

## CHAPTER 9

# Global discourses, national priorities, and community experiences of participation in the energy infrastructure projects in northern Russia

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### Introduction

Russia is among the world's largest exporters of carbon dioxide emissions (CO<sub>2</sub>) in fossil fuels (International Energy Agency, 2020). Contributing to these emissions are extensive energy infrastructure projects developed over the last 2 decades in northern Russia (Graybill, 2017). These projects include unconventional oil extraction, liquefied natural gas (LNG), and large-scale pipeline projects taking place in the Arctic, Siberia, and the Far East, primarily oriented at the export of fossil fuels. To understand the dynamics of fossil fuel export, it is important to explore the social dimensions of expanding fossil fuel production. There remains a paucity of evidence on responses in communities affected by resource extraction projects in Russia.

It is now well established that resource extraction projects should be accompanied by meaningful community participation, and a lack of participation increases the likelihood of community resistance (Conde & Le Billon, 2017). Here, I will argue that on-the-ground public responses are best understood when community participation practices are considered in a dynamic interaction with global discourses and national priorities for development. Discourses and practices are common dimensions of problematization of forms of knowledge and experiences as they help to shape the reality to which they refer (Jentoft, 2017). I aim to examine these multifaceted relations in the specific context of the northern Russian regions.

Drawing on the literature on resource industries (Bebbington & Bury, 2013) and using the power of exclusion as a conceptual framework (Hall et al., 2011), I focus on the exclusionary aspects of community participation: while communities supposedly participate in the decision-making process and in the benefits from fossil fuel projects, they are facing various challenges that limit meaningful community participation. The study identifies that exclusionary processes are driven by several strategies: discursive strategies, market mechanisms, legal and bureaucratic strategies, and strategies of uncertainty. These strategies constitute the exercise of the “hidden faces of power,” which Gaventa defined as forces that shape actions in ways not apparent in formal processes (Gaventa, 1982).

This chapter is based on qualitative research methods. The data were collected through field research conducted in 2015 in rural and Indigenous communities in the Republic of Komi (Komi) (Shelyaur, Shelyabozh, Kolva) and the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia) (Khatystyr and Iengra). Data collection methods included semistructured interviews ( $n = 25$ ), group discussions ( $n = 2$ ), and document (consultation policies and guidelines, reports by NGOs and community organizations) and media analysis. Community insights illuminate the microdynamics at play, including the place-based experiences of community participation and community response. These local-level perspectives were linked to broader socioeconomic and geopolitical processes highlighted in semistructured interviews with company representatives ( $n = 14$ ) and government officials ( $n = 22$ ). In the next section, I briefly explain the shifting spatialities of fossil fuel projects in Russia. Then, I draw together existing research on community impacts and responses to energy projects from across northern Russia. Next, I draw on the empirical study and examine exclusionary strategies and relate them to the multiscale processes at play in the development of energy projects in northern Russia.

## **Shifting spatialities of Russia’s oil and gas projects**

Russia is strongly integrated into the global organization of production as a leading producer and exporter of oil and gas and has been increasing production levels, modernizing the sector, and diversifying export routes. This expansion has occurred despite the new realities of the global energy agenda that imply transitioning to a more reliable, affordable, low-carbon, and sustainable supply of energy (Bradshaw, 2013). Energy transition policies are rapidly emerging in countries that import oil and gas from Russia

(Khrushcheva & Maltby, 2016). Due to this and other economic and geopolitical reasons, the demand for Russia's fossil fuels may decline, thus affecting Russia's energy security and sociopolitical stability, which currently rely on hydrocarbon export (Aalto, 2011).

To maintain and increase oil and gas production levels, companies have been looking into unconventional extraction methods (e.g., heavy oil extraction in the Yarega field). Moreover, extensive and complex networks of new generation energy infrastructure have been being developed in resource frontiers—very remote regions of Eastern Siberia and the Far East previously of little interest due to their remoteness, harsh climate conditions, and high levels of required investments. New extraction and transportation projects enabled increased volumes of oil and gas to be exported to China and other countries in Eastern Asia. The Eastern Siberia-Pacific Ocean (ESPO) oil pipeline was commissioned during the late 2000s and was followed by the development of the Power of Siberia natural gas pipeline system that became operational in late 2019. Both projects are oriented toward China and the broader East Asian market. The sector's modernization also comes with rapidly expanding capacity for the production and export of LNG. Over the last decade, several LNG projects were brought online, including Sakhalin-2 LNG and Yamal LNG. This diversification occurs in the face of economic sanctions and geopolitical challenges to exporting fossil fuels to traditional destinations in Europe. The shifting spatialities of oil and gas in Russia have been accompanied by growing community concerns.

