



Russian discourses on benefits and threats from international climate diplomacy

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Abstract

The Russian climate policy debate pays special interest to the economic and political benefits and threats related to international climate policy. Applying critical discourse analysis, in this study, I dismantle issue discourses into sub-discourses, identifying six central themes, and then discuss the truth-value of the claims made. Policy decisions relevant to climate diplomacy are often in line with sub-discourses of low truth-value. Thus, socially constructed reality can go against statistical data and scientific research, setting the context for policy decisions and international climate cooperation. That makes it difficult to influence Russia's climate position or domestic policies by sharing knowledge. However, the sub-discourses also indicate a domestic debate on Russia's climate-diplomacy options—a debate of higher truth-value that may influence constructions of social reality. Thus far, the Russian government has managed to avoid costly domestic emissions-reduction measures. However, the EU's Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM) will impose carbon costs on Russian export products, forcing reconsideration of this social reality.

Keywords Russia · Climate policy · Critical discourse analysis · Benefits discourse · Threats discourse

1 Introduction

Russia is the world's fourth-largest emitter of greenhouse gases (GHGs), and an important actor in global climate diplomacy, which aims at establishing climate commitments and mechanisms to achieve them, and monitor their fulfilment. After the collapse of the USSR, emissions declined sharply with the closure of many inefficient Soviet-era industrial plants. Since then, however, few credible low-carbon policies have been implemented. Climate Action Tracker (2021) deems Russia's nationally determined contribution (NDC)—limiting emissions to 70–75% of 1990 levels by 2030, with maximum accounting of carbon

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sinks—“critically insufficient,” as it allows for emissions growth (Safonov et al. 2020). Putin’s recent announcement on carbon neutrality by 2060 (Moscow Times, 13 October 2021) and passing the Low Carbon Strategy (Russian government 2021) may signal change, however.

Still, introducing carbon regulation is considered “premature” in Russia (Butrin and Shapovalov 2019), and no carbon tax was introduced in the July 2021 Federal Law on carbon regulation (JWN 2021; Russian Federation 2021), probably as the powerful fossil-fuel and heavy industries find it too costly (Ivanter and Kudiryadov 2017). The Kremlin influences domestic climate debate by limiting and directing the information available in the media, and allowing the media to overemphasize climate-sceptical research (Wilson Rowe 2012, 2013; Poberezhskaya 2016; Tynkkynen 2019). International climate pacts are widely seen as a potential source of economic and political threats (Tynkkynen 2010; Korppoo et al. 2015; Tynkkynen and Tynkkynen 2018; Korppoo 2020), although proponents of Russian participation in international climate pacts often employ the benefits discourse, stressing that Russia has much to gain from international climate cooperation (Wilson Rowe 2013; Korppoo et al. 2015; Korppoo 2020). Indeed, the availability of benefits is often considered a prerequisite for Russian participation in international climate diplomacy (see section: benefits).

Benefits and threats discourses have been analysed through both discourse and frame analyses (Wilson Rowe 2009; Tynkkynen 2010; Tynkkynen and Tynkkynen 2018; Korppoo et al. 2015; Poberezhskaya 2019; Korppoo 2020) (see Appendix Table 2). As they are central in the domestic debate on Russia’s role in international climate diplomacy, they can shed light on the origins and justifications of the Russian climate-diplomacy position. I have found these discourses to be embedded in the Russian climate debate more generally: benefits and threats related to international climate diplomacy were recognized by people holding differing opinions on this diplomacy and Russia’s role in it (Korppoo 2020). These discourses are also linked to the central role of national interest in Russia’s foreign policy (Hussain & Shakoov 2017; Tsygankov 2019): the Foreign Policy Concept (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2016) specifically notes preventing discrimination against Russia, its interests and exports.

The Russian political leadership uses benefits and threats discourses as it sees fit – for instance, in assessing the pros and cons of participation in international agreements (BBC 29 September 2003; Korppoo et al. 2006). However, the veracity and future prospects of the claims can be questioned: “discourses live a ‘life of their own’ in relation to reality” (Jäger 2001:36). Regardless of their truth-value, i.e. truth claims about social reality with “higher and lower normative quality” (Angermüller 2018:2), discourses may remain influential and construct social reality, thereby also setting the scene for international climate cooperation.

Largely drawing on sub-discourses I have identified in my previous work (Korppoo 2020; Korppoo et al. 2006, 2015), I apply the framework of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to shed light on the content and truth-values of Russian domestic benefits and threats discourses related to international climate diplomacy. Which claims do the benefits and threats discourses put forward? How do these claims relate to scientific knowledge and statistical data? Are the discourses in line with domestic policy decisions and Russia’s position in the international climate diplomacy? What are the future prospects for climate cooperation with Russia for other major players in global climate policy in this context of socially constructed reality on Russia’s role in international climate diplomacy?

Although many Russian sub-discourses on the benefits and threats of international climate diplomacy are based on claims with a low truth-value (often voiced by the political leadership), the sub-discourses indicate a domestic debate on Russia's options on climate diplomacy of higher truth-value. Assessing whether those making statements with low truth-value actually believe them is beyond the scope of CDA; rather, I contribute to theory by examining the interface of socially constructed reality and physical reality to explain the role of knowledge in formulating Russian climate policy. Empirically, I contribute by identifying issue-specific discourses on benefits and threats related to international climate diplomacy, and dismantling them into sub-discourses. I have identified most of these sub-discourses in my previous work but this analysis first time collects and compares them systematically.

2 Methodology and materials

CDA studies comprise a problem-oriented interdisciplinary research movement with a range of theoretical and methodological approaches. I draw on Fairclough's Dialectic-Rational Approach (Sengul 2019), which sees 'language as a social practice' and holds that 'the discursive event is shaped by situation, institutions and social structures, but it also shapes them' (Fairclough and Wodak 1997: 258).

