

Margarita M. Balmaceda:

**RUSSIAN ENERGY CHAINS:
THE REMAKING OF
TECHNOPOLITICS FROM SIBERIA
TO UKRAINE TO THE EUROPEAN
UNION**

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The sphere of energy has always been tangled with geopolitics, at least since oil use became a thing. Naturally, there were periods when the relationship was less obvious, but these were often followed by times when the two were practically inseparable. Probably nowhere else is this more true than in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), which is located between a major energy supplier, which is Russia, and major consumers in western Europe, most of which are grouped in the European Union. It is thus no surprise that this topic and geographical area have been subjects of researchers' attention, focused on energy geopolitics and its many different facets.

One of the most notable authors focusing on the entanglement of energy and geopolitics in this area is Margarita Balmaceda. Her list of books on the topic might not be the longest, but her deep knowledge and the extensive background research palpable in her works certainly put her among the top authors in the field. Her latest book, titled *Russian Energy Chains: The Remaking of Technopolitics from Siberia to Ukraine to the European Union*, is thus met with great expectations, especially as it focuses on the period between 2011 and 2014, years notable for several seminal events influencing the international order. The task to analyze the energy supply chains tying Russia

and its European customers while taking historical, technological, and regulatory aspects into account is of truly enormous proportions. At the same time, I admit I was a bit unsure of what to expect from this book. Gas supplies and transit, Russian politicization of the energy trade, the Russian state's stake in the energy sector – these topics have been covered quite extensively, and for more up-to-date insights, a reader can refer to policy papers and commentaries, as their publication turnout is far quicker compared to books. At the same time, having read Balmaceda's earlier works on Russian and eastern European politics made me curious about this book's added value.

It has to be noted that the book, although very complex, is also very accessible at the same time. In the beginning, the author provides a recommendation on how different readers should read the book, which is helpful, especially for time-constrained readers and more seasoned scholars who are after particular pieces of information. According to the author, the book is intended for seasoned scholars and students alike since it digs deep into the topics but also takes a look at some basic concepts and phenomena within the supply chains and energy systems in general. It is always tricky to try and implement such an inclusive focus as more experienced readers need a different scope and depth compared to newcomers. When diving deeper into the book, the persistent question I had in mind was thus how the author managed to balance the content to suit both of these groups.

Balmaceda's approach to the topic may appear controversial to some as it employs a rather holistic and strictly neutral approach. I can imagine this may not be received well by some, especially in Central and Eastern Europe, as several of Balmaceda's takes on the situation problematize some of the already stereotyped issues. Furthermore, as

she proceeds along the Russian supply chains, she inevitably deals with highly topical issues where her sober analyses may hit too close to home for some. Being a strong advocate of evidence-based, unbiased analyses myself, I welcome such an approach and find it really refreshing. In a field where echo chambers and confirmation biases may be surprisingly frequent, such books are much needed. Furthermore, the author does that for all the right reasons – to better understand the intricate fabric of energy supply chains in Europe and Russia. She looks at energy in interstate relations in a unique way and adds the concept of ‘power to’ to the common concept of ‘power over’, which provides a much-needed layer of analysis, including the other actors outside Russia.

One such take on a sensitive theme is the section dealing with the roots of current struggles between Russia and the transit states. Here, Balmaceda unveils a harsh truth that the sometimes surprisingly persistent dependence of some CEE states on Russia, despite the often thorny relations, is based on the vested interest of some actors, corruption, or simply the need for income for the state budget. Similarly enriching is her overview of the main relevant commodities and their features that have determined the historical development of the supply chains. This debunks some of the stereotypized claims about the so-called energy weapon and sheds light on the real magnitude of the powers that both the supplier (i.e. Russia) and the consumers (in this particular case, the European Union) wield in this battle.

As a result of the rather unconventional way of analyzing things by going along the whole supply chain from the source to the end consumer, Balmaceda does a great job at drawing attention to the interdisciplinarity of the issue. If you need a good example and explanation of how energy supplies can

be an interdisciplinary issue, look no further. Not only does the book just that, but it also debunks the often one-dimensional understanding of energy security as a concept obsessed with the security of supplies. Other novel angles of looking at things include the imperfections in the usual assessments of the Russian state’s energy power and the obsession with oil as the dominating commodity within the security discourse.

An undeniably strong point is made by not focusing on just one but three different energy chains. Apart from the ‘usual suspect’ of natural gas, Balmaceda also deals with oil and coal. While natural gas has been a well-known issue due to the 2006 and 2009 gas supply crises, the NordStream pipeline system, and occasional disputes between Russia and transit countries, oil has slipped from attention a bit. Although being somewhat less of an issue due to the more global nature of the oil market, addressing oil broadens the picture nonetheless. Coal, for its part, is definitely a welcome addition as it has been rather neglected in similar works from the historical perspective as well as regarding its current role. This comprehensive nature of the text is definitely the feature that students in university courses will find especially useful.

What could not be omitted is the impact of the EU’s internal energy market and related regulatory measures. They reshaped the marketing patterns in the energy sector, especially in the natural gas market, which directly impacted Gazprom’s position. Here, the author’s holistic way of explaining things is well demonstrated, as the regulation directly ties to the history of the natural gas supply, its technical features, and the traditional ways of marketing gas, which, in turn, ties back to the technical nature of the commodity.

