

Promising pipelines and hydrocarbon nationalism: the sociality of unbuilt infrastructure in indigenous Siberia

By analysing how shamanist nomads who previously opposed large infrastructure works have suddenly become enchanted by the prospect of the construction of a large gas pipeline, this paper ethnographically investigates how technology and infrastructure become perceived as promising by ordinary people on the ground in post-Soviet Siberia. Drawing attention to the discursive impact of large gas corporations and the role of deeply embedded Soviet conceptions of modernity in filling pipelines with cultural meaning, this paper provides unique insights into the highly localised engagements with infrastructure. As such, this paper contributes to the anthropology of Russia, where infrastructure has only recently received academic attention. It also corresponds to the ‘infrastructural turn’ in anthropology by studying the social, cultural and material conditions ensuring that infrastructure becomes perceived as promising. Furthermore, this paper explores the significant impact of ancillary infrastructures connected to a construction project in entangling people with technology and infrastructure.

Key words infrastructure, Altai Republic, Gazprom, resource extraction, CSR

Introduction

‘The successful opposition to the construction of a dam on the Katun river, of course!’, most of my Altaian interlocutors would excitedly reply when asked what crystallised Altaian nationhood after the disintegration of the Soviet Union. Although deeply rooted shamanist beliefs would stand central in discursively assembling opposition against this big national infrastructure project, at the same time political motives also enacted collective action. Elites central in the protests against the large hydroelectric dam admitted that protests were used to unify the diverse tribes inhabiting the high mountainous valleys and steppes of the Altai Mountains. They also affirmed that the dam operated as a metonym for Soviet-Russian control over Altaian land and the imposition of specific visions of modernity. Objecting state-planned infrastructure meant challenging Altai’s status as a Soviet colony. The protests against this hydroelectric dam, in concert with other cultural activism, ultimately proved successful in the creation of the Altai Republic (Tyuhteneva 2009), a semi-independent subject of the Russian Federation (Figure 1) in which indigenous people have the tools to govern their own culture and land.

This anti-infrastructural discourse imbued with an outspoken environmental rhetoric still dominated most conversations during ethnographic fieldwork in 2009–11. However, when I revisited the region in 2015 to study the responses to Gazprom’s¹

¹ Gazprom is the world’s largest gas producer. In much of the literature, Gazprom is conceptualised as a traditional state-controlled corporation that supports the Kremlin and its agendas, similar to how it operated as the Soviet Ministry of the Gas Industry. However, the relationships between the gas sector and the state are much more intricate since Gazprom is traded on the international stock market and is dependent on its shareholders. This means that Gazprom sometimes overrules clear political objectives set by the Putin government. The Russian government may be in control of a majority of its shares and may be defining the course of the company, but neoliberal strategic choices are equally important.



Figure 1 Location of the Altai Republic within the Russian Federation and a projection of the planned pipeline to China.

advanced plans to construct a major pipeline through the Altai Mountains, I was surprised by the dearth of opposition to the pipeline. Strikingly, many community members would even actively imbue the pipeline with promise. They did not read it as an unsustainable state-controlled project primarily benefiting the centre, as they did the dam roughly three decades ago. Contrarily, many interlocutors living along the projected pipeline would point at the ecological benefits and its necessity for *their* Republic and *their* Russian Federation.

Recently, anthropology has adopted a quest to make the socio-political work of infrastructures visible beyond the walls of the laboratory (Collier 2011; Larkin 2008). A true ‘infrastructural turn’ has produced a suite of ethnographies examining how both large-scale infrastructures such as oil pipelines and dams and more mundane infrastructures such as electricity grids enact cultural change and engender – or curtail – political activism. By selecting a title overlapping with Anand et al.’s (2018) recent monograph, this essay might misleadingly position itself as a further extension of Anand’s argument that everyday infrastructures are promising fields of exploration to explore governing practices and biopolitics. Rather, promising in the title of this paper signifies the state of infrastructure being perceived to be auspicious. Today, in an indigenous region in Siberia large infrastructures have become perceived as promising, which was not the case a few years before. Clearly, infrastructure is not inherently promising, but *becomes* promising. Studying this process of becoming promising is crucial for studies of infrastructure. Ordinary pipes, extraordinary dams and rusty pipelines become especially successful in instilling new rationalities and temporal regimes because of an already established social matrix of longing for that infrastructure (for the broad acceptance of dams in Tajikistan, see Kalinovskiy 2018). As such this paper asks how infrastructure

becomes promising and which sociocultural conditions ensure that big infrastructure suddenly becomes promising in the Altai Republic.

Different anthropologies of infrastructure (Larkin 2013; Harvey and Knox 2012) have described those feelings and emotions of promise ordinary people encode into technology. Especially Harvey and Knox (2012) have set out to study the enchantment people have with infrastructure. In an effort to 'draw analysis away from a focus on political discourse' (Knox 2017: 365), they have set out, using roads in Peru as a case study, to study how both the material conditions of a locus and everyday experiences of the material affordances of infrastructure entangle subjects with roads and engender affect. According to Harvey and Knox, building on the work of Bennett (2001), a 'mood of enchantment' is actively produced by phenomenological encounters with a given technology, which ultimately spills out into the field of politics and propels ethical relations, either binding or unbinding (when infrastructures fail) subjects with the power structures and players constituting a given infrastructure.