A review of previous work on discourse and frame analyses on Russian climate policy (Korppoo 2020; Korppoo et al. 2015; Tynkkynen 2010; Tynkkynen and Tynkkynen 2010; Wilson Rowe 2009; Poberezhskaya 2019) shows that elements of benefits and threats discourses have been recorded by many scholars (see Appendix Table 2). I draw largely on my own previous analyses for identifying issue-specific discourses and dividing them into sub-discourses, i.e. particular social constructions of reality expressed within the issue-specific discourse (Table 1). In this article, I examine them further by analysing news published in the conservative government newspaper *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, the liberal business-focused *Kommersant* and the in-depth *Expert* weekly magazine during 2019/2020. They all cover topics relevant to climate policy and are held to provide balanced coverage of climate-related discourses in society. Some articles outside this timeframe were included in order to examine a previously identified sub-discourse further. In addition, I reviewed political statements by the political leadership, members of the State Duma, and Russia's representatives in international climate conferences. Previous work and materials used are summarized by issue discourse in Appendix Table 3.

My approach to coding was deductive: all sub-discourses but one (CBAM) emerged from previous work to guide the analysis as a coding frame. The recent debate on international carbon payments is an exception, as it emerged as a new issue-specific discourse in the research material. Coding was conducted manually, as that facilitates the search for new interpretations and elements that might not be captured by the initial categories (Chong and Druckman 2007). The occurrence of the benefits and threats discourses in the works of several scholars (Appendix Table 2) validates them as a research setting. Similarly, most of the sub-discourses emerged in my previous studies: I have included those that elicited reactions from the political leadership and the expert community, which proves their societal importance. The timeline of analysis stretches from the early 2000s (before Kyoto ratification) to the 2020–2021 debate on PA implementation. These temporal dimensions of the

Table 1 Summary: categorization of issue-specific discourses, sub-discourses and main stakeholders

Issue-specific discourse & Timeline	Sub-discourses	Stakeholders
<i>Benefits</i>		
Emissions-reduction projects 2006–2013	Government failing to put Joint Implementation (JI) into practice JI is insignificant to Russian economy	Economic actors who could have received investments from JI, later also political leadership Some government sources and Duma members, some economic actors
Forest carbon sinks <i>Throughout the observation period</i>	Maximum recognition of forest sinks Russian forests discriminated under international climate agreements Russia's climate achievements show leadership	Voiced mainly by political leadership, but widely supported in society Some Russian forestry scientists, more recently the Ministry of Natural Resources Political leadership, Russia's representatives in the UNFCCC
Improving image 2003 – (especially related to ratification debates) <i>Threats</i>	Joining international climate pacts leads to negative economic impacts No domestic measures; Russia already in compliance with its NDC	Individual experts (notably then-presidential advisor Andrey Illarionov), some Duma members Industrial stakeholders, Russian Union of Industrialist and Entrepreneurs
Risks to economic growth 2003–	Climate change is a political plot Climate pacts aim to control and limit Russia Climate pacts promote business interests Carbon border payments = carbon protectionism	President Putin, individual experts, members of the Duma, some journalists; widely supported in society Political leadership, Government, industry, some experts, some journalists
Conspiracy against Russia 2003–	Not preparing for the EU carbon border payment system is risky	Ministry of Economic Development, climate experts (also in Presidential Administration), some journalists
International carbon payments 2016 -		

Author's compilation of the 'Benefits discourse' and 'Threat discourse' analyses below

issue-specific discourses are noted in Table 1 and discussed in terms of reconstruction of social reality over time.

Angermuller's (2018: 4, 6) 'competing truths in society' recognizes that 'not all ideas have the same truth-value' and that ideas are not necessarily true simply because they are accepted by the majority (see also Wodak 2011). I discuss benefits/threats discourse categories in terms of their truth-value, and thus their links to the physical world as reviewing the truth-values of claims facilitates understanding of the role of statistical data and academic research as a basis of climate policy-making. This approach seemed appropriate, given the political context of Russia's 'managed democracy' (see e.g. Mandel 2005), with its long tradition of 'alternative facts', 'fake news' (Roudakova 2017) and 'normalised lies' (Skillen 2019). President Putin provided an example of 'alternative facts' by arguing that Russia's energy mix – currently ca. 90% fossil-fuel-based (IEA 2021a)—is among the cleanest in the world (Moscow Times, 20 November 2019). Further, Pavel Zavalny, Chair of the State Duma Committee on Energy, contradicted statistical data (see 1) by stating: '[o]ur emissions are low, and from the point of view of reducing the load on the global environment, such an initiative [the Paris Agreement] is irrelevant for us' (Manuylova 2019).

To retain a constructivist approach—i.e., regarding knowledge as socially constructed (Bloor 2004)—while examining the truth-value, the analyst should apply the same set of theoretical and methodological tools of social research to all claims (Angermuller 2018). CDA does not offer a specific methodology for evaluating truth-values of discursive claims, but suggests 'assembling knowledge, consulting statistics [and] critically deconstructing them' project-specifically (Jäger 2001:60). This paper reflects the truth-value of all claims made to statistical data, previous academic research and historical account.

3 Benefits discourse

Discourse on the economic and political benefits expected from international climate policy and diplomacy entered the Russian climate debate when the Kyoto Protocol (KP) with its market mechanisms was adopted in 1997, spurring Russia's participation in the Kyoto negotiations (Korppoo et al. 2006; Poberezhskaya 2019). Also Russia's ratification of the Kyoto Protocol (KP) – after the EU agreed to back Russian WTO membership in return – underlined the importance of linkages to benefits when negotiating with Russia on climate (Korppoo et al. 2006). In line with Russia's current definition of national interests, and the fact that the benefits discourse is seldom questioned (Korppoo 2020), benefits are widely expected to follow Russian participation in an international climate pact:

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. (Member of Krasnodar city administration, leading position, in Korppoo 2020:116)

Russia, like every country, wants to find some way of profiting from the international climate negotiations. (Russian NGO representative, in Wilson-Rowe 2013: 70)

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, in Korppoo 2020)

Similar concerns were voiced regarding ratification of the Paris Agreement (PA):

[W]e need to carefully weigh the pros and cons, to understand whether this is a plus or a minus for the Russian economy. (Ananskih, Member of the Duma, in Duma debate, 11 April 2019b)

Many states have declared their position [on the PA], focusing on their national interests. Their national interests may not coincide with ours... (Mironov 2019)

