurring drawbacks of a commodity-driven economy through cautious fiscal and monetary policies, including the establishment of a stabilisation fund to set aside petrorubles (Gustafson, 2012, p. 7). Rutland (2018) adds a series of other characteristics (a relatively diversified economy with a robust manufacturing sector and a large agricultural base; a modern, literate society; a strong state tradition; the capacity to levy taxes on the oil and gas sector) that contradict the typical characterisation of petro-states.

This notwithstanding, the nationalist discourse omits vulnerabilities and contradictions looming on the horizon of the energy superpower. Despite benefiting from the 'pull of the past' to recover oil production in the early 2000s, Gustafson thoroughly explains that 'over the longer run, the Soviet legacy assets have acted as an anaesthetic, delaying the adaptation of the Russian oil industry to modern management and technology, allowing it to remain relatively isolated and poorly equipped to compete globally' (2012, p. 10). With the depletion of mature fields and falling oil prices, the profit margin is set to decline rapidly given that newly discovered fields in remote and offshore basins pose higher extraction costs. Since the government budget depends heavily on export revenues, few resources can be diverted from the rent distribution mechanism and reinvested to upgrade the industry. This made it necessary to involve foreign companies and foreign capital in order to develop unconventional oil and gas in technologically challenging fields, but as a result of sanctions imposed by the United States and EU, most projects with Western partners have been suspended and are unlikely to resume anytime soon due to the war. From another point of view, the extractive economy has also widened the abysmal gap between a handful of wealthy oligarchs and the vast majority of the population. According to one study, resource-rich regions within the country have higher levels of economic inequality (Buccellato & Mickiewicz, 2009). In addition, it has been observed that the alliance between energy barons and the security apparatus led 'a hypermasculine, cynical, and misogynistic culture' to take hold, thus contributing greatly to the deterioration of Russian society and culture (Etkind, 2014). Given the salience of these downsides, oil and gas academics at Russian technical universities provided us with a rare opportunity to gain a unique perspective from a fundamental driving force of the energy superpower.

5 | RESEARCH QUESTIONS, HYPOTHESES AND DATA

Drawing on Koch and Perreault's conceptualisation, we adopt a minimalist definition of resource nationalism as a top-down discourse promoting greater state control over resource industries. Our original objective was to assess the extent of resource nationalism in Russian society at large. However, due to both analytical coherence and practical feasibility, which was further constrained by the COVID-19 pandemic and its impacts on field research, we

narrowed our focus to a pertinent and significant stratum: higher education institutions within the oil and gas sector. These specialised academic institutions have historically played a crucial role in the development of a mature petroleum industry. Nowadays, technical universities have inherited this legacy, serving as sources of skilled personnel and innovation hubs that benefit industrial operators. As such, the higher education system occupies a pivotal position within the oil and gas value chain. While there may be regional disparities, specialised universities throughout the country share a common mission. Therefore, it is valuable to examine the belief systems held by academics. To our knowledge, this is the first empirical study on Russia's energy policy that specifically focuses on the scientific community as the unit of analysis.

Given the above, our overarching research question was formulated as follows: How strong is resource nationalism among Russian academics working in petroleum geology and related fields? We posited that the distance from the political centre may influence the strength of resource nationalism, hypothesising that centre-periphery relations play a significant role in shaping attitudes towards the government's resource nationalist narrative. In the context of oil development, these refer to the dynamic between the political centre and subordinate peripheries where oil reserves are located. As revenues accrue to the centre and are directed away from the resource-rich regions where they are generated, this can lead to economic imbalances and tension if revenues are not fairly distributed. This is a recurrent trend in many oil-producing countries where the centre experiences economic growth and prosperity while extractive communities in the periphery are exploited and marginalised. The Kurdistan Region and Basra Governorate in Iraq, as well as Khuzestan in Iran, are relevant examples. The same pattern is observed in Russia, where the oil industry is characterised by significant spatial disparities, with most production concentrated in remote regions such as Western Siberia, Eastern Siberia, North Caucasus and the Volga-Urals. However, these regions remain at the margins of economic development. Given the strong tradition of state centralisation, the vertical model of centre-periphery relations translates in limited opportunities for regional autonomy. As a consequence, the federal government and the state-owned companies headquartered in Moscow or St. Petersburg have significant degree of control over the oil industry in extractive territories, where the environmental impacts of oil development are often most severe. Therefore, we expect that support for resource nationalism may be weaker in the periphery than in the centre and that academics in the former are more likely to be aware of (and possibly willing to voice) local grievances (H1).