### **Rising community concerns**

Northern regions of Russia are sparsely populated, apart from a few large industrial towns. Communities at the frontline of energy projects are predominantly Indigenous and rural, maintaining subsistence and semi-subsistence livelihoods based on reindeer herding, hunting, fishing, and gathering. In many areas, oil and gas extraction projects have already resulted in irreversible changes to the environment (due to extensive pollution of waters and land, forest clearance and animal disturbance), access to land and opportunity to practice traditional livelihoods, local economies, social and power relations, unique ecological knowledges and cultures, and many other tangible and intangible aspects of living off the land (Wilson & Istomin, 2019). Extensive networks of leaking pipelines

crisscross the taiga in the Khanty–Mansi region in Western Siberia, with enclave-like development affecting the access of Indigenous reindeer herders to their lands (Tysiachniouk & Olimpieva, 2019).

A number of studies have documented community concerns related to oil and gas projects in Komi and Yakutia. The northern parts of the Komi Republic have been an area of extensive environmental pollution, with oil spills occurring persistently since the 1990s (a catastrophic oil spill happened in 1994 on the Kolva River) (Walker et al., 2006). Komi communities are concerned with the impacts of spills of oil and produced waters resulting from oil extraction and transportation, including impacts on the local environment as well as human and animal health (Stuvoy, 2011). In Yakutia, the construction of the ESPO and Power of Siberia pipelines, as well as a network of roads and line clearings, crosses the lands used for subsistence activities by the Evenki people in Eastern Siberia. Forest clearance, land disturbance, noise pollution, and impacts on fish and animals including through poaching raised concerns for the Evenki communities. These concerns include disruption to traditional practices of reindeer herding, hunting, and fishing, potentially resulting in a reduction in food supplies and income (Yakovleva, 2011).

### **Evolving community responses**

While there is a rich and growing literature on the public responses to conventional and emerging energy projects (Boudet, 2019), only a few studies have addressed responses that are prevalent in Russia. Some have suggested that the general public in Russia is passive: people have no genuine interest in or understanding of the oil sector (Poussenkova & Overland, 2018). At the same time, civil society engagement with the oil sector in Russia is rich with lively and varied public debates, some of which take place in social media outlets (Poussenkova & Overland, 2018). However, the impact of public debate and civil society on the energy sector is low, as key mass media are controlled by the state-owned gas company, Gazprom, and the government exercises tight control over different aspects of the economy and society, including those on the Internet (Poussenkova & Overland, 2018). Additionally, the growing resemblance with an authoritarian state has further reduced the space for environmental and climate activism led by Greenpeace Russia and a few environmental and Indigenous NGOs (Tysiachniouk, Petrov, et al., 2018).

Few studies have explored the responses of people actually living in northern regions of Russia where oil and gas are being extracted and energy infrastructure is being built. Across northern Russia, community responses to oil and gas extraction and transportation projects have varied, with direct opposition becoming increasingly common across remote regions. In Siberia, protests were held in 2004 in relation to the route of the ESPO, achieving the goal of rerouting the pipeline to avoid significant ecological damage (Yakovleva, 2014). Many protests have been held in northern parts of the Komi Republic (Pierk & Tysiachniouk, 2016). In the protests taking place in 2014–16 in the Izhma and Usinsk districts, people demanded a halt to extraction if urgent actions to replace leaking pipelines were not taken by the industry (Rodriguez & Loginova, 2018). Apart from expressing concerns over the projects' environmental and socioeconomic impacts, communities are demanding more meaningful participation in resource development (Loginova & Wilson, 2020).

### **Growing demands for meaningful participation**

Community participation in resource development has two dimensions: in the decision-making process and in the benefits stemming from resource projects. In Russia, the formal scope for community participation in decision-making is limited to public hearings as part of the environmental impact assessment of the proposed infrastructure. However, over the years of resource extraction, remote northern communities have developed an awareness of advisable international practices for community participation. The investments in some of the energy projects made by multinational corporations and international lenders meant “importing” international and best-practice rules around community participation, changing expectations from the rules prevalent in the Soviet period when infrastructure projects were centrally planned and delivered and in which community participation was not expected (Tysiachniouk, Tulaeva et al., 2018).

