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## **Domestic frames on Russia's role in international climate diplomacy**

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### **Abstract**

How are climate change and Russia's role in international climate diplomacy understood in Russia? This article enhances our understanding of the cultural drivers of Russia's international climate position by using extensive interview data with Russian (non-climate) professionals to explore domestic assumptions, perceptions, and beliefs beyond official positions expressed in international diplomatic discourses. Underlying cultural framings are understood as societal beliefs widely shared in Russian society. A framing analysis of the interview data indicates that Russian participation in climate diplomacy is underpinned by assumptions concerning Russian self-interest - such as benefit-seeking, foreign-policy goals and suspicion of the motives of other countries - that are often unrelated to environmental concerns. Societal beliefs in Russia's great-power status together with a focus on national economic and political interests, societal cynicism/zero-sum game beliefs, conspiracy theories and a dualistic approach to science are reflected in these assumptions, and provide persuasive cultural explanations for understanding official climate change statements. The influence of the political leadership on societal beliefs on climate change helps to explain the prevalence of these beliefs; wider societal beliefs are a further significant explanatory factor.

Keywords: Russia; climate policy; domestic frames; societal beliefs

### Key policy insights

- Most informants supported Russia's participation in climate negotiations but often based on concerns other than environmental ones.
- The main reasons for participating in international climate diplomacy beyond environmental concerns were related to foreign policy and expected economic or political benefits while suspicions of the motives of other countries spoke against participation; similar elements were identified in Russia's official climate position.
- Beliefs in climate change largely as a natural phenomenon reduce the rationale for mitigation actions.
- Russian societal beliefs in the country's great power status, societal cynicism/zero-sum thinking and conspiracies, and a dualistic approach to science, anchor Russia's climate position to wider cultural dynamics and make Russia's more active engagement in climate mitigation unlikely.

### Introduction

Russia is the world's fifth largest emitter of greenhouse gases (GHG), accounting for 4.7% of the global total.<sup>1</sup> After the economic transition-related decline, emissions have remained quite stable at a relatively high 14 tonnes per capita as of 2014.<sup>2</sup> The economy is based on the export of fossil fuels, which has enabled the authoritarian administration of President Vladimir Putin to remain in power. Climate change has not featured high on the Russian political agenda, and domestic measures to curb GHG emissions have remained weak (Korppoo & Kokorin, 2015) – a broader trend related to the weak linkage made between environmental issues and economic/ political ones in Russia (Chaisty & Whitefield, 2015). Russia's official position on climate change emphasizes the accounting of forest sinks and achieving a *global* climate agreement. At the same time, Moscow has typically delayed ratification of climate change treaties. Differences between Russia's official climate position

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<sup>1</sup> Excluding LULUCF. Data from: <https://www.climatewatchdata.org/data-explorer/historical-emissions?historical-emissions-data-sources=42&historical-emissions-gases=177&historical-emissions-regions=All%20Selected&historical-emissions-sectors=508&page=1>. Accessed 13 August 2019.

<sup>2</sup> CAIT: Historical emissions. < [https://www.climatewatchdata.org/ghg-emissions?breakBy=regions-PER\\_CAPITA&regions=TOP&sectors=509](https://www.climatewatchdata.org/ghg-emissions?breakBy=regions-PER_CAPITA&regions=TOP&sectors=509)>, accessed 14 August 2019.

and the domestic framings are evident. Both internationally (see for instance Bedritsky, 2011) and in its Climate Doctrine<sup>3</sup>, the Kremlin has recognized the anthropogenic origins of climate change, but climate scepticism has remained a common domestic framing (Wilson Rowe, 2013; Tynkkynen & Tynkkynen, 2018; Poberezhkaya, 2018). The Kremlin influences the views of the public on climate change by limiting and directing the information available in the media, as well as allowing the media to overemphasize the views of climate-sceptical researchers (Poberezhkaya 2016; Wilson Rowe 2012; 2013). Internationally, Russia emphasizes its low-carbon policies (Bedritsky, 2014), whereas domestic framings of climate diplomacy emphasize economic or political benefits to be derived from participation in the climate change regime, boosting Russia's international image, the negative role of the USA and conspiracy theories about the West (Henry & McIntosh Sundstrom, 2007; Tynkkynen, 2010; Wilson Rowe, 2013; Korppoo et al., 2015; Poberezhkaya, 2018).

The two-level game that governments play, making concessions at both the international level and at home (Putnam 1988), often leads to the use of different frames and arguments on each front. Politicians and civil servants follow the international framings of climate diplomacy when addressing international audiences – but reveal little about domestic framings, where the cultural drivers of international climate positions are formed. Exploring the domestic conceptualizations of climate change held by Russian (non-climate) professionals likely to be familiar with the topic without being directly influenced by the international framings, in comparison to climate experts and politicians, can reveal thinking on climate change that can be considered as endogenous and non-strategic, and reflective of the broader cultural understandings that underpin Russian climate policy. The objective of this study is to reveal such thinking (frames) and examine it in the context of 'societal beliefs' – enduring beliefs shared by members of society (Bar-Tal 2000, p.39). The purpose is to seek a

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<sup>3</sup> A declarational strategic document, which establishes the foundation for the development and implementation of Russia's future climate change policy.

broader explanation of the origins of these frames in the dominant Russian value and belief system that may indicate pathways or dead ends for future international climate change talks.