However, building on a literature that sees technological affect and sublimity as produced in a socio-historical context (Nye 1994), we argue that enchantment is assembled through discourse and gift-exchange between the state/corporation and recipient – already far before infrastructure is built. As highlighted in sociocultural analyses of infrastructure (Kalinovsky 2018) and time (Ssorin-Chaikov 2017) during and following the Soviet Union, longing for infrastructure is perhaps not for the 'thing' itself, but for the (modern) future this 'thing' promises. As indicated by timely explorations into the social construction of technology in (post)-colonial peripheries (Coronil 1997; Mrazek 2002; Appel et al. 2018), infrastructure becomes encoded with perceptions of future promise due to specific socio-cultural circumstances, dominant temporal regimes and power relations. In this paper we seek to study how these contextual conditions can change and drastically affect how large state infrastructures are perceived differently. We will especially look at those discourses and ancillary infrastructures inserted in the social arena before the primary infrastructure object is built, and how these normalise temporalities favourable to infrastructure development.

By focusing on the changed grassroots reactions to a large state-planned infrastructure in Siberia, this paper not only contributes to the infrastructural turn in anthropology, it also enriches our understanding of the mechanisms defining state-planned projects in Russia. Russia is popularly read through a 'dark anthropological' (Ortner 2016) lens where minorities and collective action are suppressed by the vertically integrated state. By exploring how discourses of the state and large corporate players, in concert with deeply rooted feelings of post-Soviet remoteness, growing civic Russian nationalism and neoliberal temporalities, engender affect for state projects, a more nuanced understanding of Russia – beyond the tropes of authoritarianism – is furthered. This is a situation where the state, corporation and even indigenous minorities exchange gifts, reciprocate and have some power in infrastructure planning – a situation different from Soviet force relations.

This exploration into the cultural life of a planned infrastructure object will be based on an analysis of the sociopolitics surrounding the large Power of Siberia-2 pipeline in the Altai Republic. Also popularly called the Altai Pipeline, this transportation system will connect western Siberian gas wells directly to the Chinese market. Disagreements between Russia and China over the delivery terms mean that the pipeline has not been built, and might never be constructed. Still it exists in the actor-network of relations in the region and shapes relations on the ground. Insights into the social dynamics

governing the perception of this pipeline are based on 16 months of fieldwork carried out over seven years since 2009. Fieldwork was conducted both in the Altai Republic's capital Gorno Altaisk and in the more remote mountainous regions where indigenous life is still defined by transhumance. These contexts were chosen to map both elite and ordinary conceptions of infrastructural futures.

The Altai Pipeline and the Altai Republic: contested infrastructures in a changing ethno-political setting

Today the Altai Republic is a federal republic of the Russian Federation. As a semi-independent region within the Russian Federation, it has its own parliament, constitution, national symbols and ministries. This special status is the result of the activism of the large and growing number of indigenous Altaians (31.1%) who dominate the rural parts of the Republic, and the concerted nation-building efforts by Soviet-trained indigenous elites following the collapse of the Soviet Union. When central power started to wane in the late 1980s, members of the Altaian intelligentsia were extremely active in reviving their nomadic culture, promoting their shamanistic lifestyle and negotiating ethno-cultural sovereignty in an effort to protect their lands from development (Halemba 2004; Tyuhteneva 2009).

Just as in other regions in Siberia, ethnic national awareness especially crystallised around ecological activism against large-scale infrastructural projects. As part of Brezhnev's attempts to modernise the economy and celebrate the Soviet Union's technological superiority and modernity, during the last two decades of the Soviet Union a suite of large dam projects (of which the Katun dam was one) were planned across Siberia and Central Asia. In a true Marxist understanding of socio-economic development, investments in the material base were believed to propel the peripheries from backwardness to socialist modernity (cf. Kalinovsky 2018). Towards the end of the Soviet Union, these large projects increasingly became the crux of environmental protests by well-organised social movements (Wiener 1999). In Siberia, assisted by environmental associations from the European centres of Russia, indigenous groups played a role in environmental protests. These groups not only protested against new overly ambitious projects on their sacred lands. Most activism was also interwoven with broader demands for sovereignty over their land and legitimisation of their indigenous lifestyles and livelihoods (e.g. Kalinovsky 2018; Balzer 1999).

Altaian anthropologist Svetlana Tyuhteneva (2009: 25–54) compared this initial ecological struggle in the process of ethno-cultural revitalisation with the role of 'yeast' in baking bread. All basic ingredients were present in the late Soviet period: many aspects of Altaian culture and shamanism had survived indoors and particular Soviet policies had created social structures ideal for ethno-nationalistic activism (i.e. the long-term impact of ethnic engineering and consolidation of different tribes into a cohesive *ethnos*). Pressure on the sacred ecology of Altai ensured that the yeast was activated. Ultimately, *perestroika* and *glasnost* provided ideal 'temperatures' allowing the dough to rise further.

Clearly, late-Soviet field conditions in Siberia enabled indigenous players to challenge state infrastructure and promises of progress relayed by the Party. This is very different from earlier Soviet-era engagements. As highlighted by Ssorin-Chaikov (2017),

central infrastructure investments in the periphery, often solving basic human needs in Siberia, were not Maussian gifts that recipients were 'at liberty to refuse' (2017: 101). Rather, they had all the characteristics of what Ssorin-Chaikov calls *Hobbesian* gifts; impositions of central sovereignty operating as technologies of direct rule and capture. Central in this governing effort was the normalisation of Soviet modernity, intrinsically activating linear understandings of time geared at economic production. This to the detriment of indigenous understandings of the world.

