
Original Article

The influence of perception on the preferences of the new member states of the European Union: The case of energy policy

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Abstract This article analyses the formation of preferences in the sphere of energy policy in the new member states of the EU. It claims that the subjective perception of states' vulnerability and strength by decision makers, that filter the objective structural and institutional attributes of a state, is a crucial point here. The empirical analysis is based on the preferences of three new members (Slovakia, the Czech Republic and Poland) in energy area. The results show that in the areas where decision makers perceive states as vulnerable (that is, ascribe to them the role of a weak negotiator) states support further deepening of integration to compensate for domestic shortcomings, whereas in areas where decision makers perceive their state to be capable states oppose further integration that could obstruct their ability to deal with challenges.

Comparative European Politics advance online publication, 13 May 2013;

doi:10.1057/cep.2013.9

Keywords: domestic preferences; energy; energy security; new member states; European Union

Introduction

Preference formation was of interest to scholars dealing with European integration since Moravcsik's (1993) seminal article published in 1993. Although there is no common definition of preferences, those can be characterized as the attitudes of governments towards EU issues (see, for example, Hug and König, 2002; Koenig-Archibugi, 2004; Mattila, 2004; Aspinwall, 2007). Existing explanations see domestic preferences as a result of pressure of societal groups (Moravcsik, 1993, 1998), trade between member states (Sweet and Sandholtz, 1997), financial benefits from the EU budget (Carruba, 1997), economic success of states and individuals (Caplanova *et al*, 2004), type and level of negotiations between member states

(Koenig-Archibugi, 2004; Aspinwall, 2007), involvement of permanent representation (Christiansen *et al*, 2002) or holding of rotating presidency (Verhoeff and Niemann, 2011). These factors see domestic preferences as a result of 'conomic cost-benefit calculations ... and/or member state's institutional setup' (Miklin, 2009, p. 943). The puzzle that these factors are having hard time to solve is why member states with the same or similar 'objective' attributes (like the size of the territory and population, GDP, the influence of interest groups or number of seats in the Council) have sometimes divergent preferences and, on the other hand, preferences match in cases when members differ in their 'objective' attributes.

To shed some light on this puzzle, the article takes up the current debate on influence of individual agency on preference formation (Nguyen, 2008; Haughton, 2009; Miklin, 2009) and makes the claim that in the process of preference formation decision makers' perceptions matter. Previous accounts do not neglect the impact of individual agency, but consider it to be of limited importance. The main argument of the article is that domestic preferences are not solely the result of an objective evaluation of a state's attributes, but are influenced by the decision makers' subjective perceptions of these attributes. Perceptions influence process of preference formation as they filter the impact of 'objective' attributes of a state on its preferences. Therefore, even if attributes of states differ, decision makers can perceive them in a similar way and can pursue alike preferences and vice versa.

After the 2004 and 2007 EU enlargements, scholars gained 12 new cases to test their assumptions about preference formation (Copsey and Haughton, 2009; Haughton, 2009; Láštík, 2010; Rybář, 2011). This article aspires to contribute to the literature on new member states (NMS) of the EU and explores preference formation in the three of them, namely, the Czech Republic, Poland and Slovakia. The article explores how NMS form the preferences supporting or opposing further integration within the EU. To put it differently, the article asks when the NMS support communitarization of a specific policy area and when they oppose it. The article focuses on preferences related to energy as this area has become one of the most prominent for NMS at the EU level (Mišík, 2010). Energy, and especially energy security, is among their top priorities, and NMS have developed quite clear set of energy preferences that they actively pursue at the EU level. Two gas crises in 2006 and 2009 increased even further the salience of energy issue for them. The article has thus two main goals. First, to identify the preferences of the selected member states on energy issues, and second, to investigate the explanatory value of a theoretical framework based on perceptions for preference formation.

The first part of the article introduces a theoretical model that shows how decision makers' perceptions of their own state influence the process of preference formation. It stresses the importance of the interpretation of reality by decision makers. Further, this part presents a role theory, clarifies how this foreign policy analysis approach can help us to explain the influence of perception on preference formation and provides essential information on the research design. This is based on a series of



unique interviews with decision makers on the national as well as European level. The second part focuses on the development of the EU energy policy before and after the eastern enlargement that was one of the main impulses for its advancement. The third part analyses the energy preferences of the studied NMS. It identifies two roles that decision makers ascribe to their states and uses them to explain domestic preferences. In areas where decision makers perceive states as vulnerable (ascribe them the role of a weak negotiator), states support further deepening of integration in energy area to compensate for domestic shortcomings in energy security area. On the other hand, in areas where decision makers perceive their state as capable (role of independent), states oppose further integration that could interfere with their ability to maintain current levels of energy security. All the three states pursue similar preferences in spite of differences in their 'objective' attributes. The study indicates the suitability of the proposed approach for explaining this discrepancy by focusing on similar decision makers' perception of states' vulnerability and strength. The conclusion summarizes the main findings, discusses limitations of the study and proposes further work.

Perception as a Source of Preferences

Scholars have already challenged assumptions about the cost-benefit rational calculus or institutional setup as a basis for explaining choices for Europe, and some of them began to argue in favour of 'non-material' explanations. For example, ideology can influence position on European integration as centrist parties support integration, whereas right wing and left wing oppose it. Therefore, governments composed of centrist coalitions are among the most prone supporters of integration (Aspinwall, 2002). Even ideological worldview of individual ministers can have an impact on states' position towards integration as well (Miklin, 2009). Politicians can pursue preferences that differ from public opinion in cases when they feel 'secure' in office (Nguyen, 2008). Decision makers that feel 'secure' pursue preferences that go against short-term public interest to gain long-term goals. Moreover, views of decision makers towards their own and also towards other states were included into operationalization of the size of a state (Thorhallsson, 2006). He adds 'perceptual size' and 'preference size' to traditional categories describing the size of a state (territory, population, GDP, military expenditure). This reflects 'the view of domestic and international actors concerning a state's size' and 'the domestic political elite's ambitions and priorities' (Thorhallsson, 2006, pp. 24–25). The way decision makers perceive the vulnerability of their own state proves to be especially helpful in explaining NMS' preferences. Haughton (2009, p. 1386) argues: 'the key to explaining a country's choices for Europe lies in vulnerability and the perceived shortcomings of the nation state'.