In addition to centre-periphery relations, another factor that may impact experts' views on resource nationalism is their support for a state-led approach to the management of natural resources. We posit that policy preferences regarding resource management are closely linked to nationalist perspectives (H2). However, examining the degree of nationalist attitudes among experts and the factors that contribute to their variation leads to further analysis of their potential influence on threat perception and policy preferences. Specifically, we suggest that nationalist attitudes may result in an overemphasis on external challenges to the Russian oil and gas industry rather than internal factors. Moreover, resource nationalism may be a crucial factor in shaping experts' support for particular policy decisions related to the petroleum sector.

To address these research questions, we designed a questionnaire (in Russian) to be administered via email to all professors and researchers of selected universities. The questionnaire was sent to teaching and research staff of leading specialised universities across the country between January and February 2021. We received 113 individual responses with a 9% response rate. Based on their geographical location, a distinction between central and peripheral universities was made.¹ We assumed that professionals who were socialised in the same institutional context would have comparable perspectives. In order to offer a basis for comparison, the first section of our survey replicated the three energy-related questions used in the NEORUSS project (Rutland, 2015). On a 5-point scale, respondents were asked to agree or disagree with the following statements: Q1. 'Russia is an energy superpower'; Q2. 'Gazprom is a national treasure'; Q3. 'Russia should not be a raw materials appendage'. Instead, the second section was designed to assess views towards public involvement in the industry versus privatisation (Q4. 'In your opinion how important is it that the state controls the oil and gas industry?'). In the third section, respondents were asked to identify challenges and threats to the oil and gas sector in the foreseeable future. The fourth section

included a series of questions covering several topics, including cooperation with foreign companies (Q9. 'Are joint ventures with foreign partners desirable?'), Russia's position on the global energy markets, the curse effect (Q11. 'Is reliance on the petroleum industry an obstacle to economic growth in the long term?') and decarbonisation (Q12. 'In view of growing concern over climate change, should Russia divest from fossil fuels and accelerate transition towards carbon neutrality?').

All questions are close ended. Although open-ended surveys can provide a more fine-grained view, we were concerned that they might create non-comparable results and lower the response rate, especially since the questionnaire was not administered in person and did not rely on prior contacts. In fact, relatively few respondents used the final comment section or agreed to participate in a follow-up interview to elaborate on their points. We avoided any terminology that could be perceived as partisan or biased when creating survey questions. Given the sensitivity of the topics, we also took care not to expose participants to any potentially dangerous situation. Accordingly, we chose not to include any questions to evaluate the impact of political beliefs or personal motivations.

6 | ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Drawing on the theoretical framework presented above, our study employs survey data to examine the degree of resource nationalism among oil and gas experts in technical universities in Russia and to identify the factors that may explain these attitudes. Additionally, we investigate the potential influence of nationalist attitudes on policy preferences and the extent to which they shape experts support for the government's energy policy.

Before delving into the explanatory analysis, we provide an overview of the experts' perceptions of Russia as an energy superpower. Notably, our sample shows a higher level of support for the energy superpower discourse (Q1) than the general public surveyed in NEORUSS. Despite a modest 9-point percentage difference between experts from central (88%) and peripheral (79%) universities, the latter exhibit significantly higher levels of support than the 46% registered in NEORUSS for the Siberian region, where two of the technical universities included in our sample are located. These findings suggest that oil and gas academics largely share the perspective that energy resources are a significant tool for exerting geopolitical influence on the global stage.