In one of the preceding paragraphs, I hinted at my initial doubts against the author’s claim that the book is suitable for both newcomers

and experts alike. I have to say that, in retrospect, focusing the book more narrowly would probably make it more concise, readable and would probably make it score better among the experts. The author claims that the book can serve as a basis for an undergrad course, and I cannot but agree with that claim. The way the narrative is constructed and how the author proceeds along the supply chains leaves no stone unturned and explains all the necessary terms and concepts needed for understanding. That being said, expert readers may find some sections rather basic and may want to skip these.

Being both a university teacher and a researcher, I would definitely recommend the book to students focusing on the area, the topic, or both. However, I am a bit concerned that energy and political analysts might reach instead for more narrowly-focused policy papers and briefs in a search of more condensed knowledge. Nevertheless, as much as I understand the urge to absorb as much knowledge as possible in a short period of time that prompts my peers among analysts, it would be to their own detriment. Balmaceda's knowledge is so deep and rich that she has a lot to offer, even to the seasoned experts. If you take the time and read the book in its entirety, you may find unique angles and relations that you might not have thought about before. The only problem might be that experts may not be inclined to go through the whole book to find the part reflecting their particular interest, but this is not the author's fault.

One may argue that the sections on the more contemporary issues (e.g. the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic) may age quickly and thus become less relevant in the future. This surely is not the book's fault, but it has to be taken into account. Anyway, when looking for sources offering more up-to-date information, there are probably different genres better equipped to deal with the quickly changing

world around us, such as policy briefs and papers.

From a more formal perspective, the author's dedication to collecting sources and sorting them out into the rich reference list, along with appendices that take up almost one-third of the book, has to be really appreciated. The list of terms and concepts that is worked meticulously into an extensive glossary is a respectable piece of work in itself and can be used as the basic introduction to the field for undergrad students.

Generally, the book can be recommended to aspiring scholars and those who want to understand the Russian supply chains in their complexity, including their roots and implications for everyday politics. In this sense, I would even rename the book to *Russian Supply Chains 101* for the way in which it introduces the reader to the complexity of the issue. If the expectation was a complex take on supply-related issues in CEE with regard to Russia, the book indeed delivers. The narrative following the supply chains from oil and gas fields and coal mines all the way through transit countries to the end-users is genuinely captivating and, in the best way, educating. The book can serve as a course textbook really well. However, don't be mistaken: the book does require background knowledge. Although the reader does not need to be particularly knowledgeable in energy security as such, a solid knowledge of the key events in CEE is strongly recommended, especially in the period under consideration (2011–2014). One has to appreciate the author's ability to write a book so broad in scope yet surprisingly deep in several parts (e.g. transit issues, key figures, political struggle in Ukraine etc.). The author offers original perspectives on some well-known topics and presents them in a way that can turn even a beginner into a knowledgeable scholar. She also raises some uneasy yet important questions, such

as the West's duty to help Ukraine with its reforms, and offers views on future developments, making the book undoubtedly worthwhile reading.

Martin Jirušek
Faculty of Social Studies,
Masaryk University

Robert B. Talisse:

OVERDOING DEMOCRACY: WHY WE MUST PUT POLITICS IN ITS PLACE.

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One problem of contemporary democratic societies is an increased political saturation of the social environment caused by our commitment to the democratic ideal itself. This commitment paradoxically leads us to the polarization dynamic and growing divisions in society, which might be cured only by putting politics in its space and adhering to the principle of civic friendship.

This is a main thesis of Robert B. Talisse, a political philosopher, who has devoted much of his recent work to the study of disagreement in democratic societies. In *Overdoing Democracy*, he cautiously traces every step of his elaboration, diagnosis, and prescriptions back to this statement. The book contributes to an ongoing debate about the contemporary crisis of democracy and provides a fresh perspective to the research on pernicious polarization. Although it primarily revolves around questions important for democratic theory,

the author presents one fitting explanation for rise of phenomena like sorting and political polarization, one of the most salient research topics for contemporary political science. Nevertheless, his explanatory mechanism, even if internally consistent, requires further empirical testing.

In the growing literature describing the nature of polarization, its causes, and effects, political science and normative political theory are engaged in two separate debates. The inherent value of *Overdoing Democracy* is that it integrates findings in the area of political polarization with democratic theory. Most intriguing in this work is that while many researchers concentrate on the effects of polarization on democracy, Talisse focuses on how following the democratic ideal stimulates political polarization and sorting. Also rather provocative is that author deals with issues which are still subject to ongoing empirical inquiry. Especially the relationship between sorting and belief polarization is understudied and even the question of whether polarization is taking place in American society is still the subject of fervent discussion by many scholars.

The publication is structured into three main parts. The first introduces the main thesis, and the second goes through the problematics of sorting and polarization, connecting them with the author's argument. After finishing his diagnosis of contemporary defects in democratic societies, the author discusses possible solutions while rejecting efforts to improve deliberation as inefficient at this stage of the disease. For researchers on political polarization, the middle part is most crucial. The author introduces the problematic of the expanding reach of politics, which goes hand-in-hand with the seeming deepening of democracy. The reach of politics is a key concept in his theory because it explains how democratic projects which are more and more demanding for each citizen can undermine