Hence, decision makers' perception of a state's characteristics affects the pattern of preferences pursued at the EU level. Perception is a subjective category that stems

from the ‘objective’ attributes of a state. For preference formation, it is also important to know what the state’s attributes *appear to be*, not only what they actually are. Although the ‘objective’ characteristics of a state are important for preference formation, their influence is not straightforward and is filtered by decision makers’ perception of their state. As showed by Freyburg and Richter (2010) on the case of the EU conditionality, filter (in their case national identity) can have a rather significant impact. Balkan states seeking EU membership follow those requirements that do not contradict their national identity, whereas those that do are met only partially or not at all (Freyburg and Richter, 2010). Such filtration may but need not necessarily alter the impact of ‘objective’ attributes. Decision makers may subjectively perceive the attributes of their state in accordance with their objective conditions, but they do not have to. The attributes of a state are first filtered by the decision makers’ perception of a state and only then exercise influence on preferences.

Role Theory

Role theory can help explain the influence of perception on preference formation, because it is able to grasp decision makers’ perception of a state by identifying specific roles ascribed to it. Roles represent aggregated perception of a state by decision makers, and they serve as a filter through which decision makers perceive the attributes of a state. Therefore, they influence the final pattern of preferences. By identifying the roles that decision makers ascribe to their states, we gain analytical terms that simplify our understanding of perception.

Role theory was developed by Holsti (1970), who focused on the subjective dimension of foreign policy. He created the term the ‘national role conception’ to offer an analytical tool distinguishable from the vaguely used term ‘role’. Contrary to the previous approaches, roles in Holsti’s study ‘were not unfolded from abstract theoretical discussion, but analysed inductively in terms of the roles policy-makers *themselves* perceived and defined’ (Aggestam, 2006, p. 13). Role theory deals with the question of how decision makers perceive their state and its place in the international system. They ascribe different roles to their state in accordance with their perception of it and select outcomes in line with these roles. Role can be defined as shared understandings regarding the place and purpose ‘of one’s own state as a social collectivity in the international arena’ (Krotz, 2002, p. 6).

Although role theory underlines the importance of ideas in foreign policy, it does not neglect material structures. Roles do not exist independently from the ‘objective’ attributes of the state. The critical issue is, rather, ‘how material factors are perceived and mediated by the actors themselves’ (Aggestam, 2006, p. 22). In different issues, decision makers perceive the state’s attributes differently; therefore, there is room for multiple roles even within the same policy area. These can follow the same goal and reflect the state’s perceived shortcomings in some areas but ability in others.

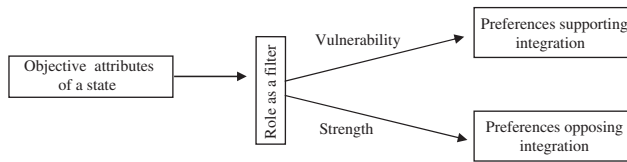


Figure 1: Explanatory model of preference formation.

Roles are rather stable, and this can be considered their main analytical advantage. They are able to create steady views on the place of the state in the international environment and enable decision makers to act in line with them (Aggestam, 1999). However, roles are not fully rigid; they are open to reinterpretation over time (Krotz, 2002). Moreover, new roles can replace old ones, but only after the latter lose centrality and their significance for policy choices decreases. Rapid shifts in roles are typical for revolutionary conditions or in the case of the creation of a new state (Chafetz *et al.*, 1996).

National Roles and Preference Formation

Roles (used in the article as a subjective concept ‘national role conception’ developed within the role theory, not as an objective concept ‘role’) that decision makers ascribe to their state influence the process of preference formation as a filter (Figure 1). Roles represent the subjective perception of decision makers about the state’s characteristics and filter ‘objective’ attributes of the state. Preferences are not determined solely by the actual attributes of the state but also by their subjective perception by decision makers, as they inform political choices, influence the process of preference formation.

Roles reflect two groups of perceptions that determine support or opposing of further integration: those that focus on the state’s vulnerability and those that assess the strength of the state. It can be assumed that in the first case, where decision makers perceive their state to be vulnerable and unable to solve problems on its own, this will lead to pro-integration preferences. Decision makers will prefer to ‘upload’ to the EU level those issues that they believe they are unable to solve domestically. They want to be a part of the bigger and stronger team with much more influence and ability to solve difficulties. As Haughton (2009, p. 1386) notes, ‘[R]ecognising the limitations of what can be achieved domestically, integration is ... advocated as a means of compensating for domestic weakness’. As a result, decision makers are pushing hard for the communitarization of those policies that are going to deal with their problems on the European level and help them to overcome shortcomings. On the other hand, a member state will oppose the deepening of integration in those policy areas where decision makers perceive it to be a capable and influential player

with the ability to cope with problems in the area on its own. EU-wide initiatives will be considered inappropriate as the national state has adequate tools to deal with these potential challenges. Pro-integration preferences thus reflect the perception of vulnerability and shortcomings of the state, while preferences that oppose further integration are attributable to the perceived strength of the state to manage the area and to deal with possible problems.

As a result of the above discussion, the following hypotheses can be deduced:

- Hypothesis 1:** If the role ascribed to a state reflects a perception of vulnerability, the member country will form preferences supporting further integration within the EU.
- Hypothesis 2:** If the role ascribed to a state reflects a perception of strength, the member country will form preferences opposing further integration within the EU.