Essentially, in the late-Soviet period, infrastructure became a Maussian gift, which could be refused in Altai. By refusing the gift, central sovereignty was not only challenged but also a new mode of exchange between the centre and periphery was established, having far-reaching implications on the place of Altai in the Soviet Union and later the Russian Federation. Refusing the planned dam on the Katun (the headwater of the Ob) was not only directed at challenging Soviet colonial power relations, but also Soviet modernity at large. As highlighted during interviews with different post-socialist leaders, for many indigenous protagonists challenging the dam meant refuting the modernist future imposed on the Altai Republic and the Altaians by the Kremlin. As elsewhere in Siberia, in late Soviet Altai most 'modern' infrastructure was failing or causing so much natural degradation (e.g. collective farms) that the utopian ideas of the Party could not be sustained.

The broad protests against the dam should not only be read as the outcome of a political struggle of an indigenous elite. Many Altaian leaders I spoke with especially recounted the protests through their shamanist understanding of the world. In Altaian shamanist conceptions of the world, the sacred ecology of the Altai Mountains is believed to be inhabited by deities defining the well-being of the living. In such a worldview, large infrastructures in particular are believed to affect this fragile balance with nature and to cause harm to contemporary society. Importantly, by foregrounding shamanist themes in their infrastructure activism, alternative indigenous conceptions of the world and time were mainstreamed to the detriment of Soviet modernist ontologies. Ultimately, the successful protests and cancellation of the dam both normalised national sovereignty and shamanist regimes of truth.

Because of its multifacetedness, the dam protests served throughout the 1990s and early 2000s – when Altaian nation-building was most intense – as a mnemonic touchstone in indigenous social memory politics. My first extended visits to the region in the late 2000s were in the aftermath of these intense nation-building efforts. During many conversations with ordinary Altaians beyond the republic's capital Gorno Altai, interlocutors would proudly revoke the dam when explaining their reservations *vis-à-vis* economic development. Many continuously stressed that maintaining the ontological unity with the landscape based on shamanistic beliefs was tantamount to infrastructure projects advancing the Republic's economy.

In March 2006, Russian President Putin put forward his intention to build two direct pipelines to China. These pipelines would make Russia less dependent on the European market and tap into the significant resource demands of China. Unrest in Ukraine made the benefits of these direct connections very tangible. One of these pipelines, the Altai Pipeline, would connect the northeastern Siberian gas fields with western China. Since a major highway (Nyiri and Breidenbach 2008) would be built next to the pipeline, connecting the republic directly with China, the region would in effect become an important energy *and* transport corridor, bringing economic development. Despite prior activism by both indigenous Altaian organisations and regional

politicians against small and large construction projects, Gazprom's infrastructure plan consisting of a pipeline two metres in diameter, multiple large compressor stations and a large road to China has been accompanied by a dearth of grassroots activism.

This lack of opposition, documented especially since 2015, is remarkable not only in the light of prior protests and prominence of nature-based ontologies among the local population. It is also remarkable in the light of the long list of small and large scandals that have accompanied the pipeline. Besides serious environmental problems, one of the most pronounced instances of infamy was the Altaigate scandal, an illegal hunting incident where the bodies of investors, a local minister and the carcass of a protected species were found in an Altaian nature reserve after their Gazprom helicopter crash landed.

Western literature on Russian social movements associates such a lack of collective action with the legal reforms and centralisation initiated by Putin since the 2000s (McFaul and Stoner-Weis 2008; Sakwa 2014). It is true that when the pipeline project was launched, the Altai Republic immediately came into the limelight of the Kremlin and a suite of local indigenous controlled institutions and juridical frameworks were dissolved. Republic-level environmental agencies were merged with departments responsible for economic development and resource extraction,² the previously elected governor was replaced by a Putin appointee and legal frameworks providing indigenous people with stewardship over their lands and heritage were either challenged³ or language was explicitly inserted allowing the construction of 'linear objects'.⁴

It would be tempting to connect this lack of opposition to a restoration of Soviet-style infrastructure planning and government, positioning the infrastructure investments in the regions by the Putin regime not as Maussian but as Hobbesian gifts, where recipients are not at liberty to refuse them. Although structural and legal challenges to indigenous movements indeed have an impact on local activism regarding new infrastructure projects in Siberia (see Balzer 2005), changed conceptions of large infrastructure projects by the silent majority of Altaians should be weighted as equally critical. These changed conceptions can be tied, on the one hand, to Gazprom's corporate social responsibility (CSR) practices and construction of ancillary infrastructure connected to the pipeline that facilitates everyday life (next section) and, on the other hand, to local physical and economic field conditions and deeply rooted dispositions texturing conceptions of infrastructure and international trade (last section). We argue that Maussian modalities of gift exchange still govern state-sponsored infrastructure projects, but rather that new ideas and reciprocities govern the relationship between state and the indigenous region. In the end we should not read large infrastructure projects in the Altai Pipeline as unilateral impositions of sovereignty by the state, but rather as the outcome of a negotiation between the corporation (Gazprom), state and

² Besides replacing many older bureaucrats with young administrators from outside the Altai Republic, some key ministries were restructured. For example, the agencies responsible for the management of natural resources, land property relations and ecology were merged into the single political authority called the Ministry of Natural Resources, Ecology and Property Relations. For more details, see <http://xn--80aa1ag9a.xn--p1ai/blog-of-head/blog-of-head/37/> (accessed October 2020).