But what is meant by ‘benefits’, or ‘national interests’ (or lack thereof) as they are often called in the domestic debate (see e.g. Korppoo et al. 2006; Tynkkynen 2010) – how are they conceptualized? During the first decade of the 2000s, ‘guarantees’ were often demanded for benefits in return for Kyoto ratification (Black 2003), as in the form of bulk trade in emissions allowances (Korppoo et al. 2006). Potential benefits were also perceived as ‘promises’ that might be ‘broken’ (Korppoo 2003); this was linked to the withdrawal from the KP by the USA, which had been expected to purchase Russia’s excess emissions allowances. After the US withdrawal, several influential Russian politicians argued that Russia had lost economic interest in the KP (Korppoo et al. 2006); some have claimed that Russia did not benefit from it (Dobrovidova 2012; IPEM 2016). In addition to economic profitability arguments, many official statements suggest that Russia’s climate achievements are linked to image benefits (Edelgeriev 2019; Putin 2021). Next I outline three influential issue-specific discourses on emissions-reduction projects, forest carbon sinks and image.

3.1 Emissions-reduction projects

Low-carbon investments under the Joint Implementation (JI) mechanism were a major benefit expected from the KP, and, thus, an important trigger of Russian interest in international climate diplomacy. Russia was widely expected to be the main supplier of emissions-reduction units in world carbon markets (Korppoo and Gassan-zade 2014). Major sub-discourses concerning JI implementation held that the Russian government had not established a functional regulatory basis for adopting projects, and that JI was economically insignificant for Russia.

Views critical to the government’s preparatory process on JI and financial losses generally came from economic actors (Korppoo et al. 2015). For instance, Anatoly Chubais, then-CEO of the electricity giant RAO Unified Energy System (UES), held that Russia might have lost ‘thousands of millions of dollars in investments’ due to administrative failure (PointCarbon 14 February 2007). Later on, this was reiterated by President Medvedev (Korppoo and Gassan-Zade 2014; Shishlov et al. 2012). According to Wilson Rowe (2013:69), the use of the JI mechanism was to be kept limited, to avoid environmentally questionable projects: thus, the main goal of the government – to protect Russia’s international image – overrode economic interests. Also the requirement to reinvest revenues from JI projects in further environmental projects (Shishlov 2011) was linked to image benefits (see below). This resulted in strong centralized control of project approval – which avoided some of the pitfalls of being criticized over the quality of JI projects but led to others.¹

The ‘insignificance’ sub-discourse countered this. According to one interviewee in a key administrative role, ‘JI was just a minor factor’; a member of the Duma considered JI to be ‘of very small benefit on the Russian scale’, and a private-sector interviewee noted that ‘there were easier ways of making money’ (all cited in Korppoo 2016: 643–644). Here also the question of agency, especially who stands to gain, was important. Small companies, less influential in the domestic debate, favoured JI – but it was the larger companies that received more JI benefits, as project allocation was political (Korppoo and Moe 2007).

¹ For instance, a large portfolio of gas pipeline renovation projects was questioned because of their environmental quality, and because the Russian hosts would take the revenues out of the country (Korppoo and Moe 2008) and was rejected by the government. However, certain centrally controlled, environmentally questionable projects were still approved.

To them, such benefits may have seemed less significant than for smaller companies. Quoting benefits, stakeholders involved in JI projects tried (unsuccessfully) to lobby the government to join the KP second commitment period, to enable project activities to continue beyond 2012 (Astrasheuskaya 2019).

Russia is supportive of the planned market mechanisms under the PA (Edelgeriev 2019). A domestic emissions-reduction project scheme launched outlines projects similar to JI (Russian Federation 2021). Agency is important here, as there will be no buyers for emissions-reduction credits without domestic carbon regulations and high-quality projects (Delovaya Rossiya workshop 2020). Here Russia's own role is recognized in generating demand for projects – as was the case with the failure of a timely setup for a functional JI administration.

Reflecting the truth-value in this case is straightforward because of historical record: Russia did receive foreign investments via JI. However, the volume of investments was lower than originally expected, which validates the 'insignificance' sub-discourse. This probably dampened interest in joining the second Kyoto commitment period.

3.2 Forest carbon sinks

The Russian taiga, the world's largest continuous stretch of forest, has been linked to international climate diplomacy through the benefits discourse (Korppoo 2020; Tynkkynen 2010). The GHG inventory submitted to the UNFCCC finds that Russian forest sinks have been declining since 2010, until the latest available inventory in 2018 (Leskinen et al. eds. 2020; UNFCCC 2021; Zamolodchikov et al. 2011). The sub-discourses here focus on maximal recognition of forest sinks, and claimed discrimination of Russian forests under the international climate pacts.

Putin (2015) called for the Russian forests, 'the lungs of the world', to be compensated under the PA; Presidential Degree 666 (President of Russia 2020) made the Russian NDC conditional on 'taking into account the greatest possible absorbing capacity of forests and other ecosystems'. Lavrov (2015) mentioned accounting for 600 Mt CO₂e per year as a goal.² Establishing scientific definitions of which land-use, land-use change and forestry (LULUCF) activities should be considered 'anthropogenic' has been problematic and politicized in international climate diplomacy (Carton et al. 2020). Russia's demands for maximum recognition of its forest sinks, even beyond the anthropogenic influence, have occasionally led to conflicts in the UN climate negotiations, and illustrate the symbolic value attached to the forests in Russia (Korppoo et al. 2006; Wilson Rowe 2013). As put by a Russian climate negotiator, referring to the Kyoto LULUCF rules:

...Russia wanted to have full accounting with a reference level from zero [credit for all Russian forests], which was too different from the position of others [credit given for improved forest stock]. My complex task was to explain to the higher-ups that counting from zero would not be anthropogenic change – forests grow anyway. (Russian climate negotiator, cited in Wilson Rowe 2013:82)

Agreement has not been reached on accounting for carbon sinks under PA; however, as the basis of LULUCF lies in the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, the IPCC methods applied will rule out accounting for natural factors (Krug 2018). Putin's interpretation that Russian products can be considered 'clean' and free of carbon footprint because Russian forest carbon sinks fully offset the country's GHG emissions (Kudiyarov 2017) are

² 600 Mt CO₂e corresponds more or less with Russia's forest sinks inventory data under the UNFCCC, but the trend is declining.

unlikely to be accepted internationally. The element of offsetting emissions from other economic sectors to avoid ‘radical’ mitigation measures remains the basis of the Russian NDC.