Research Design

Energy is a particularly suitable policy area for the study of the process of preference formation among the new members. These developed quite clear sets of preferences in energy, contrary to many other issues where they have very limited or no preferences at all. NMS have not been very active members of the Union, and energy is one of a few initiatives they actively pursue at the EU level (Malová, 2010). Moreover, the gas crises of 2006 and 2009 further increased the salience of the topic not only for NMS, but for the whole EU. The study concentrates predominantly on natural gas, which is the most important energy source in relation to energy security, the main energy concern of the NMS. Energy security can be defined as an ‘uninterrupted, continuous and sufficient availability of all forms of energy a given entity requires’ (Pointvogl, 2009, pp. 5705–5706). Gas requires a technically challenging transit system and it is traded regionally, leading to a reliance on regional suppliers (Roberts, 2009, p. 248). This is also the reason why ‘the risk of (targeted) supply disruptions mainly concerns natural gas’ (Roth, 2011, p. 606). However, the analysis also deals with other sources of energy that are emphasized by the NMS, most importantly with nuclear energy and coal.

The three chosen countries (the Czech Republic, Poland and Slovakia) are well-suited for this analysis. They are the most active among the NMS in the energy area and they have well-developed positions on the issue. Slovakia and the Czech Republic contributed to the creation of and currently host the European Nuclear Energy Forum, which supports discussion on the further development of nuclear energy in the EU. Bratislava unsuccessfully competed for the seat of the newly established Agency for the Cooperation of Energy Regulators and the post of Commissioner for Energy (Bilčík, 2010). Energy was among the top three priorities

**Table 1:** Differences between studied countries

	<i>Size of territory (km²)</i>	<i>Number of inhabitants (millions)</i>	<i>GDP (€ million)</i>	<i>Number of seats in the council</i>
The Czech Republic	78 870	10.5	154 913	12
Poland	311 925	38.2	369 522	27
Slovakia	49 013	5.4	69 058	7

Source: Eurostat, The Council of the European Union; data for 2011.

during the Czech presidency of the Council. Moreover, the European Energy Programme for Recovery, which has the aim of supporting the development of energy infrastructure, was adopted during the energy summit in Prague in 2009 (Král *et al*, 2009). Poland was at the forefront of NMS' struggle for including solidarity in energy in the Lisbon treaty. It argued that in line with the 'All for One and One for All' motto, member states should help a country that encounters problems with an insufficient energy supply (Roth, 2011).

We can distinguish two groups of differences between the countries in their 'objective' attributes that are important for the analysis. The differences are significant enough to illustrate the influence of perception on preference formation as they demonstrate the variation between 'objective' attributes and their subjective perception. First, there are differences in the size of territory and population, GDP and number of votes in the Council of the EU. Table 1 shows that Poland is bigger than the other two countries, has much more inhabitants, has higher GDP and has more seats in the Council of the EU. Poland also quite often presents itself as a regional leader and speaker for smaller NMS.

Second, studied countries differ in energy area in general and in utilization of natural gas in particular. They have various structure of energy mix with Slovakia having biggest share of gas in meeting overall energy consumption (28 per cent), followed by the Czech Republic (15 per cent) and Poland (13 per cent). The most significant difference lies in the dependence on import of gas from Russia. Whereas Slovakia is basically fully dependent on Russian supplies, Czechs import a smaller share of their total consumption from Russia and Poland even produces its own natural gas (Table 2) (Energy Regulatory Office, 2010; Energy Regulatory Office in Poland, 2010; Regulatory Office for Network Industries, 2010). Although all the three countries import gas from Russia, this fact does not automatically translate into cautious relationship towards their supplier. Slovak long-term positive attitude towards Russia was demonstrated during the 2009 gas crisis when Slovakia as the only affected country blamed Ukraine for the situation (Duleba, 2009). Traditional negative position of the Polish elite towards Russia improved after the Smolensk plane crash tragedy (with many casualties including the Polish president), but relationship are still characterized by negative attitudes of Polish public

Table 2: Natural gas consumption and import (in billion m³)

	<i>Consumption</i>	<i>Domestic production</i>	<i>Import</i>	
			<i>Russia</i>	<i>Others</i>
The Czech Republic	8.2	0.113	5.01	3.0 (Norway) 0.571 (Germany)
Poland	13.3	4.1	7.88 (Yamal 7.47)	0.993 (Germany) 0.662 (Turkmenistan)
Slovakia	5.9	0.103	5.8	0.5 ^a (Germany) 0.5 ^a (France)

^aThis includes gas that can be imported from western direction in case of emergency through reverse flow from the Czech Republic, not gas actually imported.

Source: Energy Regulatory Office, 2010; Energy Regulatory Office in Poland, 2010; Regulatory Office for Network Industries, 2010, data for 2009.

(Tucker, 2010). The relations between the Czech Republic and Russia are predominantly negative although there was a brief period of the improved Czech attitude in the 2000s and a part of the political elite 'tend to see Russia in pragmatic, if not outright friendly, terms' (Kratochvíl and Kuchyňková, 2009, p. 85).

The roles that decision makers ascribe to their state reflect their own perception of its characteristics. We can therefore employ the roles to grasp this perception for assessment of its influence on preference formation analytically. Some authors use in their analyses a set of roles introduced by Holsti (1970) (Chafetz *et al.*, 1996), but as this was developed for the study of the international system and not a particular policy within the EU it is unsuitable for our analysis. As noted above, decision makers can ascribe different roles in different policy areas, thus limiting the analysis to the roles developed in one area might be inappropriate. Therefore, following the scholars dealing with role theory in an EU setting (Frank, 2008), the article develops a set of roles that fit better with the energy policy area. Roles were constructed inductively on the basis of statements from the interviews conducted with decision makers and experts. First, the 'essence' was abstracted from the statements about the perceived characteristics of a state in the energy area. Similar 'essences' were merged together in the second step and translated into national roles.

The article is based on 38 semi-structured expert interviews conducted between June 2008 and May 2010 (see Appendix). The aim of the interviews was to capture decision makers' perceptions of their state. Interviewing is especially suitable as a technique for tracing perception as it enables access to information that would otherwise stay hidden, including, for example, the experience or opinions of respondents (Peräkylä, 2008). Respondents included senior officials from the Czech, Polish and Slovak ministries of economy and foreign affairs, regulatory authorities, diplomats from permanent



representations of the studied countries in Brussels, members of the European Parliament, the European Commission (EC) and experts. All interviews were carried out face to face, with an average duration of about 40 min and were recorded.