³ Russian Federal Law N73-FZ, article 49 stipulates that all archaeological objects under or on the ground are Federal state property.

⁴ Amendment from 2 August 2012, number 202.

indigenous groups. All the different players have agency, and indigenous players have the possibility to refuse the gift – although the rules of the game are less in their favour.

Favourable ancillary infrastructures as gifts that need to be reciprocated

In his analysis of Nigerian petropolitics, Watts (2005) asserted that, when a region becomes inserted in the global energy market, in addition to the energy company a whole army of other players and actors (such as lobbyists, NGOs, cultural workers, scientists) enter the social arena and drastically redefine the rules of the game. Watts' description of this 'oil complex' is not only relevant to the oil sector but is largely characteristic for any resource frontier (Tsing 2003). In the Altai Republic it was similarly the case that lobbyists, representatives of international NGOs, bureaucrats of UNESCO and Russian opposition parties suddenly discovered the Altai people and drastically altered the socio-political fabric of the Republic. However, this resource complex was not only limited to an assemblage of players, the energy complex also included things and infrastructures associated with the main energy project that enact cultural change.

During the first years of my fieldwork I witnessed how roads were being upgraded, disintegrating bridges were replaced, plans were made to reopen Soviet-era airports and local bureaucratic institutions were being professionalised. These were primarily constructed to facilitate the construction of the pipeline once an energy deal with China was reached. The impact of this infrastructural investment was especially significant for ordinary Altaians. Especially the new transportation infrastructures meant that it became easier to navigate Altai. A direct sponsored air link with Moscow's Domodedovo airport opened up Altai to other parts of Russia and the world. As noted by Ssorin-Chaikov's (2017) ethnography of post-Soviet life in Evenkia, for many peripheral regions in Siberia the loss of Soviet-era sponsored flights and intraregional mobility was dearly missed as it ensured flexible and unplanned travel. During my visits after the upgrading of the road, the straightforwardness for *ad hoc* travel was embraced, and many unplanned trips were made to specific sacred places because it was now possible (and I paid for the fuel). As noted by Hojer and Pedersen (2019: 14) and other ethnographies on nomadism in Siberia (Jordan 2011), flexibility and unplanned mobility is of particular importance for nomads like the Altaians.

Hydrocarbon extraction and transport might be relatively dematerialised compared with coal mining (Mitchell 2011), for example. As described by Rogers (2012) in his analysis of Lukoil's activities in the Perm region, the true materiality of the oil and gas industry lies in the outcome of its CSR strategies. In addition to transportation infrastructure directly benefiting the pipeline and Gazprom staff, a suite of other infrastructures were funded by Gazprom geared at raising the profile of the corporation on the ground. Through a grant funding framework, Gazprom contributed to the Republic's budget, enabling the Republic to renovate schools, construct swimming pools, develop sports infrastructure, organise cultural festivals and reconstruct the Republic's National Museum. Gazprom also developed plans to construct a domestic gas utility network⁵ connecting to most villages of the Altai Republic.

⁵ This network came at a considerable cost and is completely independent of the planned transportation pipeline.



Figure 2 Museum before (left) and after reconstruction (right).
 [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

Although all of Gazprom's strategic involvement in the different sectors of regional government is significant, especially the strategic contribution to the budget of the ministry of culture was key in the image management of the corporation. In a political climate defined by centralisation and Kremlin-supported patriotism, indigenous cultural institutions such as the ministry of culture of the Altai Republic have remained structurally underfunded. However, this precarious financial and political support for indigenous cultural institutions was suddenly overcome through direct contributions by Gazprom to the Republic's budget for culture.⁶

This budget was used for the renovation of the National Museum of the Altai Republic. The renovation transformed the late Soviet exhibition hall into a state-of-the-art museum where Altaian culture and heritage was being celebrated. Re-opened in September 2012, the museum occupies an important space in the cityscape of Gorno Altaiisk. Located between grey Soviet-era apartment blocks, the museum stands in sharp contrast with the rest of the post-Soviet cityscape (Figure 2). Museums are a key part of the urban infrastructure and are known to operate, through their architecture and position in the cityscape, as ideological symbols to the wider population, furthering specific narratives and negotiating power relations (Bennett 1995). This is no different for the national museum of the Altai Republic: the new museum signifies a new modern future for the region.

Today, the museum celebrates the uniqueness of contemporary Altaian culture and representation strategies in the archaeology and heritage section of the exhibition explicitly celebrate Altaian otherness and their deep historical ties to the land. Museum workers and Altaian academics were able to independently develop exhibitions and tackle otherwise politically charged themes and ethnic histories because of the financial support by Gazprom. To increase attention to the deep roots of Altaians to their land, the layout of the museum was developed around the Altai Princess, a uniquely

⁶ During the years 2011–16, Gazprom provided at least 71% of the funding for culture, meaning that the budget increased by almost 250%. The budget proposal of the ministry indicated that Gazprom contributed 477 million rubles to the budget of the ministry. The full budget proposal for 2011–15 can be found at: <http://docs.cntd.ru/document/473311100> (accessed October 2020).

preserved 2,500-year-old Scythian mummy and acclaimed mythical progenitor of the Altaian nation. A serious conflict over the ownership of this mummy with Russian archaeologists of the Academy of Sciences has been at the crux of Altaian indigenous cultural activism and negotiations with the centre since the 1990s. Archaeologists ultimately agreed to repatriate the mummy after the investments of Gazprom in the museum. When contrasting the museum celebrating Altaian uniqueness with the widespread 'folklorisation' and depoliticisation (Prina 2016) of indigenous minorities and their culture in the Russian Federation, one can see a clear exception to the otherwise strict government of culture by the Kremlin (Plets 2019). Clearly, both Gazprom and the state are not unilaterally imposing sovereignty on the Altai people. To the contrary, they are providing Altaians with powerful cultural capital.