The accuracy of the IPCC-approved Regional Forest Carbon Budget Assessment (ROBUL) model used for calculating Russia’s forest sinks has spurred discussion about Russia receiving the maximum account of forest sinks (Kudiyarov 2017). Several Russian forest experts have criticized the low quality of data used, and indicated that more of Russia’s forests should be included under the ‘managed’ forests category (IEF RAS 2021). Several forest scientists and some politicians have seen ‘discrimination’ against Russia as regards defining the absorption potential of Russia’s forests in comparison to those of other countries, or ‘miscalculation’ of Russian forest carbon sinks (Ivanter and Kudiryadov 2017; Ananskih 2019a; Kudiyarov, 2017). Although Sergey Donskoy, former Minister of Natural Resources, held that the proposed alternative calculation methods would not be approved by the UNFCCC since they would lead to ‘artificial overestimation’ of Russian forest carbon sinks (Kudiyarov, 2017), the Ministry launched a revision of inventory rules in 2021 (Davydova 2021). Here the national interests approach seems to override science. As Kudiyarov (2017) put it: ‘It is not very clear what is wrong with “overestimating” the absorbing capacity of our forests, if it corresponds to the goals of protecting the domestic carbon-intensive industry on the world market.’

In terms of truth-value, the scientific evaluation of the absorptive capacity of the Russian forests, which might possibly be calculated more accurately, is perhaps misunderstood as equivalent to anthropogenically enhanced LULUCF under the UNFCCC emission inventories. Given these UNFCCC rules, it is difficult to see how Russia could be discriminated against. After all, forest sinks reduced the need to cut emissions from energy use significantly. In 2018, Russian emissions with LULUCF (UNFCCC 2021) were 52.4% of the 1990 level, as opposed to 69.6% without them.

3.3 Image benefits

Image benefits, which the Kremlin generally appears to seek by emphasizing the country’s climate achievements, have been seen by scholars as the trigger behind Russia’s participation in international climate diplomacy (Henry & Sundstrom 2007; Tynkkynen 2010; Korppoo & Kokorin 2017; Korppoo 2020). For instance, Henry and Sundstrom (2007) hold that concerns over Russia’s international image supported ratifying the KP. The view that Russia is a climate leader because of its climate contributions forms a sub-discourse (Korppoo 2020; Gracthev, 2004; Zubov 2004).

Official speeches continue to underline Russia’s climate achievements, including the steep emissions decline compared to 1990 levels and the country’s decisive role in enabling the KP to enter into force (Bedritsky 2011; Edelgeriev 2019). At the Paris Climate Conference, President Putin (2015) argued: ‘Russia’s efforts made it possible to slow down global warming for almost a year’; at the Leaders’ Summit on Climate organized by US President Biden, Putin (2021) said, ‘[c]ompared to 1990, Russia has reduced its greenhouse gas emissions more than many other countries’. It has been noted even domestically that it is easy for Russia to comply with the PA and thereby show commitment to internationally important environmental issues (Drize, 2019).

Recently, Russia has made voluntary contributions to finance climate measures in developing countries and the CIS (Edelgeriev 2018, 2019), as well as to the Green Climate Fund (2021), possibly motivated by image ambitions. According to Prime Minister Medvedev, adoption of the PA meant that Russia would now ‘allocate financial resources... to

developing countries for the prevention and adaptation to climate change.’ (France24, 23 September 2019).

To ascertain the truth-value of the leadership’s claims as to Russia’s climate achievements, we must examine Russia’s climate contributions in comparison with other countries. International comparison reveals the low efficiency of energy use in Russia: total final energy consumption (TFC)/GDP was five times that of OECD, and two-and-half times more than that of China in 2018 (IEA 2021b). The potential for technical energy-efficiency improvement in Russia has been estimated as some 30–35% of total primary energy supply (IEA 2015:194). Also scientific assessments of the fairness of the NDCs under the Paris Agreement categorize Russia’s goal as ‘critically insufficient’ (Climate Action Tracker 2021). As official climate-contribution statements are rarely framed within such international comparisons, and generally contradict them—and are therefore received with scepticism abroad—they can be considered to have low truth-value.

3.4 Reflections on policy-decisions

The benefits discourse is in line with policy decisions. The EU’s support to Russian WTO membership in exchange for Russian Kyoto ratification clearly fits the discourse. Also dropping out of the second Kyoto commitment period was justified by the insignificant amount of expected JI investments; and the functional approval system for JI was established as a response to the sub-discourse critical of its preparation. Gaining more forest sinks has driven Russia’s position in UN climate negotiations to the point of blocking negotiations; the Ministry of Natural Resources is working to update its forest inventory methodology, in line with criticisms put forward under the sub-discourse on maximum accounting of forests. The desire to avoid damage to the national image may have limited the use of the Kyoto mechanisms. Country’s image is likely to have supported the adoption of both the KP and the PA, perhaps also encouraging Russia to finance carbon cooperation in other countries.

4 Threats discourse

Threats, plots and foul play, such as hints of foreigners seeking financial or political gain, or taking advantage of Russia under the banner of environmental protection, have been a recurrent element in the Russian climate discourse (Korppoo et al., 2015; Roginko, 2002; Tynkkynen, 2010; Wilson Rowe, 2009; Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2016). As the quotes below illustrate, many politicians as well as members of the public feel that climate agreements are constructions fabricated in order to achieve other goals than environmental ones. General suspicion and sceptical views on climate science often link to conspiracy discourse (Korppoo 2020).