EU Energy Policy Before and After the Eastern Enlargement

Eastern enlargement marked a new period in the EU's approach to energy. The EU had not paid much attention to energy before 2004 in spite of the fact that two of the three original treaties, the European Coal and Steel Community Treaty and the Euratom Treaty, dealt with energy (Matlár, 1997). The internal energy market was developing since the 1980s, but it has not yet led to the creation of a common energy policy. The situation was even more complicated with energy security. After the oil crises in the 1970s, member states 'nationalized' energy policies and attempted to avoid infrastructural dependency on other states (Belyi, 2008). Old member states (OMS) were decidedly reluctant to 'rely on the Community to enter into negotiations with third country producers of energy' (Haghighi, 2008, p. 478).

Although there is no common EU energy policy, energy issues within the common market are regulated by the EU legislation. Energy had no legal basis before the adoption of the Lisbon treaty on 1 December 2009. Until then, energy regulations and directives were based on different provisions of the EU treaties, which were unrelated to energy (Delvaux and Guimaraes-Purokoski, 2008). Previous attempts to include energy references into the European treaties were not successful and it was mentioned for the first time in the unsuccessful Constitution for Europe (Haghighi, 2008). Energy policy had been traditionally in the hands of national governments but with the development of a common market energy started to be coordinated at the EU level. An internal energy market was created in 1988 that concentrated mainly on deregulation and open access to gas and electricity supplies (Matlár, 1997). But progress has been very slow due to member states' hesitation to deepen integration and cede competencies to the Community. Therefore, the EU today is still 'without what could be called a Common Energy Policy' (Pointvogl, 2009, p. 5704).

Energy policy and especially the question of energy security became one of the main topics in the EU only after NMS joined the EU. Energy was an important part of the negotiation process, but the EC focused on solving short-term issues concerning the safety of nuclear facilities, environmental protection and adaptation of the EU legislation. The EU-15 concentrated on the development of the internal energy market and underestimated challenges in the Central and Eastern Europe. The enlargement and problems of NMS connected to energy security influenced the shift in the way the EU handled the energy issue after 2004. Most of the NMS are crucially dependent on the import of gas from Russia, and energy security is a high priority for them (Mišík, 2010). Moreover, Russia is increasingly using energy as a political lever and there was a global increase in hydrocarbon prices (Mayer, 2008) that

further increased the need for a common approach. In addition, growing demand for energy in emerging economies like China or India has contributed to the overall uncertainties about global energy reserves (Umbach, 2010).

The EC recognized these threats and published the Green Paper: A European Strategy for Sustainable, Competitive and Secure Energy in 2006. It outlined the need for a community-wide energy policy at both the internal and external level. One of its aims was 'to speak with the same voice' (Green Paper, 2006, p. 14), but the Council rejected the proposal for a Common European Energy Policy in March 2006 (Mayer, 2008). However, the Paper marked the beginning of the period of further Commission initiatives in foreign (external) energy policy and an interest in the question of energy security. In October 2006, the EC prepared the communication *External Energy Relations – from principles to action* – followed in January 2007 by the first Strategic EU Energy Review based on the 2006 Green Paper recommendations. The Council adopted proposals in the first strategic review in March 2007 together with an Energy Action Plan for the years 2007–2009 (Mayer, 2008). The Second Strategic Energy Review and its EU Security and Solidarity Action Plan, presented by the EC in November 2008, identified obstacles in the creation of a common foreign energy policy of the EU and securing the energy supplies of its members (Umbach, 2010).

The 2009 gas crisis gave an important impulse for NMS to focus on energy security and for the EC to take their concerns seriously. Disputes between Russia and Ukraine over the price of gas and transport fees in January 2009 caused the full cut-off of gas supplies through Ukraine for the very first time in the almost 40-year history of Russian export to Europe. It was another 'Russo-Ukrainian gas soap opera, which this time developed into a thriller' (Wyciszkiewicz, 2009, p. 183). Gas supplies were interrupted for 11 days and altogether 17 states were affected (Duleba, 2009). Czech representatives accused both sides for this situation, whereas the Polish assumed a neutral position (PRG-09-03, WAW-10-06). Slovakia was the only country to openly blame Ukraine for the crisis (Duleba, 2009). As admitted by respondents, neither Slovakia nor the Czech Republic were prepared to face a situation when no gas flowed from Ukraine, even though a similar gas crisis had occurred in 2006. Poland, which imports most of Russian gas through Belarus, also took the situation very seriously, being concerned that it could be repeated any time in any part of the energy infrastructure.

The EU was actively involved in solving the crisis, although the EC (2009) in its working paper admitted that 'the scale of the gas supply disruptions required an adequate response at the EU level, however, a clear strategy as well as concrete instruments were lacking'. An extraordinary Energy Council meeting was held on 12 January 2009 with the presence of Ukrainian and Russian ministers. As recalled by the Czech official who was present at the forum, it was quite difficult to agree on a common EU position, as 'all ministers or state secretaries of member states were present' and for OMS this was not that much of a 'hot issue' (PRG-09-01). The crisis thus underlined different views of new and old members on energy security. One of



the concrete outputs was the adoption of a regulation on security of natural gas supplies (No. 994/2010) in 2009. It introduced the ‘N-1’ rule according to which member states have to create emergency stocks of natural gas that would cover demand for a specific time period in the case of the failure of the main gas infrastructure (plus some general stock in other emergency cases).

What do NMS Want to Achieve at the EU Level?

Having provided the context, this section explains the preferences of the three studied NMS in the energy area. It utilizes the framework developed in the previous section and identifies the roles that representatives ascribe to the Czech Republic, Poland and Slovakia. These countries differ in their ‘objective’ attributes but they pursue similar preferences in energy. This puzzle can be explained by the subjective perceptions of decision makers who can ascribe similar roles to states that have different characteristics and therefore pursue similar preferences.