The paper applies frame analysis, which examines the social constructions of reality by coding text (in this case primarily interview transcripts), to identify storylines how people organize and interpret a complex reality and define a given problem based on their knowledge and underlying worldviews (Schön & Rein, 1994). The approach used in this paper aims at reconstructing the assumptions, perceptions and beliefs of the interviewees concerning the origins and impacts of climate change, and what they see as appropriate Russian responses in international climate negotiations. This can reveal more clearly how climate-related issues are justified and framed domestically, and how underlying assumptions reflect (and are reflected in) the international climate position taken by Russia. Frame analysis is not so dissimilar from approaches drawing on societal beliefs. The additional merit of the latter consists of the sharedness and relative permanence of the beliefs (Bar-Tal, 2000).

Beliefs become societal beliefs when they are spread and accepted among members of society, appearing in various cultural products, public debates, media, leaders' speeches and educational materials. Once beliefs are found to be shared, they achieve the phenomenological status of objective reality, making those who hold them more confident, imbued with a sense of rightness and power. As a result, individuals rarely change their opinions on societal beliefs (Bar-Tal, 2000). I argue that societal beliefs regarding the worldviews and values that define a given society are reflected in frames used in that society. Understanding societal beliefs and frames as interlinked makes it possible to explain why they have endured, as beliefs that run counter to a society's core values will be more difficult to challenge in international negotiations than less centrally anchored ones. The analytical approach used distinguishes between two levels of domestic frames: *issue-frames*, derived from interviews, that focus on the prognosis and diagnosis of the problem; and *metaframes*,

which are more general assumptions, perceptions and beliefs identified across the issue-frames. Metaframes are then compared with societal beliefs to establish their relevance to more generally shared societal assumptions and worldviews typical to the Russian culture.

The novel contribution of this study is its examination of the views of Russian professionals on climate change and related policies. To the author's knowledge, only Graybill (2013) has collected discourses from Russian laypersons, but her group of interviewees (20) was significantly smaller than the present one (106). However, this qualitative study is not representative of the Russian public, nor can it establish specific mechanisms whereby domestic and international frames influence each other. Also, generalisations are necessary for this type of society-wide analysis, which aims at capturing shared average rather than individual assumptions, perceptions and beliefs, even though it is recognized that reality is more complex and diverse. As outlined above, the domestic frames, with their cultural underpinnings explored through the concept of societal beliefs, are taken as the explanatory factors underlying the substance of the international frames.

The next chapter outlines what is known about Russian societal beliefs relevant to the climate debate. After presenting the research design and methods, the focus turns to identifying issue-frames on climate change and diplomacy. Metaframes are then derived from the issue-frames, and reflected against Russian societal beliefs in order to analyse the anchoring of the Russian climate position to wider cultural factors.

### **Russian societal beliefs**

In this study, beliefs are considered as *societal* beliefs if two or more of the following conditions hold: 1) opinion polls show that they are widely recognized by members of society; 2) they are spread in the public domain by policy-makers; and 3) they are evidenced by previous academic research.

Russia has sought to be recognized as a great power, an equal with its European peers. Although it has failed to achieve such status permanently, Russian nationalism has coalesced around this issue (Neumann 2008). Russia's status as a borderland nation with a volatile environment and faced by threats of invasion has supported the main foreign policy approaches, centring around ideas of the Self and Other (Tsygankov & Tsygankov, 2010), as also shown in public opinion polls. In 2018, 75% of Russians surveyed considered their country to be a superpower and 88% agreed that Russia should maintain its superpower status (Levada Center 2019). President Putin has also promoted the great-power image in his rhetoric; For example, in his annual speech to the Federal Assembly in March 2018, President Putin declared: 'Today, Russia ranks among the world's leading nations, with a powerful foreign economic and defence potential.' Moreover, the 2016 *Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation* declared 'consolidat[ing] the Russian Federation's position as a centre of influence in today's world' as a national interest and strategic priority (Art. 3). Russia's *status as a great power or a superpower*, or its aspiration to become one, clearly qualifies as a societal belief.

Conspiracy theories are intrinsic to Russian culture (Laruelle, 2012; Borenstein, 2019) and have become a popular tool for interpreting the social and political realities of post-Soviet Russia (Yablokov, 2018). A VCIOM (2018) poll found that 66% of those surveyed 'consider that there is a group of people which strives to rewrite the Russian history, to falsify the historical facts in order to harm Russia and to diminish its importance'. Ortmann and Heathershaw (2012) note that it is common to come across such beliefs when studying Russian culture, which are perhaps fed by personal experience of corruption. Conspiracy theories have frequently been invoked by the Russian leadership (see for instance Yablokov, 2014; Poberezhkaya, 2016). Further, Tynkkynen (2010), Korppoo et al. (2015), Poberezhkaya (2017) and Tynkkynen & Tynkkynen (2018) have demonstrated the existence of conspiracy

beliefs in Russian climate discourses, while Hønneland (2003) found them in the fisheries and nuclear safety discourses. Thus, a *belief in conspiracy theories* can be reasonably identified as a Russian societal belief.