Various indigenous elites who previously reacted critically to major infrastructural projects have publicly accepted these investments and initiated the process of reciprocal exchange through publicly reifying Gazprom's image using a discourse rich in Altaian symbolism and cultural references. For the opening of the museum, an important Altaian poet even composed an 'Ode to Gazprom', embodying how cultural producers in the public sphere mediate the pipeline using references to Altaian traditions and mythology. This poem celebrates Gazprom's contribution to Altaian society and associated the fate and future of Altai and its people with the success of Gazprom:

Clean snow shines from the top,

Altai – is a talisman of Russia.

The greatness of the mountains, the beauty of the valleys

It will be preserved because of Gazprom.

Altai is eternal and great

It remembers its friends.

Gazprom is a guide of good

It (Gazprom) will become stronger.

(Poem by Sergey Peshetnev, translated from Russian)

Ultimately, these ancillary infrastructures of key importance for everyday livelihood practices and indigenous cultural life, constructed long before the pipeline, not only materially entangle subjects with Gazprom, beyond their technological function they also serve as semiotic and aesthetic vehicles (Larkin 2013: 329) influencing people's perceptions of infrastructure projects. As argued by Schweitzer et al. (2017: 78), in a context like Siberia where there is a relatively low population density and paucity of reliable infrastructure, investments into the built environment especially have a big socio-political impact and high visibility, leaving a strong imprint on everyday people who become dependent on these infrastructures. Similarly, the modernised bridges, widened roads, central heating and impressive-looking cultural infrastructures that are visually and materially engaged with on a daily basis serve as mnemonic touchstones

normalising the presence of the corporation in the Altai Republic. These exceptional gifts, otherwise not given to non-Russian minorities in Russia, produced an obligation to reciprocate. This strategic exchange by Gazprom has clearly raised the profile of the company and was successful in tamping down anti-corporate critique and in viewing the assembly of the actual pipeline favourably.

Infrastructure and the promise of shamanist sustainability, modernity and neoliberal national progress

There is little doubt that the CSR practices of Gazprom "conducts the conduct" of ordinary citizens and indigenous leaders. However, despite the authoritarian turn in Russian politics and often dystopian depictions in Western literature, indigenous people in Russia are not entirely trapped in a web spun by key multinationals and the petro-political establishment. The many conversations and public hearings between Altaians and (Russian) officials I witnessed made it clear that indigenous groups still have agency and subtly challenge political structures through cultural practices, sarcasm and speech actions.

For studies exploring enchantment with infrastructure in Eurasia, this means we also need to explore on a deeper ontological level why people abstain from opposition and encode valuations of promise and trust in technology. During multiple conversations, I was reminded of the good intentions of Gazprom in relation to its investments in the Republic, and a significant number of informants also justified the pipeline in relation to the material realities and changed socio-economic conditions governing everyday life. Generally speaking the imperativeness of the pipeline was normalised by drawing on three interconnected tropes: that the pipeline (1) was a sustainable ecological project in synch with Altaian shamanist conceptions of ecological harmony, (2) could modernise the region and overcome socio-political backwardness and (3) would integrate the region in the national hydrocarbon-economy.

Promoting energy literacy: activating the shamanist affordances of gas

The image of large Kamaz trucks overloaded with wood rumbling down the narrow dirt roads and the Chuyskiy Tract (the only paved road) is a familiar sight for many Altaians in the summer months. Because of the short summer, there is only a small window for chopping trees, processing logs and transporting firewood to the many Russian villages around Biysk, Barnaul and Novosibirsk. Although most wood ends up outside the Republic, Altaians also stock up on firewood. Most of this wood will have disappeared after the gruelling winter characteristic of much of Siberia. Especially in the eastern parts of the Republic, the firewood industry is widespread and has an enormous impact on the environment. The disappearance of forests that are of cultural importance has increased over recent years as extended periods of drought are leading to large forest fires.

During many conversations I would be reminded that this situation needs to stop and that this extraction is offending *Altai Kudai* (the main transcendent deity in Altai

shamanism) and many other deities energising the sacred ecology of Altai. Although the core of the rapid deforestation and interlinked drought related to forces outside the Republic, it was not the regulation of the wood industry but rather the pipeline that was seen as a direct solution for this ecological catastrophe in the making. Time and time again I was reminded about the ecological affordances of gas, and how this pipeline could help Altaians with restoring their sacred forests. People would frequently silence my critique about Gazprom's politics and would affirm to me that 'we need the pipeline and Gazprom, we have a problem with our wood supply' and 'we are polluting our Altai by burning wood and coal'.