The studied countries are, first and foremost, interested in improving energy security. Russia has proven to be an unstable supplier and therefore energy security has become one of the top topics in the region. The three countries actively pursue several preferences at the EU level in order to increase their energy security in general, with extra attention paid to the security of gas supplies. The first section identifies the two roles ascribed to the states – those of the *weak negotiator* and the *independent* – that are used in the second part to examine five energy preferences that these countries pursue at the EU level.

Roles of the NMS

We can identify two national roles ascribed to the studied NMS. As decision makers can perceive the state’s characteristics differently in different sections of a policy, we can identify multiple roles ascribed to states in the same policy area. The first identified role is that of the *weak negotiator*, according to which states are seen as vulnerable and unable to solve problems in energy supply on their own. Although the countries studied are dependent on Russian imports to different degrees, their representatives perceive this challenge in the same way, ascribing them the same role. The second recognized role is that of the *independent*, which is characterized by a reluctance to cede competences to the EU level in some energy areas as decision makers perceive their own countries as capable to maintain the current level of energy security.

According to the role of *weak negotiator*, decision makers perceive their countries as unable to guarantee energy security. Countries are not capable of convincing suppliers that they should adhere to the rules, effectively prevent crises and, should a crisis occur, be able to solve it on their own. The main challenge is the key supplier,

Russia. The EU is the only partner that Russia would take seriously: a small country like Slovakia ‘the size of a Moscow suburb’ is not an equal partner for Russia (BTS-10-11). An official at the permanent representation perceived the limited capacity of the Czech Republic in a similar way when he claimed that ‘we are a small member state and for example we will be ignored when negotiating with Russia individually’ (BXL-10-03). Although Poland is much bigger, imports less natural gas and even produces a significant amount of gas, perceptions towards Russia do not differ. A Polish interviewee noted that ‘we are bigger than Slovakia, but I do not think we are that important. When you see what is going on in China, they are able to buy all their gas from Russia’ (WAW-10-02).

One of the main challenges is Russia’s effort to negotiate individually. In such a situation, the role of *weak negotiator* is reinforced. Russians are well aware of their advantageous position during bilateral talks and are therefore eager to retain the current state of affairs. In the words of a Czech respondent, ‘... if one person speaks for the whole EU, you can carry through much more than any other way. But Russian strategy is to isolate member states, deal bilaterally with Germany, France ...’ (PRG-09-02). Dependence on Russian supplies and uneven mutual relations became clear during the 2009 gas crisis. The affected countries were not individually able to persuade Russia about the need to restore full supply capacity. Russia and Ukraine avoided multilateral forums and negotiated on a bilateral basis. A Slovak respondent sarcastically noted that ‘neither in Kiev, nor in Moscow did anybody care about Slovak or Bulgarian citizens, because Russian people are used to freezing all year-long’ (BXL-10-11).

The second identified role ascribed by decision makers to their state in the energy policy area is *independent*. It reflects a desire among member states to stay free from external constraints. They want to fully utilize domestic sources of energy that are most suitable to safeguard energy security and do not want the EU to influence this ability negatively by creating common rules that would not take into consideration their specific characteristics. As noted by a respondent, ‘every country has specific conditions and the Czech Republic doesn’t have conditions like, for example, Austria’ (PRG-09-02). The Polish point of view was expressed by an official, who claimed that ‘every country has its particular problems. It is very difficult to compare countries in energy production’ (WAW-10-04).

Utilizing domestic sources of energy is necessary for maintaining energy security and role of independent thus also contributes to this aim. The studied countries want to stay independent in those areas where they are able to effectively deal with energy security. For Slovakia and the Czech Republic, this concerns mostly nuclear energy, whereas for Poland the question of coal is especially sensitive. A Czech interviewee, who explained Prague’s point of view, noted that ‘[I]t is up to us, whether we build a nuclear power plant or not’; this should not be decided on the EU level (PRG-09-04). According to an energy expert, coal is not an issue related to the large number of coal-fired power plants in Poland, but the point is that ‘they produce it at home and it is their decision and nobody can interfere with their decision’ (EUIN-08-07).



Preferences of the NMS in the Energy Area

The first identified preference of the studied countries is support of the development of a harmonized *common energy policy* of the EU with external dimension. Such a policy would enable the EU to ‘speak with one voice’ on energy matters. A common European energy policy is considered by Czech representatives to be the ‘main and the only option ... it is the most appropriate and the most proper approach to negotiations with suppliers’ (PRG-09-07). The Czech Republic supports the development of the ‘real, effective and united foreign policy, because we are on the Eastern margin of Central Europe and naturally Russia is important for us and we are quite dependent on it’ (PRG-09-05). Russia is going to take into consideration the EU only when it speaks with one voice and therefore Slovakia also favours the creation of a common energy policy. According to the Polish position, it is crucial to send only one message from the EU to the suppliers and not to speak separately. As a Polish representative put it, common policy would increase energy security as ‘we are more effective when speaking with one voice’ (WAW-10-04). Member countries will be represented by the whole EU, and will not have to deal with Russia on their own. As one interviewee observed, ‘when for example some external suppliers [will be] flirting with the idea of switching off gas, then if the president of a small member state [says] oh, do not do it, because we will have a big problem, and it is not fair, I would risk the opinion that it will not work. But if the Commissioner says the same, it could help prevent the crisis from happening’ (WAW-10-06).

The current situation in external energy relations is characterized by the individual approach of member states that sometimes pursue preferences contradicting the EU (the Commission’s) position, but also that of other member states. Russia favours a situation where it can negotiate with member states on a bilateral basis as it has greater influence that way. Interviewees often spoke about the difference between the proclaimed willingness of all the 27 member states to create a common position towards external energy partners and the reality when the EU members join bilateral projects. ‘[W]e are talking about ‘speaking with one voice’, we have it in conclusions but contracts are being signed bilaterally, without considering the other 26 member states’ (BXL-10-03). The aim of the studied countries is to create a common policy that would coordinate and unite member states’ positions towards the third parties. Large, long-standing members have much better negotiating positions, both in negotiating prices and avoiding supply interruptions. As remarked by an interviewee, ‘[I]f we had been Germany, we might have discussed prices. But for [Russia], there is a totally different political weight to Germany and Poland’ (WAW-10-02).