Societal cynicism has been explored in terms of a negative view and distrust of people and institutions, a corrosive view of power and status, frustration with kindness and charity, and disbelief in the effectiveness of showing goodwill toward others (Hui and Hui 2009). Related beliefs in zero-sum thinking view social relations as antagonistic, where one person's winning makes others the losers. Magun and Rudnev (2012) report that an orientation to the competitive values of personal success, power, and wealth typical of a zero-sum game is stronger in Russia than in most other European countries, while Bond et al. (2004) find that Russia scores higher than average<sup>4</sup> in a global study of 41 countries regarding societal cynicism. However, in other studies, Russia scores lower than the USA<sup>5</sup> on societal cynicism (Alexandra et al., 2017), and clearly below average<sup>6</sup> in perceptions of a zero-sum game (Rozycka-Tran et al., 2015). According to Rozycka-Tran,<sup>7</sup> these latter results can be explained by the samples consisting of well-off university students who are typically less cynical about society than the average Russian. There are also examples of zero-sum thinking from international environmental diplomacy: Russia, and before it the USSR, have traditionally understood international environmental cooperation in terms of securing economic and political benefits, often through the negotiation of trade-offs (Darst, 2001; Kotov & Nikitina, 1998; Korppoo et al., 2015). A complicating factor may be that the standard scale of social cynicism/zero-sum thinking may not fit Russian society because the clear-cut distinction between public and private space confuses the picture. According to some authors, the Soviet-era deep distrust of central and political authorities translated into

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<sup>4</sup> 59.7 on an index ranging from 48.2 for Norway to 64.3 for Pakistan.

<sup>5</sup> 2.96 in Russia; 3.13 in the USA.

<sup>6</sup> 3.09, the index ranging from 2.93 in Israel and 4.90 in Angola in a 37 nation comparison.

<sup>7</sup> Personal communication by email 12 March 2019.

opportunistic behaviour in the public space, such as not treating public goods as communal but considering it acceptable to appropriate state property illegally, whilst networks of personal trust have remained the backbone of Russian society and social capital (Schrader 2004; Ledeneva, 2006). Thus, there are certain features of *zero-sum thinking and societal cynicism* in Russian society, but since the evidence is not clear-cut, it is put forward here as a hypothesis.

Russians typically interpret environmental issues as a question of natural science (Korppoo et al., 2015). In the Soviet Union, faith in science was exaggerated (Oldfield & Shaw, 2016, p.8). Soviet Marxism considered the socialist approach to nature as scientific, and held that there is ‘an objective truth’ about the world (Ziegler, 1985; Kojevnikov 2008). Dronin and Bychova (2017, p. 2103) call this ‘scientific naturalism’. However, the term ‘science’ is often used more vaguely in official Russian statements on climate change: still undecided on ratification of the Kyoto Protocol, President Putin called the pact ‘scientifically flawed’ (Bell 2013); Bedritsky (2010), presidential advisor on climate change, declared that the Kyoto Protocol was ‘neither scientifically, economically nor politically effective’. Such unspecified references to ‘science’ can be linked to decades of decision-making labelled as ‘scientific’ in the Soviet Union, where science-related terminology was used to justify political decisions (on this, see for instance Ziegler 1985) – or, as Savelyev and Detinov (1995, p.18) put it, for the propagandistic substantiation of political decisions. Such a *dualistic approach* to science - that is, the importance and high quality of science is emphasized as a justification for decision-making, but at the same time, the term ‘science’ is used without further substantiation to justify political decisions - indicates a pattern of thinking that might constitute a societal belief in Russia<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> Dualism in Russia has been reported for instance in law (see Hendley, 2011) and in state structures (Sakwa, 2010).

There is sufficient evidence of two beliefs, aspirations to great-power status and a belief in conspiracies – for them to be considered as societal beliefs in Russia. In addition, this paper puts forward two hypothesized societal beliefs – social cynicism/zero sum thinking, and a dualistic approach to science – for further testing with the framings identified in the interview material.

### **Research Design and Methods**

Between June 2012 and April 2013, during the negotiations towards reaching the Paris Agreement, 106 interviews were conducted, in Russian, in six regions – Altay (19 interviews), Archangelsk (18), Krasnodar (18), Moscow (14), Murmansk (21) and St Petersburg (16) – by five local contractors (one covered two regions) from the project team’s research and NGO networks. This was logistically and financially effective; moreover, local researchers have personal networks and local cultural understanding invaluable for accessing the chosen types of interviewees and eliciting answers closer to what respondents actually believe (Michailova, 2004). To ensure data comparability, the contractors were supplied with a Russian-language list of interview questions (Appendix 1), and they delivered transcripts of the interviews, four in Russian and one in English. The transcripts were then translated into English, as both language versions were useful in the analysis. Environmentalist views may be slightly over-represented in the Moscow sample, as some of the non-NGO interviewees had an environmental NGO background. The impact is difficult to judge, however, because environmental NGO representatives across the sample proved not much more likely to emphasize the anthropogenic origin of climate change than the rest of the sample. It may be that Muscovites are more influenced by the international frames on climate change in comparison to the rest of Russia; in any case, they represent only some 13% of the sample. Purposive sampling (Battaglia 2008) was applied to identify professional Russians with no direct work-related link to climate change, but who were likely to encounter the topic at work,