[Under the Kyoto Protocol] orders will be given that we should live in a way that others consider necessary. (Altay interview no.16, academic: lecturer in geography, Korppoo 2020)

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 no. 11, agricultural company employee, Korppoo 2020)

[...]the Paris Agreement is not about climate, not about ecology, not about politics – it’s about the economy. (Igor Ananskih, member of the Duma, 2019a)

[Moscow...] is extremely concerned about attempts to use the climate agenda to create new barriers. (Maxim Reshetnikov, Minister of Economic Development, cited in Morgan 2020)

Russian observers expect other negotiating countries to focus on securing national benefits for themselves as well—perhaps because the environmental benefits that international environmental agreements aim for do not feature significantly in the domestic discourse. This would fit the view of Russians as being ‘less able to connect their environmental concerns to their economic and other concerns’ (Whitefield 2003). For instance, even though 57% of Russian respondents to a Russian Public Opinion Research Center poll³ (VCIOM 2020) agreed that climate change had influenced the lives of their family or themselves, 76% were unwilling to pay more for fuel to finance climate mitigation policies. Moreover, Kurbanov and Prokhoda (2019) found that, in Russia, differences in educational level do not correlate with differences in environmental values, as is the case in many other countries; they argue that the educational system is not involved in forming the general level of knowledge on global problems such as climate change. These dynamics may partly explain the suspicions over the ‘real’ motives of various other governments that promote climate policy. This is evident in formal policy: 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.’

According to Freeman and Bentall (2017: 596), ‘unfounded conspiracy beliefs and paranoid ideas are both forms of excessive mistrust...at both an individual and societal level’. The Soviet Union was a low-trust society (Hosking 2013); in Russia, trust in social and political institutions remains among the lowest in the world (Shlapentokh 2006), and the situation may have even worsened since the Soviet era (Pehlivanova 2009). Ortmann and Heathershaw (2012) note that, when studying Russian culture, it is common to encounter conspiracy beliefs, which are perhaps fed by personal experiences of corruption. Conspiracy theories have frequently been invoked by the Russian leadership (see for instance Poberezhskaya, 2016; Yablokov, 2014).

We now turn to three issue-specific discourses: risks to economic growth, conspiracy against Russia, and international carbon payments.

4.1 Risks to economic growth

A common Russian approach to climate pacts has been that participation should not entail negative impacts on the economy (Korppoo 2020). As journalist Igor Alabuzhin (2019) put it: ‘real action to reduce greenhouse gas emissions means an economic recession’. Thus, the sub-discourses focus on the adverse economic impacts of climate pacts, and opposition to domestic climate policies.

Deep suspicion of climate-mitigation measures dates back to the KP, which a Duma member described as a ‘foreign capitalist’ plot aimed at limiting Russian economic growth (interview with Duma member, Korppoo 2016). Presidential Advisor Andrey Illarionov was known to fear that the KP might limit national economic growth (Korppoo et al. 2006). Similarly, Sergey Roginko (2019), head of the Centre for Ecology and Development at the Institute of Europe, the Russian Academy of Sciences, has argued that the PA dooms Russia to ‘an economic lag behind developed countries’. According to geologist Polevanov (2019), the cost of electricity will rise, GDP decline, industries lose profitability, and unemployment

³ The oldest polling and marketing research provider in Russia; state-owned.

increase if Russia ratifies the PA. In response, respectively, the Minister of Economy stated that KP ratification would not harm Russia's interests (Korppoo et al. 2006), and the Ministry of Energy said that implementation of the PA should not negatively affect the economy or competitiveness (Alexander Novak, Minister of Energy, 6 November 2019).

Some Russian observers have categorized policy measures to cut emissions as either 'soft' (not damaging the national economy) or 'radical' (as with a carbon tax or a domestic emissions trading system) (IPEM 2016; Ivanter and Kudiryadov, 2017). When preparations for implementing the PA begun with a proposal to regulate carbon and perhaps set a domestic carbon tax, the Russian Union of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs (RSPP) argued that Russia had already over-fulfilled its NDC, and that further PA implementation would have negative impacts on socio-economic development and competitiveness (Sauer 2019).

In terms of truth-value, the expert evaluation agreed that Russia was highly unlikely to exceed its Kyoto target level (Korppoo et al. 2006); historical emissions data have proven this correct (UNFCCC 2021). Similar evaluations apply to the PA NDC (Safonov et al. 2020; Butrin and Shapovalov 2019). However, emissions growth is likely to catch up with the most recent target at some point, as Russia's commitment has tightened from remaining under the 1990 emissions level (KP) to limiting emissions to 70–75% of the 1990 level by 2030 (PA) in the absence of effective domestic emissions-reduction policies, and is expected to tighten further due to the review mechanism of the PA. Thus, more 'radical' and costly domestic policies cannot be avoided indefinitely, which increases the truth-value of this claim over time. The claim that no domestic measures are required as Russia is already in compliance with its NDC is correct but presented out of context, as the motivation for launching such measures is related to the requirements of the EU CBAM (see section '4.3').

4.2 Conspiracy against Russia

The domestic climate debate has noted various 'plots' against Russia. These have included conspiracy theories and pseudo-science, some seen as targeting Russia in particular. The KP ratification debate overflowed with anti-Russia conspiracy claims: controlling the development of the Russian economy, enabling access to Russia's natural resources and forcibly selling foreign environmental technologies to Russia (Korppoo et al. 2015: 42–43; Roginko 2002). This issue-specific discourse remains relevant to the PA, which journalists Yelnik (2019) and Kudiyarov (2017) argue reflects Western interests in maintaining their competitive advantages and promoting business interests under the mantle of climate protection. President Putin himself was sceptical that other countries favoured zero-carbon energy because of climate-change considerations: he accused them of 'pursuing their own agenda': '[t]hese people are trying to insert themselves into the current trends of public opinion, and trying to lead us all into delusions' (*Moscow Times*, 20 November 2019). Also 68% of the respondents to a VCIOM (2020) opinion poll saw the environment (in this case EU introducing its carbon border adjustment mechanism CBAM) as an excuse for other governments to achieve unrelated goals. Further examples abound:

[A] global carbon fee of \$ 50–100 per tonne by 2030...would give climate fighters up to \$4 trillion a year. In general, a solid jackpot is visible on the horizon.... Who cares about real temperature dynamics? (Ivanter and Kudiryadov, journalists, 2017) There is no global warming – there is a global scam...I hope this does not end with the destruction of the country by ratifying the Paris Agreement. (Polevanov, PhD in geological and mineral sciences, 2019)