For the indigenous population in northern Russia, these changing expectations include the right for free, prior, and informed consent (FPIC), which means that indigenous people must be informed and consulted about large projects prior to the beginning of development on the territories of traditional land use (Buxton & Wilson, 2013). Moreover, communities are seeking to participate in sharing benefits derived by the developers, which entails that communities that grant access to their traditional territories and resources should receive a share of the benefits,

including monetary and nonmonetary benefits. In Russia, such benefits are often codified in socioeconomic agreements and corporate social responsibility (CSR) programs (Tysiachniouk, Petrov, et al., 2018). Socioeconomic agreements are negotiated between companies, local and/or regional authorities and may include representatives of Indigenous communities and institutions. CSR programs in general target contributions to municipalities supporting social infrastructure and the environment.

In practice, remote communities have little to no capacity for negotiation, being powerless actors in their attempts to influence the decisions made in the Kremlin or the offices of state-owned corporations and multinational firms. Communities experience frustration, deception, anger, and community division (Loginova & Wilson, 2020). Part of the problem lies in community experiences of exclusion and nonparticipation in the development of these projects.

## Strategies of exclusion and nonparticipation

The exercise of extractive-based development is known to undermine participation practices (Schilling-Vacaflor, 2017). If inclusion relates to meaningful participation practices at different stages of the project development, then exclusion refers to the processes that lead to nonparticipation or a lack of participation. Previous studies identified the exclusionary aspects of community participation in resource projects (Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2019). Bebbington et al. (2013) suggested that a range of strategies constitute “the power of exclusion” (Hall et al., 2011), including discursive strategies, market mechanisms, and legal and bureaucratic strategies (Bebbington & Bury, 2013). This section identifies these strategies as they evolved in the case study communities in the Republic of Komi and the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia). In addition, I identify strategies of uncertainty as a powerful element of nonparticipation.

### Discursive strategies

As defined by Bebbington et al., discursive strategies of exclusion are centered on the framing of development and the definition of countries and regions as being naturally predisposed for resource extraction (Bebbington & Bury, 2013). Indeed, in Russia, oil and gas projects are celebrated as an imperative driver of economic growth and development. Over the last decade, the oil and gas sector has been generating up to a half of federal budget revenues and contributes up to one-third of gross domestic product.

In northern regions, energy projects are framed as a pathway to modern development in the absence of other productive and profitable industrial alternatives. This framing is conveyed through regional strategies of industrial and socioeconomic development, programs of CSR, as well as regional and local media and billboards placed in remote villages and regional centers.

Another framing of the energy projects in Russia places them in a broader context of the ideological construction of Russia as a great hydrocarbon superpower (Bouzarovski & Bassin, 2011). Large oil and gas projects are imagined and governed as related to geopolitical processes. As indicated in interviews with community members and regional authorities, the national government is pursuing large-scale energy infrastructure to achieve geopolitical goals, unconditionally promoting and supporting fossil fuel projects. For example, the growing geopolitical importance of Russia—Asia relations has been at the center of the government strategy, media reporting, and community perceptions related to the Power of Siberia gas pipeline and the ESPO oil pipelines. Similarly, the conquest of the Arctic has served as a powerful narrative to justify the rapid development of oil and gas exploration and extraction projects in high latitudes, despite large risks, uncertainties, and the fragility of Arctic environments and cultures due to climate change and modernization. Extensive and resilient energy infrastructure in these resource frontiers is of strategic importance to ensure sustained flows of oil and gas for domestic consumption and exports. Regional governments are often placed “in charge” of nationally strategic projects to ensure there are no constraints on developing resource fields and building infrastructures in a timely manner. Note, for instance, the quotation of a representative of the regional administration of the Komi Republic:

*We create all conditions for effective industrial operations in our region; even if we cannot help, we make sure that nothing constraints these activities. Of course, there are tensions between strategic projects and people in localities, but they have to understand that these projects are of not only regional but national and international significance (interview, June 2015).*

Discursive strategies hinder the participation of local communities, with limited space to express their opinions and visions for development. According to interviews, community members perceive that regional governments strongly support fossil fuel projects and resource companies. The oil and gas industry is expected to form a significant share of the

regional economy and job opportunities. For example, in Yakutia, the rapid expansion of the oil industry resulted in 16% of the regional domestic product's annual growth in 2015. Regional authorities are proud of the infrastructure they helped to create, highlighting the importance of partnership relations with the resource companies and the federal government.