The second identified preference is the *support for diversification* of transport routes and sources of natural gas as well as building interconnectors within the EU. The main aim of diversification is to decrease the dependency on Russia by creating alternative transport routes, but also to improve the interconnectivity between the member states. A Czech official explained that their ‘real interest is decreasing the

dependence of Europe on Russia. I think this is the main interest of the Czech Republic, simply to diversify supplies' (PRG-09-02). Czechs fully support Nabucco, as 'only this gas pipeline enables real diversification of sources' (PRG-09-03). Slovakia does not have such an exact position; its representatives claim that there is a need to diversify but they are less specific about concrete projects (BTS-10-09). Poland supports all diversification projects as far as those have an EU perspective, that is, they are supposed to increase energy security of the whole EU, not only one state. Taking into consideration this requirement, 'Nabucco fits perfectly into Polish energy policy. So this is why Poland is more positive about Nabucco than about Nord Stream and South Stream' (WAW-10-02).

Contrary to these 'big' diversification projects that countries support politically, but do not take part in their implementation, they are much more active in 'smaller' projects, focusing on building interconnectors between member states. The countries cooperate in constructing the interconnectors that will link the two LNG terminals in Poland (Świnoujście) and Croatia (Adria). Although these terminals will be able to cover only a small part of gas consumption in the region, they will significantly contribute to energy security. As an energy expert noted, the terminal 'is built for [security purposes], of course. We call this mechanism the "security pillow"' (BXL-10-02). For Russia, gas is not only a natural resource to be sold, it 'is an instrument of policy. This is why Poland has to seek other sources of energy, other suppliers' (WAW-10-02). Although building the interconnectors seems to be a domestic policy goal, these countries 'uploaded' it onto the EU level. They proceed with projects that gained enough financial assistance from the European Energy Programme for Recovery (Polish LNG terminal, Slovak–Hungarian interconnector) and terminated a proposed project that acquired insufficient EU funding (Slovak–Polish interconnector) (European Parliament and the Council, 2009).

The third pursued preference, *solidarity*, goes hand in hand with the previous one, because it presupposes the development of energy infrastructure between the member states. The 2009 gas crisis was often mentioned during the interviews as a reason why there is a need for solidarity among the member states. It was also used as an example of how solidarity might work in practice, as at the end of the crisis Czech companies enabled a reverse flow of gas to Slovakia. Bratislava fully supports solidarity in the energy area and many respondents pointed to this period. As underlined by a Czech respondent, solidarity must go hand in hand with the development of internal market infrastructure because this is an essential condition for its proper functioning (PRG-09-05). Poland pushed hard to include solidarity in energy into the Lisbon treaty (Roth, 2011). It supported the 'One for All, All for One approach', but 'the idea was badly sold to member states' (WAW-10-02). In the words of a Polish diplomat, 'energy supply is a common interest, and if a single member state had a problem with the supply of energy, other member states should be ready to help this country' (NCS-09-38). In the end, solidarity became a part of the Lisbon treaty and its energy provisions in Article 194.



The fourth identified preference concerns *energy mix*. Besides establishing a legal basis for the EU energy policy, the Lisbon treaty states that the decision about energy mix shall stay within the competences of individual member states. The countries studied are willing to keep energy mix in their own hands and therefore they supported the incorporation of this provision to the Treaty. The structure of the energy mix is, according to a Slovak interviewee, 'one of the basic competences that belong to us and I think that it is generally accepted that within the EU no one will interfere in this' (BTS-10-09). An official at the permanent representation in Brussels noted that the Czech Republic 'cannot imagine this competence being transferred to the EU level' (BXL-10-02).

United rules concerning energy mix are, on the one hand, not very feasible due to the specific conditions of individual members. On the other hand, however, a Slovak representative spoke about the possibility that with such a policy in practice different 'pressures could occur from other member states to close down and not to support the construction [of nuclear power plants]' (BXL-01-03). Austria in particular was often mentioned as the most critical member towards utilization of nuclear energy. A Slovak respondent noted that 'it is clear that Slovakia is not going to give up nuclear energy ... and the European Commission has no right to dictate our energy mix' (EUN-09-11). According to the Czech energy strategy, nuclear energy contributes to maximizing independence from energy sources originated in unstable areas (MPO, 2004). In the Polish case, this preference is connected to utilization of domestic coal stocks for electricity generation. Coal is going to remain the main source of electricity for the next few years because of the lack of alternatives that would not increase import of energy resources: 'it would be very easy to cut coal from the energy mix, but then we would have no other source of energy' (WAW-10-06). Not even the proposed nuclear power plant will significantly change the energy mix and gas-fired power plants would only increase gas imports.

The fifth preference that also shows limits to integration is *further liberalization of the internal energy market*. When the EC presented its proposal of the third liberalization package (the main issue being unbundling), that tried to improve competition in gas and electricity market within the EU and built on the two previous liberalization packages already in force, Slovakia joined the group of other seven member states that opposed the solutions, presenting and proposing their own one instead. The Czech Republic, which held the presidency at that time, did not openly oppose the idea, as its task was to mediate the negotiation process, but it also did not consider the proposed solution to be the best possible. Czech objections were summarized by an official from the Ministry of Industry and Trade: '[I]n the area of the gas industry in Central Europe that is mostly dependent on one source, [unbundling as proposed by the EC] is ineffective because it does not lead to an increase in competition in the gas market, yet the cost will rise' (PRG-09-01). Slovakia was not *a priori* against the ownership unbundling, but its representatives claimed that this solution was not suitable for all the countries and the EC did not



look at the concrete impact on the individual markets. Thanks to further liberalization of the common market, Russian companies could gain access to gas infrastructure through their subsidiary companies based in the EU. Although Poland did not join the ‘group of eight’ that openly opposed full unbundling, its officials remain ‘deeply suspicious of Russian investment into Polish energy infrastructure and stressed that the ownership unbundling foreseen in the third internal energy market package should not lead to hostile, foreign takeovers of transmission systems’ (Roth, 2011, p. 609).