[The Paris Agreement] is a tool for managing foreign economies by those countries that want to steer and want to get money out of thin air.... They want to drive us into the category of backward, developing countries, they do not want Russia to develop. (Sergey Mironov, member of the State Duma, a statement in the State Duma, 19 December 2018)

[T]he Paris Agreement is not about climate, [about the big economy, about the struggle for the redistribution of markets and international financial flows. (Igor Ananskih, statement in the State Duma, 5 April 2018)

The IPCC (2021) offers sufficient evidence for dismissing Russian invalidity claims against the scientific basis of global climate pacts, and resolving the climate crisis as a reason for other governments to act. Such claims have lessened in the Russian debate but not completely disappeared. The claim that other countries are seeking to control the Russian economy through climate policy has shaky foundations, as Russia accounted for only 1.95% of the global economy in 2017 (Worldometer 2021), and invested a much lower share of the GDP in R&D than the world's leading economies (OECD 2021). Other countries have access to Russia's natural resources, with the active assistance of the Russian government dependent on the tax revenues from fossil-fuel exports. Russia's business-as-usual NDC ensures that there is little need to purchase environmental technologies from international markets, because of climate pacts. The government also promotes demand for domestic technology—for instance, by requiring an increasing share of domestic technology in the case of renewable-energy tenders (Tissot and Bogdanov 2020). Thus, such claims do not withstand critical evaluation.

4.3 International carbon payments

The EU's CBAM aims at reducing carbon leakage (i.e. the transfer of polluting production to countries not committed to strong climate mitigation measures), by establishing carbon tariffs for products imported to the EU. Minister of Economic Development, Maxim Reshetnikov, has cautioned against attempts to 'use the climate agenda to create new barriers' under the WTO, holding that promotion of an environmental agenda should be done strictly within the WTO rules – which some proposals (presumably those of the EU) allegedly contravene (Morgan 2020). This is in line with the 2016 Foreign Policy Concept, according to which Russia opposes politicizing environment protection and its use for encouraging unfair competition. Further, former Presidential Climate Advisor Alexander Bedritsky (2014) has stated that it is unacceptable to force Russian companies to participate in carbon-trading schemes. Disbelief in 'environmental motives' reappears here: IPEM (2016) has argued that such restrictions are imposed under 'the guise of fighting climate change'. Journalists Ivanter and Kudiryadov (2017) have even branded those promoting cross-border climate payments as 'climate fraudsters' in international trade.

The other sub-discourse argues that *not* preparing for the EU CBAM is risky. Domestic carbon-taxes are increasingly common and cannot be avoided indefinitely (Ivanter and Kudiryadov 2017): participation in this global trend can make or break Russian industry's future competitiveness (Matveeva 2019). Presidential Climate Advisor Ruslan Edelgeriev holds that Russian businesses should prepare for the EU CBAM, as it will be launched in near future (*Rossiia Segodnya*, 6 February 2020). Further, support for introducing a domestic carbon tax in Russia has come from Anatoly Chubais, formerly of Rusnano, and Deputy Head of the Ministry of Economy Mikhail Rasstrigin (RIA Novosti, 31 October 2019; Butrin and Shapovalov 2019). The risks of carbon-intensive export to the EU and

beyond are well recognized (*Kommersant*, 17 October 2019; Davydova 2019a, 2019b). Oleg Pluzhnikov of the General Council of Business Russia has noted that delays in establishing an emissions reporting system entail significant risks of the introduction of carbon-protection measures against Russia (Davydova 2019c). Russia's own role has emerged in this sub-discourse, and represents a more liberal mindset. According to Presidential Climate Advisor Edelgeriev, '...it is wrong to say that the start of regulation of greenhouse gas emissions will lead to a decline. On the contrary, if we do not regulate [emissions] and if business and the government do not work on this, we will get a recession' (cited in Batalova 2019).

The *domestic debate* has been balanced and of higher truth-value than the official statements. The CBAM will certainly have negative economic implications for Russian exports, which have a large carbon footprint (Safonov 2021); however, complying with such standards could also support the Kremlin's modernization goals and the future competitiveness of Russian industry. Allegations that the EU is using the climate issue as an excuse for protectionism should be seen in light of the Russian proclivity for conspiracy theories, also in line with Russia's Foreign Policy Concept. Such claims have been dismissed in the domestic debate (Kutuzova 2019), as the CBAM aims at cutting carbon leakage and is merely the latest addition to the EU's previously adopted costly climate policy: the EU spent some 19–20% of its budget on climate policy during 2016–2020, accounting for some €200 bln between 2014 and 2020 (European Parliament 2018).

4.4 Reflections on policy-decisions

The threats discourse has spurred deeper scrutiny of the pros and cons for Russia and its ratification of the KP and PA. It may have helped the Kremlin to negotiate more benefits from other countries to support its participation, and could therefore be politically valuable. Also the stalled introduction of carbon regulations based on economic concerns corresponds with the economic threats sub-discourse. As *Kommersant* political observer Dimity Drize (2019) noted: 'Our resource lobby is still stronger than the "green" one'. Threats labelled as 'carbon protectionism' are in line with the Foreign Policy Concept's critical approach to trade barriers based on environmental protection. On the whole, the Russian government has clearly reacted to issues raised by the threats discourses in order to reduce the risk of adverse outcomes.

5 Discussion and conclusion

Using CDA allowed me to dismantle social constructions of reality as reflected in the discourses, to discuss the justifications behind political decision-making even when their truth-value is low. Such constructions shed light to the role of knowledge in decision-making, offering a deeper understanding for those who negotiate with Russia on climate. This section first reviews the truth-values of the sub-discourses and how they reflect statistical data, academic research and historical accounts. I then discuss the relationship of truth-value and policy-decisions / diplomatic positions, before turning to the future prospects for climate cooperation with Russia in the context of this socially constructed reality.