### Market mechanisms

The second range of strategies refers to the use of market mechanisms. These primarily operate through the power of economic benefits, compensation mechanisms, and CSR programs (Bebbington & Bury, 2013). They are operationalized by companies seeking to gain legitimacy for the resource projects and authority on the territories of traditional land use. In both the Republics of Komi and Sakha, resource corporations have increasingly been providing finances to support socioeconomic development and address environmental impacts of industrial activities under the CSR agenda. These initiatives include contributions to social infrastructure (e.g., renovation of local schools and hospitals), culture and sports (e.g., support to traditional celebrations and sports events), and restoration of biological resources (e.g., introducing fish to polluted rivers) (Tulaeva & Tysiachniouk, 2017). The payments are usually made to municipal authorities or regional (subnational) governments in the Komi Republic and directly to communities in Yakutia (Gavrilyeva et al., 2019).

Across northern Russia, municipal and regional authorities are tasked with local and regional socioeconomic development. However, according to an interview with a municipal head in the Komi Republic, municipalities in remote northern regions have limited sources of income. Thus, any contribution offered by companies is seen as significant; municipalities are placed in a situation of having marginal negotiation power and accept it. In the Komi Republic, socioeconomic agreements are made between resource companies and regional/municipal governments, commonly without the participation of a local community. Only recently, to overcome this imbalance, the movement of Komi-izhma people initiated a negotiation directly with the oil company, resulting in a contribution (educational opportunities for young community members) that would be locally beneficial according to the community members, instead of going to bureaucrats (Loginova & Wilson, 2020).



Some communities directly affected by large-scale infrastructure projects receive one-time compensations for the loss of land and livelihoods. In Yakutia, during the construction of the ESPO pipeline, compensations for the loss of land and livelihoods were provided to a few families based on land rights and negotiations between representatives of families and companies. Community–company–government relations based on power imbalances have influenced the bases that make resource projects possible through the transfer of land from traditional nature use to industrial (Gavrilyeva et al., 2019).

### **Legal and bureaucratic strategies**

The third range of strategies includes the use of legal and bureaucratic mechanisms (Bebbington & Bury, 2013). In northern Russia, these mechanisms refer to the poor adherence to the state legal framework and limited engagement with global standards for FPIC and meaningful participation. Several previous studies have indicated that existing legislation that regulates local communities' participation in the decision-making process and benefit sharing is not sufficient for stakeholders to consider all local concerns and interests (Gavrilyeva et al., 2019; Wilson & Istomin, 2019). According to the regulations of the Environmental Impact Assessment process, community members can provide their feedback on the project design and companies report the results of public hearings for the government to make a decision. However, community engagement is very limited due to existing regulations, prevailing approaches, and a lack of understanding of international practice (Gulakov et al., 2020).

In Komi, interviews with community members showed that public discussions are seen by companies as being a formality. Experiences of Komi communities, as identified through interviews, demonstrate that organizers of public hearings (municipal administration and project proponents) can control who is invited to public meetings, preventing the participation of community members who dissent. Several community members reported cases when the development of projects had begun before the approval of impact assessment was granted (Loginova & Wilson, 2020).

Another dimension of legislative strategies refers to the nonrecognition of Indigenous status or territorial rights of communities affected by resource projects, thus excluding communities from meaningful participation, as advised by global standards. Global standards for FPIC and

meaningful participation do not apply in the Komi Republic, as Komi people are not recognized as indigenous according to national legislation (though they are recognized as such internationally). The situation is different in Yakutia, where the regional government has implemented comprehensive frameworks for indigenous rights, use of traditional territories and benefit-sharing agreements (Gavrilyeva et al., 2019). Despite a robust policy framework, on-the-ground experiences of communities affected by large-scale energy infrastructure suggest that a genuine FPIC from the local population is not always received, as the focus is on compensation for the loss of traditional lands.

### **Strategies of uncertainty**

The final group of strategies is associated with community concerns about a lack of comprehensive, accurate, timely, and accessible information about projects and their progress, as well as poor communication and a perception that communication was deliberately exclusionary. This uncertainty relates to both the information about the participation process and also regarding the impacts and benefits that might accrue from the projects. Indeed, not providing or restricting access to information at the community level can be in the interest of corporations, illustrating “everyday” processes of exclusion (Hall et al., 2011).