in order to find respondents who would convey domestic rather than international framings on climate change. Geographical distribution of the sample across Russia was chosen to avoid over-representation of the capital area and major cities, where greater exposure to international frames is more likely. Further, the regions were chosen because of their experience of the impacts of climate change or vulnerability in the near future: Muscovites experienced the smog and fumes caused by forest fires in 2010; Krasnodar Krai had a major disaster caused by flooding in 2012; Arkhangelsk and Murmansk regions are located on the melting permafrost; St Petersburg has a long history of disastrous flooding from the Gulf of Finland (now ameliorated by a flood gate); and the mountainous Altay region is experiencing glacial melt. To avoid over-representation of one specific professional background, a range of backgrounds were selected: private sector (29 interviewees), administration (28), research organizations (23), NGOs (14), politicians (9) and journalists (3).

The point of semi-structured interviews is not to provide a sample demographically representative of a wider population, but to obtain data representative of the phenomenon under investigation (McIntosh & Morse, 2015). The focus on societal beliefs further enhances this, as studying societal beliefs that are shared, or at least recognized, by the majority of the population does not require statistically representative data: the representativeness of the data is demonstrated by its saturation (Guest et al., 2006). In this study, approximately halfway through the coding work, no new data were found that shed further light on the emerging frames.

The questionnaire started by asking about the existence and the origins of global warming, and the expected and experienced consequences of climate change and adaptation measures, both in general as well as in Russia and in the respondent's region. Further, questions were asked about general understanding of the climate change phenomenon by the public and the involvement of local politicians. Finally, questions were posed on what

Russia's role in international climate negotiations should be, and which strategies should Russia pursue in this context. See Appendix 1 for the full list of questions.

The approach to coding in this paper builds on the hierarchical cluster analysis approach, whereby the frame is split up into its separate elements for coding (Matthes and Kohring 2008). The concept of 'issue-frames' – 'policy frames that provide a relatively coherent story/reasoning in which issue specific prognostic elements respond to issue specific diagnostic elements' (Dombos et al., 2012, p. 5) – was employed as guidance in separating the coding work into elements. Diagnostic frames indicate the main characteristics of the problem and the attribution of blame (here: regarding the origins of climate change and its expected impacts), while prognostic frames indicate suggested solutions and strategies, as well as reasons for action (should Russia participate in international climate diplomacy? how and why?) (Snow & Benford, 1988). The 86 respondents who gave meaningful responses to the question 'what role should Russia take in international climate negotiations?' were included in the issue-frame analysis. The main statements per interview were coded on both chosen elements – diagnosis and prognosis – to identify explanatory factors behind respondents' views on Russian participation in international climate diplomacy.

Drawing on issue-frames, 'metaframes' – 'overarching frames of a higher level of generality that stretch over different policy issues and can be operationalized as the normative aspects of issue frames' (Dombos et al., 2012, p. 7) were identified. These normative aspects indicate endogenous assumptions, perceptions, and beliefs underlying Russia's climate position, thereby tending towards societal beliefs. These findings were then compared against the information available on Russian societal beliefs, in order to establish the cultural understandings behind specific climate views and positions. Table 1 outlines the analytical approach.

<TABLE 1>

To map Russia's official climate position at the time of the interviews, five speeches by Alexander Bedritsky, then Presidential Envoy on Climate Change in the UN climate meetings 2010–2014, were analysed. These situations, where Russia presented its official international climate position to a global audience, were judged to be the most reliable example of the international frame, which this study sought to compare with the domestic frame identified through the interviews.

### **Issue-frames: Problem Diagnosis**

By far the most frequent explanation (offered by 45% of the respondents) of the cause of climate change was the influence of a combination of factors, involving GHG emissions from anthropogenic sources as well as natural factors like natural cycles and cosmic elements. As one respondent put it:

There are many reasons, but modern science has not yet determined which of them is the most important. But nobody denies the anthropogenic factor. (St Petersburg interview 6, leading position in government environmental protection agency)

The second most common explanation (26%) concerned natural cycles alone: the Earth is currently poised between Ice Ages, with atmospheric warming to be followed by cooling.

In my opinion, there is no such problem... Instead, mankind is going to have to solve the problem of global cooling. (St Petersburg interview 7, leading position in an energy company)

Of course, we may think that human actions exacerbate the impacts on the climate, but that's only our imagination... the [climate] system is so complex on the one hand, and

yet so balanced, that human influence cannot bring it out of balance. (Archangelsk interview 3, academic: biology)

Less than a fifth (19%) saw the phenomenon as mainly human-induced, although very few respondents denied that climate change is currently underway.