Regarding benefits, history has proven previous claims about the already-expired JI projects correct: investments were indeed received, albeit less than expected and clearly

insignificant for the economy, largely due to administrative delays. However, discrimination against Russian forests seems unlikely, instead reflecting the aim of getting recognition of the maximum amount of LULUCF, regardless of their anthropogenic origins. The definition of national interests, and the social construction of the Russian forests as especially significant to Russia's climate position (Wilson Rowe 2013), may be at play here. Further, claims correct as such but not placed in the wider context necessary for achieving a high truth-value, are typically used to boost Russia's image. For instance, Russian emissions plummeted after 1990, but unlike the Russia's political leadership has often claimed this is not comparable to other countries' targeted climate-policy actions, as shown by Russia's continued high inefficiency and carbon intensity.

The threats discourse fits the socially constructed reality on conspiracies and the perceived discrimination as violating Russia's national interests as also voiced in the Foreign Policy Concept. Early claims as to the economic threat posed by KP were highly unrealistic. As knowledge on the issue has increased, the claims have softened; however, the more ambitious target, together with emissions growth, adds to the truth-value in the medium term. Claims with low truth-value have been made concerning conspiracies against Russia, often anchored in the tradition of scepticism to climate science or to disbelief in environmental concern as a motivation behind the costly policies of other countries. Also the Kremlin, monitoring what is said about climate change in the media (Poberezhskaya 2016), may maintain such a sub-discourse, as climate scepticism is in the interest of fossil-fuel exporters. EU CBAM related claims have raised widespread concern in Russia. Suspicions of carbon protectionism disguised as environmental policy are not credible as regards long-term EU measures to cut emissions, as also recognized in the domestic debate. However, claims about economic threats to Russia are valid, given the carbon intensity of Russia's export products.

CDA does not offer tools for establishing whether the sub-discourses have actually influenced policy-decisions, but they were found to be generally in line with sub-discourses of low truth-value. This suggests that socially constructed reality can go against statistical data and scientific research, though it was complex at times to identify relevant statistical or scientific data against which the claims could be reflected. Still, debate including claims of higher truth-value against those of lower truth-value driving policy have increased gradually, perhaps due to increasing levels of knowledge. For instance, the economic threat to Russia by CBAM is widely discussed, whereas related protectionism claims also used by the political leadership have been dismissed by various stakeholders. Thus, beyond the socially constructed reality that drives policy, there is a more facts-based climate debate underway, which may reconstruct the social reality on climate diplomacy over time. JI provides an example of an earlier, high truth-value claim that successfully changed policy as the issue attracted publicity and political support.

To some extent, the sub-discourses reflect gradual reconstruction of social reality, but no consistent adoption of claims with higher truth-value is in sight (see Appendix Table 4). Some of the sub-discourses have been temporally limited (JI, CBAM), but most have remained relevant throughout the observation period. Some reconstruction of social reality can be detected in policy-decisions, both towards higher (rules of JI approval) and lower truth-value (decisions on re-calculating the absorption capacity of Russia's forests). However, sub-discourses concerning the big questions of Russian climate position—a more ambitious NDC, LULUCF's role in achieving it, and domestic emission reduction policies—have not undergone major reconstructions. The central role of the image discourse may also be diminishing, as Russia has become more confrontational internationally (Skryzhevskaya et al. 2015). It is also notable that the conspiracy issue discourse spills to the debates on other issue discourses.

Russia's benefits and threats approach to international climate pacts seems logical given the constructions of social reality evident on closer examination of the discourses. Scepticism to climate science explains the lack of concern over the impacts of climate change. The difficulties of linking environmental problems with costly action, and the approach and expectations of foreign policy provide further background. Against this backdrop, it is easy for many Russian stakeholders to conclude that other countries participate in climate pacts in order to take advantage of Russia and the pact, rather than to protect the environment. Thus it becomes logical to seek benefits (as others are expected to do) and be wary of others seeking gains at Russia's expense, under the banner of saving the climate. Globally, such considerations are not uncommon. Disputing climate science has been central in the US climate discourse (Hayes and Knox-Hayes 2014; Cohen 2020; Cheung 2020), with climate policy viewed as a threat to the national economy, even to the point of withdrawing from climate pacts (Jotzo et al. 2018).

Russia's stance constitutes a challenge for those seeking to promote climate cooperation, as this would have to focus on providing benefits to Russia or alleviating perceived threats. The threats discourse may be particularly useful for Russian policymakers: it allows greater room for decision-making domestically. From the perspective of cooperation, the dominance of sub-discourses based on claims which are not backed by statistical data or scientific research is worth noting: influencing Russia's climate position or domestic policies by sharing knowledge will be difficult as long as such social constructions of reality prevail especially amongst the political leadership. However, it is reassuring that a broader, facts-based debate does exist in Russia, and may gradually reconstruct the current social reality.

However, variously founded Russian claims as to climate achievements are likely to continue. Image benefits seem to be sought with arguments that appear far from convincing—if the goal is to impress an international audience. However, the target could be at least partly a domestic audience more inclined to accept the claims put forward, and see the issue linked to Russia's 'great power' identity discussion (Neumann 2008). Further, the benefits achieved are often downplayed in the domestic debate by claims that the concession—for instance, EU support for Russian WTO membership (Kails 2004)—has made little difference. Such an approach could aim at managing domestic expectations as well as demonstrating that Russia cannot be influenced by other governments—but it may prove problematic for attempts to create cooperation with Russia.

The existence of a more balanced fact-based domestic debate means that there are stakeholders interested and equipped to discuss wider options of climate policy with foreign partners. The recent regulations on domestic low-carbon projects and the Low Carbon Strategy suggest this. Debate on CBAM has been detailed and relatively multi-voiced, and could become an issue-area for cooperation, especially if framed in terms of better access to the EU market in order to build trust. The introduction of CBAM may force a restructuring of the social reality in terms of the framework of climate policy. So far the Russian government has managed to opt out of costly domestic emissions reduction measures—but, as an external trigger, CBAM will impose new rules on Russian export products, regardless of the domestic constructions of reality. As Russia will have to react on these new requirements, the voices spreading knowledge with higher truth-value are likely to gain importance, as with the debate on making use of the JI mechanism before it expired. At stake this time will not be minor benefits, but avoiding major export losses. International cooperation is important for keeping Russia active on the climate-policy front, and thus, efforts to build trust from the EU side may support cooperation on CBAM with Russia on a longer term. However, the deteriorating diplomatic relations between Russia and the EU do not set a favourable scene for such approach. External triggers remain the main drivers of Russia's climate policy – even though they may sometimes be perceived as conspiracies.

