

Review - The Role of Energy in Russian Foreign Policy towards Kazakhstan

Written by Daryl Morini

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Paolo Sorbello

The Role of Energy in Russian Foreign Policy towards Kazakhstan

Geopolitics, Economics, Law, and Technology in Central Asian Oil and Gas



Paolo Sorbello has written a very interesting monograph covering, as the title suggests, The Role of Energy in Russian Foreign Policy towards Kazakhstan. Its strengths are the multi-disciplinary focal points of this study, its original methodology, and the artistic manner in which the author weaves complex and, usually, separate scholarly fields into one narrative. Above all, Sorbello succeeds in crafting, as he puts it, a “well-rounded and thorough scientific approach to the study of energy’s role in foreign policy.” In a field of inquiry which is more often shaped by popular journalism, with dramatised headlines of ‘gas wars’, this book comes as a welcome wake up call to scholars. It turns out that Putin’s Russia is not simply playing the energy card as a foreign policy tool; that, in fact this is only part of a more nuanced story. Carbon fuels may also be the deeper material force playing Russia.

Foreign Policy, Energy and Methodology

This book ties together numerous academic literatures which often exist in relative isolation from one another: Russian foreign policy, energy economics, energy and foreign policy, post-Soviet studies, international and domestic (Russian and Kazakh) law, geography, geopolitics and technology. It is a broad agenda indeed, but one which the author argues is desperately needed if Western scholarship is to come to grips with the deeper significance of oil and gas in world affairs and, in particular, to the Russian decision-making process. To this effect, particular strong points of the book are those sections which deal with the often undiscussed details which make hydrocarbon exploitation so difficult – and so lucrative – such as the geographic distribution of resource endowments, the technological aspect of drilling for oil, the technical difference between “greenfields” and “brownfields”, and the host of economic, legal and diplomatic issues surrounding the energy question in Russo-Kazakh relations. This in-depth study into the complex and multi-faceted aspect of the role of oil and gas in Russian foreign policy goes beyond the headlines, taking the reader through the hydrocarbon fields, and into the backroom of energy contract negotiations between the Russian Federation and Kazakhstan since 1991.

Putin, Gazprom and the Recentralisation of Russia

Interesting details in the book include the fact that then-President Vladimir (and now-Prime Minister) Putin was said, in 2008, to meet with Gazprom officials more frequently than with his highest-ranking principal government ministers. Perhaps the conversation was more pleasant? Sorbello explains how Putin first sought to revive Russia’s great power status (*Velikoderzhavnost*) by recentralising the state. In practice this meant taking back state assets, including energy firms, which had been privatised in the “grabbing” of the 1990s. The author tackles this topic without the lofty romanticism with which Western eyes often view the struggle between Putin and the oligarchs, which can easily lead to those poor (figuratively-speaking) oligarchs being lionised as symbols of the resistance of free-

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market capitalism and liberal-democracy against the persecution of an evil dictatorship. In fact, there are no heroes in this story; both sides are equally shady, and the oligarchs did not seem to treasure liberal-democratic values when they were 'grabbing' the collective wealth of Russians in a profligate feast of predatory capitalism when the USSR imploded. Sorbello does not defend Putin's anti-corruption record, admitting that it is selective, politicised and no doubt self-interested. But his take on this period of Russia's recent history is arguably more even-handed than numerous popular accounts written by many Western commentators and exiled Russian critics.

Style, Structure and Argument

The Role of Energy in Russian Foreign Policy towards Kazakhstan is generally well-written, shows very good research in numerous complementary academic streams, and makes excellent use of Russian-language and other foreign language resources. It is clearly the fruit of intensive labour. The structure, however, is perhaps the least accessible aspect of the book. Because this work deals with diverse and often unrelated academic disciplines, each chapter analyses a different aspect of the topic. For example, one section deals with the deep, technical aspects of drilling for oil and gas, and another explains the intricate legal question of Production Sharing Agreements (PSAs) and other legislation relating to energy production. Whilst the author does an excellent job of discussing these complex expert-area problems, they may be less accessible to International Relations scholars and general audiences without any legal or economic background.

According to Sorbello, the "chief objective of this book is to investigate and understand the dynamics that the 1991 events generated within Russia's foreign policy decision-making towards Kazakhstan, especially in the energy sector." The author certainly accomplishes this broad goal. But the argumentation in this book is occasionally unclear and buried among each chapter's detailed, empirical analysis. Several chapters could be read as stand-alone articles, because an absence of visible argumentation and signposting leave some heavily descriptive sections only loosely integrated into the Russo-Kazakh focus of this book. Perhaps this remark is beside the point, however, as Sorbello concludes:

The originality of the present book was not planned to consist so much in its outcome as in the scientific approach to the matter... The structure of the analysis required that various questions be addressed individually. These questions were broken down into chapters according to the academic discipline best suited to answering each one.

Hence, the original methodology and multi-disciplinary focus of this book, its strongest point, necessitated a novel approach. The author makes an original contribution to scholarship on the role of energy in foreign policy, especially that of Russia since 1991. The scientific and thorough approach to this question, which Sorbello feels is often missing in academic work on the subject, not only fills a gap, but builds an exhaustive and well-researched precedent for future researchers on the role of energy in foreign policy.

The concluding argument of this book is the most interesting: "Energy enjoys the unique characteristic of being both a tool and a trigger of foreign policy decision-making." Hence, the matter is more complex than the simple narrative of Putinist Russia manipulating its smaller neighbours by using Gazprom as the extension of Russian foreign policy by other means. What we may also have witnessed since Putin's rise to power, Sorbello suggests, is the Gazpromisation of Russian foreign policy – oil and gas 'national champions' assuming the role of new quasi-state actors in the formulation and execution of the state's national interests.

Conclusion

In future editions of this book, the author could perhaps develop a final chapter on the concept of energy security, and how it has evolved in Central Asia, through the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation for example, and how it is likely to develop in the future. More attention could also be given to the competing imperatives to Russo-Kazakh energy cooperation, such as China's voracious appetite for hydrocarbons, and how this is reflected in the pipelines running from Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan to western China. Overall, this book is recommended reading for all regional or country-experts and interested readers alike.

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