The overwhelming majority (74%) acknowledged the likelihood of climate change leading to negative consequences. Some even mentioned worst-case scenarios:

In general, for people the consequences are negative. More than that, I'd say that the consequences could be catastrophic... Migration, and, in the future, wars, connected with lack of and fighting over limited water resources – that's what may be in store if we don't pay attention to this problem. (Krasnodar interview 10, farmer)

However, 36% of those interviewed indicated that there might be some positive consequences:

I think the consequences can be both positive and negative. The question is, can the planet adapt to these changes, can all living organisms adapt to them? (Altay interview 12, environmental NGO campaigner)

Very few respondents expected climate change to be entirely favourable, but a full 12% held that no serious consequences should be expected. For instance:

I don't think there will be any critical changes in St. Petersburg in the near perspective. Well, slight flooding in the worst case. That's not so scary. (St Petersburg interview 7, leading position in an energy company)

### **Issue-frames: Prognostic policy prescriptions**

*Join – to protect climate and the environment*

The largest group of respondents indicated genuine concern over the impacts of climate change, and argued that Russia should participate in an international climate agreement in order to do its share – and in some cases more – to protect the planet:

Russia could and should take on serious commitments regarding carbon emissions, especially as we have a great potential here... (Moscow interview 1, PR director, environmental NGO)

Respondents emphasized the size and significance of Russia when arguing that it has a duty to participate in the climate agreement. Some expressed criticism of the government's approach to the international climate negotiation process, and many spoke of the lack of leadership:

Russia should – as in many other processes – be in a leadership position, initiating actions... but unfortunately, in reality, our leaders' actions are usually quite the opposite. (Moscow interview 14, politician)

Russia should take initiatives and act as an example to others – the fact that others don't participate should not make Russia refrain. (Krasnodar interview 4, leading position, government fishery regulator)

Some were critical at the low quality of domestic climate strategy and implementation, and many criticized Russia's withdrawal from the second Kyoto Protocol commitment period regardless of the financial support available for environmental projects.

Further arguments for participation included the Russian government being unlikely to adopt a mitigation policy independently, outside of an international agreement, and that reducing the impacts of human activities on the environment was a generally positive goal. Many respondents mentioned related environmental benefits, like forest protection projects and investments in energy and agriculture, as well as image-building.

Some 40% of the respondents fell under this frame. As to diagnosis, the combination of natural and human-induced reasons as the cause of climate change dominated (68%), but 30% held that human beings alone were to blame. A slight majority (59%) saw the overall consequences of climate change as negative. Their policy recommendation was for Russia to join an international climate agreement<sup>9</sup> in order to halt climate change. All recognized human influences on the climate (with natural causes as a strong additional factor); most expected negative consequences, and all held that Russia should participate in an international climate agreement in order to reduce the risks related to climate change. Environmental concerns emerged as clear drivers of the policy prescriptions offered.

### *Join – if gains can be expected*

A substantial, albeit smaller, group of respondents argued that, for participation to be justified, Russia should reap some economic and political benefits from the climate agreement. As one interviewee put it:

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<sup>9</sup> The idea was not to ask whether Russia should join any *specific* climate agreement, but international climate agreements in general. Many interviewees were clearly thinking of the Kyoto Protocol in their responses, not the climate agreement under negotiation at that time.

In questions linked to global warming, Russia should take a very pragmatic position and support only those initiatives that are economically profitable...Otherwise there is no benefit in this. (Krasnodar interview 6, leading position, city administration)

Respondents tended not to specify the benefits, but generally held that an agreement should be expected to be profitable for Russia in return for participation. Some argued that Russia should receive benefits from participation because of its large territory and significant natural resources. This approach is close to the idea of an 'ecological donor': that Russia's sizable natural resources, including forests and energy, should entitle it to economic or political benefits in return for joining an international environmental agreement (see Tynkkynen, 2010). National interests featured strongly: most arguments involved combining national and global interests, while warning against giving priority to the latter – for instance accepting limits to economic growth in order to protect the climate. As one respondent explained:

Strategies could include aiming to be one of the leaders in carbon capping, as long as this doesn't go counter to plans for socio-economic development. (Moscow interview 2, academic: economics)

Quite a few expressed fears that climate agreements could be used to control, limit or manipulate Russia as regards economic growth and international competitiveness. These ideas fit well in the context of achieving gains / avoiding losses.

In all, 28% of the interviewees could be classified under this frame. As to diagnosis, views on the causes of climate change varied, with natural causes dominating (38%), but only barely: the combination of natural and human-induced factors (34%) as well as human

activities (25%) were also cited as main explanatory factors. Half of the respondents under this frame held that climate change would have both positive and negative impacts. Their policy recommendation was for Russian participation to be conditional on the likelihood of *receiving economic or political benefits*. There was little concern over the impacts of climate change; these interviewees also felt that humans play a negligible causal role here.

*Join – to protect national interests*

Respondents in this group felt that Russia should take a strong position in the negotiations in order to be taken seriously as a foreign-policy actor, to demonstrate its significance globally, and avoid having terms dictated by others. As one respondent put it:

Russia should take part in negotiations of this kind, should take initiatives. In many issues we can and must be leaders; that will improve the image of our country. (St Petersburg interview 9, employee of a shipping company)

These respondents considered the role of Russia-as-initiator to be both appropriate and good for the national image. Many also warned against sacrificing Russia's own interests, especially concerning economic growth:

One must always act from the viewpoint of one's own interests. Group interests can be taken into consideration only in those cases where they do not conflict with national interests. (Murmansk interview 7, regional administration)

Some respondents mentioned conspiracy theories, usually about dishonest scientists who have fabricated the climate-change problem in order to reap advantages for themselves.