Appendix 1

Table 2 Benefits and threats discourses identified in earlier discourse and frame analyses on Russian climate policy in international literature

Publication	Method / approach	Focus of research	Research material	Benefits discourse	Threats discourse
Wilson Rowe 2009	Frame analysis	How climate change framed as a policy problem, role of experts	Newspaper articles: <i>Rossiskaya Gazeta</i> 2000–2007	Not placed within a frame but discussed as background	Causally agnostic frame
Tynkkynen 2010	Frame analysis	Framing of climate change problem in Russia's public discussion	Newspaper articles: <i>Kommersant</i> , <i>Nezavisimaya Gazeta</i> , <i>Izvestiya</i> , <i>Rossiskaya Gazeta</i> , <i>Moskovskiy Komsomolets</i> 2000–2004	Duty frame National interest frame	National interest frame
Korppoo et al. 2015	Discourse analysis	Interface of domestic policy and Russia's international positions in environmental regimes: 1) Kyoto ratification, 2) Joint Implementation	News articles, various sources, 2003–2005 and 2009–2012	Specific benefit discourse but also under other discourses	Specific threats discourse but also under other discourses
Tynkkynen & Tynkkynen 2018	Discourse analysis	Climate denial discourses in Russia	<i>Rossiskaya Gazeta</i> , <i>Izvestiya</i> 2012–2013, TV documentaries 2010–2013, two books	N/A	Conspiracy theories
Poberezhskaya 2019	Discourse analysis	Evolution of climate discourse in the Russian traditional media	Newspaper articles: <i>Izvestiya</i> 1992–2012	Since 1997	Since 2000
Korppoo 2020	Frame analysis	Russia's role in international climate diplomacy	106 interviews with professional laypersons 2012–2013	Across frames	Across frames

Newspaper search 2019–2020: *Rossiskaya Gazeta*, *Kommersant*, *Ekspert*. Broad news-article search; additional newspaper article search, in some cases on specific timeframe, to deepen or update an issue-specific discourse identified in previous research. Political statements: statements by representatives of the Russian Federation in international climate conferences, official statements by the President and the members of the Duma.

Appendix 2

Table 3 Research materials / previous work used, by sub-discourse

Issue-specific discourse	Materials used
Benefits discourse – general	Poberezhkaya 2019; Korppoo et al. 2006; Korppoo 2020; Wilson Rowe 2013; political statements
Emissions reduction projects	Korppoo & Gassan-zade; Korppoo et al. 2015; Korppoo 2016; Korppoo & Moe 2007; broad news-article search
Forest carbon sinks	Wilson Rowe 2013; broad news-article search; Korppoo 2020; Korppoo et al. 2006
Improving image	Korppoo 2020; political statements; newspaper search 2019–2020
Threats discourse – general	Korppoo 2020; political statements
Risks to economic growth	Korppoo 2016; Korppoo 2020; Korppoo et al. 2006; political statements
Conspiracy against Russia	Korppoo et al. 2015; political statements; newspaper search 2019–2020; broad news-article search
International carbon payments	Newspaper search 2019–2020; broad news-article search

*Policy decisions: Policy-decisions judged to be in line with the claim made by the sub-discourse are mentioned; however, there is no way of knowing whether the sub-discourse has actually influenced the decision. Those in parentheses provide background to the sub-discourse.

Appendix 3

Table 4.

Table 4 Evaluation of the truth-value and evolution of sub-discourses

Sub-discourse	Truth-value	Supporting evidence	Evolution	Policy decisions* In line with / (related)
Government failing to put JI into practice	High	Historical	JI mechanism ended in 2012	Revision of JI approval rules
JI is insignificant to Russian economy	Middle	Historical	Companies focused on getting projects when they became available	Rejection of the second KP commitment period
Maximum recognition of forest sinks	Low	UNFCCC sinks definition	Constant	Russia's official position in UNFCCC negotiations
Discrimination of Russian forests under international climate agreements	Low	UNFCCC sinks definition	MNR first rejected the idea, but this claim has recently gained importance	Re-calculation of sinks has been launched
Russia's climate achievements show leadership	Low: the statements themselves not necessarily incorrect, but presenting them out of context opens for data misuse	Statistical data: GHG emissions data	Description of achievements has become more complex over time but still ignorant of international comparisons	Russia's official position in UNFCCC negotiations (Russia's critically insufficient NDC)
Joining international climate pacts leads to negative economic impacts	Low to Middle: economic concerns related to KP were not founded but are gaining importance with the PA NDC and beyond	Statistical data: GHG emissions data	General arguments mellowed to some extent since KP ratification debate	Russia's critically insufficient NDC
No need for domestic measures: Russia is already in compliance with its NDC	Low: factually correct claim presented out of context, as domestic measures have not been launched to comply with PA	Statistical data: carbon footprint of Russian export products	Actual policies and measures have emerged in the Russian debate with PA NDC	Rejection of domestic carbon regulation

Table 4 (continued)

Sub-discourse	Truth-value	Supporting evidence	Evolution	Policy decisions* In line with / (related)
Climate change is a political plot	Low	IPCC climate science	Climate-sceptical beliefs typically presented as justification have lessened in the Russian debate but not disappeared completely	Russia's critically insufficient NDC
Climate pacts aim to control and limit Russia	Low	Statistical data: Russia's international competitiveness	Constant, but claims have become more specific and sophisticated	Critical approach to EU CBAM (Foreign Policy Concept)
Climate pacts promote Western business interests	Low	Historical record on Russia's climate policy measures and requirements on domestic technology	Constant, but claims becoming more specific and sophisticated	Critical approach to EU CBAM, Foreign Policy Concept
Carbon border payments are carbon protectionism	Low	Historical record on the cost of EU's climate policies	Recent claim which has gained detail as the EU CBAM plan has developed	Critical approach to EU CBAM, Foreign Policy Concept
Not preparing for the EU carbon border payment is risky	High	Statistical data: high carbon footprint of Russia's export products	Recent claim which has gained detail as the EU CBAM plan has developed	(Rejection of domestic carbon regulation)

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