Taking into account the material and economic realities governing everyday life in the Altai Republic, it is no surprise that during conversations about the pipeline people would emphasise the positive aspects of Gazprom's infrastructure project and its capacity to solve the most basic need in Siberia: heating. In his analysis of the biopolitics of infrastructure in the Soviet Union, Collier (2011) similarly pointed to the importance of communal heating stations in the process of disciplining subjects in the cold Soviet Union. As the epitome of much-cherished urban modernity, pipes and grids providing basic human services, like the utility network developed by Gazprom, need to be conceived as a 'sticky nexus of material, spatial and institutional dependencies' (Collier 2011: 215) influencing social action and subjectivities in favour of those players controlling basic infrastructures. In addition, it is not only the control over heating infrastructure that textures local imaginaries about Gazprom, also the qualities of the heating resource itself structures engagement. Just as the unique material qualities of oil produce specific power relations (Mitchell 2011), so do the qualities of gas as a relative clean and easily transportable heating source structure Altaian engagements with the pipeline and corporation behind it.

While this affordance of gas circulates in the actor network of relations and regimes of truth of cold Siberia, this still does not explain why many indigenous respondents suddenly turn a blind eye to the many negative dimensions of hydrocarbons. As one older respondent very active during the dam protests indicated: 'I do not understand this trust in gas, thinking back now, we should have built the dam, at least we would not be scarring our landscape and pollute it through burning gas'. Rather, the 'ecological' affordances of gas were amplified by external players and actively connected to local dispositions.

The reason why this rationale could take root has to do with the mode of energy literacy Gazprom normalised through its propaganda. Within a given context there are always multiple energy literacies – a term used by hydrocarbon players in their CSR plans (Plets and Kuijt n.d.) – meaning that there are always different interpretative frameworks available to people that texture how they read and make sense of the energy regime they are entangled in. Hydrocarbon corporations are known to promote that mode of energy literacy that rationalises their needs by tapping into local concerns and regimes of truth.

Gazprom is known to be extremely adept at amplifying the basic heating affordances of both the pipeline and the resource it is transporting. As described by Tynkkynen (2016), Gazprom's PR materials are especially good at connecting the network of transportation pipelines with direct local benefits of gas. In Altai, a suite of discursive tactics were used to subtly imbricate the domestic gas network with the large transportation pipeline networks it is planning. At the same time, by using Altaian media outlets and promotional materials tailored to Altaian shamanist conceptions of

land and ecological stability (Figure 3), Gazprom successfully taps into the ecological degradation caused by wood or coal burning. A discourse underscoring the ecological benefits of gas is also further routinised by a drove of players on the first hand disconnected from Gazprom. Members of the Russian scientific establishment (in the case of Altai, the Novosibirsk Branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences) play a central role in publicly underscoring the ecological benefits of pipeline transport for the region using a scientific framework and language (see Plets 2016: 207). Many of these scientists connected to prestigious research institutions are, however, dependent on Gazprom for research funding as a result of shrinking state support for academia.

Shamanist and modernist dreams: mediating Soviet and shamanist temporalities

Within Siberian ethnography, and especially those works pertaining to Altai nomads, there is a strong tendency to emphasise the unique shamanist dimensions of everyday life and cultural politics. Similarly, in this paper it would be tempting to explore Altaian enchantment with the Gazprom pipeline mainly through shamanism, especially since the Altaian-ness of the indigenous population was also brought into the limelight during the late Soviet period by indigenous elites in their nation-building efforts of the 1990s to early 2000s. However, as noted by Grant (1995), we should



Figure 3 The opening of CNG (compressed natural gas) stations (2012) in the Republic's capital was well choreographed by Gazprom. In the performance and speeches skilful references to Altaian indigenous cosmology were inserted and an appropriate environmental discourse was relayed. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

always remind ourselves that no indigenous Siberian conforms to the image of the idealist indigenous savage. Rather, almost 70 years of Soviet ethnic cultural and economic policy has strongly influenced how ordinary people make sense of the world around them. Balzer (1999: 143) similarly argued that most Khanty had become 'bicultural' during the Soviet Union and in social practices fall back on a habitus structured by both indigenous and Soviet images of modernity.

This is not insignificant in explorations about infrastructural promise. Promise is intricately connected to temporality; something is perceived to be auspicious in the present because it is believed to enact certain futures. A suite of ethnographies and cultural histories on the former Eurasian socialist space have explored what the Soviets did to time, and traced how a more linear understanding of time became naturalised (Kalinovsky 2018; Ssorin-Chaikov 2017; Hojer and Pedersen 2019). This Soviet temporality was clearly a modernist one; geared at economic and materialist development and strongly focused on achieving communist utopian development. It was perceived to be important to be on the temporal stairway from 'cave to communism' (Grant 1995: 156–63).

On many occasions, Altaians would complain about the 'backwardness' (*Otstalost'*) of their existence after the disintegration of the system of collective farms. Many would especially lament their daily struggles with their harsh natural environment. The signifier backward is imbued with a temporal connotation, signifying being 'behind time', lagging on the linear scale of development. One respondent defended the pipeline because Altai had become an 'ancient people', non-modern, in dire need of modern infrastructure that would update the Republic and make people less subject to nature. This longing for infrastructural development and control over nature clearly ensured that the pipeline was being bestowed with the promises of modernity. According to Edwards (2003: 191), infrastructure and modernity are co-constitutive, meaning that while infrastructure create modern life, at the same time modern ideologies centring around the importance of rationalised life enable the creation and support for infrastructure. Longing for infrastructure is longing for the 'modernist settlement' (Latour 1993) in which there is a 'systemic, society wide control of over the variability inherent in the natural environment' (Edwards 2003: 188).