One quarter of all interviewees could be placed in this frame. With their diagnosis of climate change, they did not support Russia joining a climate agreement for environmental reasons: 34% believed that climate change was caused by natural cycles, with the same proportion citing combined human and natural causes. Further, 33% expected no serious impacts of climate change; 29% expected both positive and negative impacts. Here, the policy prescription was for Russia to join the climate negotiations, but in order to protect its own political interests, not because of climate change as such. This frame introduces a third major explanatory factor that could support Russian participation: *foreign policy*. Here, some doubts were expressed that climate change exists, and therefore no support for participation on environmental grounds.

*Do not join the corrupt pseudo-agreement*

Significantly fewer respondents could be placed in this group (8%) than the other three, but they clearly constituted a separate category: Russia should stay out of international climate agreements, which were seen as harmful. In the words of one respondent:

There are no advantages for Russia in the international climate agreement. It is an absolutely useless and even harmful agreement whose provisions no one intends to fulfil. I would not recommend our country to take part in such pseudo-agreements. (St Petersburg interview 13, politician)

Respondents here saw no benefits for Russia, and many emphasized the risks involved. Climate agreements were dismissed as constructions fabricated in order to force Russia to buy Western products. The environmental merits were questioned: the Kyoto Protocol's low coverage of countries and emissions was seen as underlying the alleged manipulation under

the treaty. Some respondents expressed sceptical views on Russia's foreign-policy role, along conspiracy lines.

Their diagnosis was not supportive of climate action, even though 43% held the impacts of climate change to be negative. Respondents here were divided evenly into two camps: those who believed that climate change was a natural phenomenon (43%), and those who saw combined factors as the cause (43%). The policy prescription here was to avoid participation in climate agreements, because of the expected negative effects. Some cited environmental arguments against international climate diplomacy. Suspicion was a strong explanatory factor here:

[Under the Kyoto Protocol] orders will be given that we should live in a way that others consider necessary. (Altay interview 16, academic: geography)

I don't think that the Kyoto Protocol has anything to do with protection against global warming – not only because many hypotheses are very controversial, but also because the emissions limitations they are considering are really quite insignificant. (Krasnodar interview 11, employee of an agricultural company)

There was little belief that human activities are causing climate change, and respondents advised against Russian participation. Table 2 summarizes the issue-frames.

<TABLE 2>

### **Metaframes**

Several explanatory factors concerning Russia's climate-policy position overlapped between issue-frames, which indicates metaframes – normative views behind the frames.

*National benefits* (or lack thereof) feature in all four issue-frames; in one of them they are dominant and decisive for views on Russian participation in climate negotiations.

Terminology like ‘ecological donor’ was employed to communicate this view. Despite the differing approaches, all issue-frames recognized national benefits as a legitimate factor in directing decision-making and no respondent questioned it. It was seen as natural for Russia and other countries to join international pacts only if these were profitable in some way, beyond any environmental concern, for instance to the national interest or economically. As one respondent noted:

For the USA and China, it [the Kyoto Protocol] was not profitable, so they didn’t sign.  
(St Petersburg interview 11, leading position in business)

Russia’s *foreign-policy role* was evident in several issue-frames; in one this was totally dominant. Those respondents held that Russia should ensure its role as a serious foreign-policy actor; it should avoid being ignored or manipulated by others, aim at taking a leadership role, and protect its national interests.

The Soviet Union...would have been treated more seriously on this issue and would not have allowed itself to be led on a leash. (Murmansk interview 9, employee of an energy company)

Respondents justified Russia’s importance in the world by its large size and significant natural resources. Some who otherwise showed scant concern about climate change argued that Russia should participate in international climate policy negotiations precisely in order to demonstrate its global role. For instance:

If we distance ourselves from participation in this issue, we will no longer be included.

(Murmansk interview 7, regional administration)

*Suspicious of the motives of others*, foreign and domestic, were widespread. Respondents seemed prone to believe that there were plots behind the official arrangements regarding climate change policy. For instance:

The climate question is a well-designed mechanism for impacting industry – to speed up or put the brakes on things, as necessary. I’m deeply convinced that this is a planned human instrument. (Murmansk interview 9, employee of an energy company)

Finding it unrealistic that climate change concerns could have triggered action in other countries, many respondents saw ‘the environment’ as an excuse for achieving unrelated goals. Domestic actors, like NGOs, were similarly suspected of promoting climate change policies for personal or financial interests.