6.1 | Explaining experts' resource nationalism

Our first hypothesis (H1) is that oil and gas experts' nationalist attitudes differ based on their geographical location. To measure the dependent variable, we used a question that asks respondents whether they believe that Gazprom is a national treasure (Q2). This question is based on a controversial slogan that was used by Gazprom and later removed from advertising in 2003. Despite this, the slogan continues to be associated with the company's commercial image by executives and high-ranking officials. Agreement with this statement is considered to reflect individuals' nationalist attitudes towards energy resources. In our sample, the majority of respondents (51%) agree with such a view, more or less strongly, while the remaining half is divided between those who neither agree nor disagree (26%), or even disagree with the statement (23%). To test our hypothesis, we cross-tabulated the nationalist variable with the respondents' geographical location. It should be noted that our sample is unbalanced, with 72 respondents out of 113 contacted (64%) from central institutions. Despite this, however, the sample provides a sufficient number of respondents from the periphery to evaluate whether such relationship holds significant results. Table 1 shows that the nationalist view is mostly shared by respondents from the centre (58%) as compared with those from the periphery (39%), although the difference is not statistically significant.

In view of the partial explanatory power of the centre-periphery dimension in accounting for the variation in resource nationalism among experts, we examined their preferences concerning the management of natural resources. This is operationalised through a question that probes the perceived importance of state control in the oil

TABLE 1 Relationship between resource nationalism and geographic location (%).

	Centre	Periphery
Gazprom is a national treasure – Yes	58	39
Gazprom is a national treasure – No	42	61
N	71	41

Note: Pearson $\chi^2(1) = 3.6$ ($p = 0.056$). In relation to Q2, the response options ‘Strongly agree’ and ‘Agree’ were collapsed into a single category and subsequently recoded as ‘yes’. Similarly, the response options ‘Strongly disagree’, ‘Disagree’ and ‘Neither agree nor disagree’ were recoded as ‘no’.

TABLE 2 Relationship between state-centred approach and resource nationalism (%).

	State control Important	State control Not important
Gazprom is a national treasure – Yes	59	28
Gazprom is a national treasure – No	41	72
N	83	29

Note: Pearson $\chi^2(1) = 8.51$ ($p < 0.001$). In relation to Q4, the response options ‘Important’ and ‘Very important’ were recoded as ‘Important’, while ‘Not important’, ‘Not important at all’ and ‘Of average importance’ were recoded as ‘Not important’.

TABLE 3 State-centred approach and resource nationalism, by geographic location (%).

	Centre		Periphery	
	State control Important	State control Not important	State control Important	State control Not important
Gazprom is a national treasure – Yes	46	-	69	35
Gazprom is a national treasure – No	54	100	31	65
N	35	6	48	23

and gas industry (Q4). Our analysis reveals that state control is overwhelmingly supported by the majority of respondents (74%), while 19% regard it as only moderately important, and a mere 7% do not consider it important at all. However, a bivariate analysis examining the relationship between nationalist and statist attitudes indicates a significant association between the two variables.

As Table 2 shows, 59% of those who consider state control to be important also share the nationalist view of Gazprom as a national treasure. This percentage, however, drops to 28% among respondents who reject the state-centred approach. To examine whether the geographic location of the respondents' institution has an impact on these views, we introduced centre-periphery as control variable. Table 3 confirms that the state-centred approach has a strong influence on nationalist views even after controlling for the geographical location. Specifically, the results indicate that even among respondents from the periphery, those who consider state control important significantly support the nationalist view (69%), as compared to those who do not consider it important (35%).

Although the strong statist tradition undoubtedly plays a role in the preference for a state-centred approach, follow-up interviews revealed a pragmatic stance highlighting economies of scale as the main factor supporting direct state participation in the industry. Survey data also confirm this, as two-thirds of respondents support the

privatisation of the sector if it would make it more competitive. Further disaggregated data reveal that academic staff from top-tier institutions are more open to privatisation. Interestingly, most respondents (70%) welcome joint ventures with foreign operators (Q7), indicating that the dominant nationalist frame does not necessarily exclude or oppose international cooperation, which is viewed as a natural aspect of global commodity markets and an opportunity to maximise the geological potential, particularly in unconventional deposits. The inclination towards foreign companies seems to be stronger in the periphery (76% versus 67%), where the challenges of exploring technologically complex and geographically remote fields are likely to be more pressing.