This longing for being modern is not only textured by everyday material struggles with nature and crippled infrastructure, but also interconnected with deeply rooted Soviet dispositions and Marxist historical materialism (Kotkin 1997) in which *infrastruktura* is perceived to be a precondition for modern life (Pedersen 2011), a prerequisite for not being backward. As Grant (1995) and Kalinovsky (2018) argue, indigenous groups in Siberia and Central Asia were far from anti-Soviet; many were staunch *kolkhozniks* who believed in utopian progress and material development of their lives. When debating the seemingly incompatibility between Soviet infrastructural modernity and post-Soviet Altaian-ness in which shamanist conceptions of the environment play a structuring role, one of my respondents confessed 'one can leave the *kolkhoz*, but the *kolkhoz* cannot leave you, we still think and act like that'.

In his seminal ethnographic exploration of time among the Evenki, Ssorin-Chaikov (2017) similarly underscored that Siberian indigenous life is defined by multiple temporal regimes. Soviet linear time and indigenous cyclical conceptions of time prominently shape the timescapes informing people's *modus operandi*. Although these modes might seem incompatible, they are perceived to be compatible and people navigate between them on a situational basis. Clearly, contemporary Altaian understandings of

infrastructure are textured by the current crises of time, of being a landlocked region overcoming post-socialist despair (Oushakine 2009). Although this lack of infrastructure has helped many indigenous groups to maintain their local culture and practices, contemporary disadvantages of remoteness and immobility are poignant. Different ethnographies of Siberia detail how ordinary citizens do not always see this remoteness through a romantic lens (Kuklina and Holland 2018; Schweitzer et al. 2017) but evaluate it in contrast with images of modernity furthered by Russian media.

Clearly the field conditions today are very different from those of the late 1980s. During the latter period, infrastructure affecting the sacred ecology and broken utopian dreams ensured that large infrastructure projects were evaluated through the Altaian shamanist temporal regime. Today, a total disappearance of utopian dreams and infrastructure ensures more linear conceptions of time and progress are activated and govern the evaluation of the pipeline. Ultimately, this deeply rooted habitus and material field conditions are continuously amplified by the *gazifikatsiia* (gasification) discourse relayed by Gazprom in national media, digital promotional videos and education. According to Tynkkynen (2016), in its discourse Gazprom purposefully connects gasification with modernisation; only by embracing the potential of Russian gas can the problems connected with post-Socialist collapse, loss of status in geopolitics and dependency on nature be overcome. The message of Gazprom is clear ‘regions without gas are left outside the development and modernisation of the economy – prosperous regions choose gas, backward regions choose other sources of energy, and in the process they are doomed to battle against scarcity and cold’ (Tynkkynen 2016: 376). This fear of being cold *and* backward is clear in many reactions of Altaians when confronted with the discourse of Gazprom and the prospect of the pipeline.

National infrastructure in a time of growing civic national pride

As discussed above, one of the targets in the protests against the Katun dam was the Soviet project itself, and the centre–periphery relations underlying it. As many of the protestors from the 1980s told me, infrastructure and cultural heritage were safe vehicles to speak about Russification indirectly without being criticised for being nativist. Today, the ethno-political fate of many indigenous groups is still dire and indigenous culture is increasingly being folklorised as ethnic nationalism is undermined (Prina 2011). However, at the same time Russian civic nationalism has been clearly established among indigenous groups in Siberia. Also in Altai, especially Putin and Russian myths connected to the Great Patriotic War are extremely popular. This Russian civic pride has only expanded in the aftermath of the annexation of Crimea and Russian involvement in Syria, which has firmly normalised a ‘fortress Russia’ mentality among the local population centring around national Russian unity in the face of foreign pressure (see Plets 2017). Clearly new feelings of belonging to the Russian community also structure the evaluation of ‘national’ infrastructure.

As for many inhabitants of the small villages in the expansive mountainous parts of the Republic, the pipeline also elicits integration into the Russian Federation’s economy. Although, throughout much of the Tsarist and Soviet period the Altai Republic was a peripheral region far from the centre, the region played a role in the national economy. Many interlocutors proudly recounted how Altai was an important node in the dairy industry of the Soviet Union. Interlocutors boasted how they provided butter

for the whole Union and cheese was exported to other socialist republics. However, following the privatisation of the economy during the 1990s, the agricultural industry collapsed. As export to other regions of Russia halted, the region became almost fully dependent on money transfers from the centre. This causes fear that the independent Altai Republic would be integrated in the neighbouring Altai Krai region, but also the fact that Altai does not contribute to the Russian national economy is at odds with the neoliberal economic subjectivities governing everyday life in Russia today (Rutland 2013; Collier 2011). The pipeline fills in this void and integrates Altai into the global economy.

Furthermore, as detailed in his captivating petrohistory of Venezuela, Coronil (1997) stresses that subsoil treasures are popularly conceived as 'national treasures' to be embraced by the entire nation since they benefit the entire nation. Following a similar line of inquiry, one of my interlocutors forcefully argued in defence of the pipeline: 'Russia has so much energy, we have none and should be grateful we can play a role ... we should do our best and contribute'. For many interlocutors, the fact that the pipeline would connect Russia to China not only provided a sense of connectivity to Russia but also elicited the idea that Altai was supporting the national energy sector and Gazprom, which is framed by the Kremlin as the 'national champion' (Balzer 2005) ensuring national welfare. As argued by Barney (2017) in his assessment of pipeline nationalism in Canada, pipelines operate as important tools in the imagining of communities because they elicit national encompassment and integration into the national economy. By supporting Gazprom to construct its pipeline and diversify its market away from Europe, the peripheral Altai(ans) get a place in the national 'petroculture' (see Wilson et al. 2017) promoted and mainstreamed by the Kremlin.