Summarizing the empirical findings, the identified preferences support the main argument of this article, namely, that each country’s support or opposition towards further integration is influenced by the perceptions of decision makers about their state’s strength and vulnerability. Although the three countries studied differ in their dependence on Russian natural gas imports (and also in many other ways), they pursue the same preferences in the energy area. These preferences reflect decision makers’ efforts to increase energy security, which they perceive as the main challenge, and this is so notwithstanding the difference between those states in their actual dependence on imports. Although Poland has the smallest share of natural gas in its energy mix, produces a significant amount of it domestically and is bigger than the other two countries in all aspects, its representatives perceive energy security in the same way as Slovak ones. But Slovakia imports almost all of its natural gas from Russia; the share of gas in its energy mix is twice as large as in Poland, and is the smallest one. The Czech Republic finds itself between these two poles, but this has no influence on its preferences; decision makers perceive energy security as the main energy issue. Despite the differences in actual attributes of the states, decision makers perceive vulnerability and the strength of their states in the same way (ascribe them the same roles) and thus form the same preferences.

The countries analysed here pursue five preferences in order to improve their energy security. The first three (support for the creation of a common energy policy, support of diversification and solidarity in energy) mirror the role of the *weak negotiator* and aim to improve the negotiating position of the member states *vis-à-vis* Russia. In today’s situation, Russia has an advantageous position in negotiations, as it is the only or main supplier of natural gas to these countries and it has already been shown twice, and it stands no difficulty in cutting off the gas supplies. A common energy policy would improve the negotiating position of member states, as they would not have to deal with the supplier on their own, but would be represented by a bigger entity with a much stronger position during negotiations. Diversification of sources and transport routes as well as solidarity among the member states is also supposed to improve their negotiating position. Both preferences reduce reliance on current importers (that is, Russia) and can create a back-up plan to deal with a sudden interruption of supply. With ‘plan B’ ready, Russia would be less tempted to play with natural gas exports and this would thus reduce the current asymmetry between the supplier and the consumer. In the case of a sudden interruption of supply, solidarity would secure emergency supplies from other member states. This measure



increases the energy security of the EU members as it improves the states' position *vis-à-vis* Russia and also reduces the effectiveness of Russia's cut-offs.

The two other preferences (to keep the energy mix as a matter for domestic competence and opposition to further liberalization within the energy market) reflect the role of the *independent* and their aim is to maintain the current levels of energy security and avoid its decline. Harmonization of energy mixes can result in constraints upon some energy sources (coal, nuclear energy) that are critically important for the studied countries. This can consequently cause an increase in energy imports that will further exacerbate dependence and energy insecurity. Excessive liberalization of energy markets can 'backfire' on the efforts to increase energy security, as a liberalized environment can lead to takeovers of transmission systems by foreign (that is, Russian) companies. In this way, Russia could increase its influence on the European gas market, and in the end liberalization could lead to reduced energy security and increased dependence.

The empirical findings also support both proposed hypotheses. In cases when decision makers ascribe roles that reflect their perception of their state's vulnerability, the studied countries form preferences that support further deepening of integration in the energy area. Within the role of a *weak negotiator*, decision makers perceive their states as unable to secure uninterrupted supplies of natural gas from Russia. Therefore, they support 'uploading' and transfer of responsibility for energy security to the EU. This result is in line with the previous work that emphasizes vulnerability as a key explanatory variable for NMS' policy preferences (Haughton, 2009). Integration thus serves as a compensation for domestic shortcomings. In the second case, when the role mirrors a perception of states' strengths and capability (role of *independent*), the Czech Republic, Poland and Slovakia form preferences that oppose further integration in the energy area. This role encompasses their perceived need to create energy security at least to some extent by staying free of external constraints and utilizing national resources (nuclear energy, coal). In these areas, a common EU approach would not contribute to the improvement of energy security, as it would not respect particular national characteristics that are decisive for it.

Conclusion

The main objective of this study was to investigate the formation of domestic preferences of the NMS. The starting point of the analysis was the current discussion about the limits of existing accounts of preference formation (Nguyen, 2008; Copsey and Haughton, 2009; Miklin, 2009). These have difficulty explaining similar preferences between member states with different 'objective' attributes and vice versa. It is caused by their focus on the attributes of a state: when they are alike, preferences should be comparable. But this is not always the case and it reveals the limitations of an exclusive focus upon 'objective' attributes of state.

This article argued that if we use decision makers' *perceptions* of their state as a filter, we will be able to explain the discrepancies between the 'objective' attributes of states and their preferences. The subjective perception of a state's attributes – which may differ from its 'objective' attributes – is operationalized through a national role that mirrors decision makers' understanding of their state. The article tested two hypotheses that proposed assumptions about the support and the opposition to integration within the EU. If decision makers perceive their state in terms of vulnerability, they support further integration as a means of compensating for their domestic shortcomings. In areas where the state is perceived as capable, decision makers oppose the deepening of integration. EU initiatives are considered inappropriate, as the nation-state has tools for dealing with challenges in those areas.

The article used energy policy to illustrate the potential of the proposed theoretical framework to shed more light on preference formation in the NMS. Although NMS have been members of the EU for several years, most academic literature about their involvement has been at a general level and only a few scholars have dealt with their activities and preferences in concrete policy areas (Copsey and Pomorska, 2010; Roth, 2011; Rybář, 2011). Energy, and especially energy security, is one of the dominant issues for the NMS at the EU level and therefore this policy was chosen for the analysis.