6.2 | From resource nationalism to policy preferences

As shown, state management over the oil and gas sector is closely related to a sense of national pride. Does resource nationalism influence views on energy policy more generally? We investigated whether resource nationalism affects the perception of threats to the industry. We distinguished between external (price volatility, geopolitical tensions, limited access to international capital markets) and internal (inefficiencies in the regulatory framework, lack of domestic investments, tax increase) threats and expected stronger nationalist attitudes to be more likely associated with the former (H3). While Figure 1 appears to support this hypothesis, the observed relationships are not statistically significant (Figure 2).

On the contrary, our findings suggest that resource nationalism has a significant impact on attitudes towards the role of the petroleum industry in the economy, rather than on perceived threats. Those who share a sense of nationalist pride for Gazprom tend to support the notion that the petroleum industry is not an obstacle to economic growth (the country is mostly seen as an exception to the oil curse theory), as well as that Russia should not divest from the petroleum industry due to climate change concerns. Furthermore, they tend to believe that Russia influences the global energy market, rather than being influenced by it. Although the questionnaire was conducted prior to the outbreak of the Ukrainian war, this view is especially relevant in the light of the ongoing conflict since it indicates the

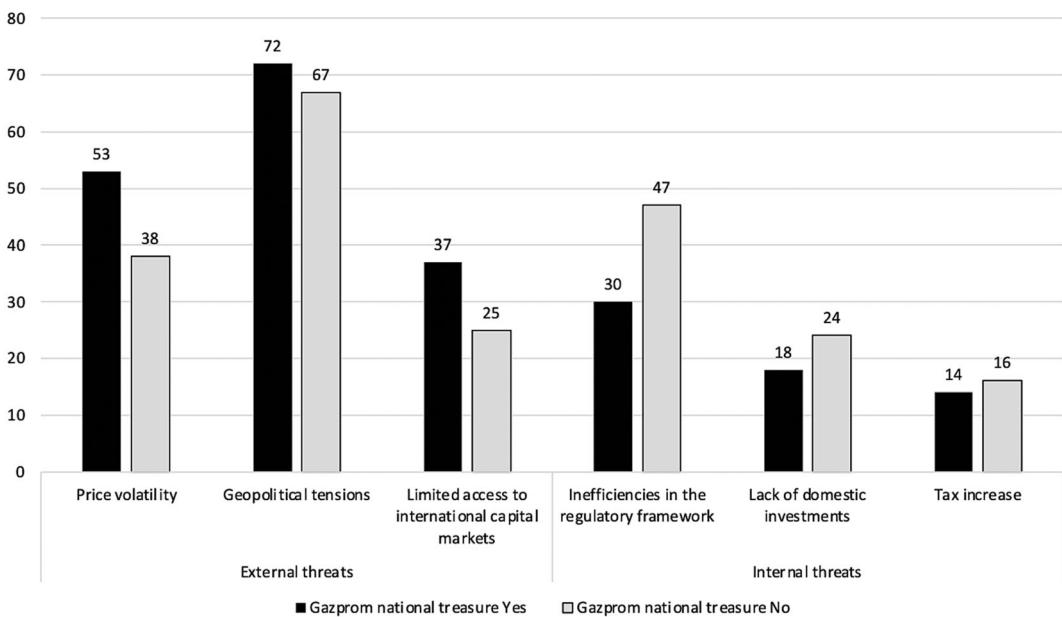


FIGURE 1 Resource nationalism and perception of threats (%). [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1468-2925.2024.00000.x)]