Interview responses revealed a clear *mismatch in the demand for science in rhetoric and the actual impact of scientific evidence*. Scientists as experts are expected to dominate the climate debate, and some respondents called for ‘infallible scientific data’ to support decision-making. Some respondents even argued that persons without the necessary scientific credentials should not be entitled to speak in the public discussion: they were seen as simply trying to reap profits. For instance, environmental NGOs were not always considered legitimate commentators. The importance of formal competence was also reflected in many interviewees being unwilling to estimate the impacts of climate change, citing their own lack of expertise. Regardless, it was widely held that there is no scientific consensus on the origins

of climate change: most respondents mentioned both anthropogenic and cyclical causalities. One interviewee linked this to Russian policy-makers accepting questionable ‘scientific’ advice because of the formal academic competence and seniority of the advisors:

We believe that academics are the most intelligent, they know everything. And sometimes they say things about the climate that have no scientific basis – but we listen to them, the government listens. (St Petersburg interview 3, academic: geophysics)

#### *Metaframes in Russia’s official statements*

The metaframes identified have featured frequently in official statements, particularly those of then-Russian Presidential Envoy Alexander Bedritsky. These statements (Bedritsky 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014) note the key role of gaining economic benefits, with every speech underlining the importance of including forest carbon sinks and market mechanisms in a future agreement. Russia sees including some natural carbon sinks in climate agreements as advantageous to its own interests, as they can replace emissions reductions from energy-intensive sectors (Wilson Rowe, 2013); the surplus of emissions allowances received under the Kyoto Protocol was expected to be tradable, even transferrable under a future climate agreement. Also linked to Russia’s desire to demonstrate its foreign-policy position, the Russian delegation had pressed for economic benefits to extend to other economies in transition.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Such benefits included the transfer of emission surpluses between Kyoto commitment periods (Korppoo 2013), as well as supporting Belarus and Kazakhstan being recognized as an Annex B countries under the Kyoto Protocol, which could have in theory brought tradable emissions surpluses.

Russia has sought to demonstrate its foreign-policy position as an important actor on many occasions. Official speeches have repeatedly underlined the country's climate achievements, including a steep emissions decline compared to 1990 levels and Russia's decisive role in enabling the Kyoto Protocol to enter into force (Bedritsky, 2011, 2012), as well as the Russian proposal for periodic review of country groupings in the climate change regime. Further, Russia has used speeches at the UN climate conferences to take up other foreign-policy issues – such as its diplomatic disagreement with Qatar, opposing the country as the host of the COP18 climate conference (Bedritsky, 2011).

Unsubstantiated science-related arguments, which perhaps illustrate the domestic tendency to frame political arguments as scientific, are part of Russia's official line. Criticism of the Kyoto Protocol's low coverage and insufficient commitment levels framed in terms of scientific 'efficiency' (see for instance Bedritsky, 2010) provides an example.

Direct conspiracy theories have not featured in official statements. However, Russia, like many other countries, seems highly concerned about climate agreements as regards the fairness of the efforts involved. The focus has been on ensuring that all emitters, or at least the main ones, will cooperate under the future agreement (Bedritsky, 2013, 2014), regardless of Russia's own target, which essentially allows it to continue with business-as-usual (Korppoo & Kokorin, 2017). Also, Russia's withdrawal from the second Kyoto commitment period was justified by its low coverage, again invoking the issue of fairness.

### **Societal beliefs and metaframes**

Societal belief in *great-power status*, or the aspiration to become one, is clearly manifested in the metaframes: references to ensuring Russia's role as a serious foreign-policy actor, avoiding being ignored or manipulated by others, aiming at taking a leadership role, and protecting national interests. Respondents' approaches illustrate the concern with Russia's

legitimacy and equality as a participant in international negotiations. Many respondents saw climate negotiations as a foreign-policy arena for promoting Russia's more general interests, rather than as an environmental policy forum.

*Social cynicism and zero-sum game beliefs* were demonstrated by those who saw an international climate agreement as an option for those countries that stand to benefit economically or politically from it. Other negotiating countries were expected to focus on securing national benefits for themselves as well – as is common in the Russian debate<sup>11</sup> – even though this flies in the face of the basic idea of an international environmental agreement, which tends to entail a price tag rather than an income stream for participants. This would be in line with Chaisty & Whitefield (2015), who note Russians' difficulty in linking environmental problems and action. Further, suspicion of the motives of various participants in the international climate debate, for instance NGOs, and widespread beliefs in plots underling international climate diplomacy, indicate *social cynicism* and *zero-sum game beliefs*, along with *conspiracy theory* beliefs, which emerged clearly in metaframes. Although *conspiracy theory* beliefs, along with *social cynicism* and *zero sum game* thinking, were not directly identifiable in official statements, Russia has long advocated broad participation in global climate mitigation commitments. This view is shared by many other countries with commitments, but Russia's own almost-business-as-usual commitment suggests that this attitude may be linked to distrust of fellow participants. Perceived deliberate exaggerations of the threat of climate change, voiced by foreigners seeking to gain economic or political benefits or take advantage of Russia under the banner of environmental protection, have permeated the Russian climate debate (Roginko, 2002; Wilson Rowe 2009; Tynkkynen, 2010;

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<sup>11</sup> As stated by a Russian NGO interviewee in another study (Wilson Rowe 2013, p.70): 'Russia, like every country, wants to find some way of profiting from the international climate negotiations.' National benefits are also typically believed to drive the participation of other countries: For instance, Roginko (2002) has argued that the EU's motivation for supporting the Kyoto Protocol stemmed from securing markets for its environmental technology.