Concluding remarks: infrastructure as a result of top-down discourse of local conceptions?

Enchantment with infrastructure might be produced through daily encounters with the materiality of technology and the material challenges they overcome; at the same time, these perceptions and valuations are the outcome of strategic public relation efforts and exchanges of gifts by Gazprom, both activating deeply rooted dispositions on the ground.

In the Altai Republic, strategic investments by Gazprom into basic state infrastructures paired with skilful image management efforts have helped the corporation to entangle themselves into the fabric of Altaian society and engender a valuation of promise and enchantment. Through the construction of ancillary infrastructures, it has created a favourable image of the corporation and normalised the construction of the large transport pipeline. In particular, the strategic investment into cultural heritage infrastructure, enabling indigenous institutions to overcome sensitive cultural conflict, has helped Gazprom. The museum and other ancillary infrastructures need to be conceived as part of the resource complex and to operate as touchstones reminding both ordinary Altaians and politicians about their obligation to reciprocate to Gazprom.

In addition to carefully planned discourse and concrete actions on the ground on behalf of the corporation, material conditions on the ground and affordances of the pipeline, in conjunction with deeply rooted dispositions, also texture the embodiment

of the pipeline. The pipeline is perceived to be promising because of existing environmental problems, which are amplified by both Gazprom and scientists-consultants connected to the project. At the same time interlocutors, faced with economic decline and a difficult peripheral position in post-Soviet Russia, embraced the potential of being a node in a neoliberal energy market of national importance. Furthermore, deeply embedded materialist conceptions of modernity influence a longing for infrastructure. Siberia might be a region of great infrastructure accomplishment, but it remains a space with a dearth of basic infrastructures. This absence in a sociocultural environment textured by modernity strongly impacts how people conceive recent infrastructure investments.

It is true that the support for this large mega project could yet again be explained through a dark anthropological heuristic by foregrounding the discourse produced by the state and a multinational energy conglomerate. However, the fact that the state and corporation actively aim to structure the ways people perceive an infrastructural project does not mean that the dearth of opposition to the pipeline is the result of a return of Soviet-style authoritarian government characterised by the unilateral imposition of sovereignty. To the contrary, the enchantment with the pipeline is clearly the outcome of a dialectic between deeply rooted dispositions and material realities of ordinary Altaians. It is true that well-targeted actions and discourses by Gazprom tapping into local problems activated these conditions. However, this strategic influencing through discourse and strategic gift-giving has close similarities to mainstream CSR practices in the West and beyond (Dolan and Rajak 2016; Plets and Kuijt n.d.). The Altaians had the possibility to refuse the gifts, but the gifts provided so much political capital to indigenous players that they were unrefusable. The massive investment into the National History Museum, for example, enabled indigenous protagonists to mainstream nativist narratives diametrically opposed to the dominant historical and identarian discourses of the Kremlin. Clearly, both parties hold sovereignty and power. Both for the Kremlin and Gazprom, their gifts were foremost transactional rather than acts of one-sided conquest or capture.

The enchantment with a transnational large transportation pipeline was mapped before the pipeline was built. Although it is still uncertain if the construction of the pipeline will go ahead because of continuing negotiations about the price between China and Russia, it will be interesting to study how people will react to the pipeline itself. Once construction has started, additional fieldwork will be imperative to study how the introductory chapter of the cultural biography of the pipeline textures the ultimate engagement with the infrastructure itself. However, this paper has underlined that the planning stage and ancillary infrastructures already put in place have drastically altered the socio-political arena and have successfully bound Altaian citizens to the corporation and its socio-economic agenda.

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Gazoducs prometteurs et nationalisme pétrolier : la socialité des infrastructures non construites dans la Sibérie autochtone

Cet article analyse d'un point de vue ethnographique la manière dont la technologie et les infrastructures ont été reçues favorablement par les habitants de la Sibérie post-soviétique, en étudiant comment les nomades chamanistes, opposés par le passé aux grands travaux d'infrastructures, furent soudain enchantés par la construction à venir d'un grand gazoduc. Mettant l'accent sur les effets discursifs des grandes compagnies gazières et sur le rôle des conceptions soviétiques profondément enracinées de la modernité visant à remplir les gazoducs d'une signification culturelle, cet article livre des renseignements inédits sur les tensions sociales fortement localisées en matière d'infrastructure. Il alimente ainsi les recherches anthropologiques sur la Russie, où les infrastructures constituent un objet d'étude depuis peu. Par ailleurs, il s'intéresse aux conditions sociales, culturelles et matérielles permettant à l'infrastructure d'être perçue comme un atout, et s'inscrit ainsi dans le cadre du « tournant infrastructurel » de l'anthropologie. Il explore également l'impact significatif des infrastructures annexes – liées à un projet de construction – qui contribuent à relier les populations aux technologies et aux infrastructures.

Mots clés infrastructures, République de l'Altaï, Gazprom, extraction de ressources, CSR