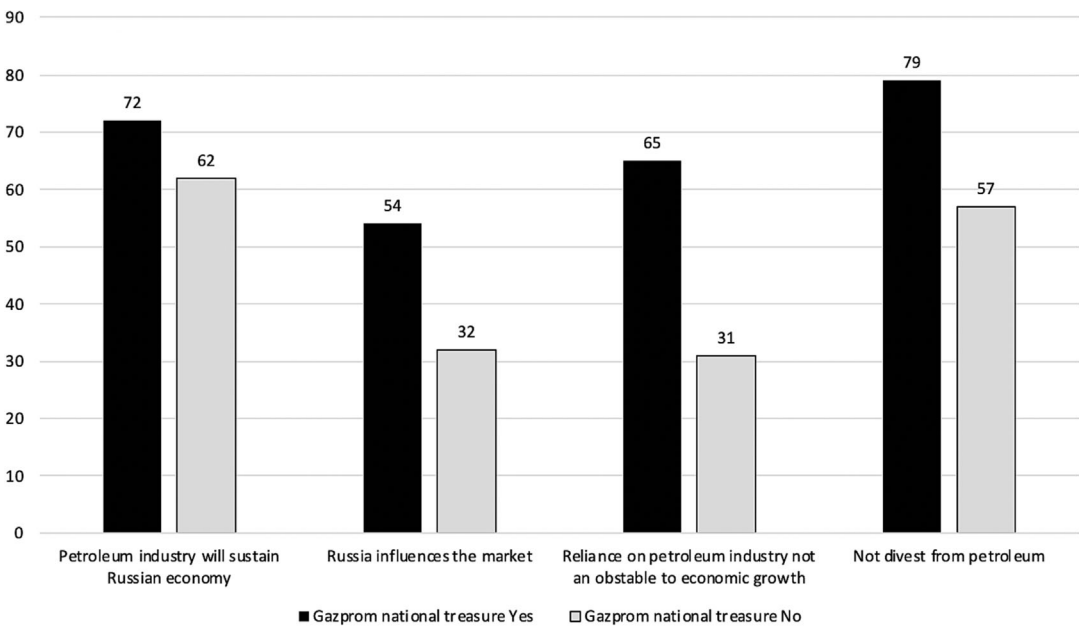


FIGURE 2 Resource nationalism and views on energy policy (%). [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/janna.12978)]

confidence of oil and gas academics regarding Russia's position in the global energy landscape. It would be worthwhile to investigate whether recent developments have altered these attitudes, particularly after the European Commission's approval of sanctions and the plans of some EU member states to reduce energy imports from Russia. Our data also revealed that only around one-third of respondents consider climate change a pressing concern that should prompt a shift away from a fossil-fuelled paradigm. In fact, some interviewees view the global push for carbon neutrality as a political plot of the West. Although the relationship between resource nationalism and the belief that the petroleum industry will sustain the Russian economy in the medium-term is not statistically significant, this view is still commonly held by a sizable portion of respondents.

7 | CONCLUSIONS

The aim of this study was to investigate the extent to which Russian academics in the oil and gas sector subscribe to the energy superpower discourse cultivated by the government. Haas argued that epistemic communities play a crucial role in formulating and disseminating causal ideas and normative beliefs, thereby contributing to the shaping of state interests and preferences. In this light, survey responses revealed a largely cohesive epistemic community that shares a common policy enterprise and does not question the nationalist discourse, neither from an ideological perspective nor from a pragmatic standpoint that accounts for the industry's needs. As compared with the NEORUSS survey our sample shows greater support to the nationalist narrative. Nonetheless, differences between universities were observed. Our central assumption was that socialisation within a particular academic environment situated within a broader socio-economic, cultural and industrial context influences one's perspective on energy policy. In this respect, our hypothesis regarding the relevance of centre-periphery relations was partially corroborated. The link between nationalist attitudes and a preference for a state-centred approach was robust instead. Notably, experts' support for privatisation and partnership with foreign companies constitutes empirical evidence that challenges the mainstream view of resource nationalism as an autarkic response to foreign firms and investments. This finding is a

major contribution of the study, highlighting the inadequacy of the privatisation/nationalisation pendulum in capturing the hybrid nature of resource governance (Childs, 2016), even in a petro-state that inherited a highly centralised economy. Moreover, we found evidence that resource nationalism contributes to shape support for government's energy policies.

Despite the limitations of this study, we believe that the findings offer a promising avenue for further exploration. Our empirical assessment provides a comprehensive understanding of the various dimensions of resource nationalism beyond the mainstream economic approach. Additionally, it suggests the need to examine Russia's oil and gas politics through the lens of centre-periphery relations, an aspect frequently neglected in the literature. Despite the centralisation of energy policy within the federal government, it is important to remember that production processes and rent distribution mechanisms take place locally. Concealed behind the guise of a unitary energy superpower, the political economy of oil and gas takes on a distinctive form in each production region. Ultimately, our approach presents new opportunities for future research on the higher education system in the country, not only as a testing ground for the influence of government policies and discourses, but also as an institutional arena where actors are actively involved in resource governance.

ENDNOTE

¹ Names of both universities and respondents are not disclosed for confidentiality reasons.

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