Korppoo et al., 2015); perhaps linked to the Soviet belief that science was subject to social and ideological influence especially in the West (Kojevnikov 2008). Even the 2016 Foreign Policy Concept (Art.41) states: ‘The Russian Federation opposes far-fetched attempts to politicize environment protection and use it as a pretext for restricting State sovereignty over natural resources or for encouraging unfair competition.’

*Dualism on science* emerged strongly in metaframes: the label of ‘science’ or ‘formal scientific competence’ is emphasized instead of focusing on the scientific quality and credibility of the results or the statements. Science and scientific expertise are highly respected, deemed crucial for discussing climate change; and the credentials of commentators were questioned. This may be a product of Russia’s technocratic tradition and the ensuing difficulty in seeing problems as multi-disciplinary; perhaps a ‘scientific’ framing is more readily acceptable or understandable to the Russian public than an environmental one. Further, Dronin and Bychova (2017) explain that Soviet-trained scientists see nature as an objective entity, and focus on natural causes even when alternative, non-natural, explanations would seem more likely. This, in turn, makes it difficult to believe that humans have changed the balance of the planet – as was also voiced by many interviewees. That would fit the typical Russian dualistic claims that the anthropogenic contribution to climate change is only partial or minor (Interviews; Dronin & Bychova, 2017; Yegorov, 2018) regardless of the firm scientific evidence now available.

The interview material has provided clear support of the ‘societal belief’ status of societal cynicism / zero-sum game and dualistic science beliefs. Therefore, while further evidence would strengthen these cases, I consider them as societal beliefs for the purposes of this study and as hypotheses for further research.

## **Discussion and conclusions**

Although the issue-frames identified reflect differing approaches among respondents, the main message emerged in all but one (the smallest) of the four issue-frames: *Russia should participate in international climate diplomacy*. However, the belief that climate change is at least partly a natural phenomenon reduces the rationale for domestic mitigation policies.

Societal beliefs shared by the public and policy-makers alike indicate that *Russian participation in international climate diplomacy is largely driven by various factors unrelated to environmental concerns* (see also Korppoo et al., 2015), namely, foreign-policy interests, benefit-seeking, and conspiracy concerns. Additional quantitative research could test these findings among a representative sample of the Russian public.

Societal beliefs largely define how issues such as climate change are framed domestically. They go beyond democratic choice and awareness of climate change and related science, because they establish the basic understanding of the world which members of society share. Societal beliefs can and do change, but some may prove extremely sticky because the conditions that generated them in the first place remain unchanged. For instance, corruption and economic/ political uncertainties in society feed societal cynicism/zero-sum game beliefs, and make conspiracy theories seem plausible. Russia remains involved in various diplomatic disagreements, probably driven by (as well as supporting) the view that the country is / should be a great power.

For an external observer, it is challenging to evaluate how societal beliefs are likely to affect a specific political issue like climate diplomacy, as some societal beliefs could both support and obstruct participation in global climate mitigation efforts. For instance, the great-power belief emphasizes Russia's independence, but also sees Russia as a global leader. Both parts of this belief were evident in interviewees' responses; however, putting national interests first, especially avoiding economic disadvantages, was often linked to the leadership position. Societal cynicism also featured in justifications of why Russia should or should not participate

in international climate agreements. Cynicism regarding the Kremlin's motives for implementing climate policies independently was expressed by some who supported Russian participation in a climate agreement, while cynicism as to the motivations of other countries was a strong factor for those sceptical to Russian participation.

Dualism as to science was obvious across the frames: respondents called for firm scientific evidence, which they saw as a condition for policy-decisions – but regardless of the scientific evidence on anthropogenic climate change provided by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) (in which Russia participates), lack of scientific consensus on the origins of climate change was routinely cited. Here, broadcasting of sceptical views on climate change by the state-controlled media may be part of the explanation. Further, the weak linkage drawn between environmental problems and related domestic action (Chaisty & Whitefield, 2015) seems relevant: even respondents supportive of Russia's participation in climate diplomacy for environmental reasons failed to mention any connection to domestic climate mitigation efforts.

What, then, of Russia's future approach to international climate diplomacy? Here we must differentiate between support for Russian participation in international climate diplomacy and support for domestic emission reduction efforts. Most interviewees focused on the former, with the emphasis on national interests especially under the frames supporting Russian participation for non-environmental reasons clearly showing this differentiation. The societal beliefs identified here are likely to allow and support – especially concerning great-power aspirations – Russia joining climate pacts but would stir up trouble as regards costly domestic policies for reducing GHG emissions. This is where the social cynicism / zero-sum game and conspiracy beliefs are likely to be voiced and increase the risk that Russia will not go beyond a business-as-usual commitment also in the future.

Should awareness of climate science increase in Russia – which might result from less state control on the topic in the media – attitudes could change, making it easier to understand the environmental motives of other countries. However, given the low level of public democratic influence in Russia, the views expressed by the interviewees should be taken as an indication of domestic beliefs reflected also in the thinking of policy-makers, rather than public pressure driving policy-making.

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