Interviews with community members in Komi and Yakutia indicate that communities are concerned with the lack of knowledge and sufficient information about technical aspects of project development and their impacts on health and the environment. Several community members reported that there is a lack of communication regarding these topics, which is intentional, from the company perspective. For example, communities in northern Komi reported that there were cases when companies operating regionally were hiding oil spills and did not report forest clearings. In interviews, community members reported these cases as disinformation and violations of formal processes established by federal and regional regulations.

Most importantly, as interviews show in both Komi and Yakutia, communities lack a clear understanding of formal participation procedures and the arrangements for benefit provision. Formal instruments for the assessment of the loss of land and procedures for the provision of compensations have been obscure and nontransparent for community members. For example, community members in northern Komi Republic reported

occasions when only those selected by the local administration could attend public meetings dedicated to the environmental impacts of oil extraction. The recent rise in collective action among remote communities in fighting for more meaningful participation, however, shows that power imbalances stemming from the strategies of uncertainty can be addressed. For example, in northern Komi, the results of community-led assessments of environmental damage differed from the ones performed by the companies, empowering communities to demand a change in the way resource projects are being developed and community participation takes place.

## Discussion and conclusion

The development of large-scale energy projects should be accompanied by best-practice community engagement practices and meaningful community participation. Lack of participation, poor communication, and distrust increase the likelihood of community resistance to fossil fuel projects (Conde & Le Billon, 2017). I contribute to the understanding of public responses to the development of oil and gas projects in northern Russia by uncovering challenges of community participation in decision-making and the distribution of benefits. Specifically, I propose that more attention should be given to the multiscale relational dynamics that contribute to the power of exclusion as it relates to global discourses and national priorities. This approach may enrich our understanding of public responses to the fossil fuel export as it uncovers contextual multifaceted relational features directly linked to public attitudes and community action. In turn, these features can explain the emergence of conflicts and provide opportunities for improving relational justice. These aspects were empirically demonstrated by presenting results from a qualitative study of participation experiences across northern Russia, in particular in the Republics of Komi and Sakha (Yakutia).

Shifting geographies of fossil fuel export in Russia brought large-scale infrastructure projects for extraction, processing, and transportation of oil and gas in northern Russia. These projects are linked to significant transformations at the local and regional scales involving land-use change, environmental degradation, economic development, and cultural impacts. In these remote northern communities, meaningful community participation is demanded, despite prevailing norms and rules that community consent can be taken for granted. On-the-ground experiences of community participation in the development of these projects have played and

continue to play a defining role in the way communities perceive the risks and benefits of the projects and respond. Across northern Russia, communities experience numerous challenges because of exclusionary aspects of participation.

I identified four kinds of strategies of exclusion that work together in making projects socially feasible. Discursive strategies project the image of Russia as a “hydrocarbon power,” implying that oil and gas projects are imagined and managed in relation to strategic and geopolitical processes, and minimizing the need for community consent. Market-based strategies include the economic benefits directed by oil and gas companies to remote communities where other sources of income are limited, providing communities with marginal negotiating power. Legal and bureaucratic strategies target certain groups or individuals to be excluded (e.g., from attending a public hearing or receiving compensations for land and livelihood loss). Finally, strategies of uncertainty are linked to the accessibility and quality of information about the projects and their impacts, lack of transparency of decision-making, and lack of capabilities in communities to make informed decisions. Although community–company relations evolve differently in each locality, an illusory consensus owes more to the lack of community experience and the specific culture of nontransparent, top-down decision-making in Russia. In this context, opportunities for people to participate in decision-making processes meaningfully are compromised, and the space to make an informed decision about projects is minimized. These exclusion strategies are anchored in the multiscalar space constituted by the interactions of multiple actors and their agendas: the profit-oriented agendas of corporations, geopolitical aspirations of the federal government, and economic development goals of regional governments.

In this chapter, I demonstrate that understanding the experiences of community participation is helpful for research on public responses to fossil fuel export projects as it leads to more reflexivity about contextual community experiences. The different arenas of community participation need to be further explored by providing accounts that seek to unveil ways to minimize exclusion and relational injustice in the context of resource development and export.

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