The empirical findings of the study into the preferences of the Czech Republic, Poland and Slovakia in energy found support for the theoretical claim about the importance of perception on preference formation. The article has demonstrated that although the studied countries differ in 'objective' attributes, they pursue similar preferences at the EU level. Decision makers perceive their states in a similar way (as a *weak negotiator vis-à-vis* Russia and as an *independent* in relation to harmonization within the single energy market) and therefore they pursue similar preferences despite the fact that they differ in dependence on energy imports (but also in many other areas). They pursue altogether five preferences with the common goal of increasing their energy security. Poland is the biggest and least dependent state on Russian imports, but its representatives perceive the energy security issue in a very similar way to the Slovak ones, who have to deal with almost total energy dependency on Russian supplies and whose country is much smaller. The Czech Republic finds itself between these two poles and its representatives also perceive energy security as a key issue. The above analysis suggests that the level to which a member state is actually dependent on energy imports is significant only to a limited degree. Important for preference formation is also *perception* of this dependence by decision makers.

Moreover, the article found support for both proposed hypotheses. Member states form preferences supporting further deepening of integration in those energy areas where decision makers perceive their state as vulnerable (Hypothesis 1). The main challenge concerns security of supplies and asymmetrical dependence on Russia as their main supplier. Preferences supporting deepening integration in energy (support for the creation of common energy policy, support of diversification and solidarity in



energy) are supposed to improve their position *vis-à-vis* Russia. On the other hand, in those areas where decision makers perceive their state as able to deal with possible challenges oppose further integration (keeping the energy mix in domestic hands and opposing further liberalization) that is seen as interfering with their efforts to retain at least their current level of energy security (Hypothesis 2).

This article tried to contribute to the discussion on preference formation and shed some light on the causal mechanism between the roles ascribed to member states and the preferences pursued by them at the EU level. The article included role theory into the analytical framework that developed a link between the roles and preferences of member states. The most significant contribution of the role theory for analysis of preference formation is that it offers a concrete prescription how perceptions can affect preferences. Preferences are influenced not only by 'objective' attributes of a member state, but also by the roles ascribed to the state that mirror its perceived shortcomings and strengths. Thus, roles function as a filter that modifies the significance of state's 'objective' attributes. The article demonstrated that perception is significant for preference formation and can also explain divergences of preferences among individual members.

The conclusions of this contribution are limited to the case of energy policy and the studied NMS. Further research will be needed to evaluate the explanatory value of decision makers' perceptions upon preference formation in other policy areas and among other member states. Furthermore, employing the role theory to analysis of perception is only one possible perspective: applying different approaches from other areas of international relations and European integration can help us to complete the picture of national preference formation.

Acknowledgements

The work on this article was supported by the Slovak Research and Development Agency grants no. APVV-0660-06 and APVV-0484-10. I am grateful for the comments on the earlier versions of the article made by Darina Malová, Marek Rybář, Erik Láštík, Nathaniel Copsey, Anneliese Dodds, Ed Turner, Carolyn Rowe and the anonymous reviewers. I would also like to thank all the interviewees for their willingness to take part in the research and for sharing their knowledge with me.

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Appendix

Table A1: Interview list

PRG-09-01	Director, Gas and Liquid Fuels Department, Ministry of Industry and Trade of Czech Republic, Prague, 11 August 2009
PRG-09-02	Head of Unit, Ministerial Coordination Group, Ministry of Industry and Trade of the Czech Republic, Prague, 13 August 2009
PRG-09-03	Head of Research Department, Institute of International Relations, Prague, 11 August 2009
PRG-09-04	Researcher, Institute of International Relations, Prague, 11 August 2009
PRG-09-05	Program Coordinator, Prague Security Studies Institute, Prague, 12 August 2009
PRG-09-06	Journalist, Hospodářské Noviny, Prague, 11 August 2009
PRG-09-07	Senior Official, Energy Regulatory Office, Prague, 1 September 2010
BTS-09-01	Researcher, Slovak Foreign Policy Association, Bratislava, 31 July 2009
BTS-10-05	Director, Slovak Innovation and Energy Agency, Bratislava, 2 February 2010
BTS-10-07	Director, Department of EU Affairs, Ministry of Economy of Slovak republic, Bratislava, 20 April 2010
BTS-10-08	President, Slovak Nuclear Society, Bratislava, 20 March 2010
BTS-10-09	Senior Official, International Energy Relations Department, Ministry of Economy, Bratislava, 27 March 2010
BTS-10-10	Director, Energy and Raw Materials Policy Department, Bratislava, 27 March 2010
BTS-10-11	Slovak Gas and Oil Association, Bratislava, 27 March 2010
WAW-10-02	Director, European Affairs Department, Ministry of Economy, Warsaw, 25 May 2010
WAW-10-04	Director, Nuclear Energy Department, Ministry of Economy, Warsaw, 26 May 2010
WAW-10-06	Senior Official, Department of Foreign Economic Policy, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Warsaw, 26 May 2010
WAW-10-09	Researcher, Centre for Eastern Studies, 27 May 2010
WAW-10-10	Coordinator of International Cooperation, Energy Regulatory Office, Warsaw, 28 May 2010
BXL-10-01	Energy Attaché, Permanent Representation of the Czech Republic to the EU, Brussels, 13 May 2010
BXL-10-02	Secretary, Energy Department, Permanent Representation of the Poland to the EU, Brussels, 11 May 2010
BXL-10-03	Energy Attaché, Permanent Representation of the Slovak Republic to the EU, Brussels, 13 May 2010
EUIN-08-02	Deputy Head of Cabinet, DG Social Affairs, European Commission, Brussels, 7 October 2008
EUIN-08-07	Detached National Expert, Energy Policy and Security of Supply Unit, DG Transport and Energy, European Commission, Brussels, 14 October 2008
EUIN-08-09	Member of Cabinet, DG Regional Policy, European Commission, Brussels, 4 December 2008
EUIN-09-11	Member of Cabinet, DG Education European Commission, Brussels, 10 March 2009
EXP-08-02	Research Fellow, The Centre for European Policy Studies, Brussels, 12 June 2008
EXP-08-05	Researcher, European Policy Centre, Brussels, 9 October 2008
EXP-08-06	Researcher, The Centre for European Policy Studies, Brussels, 14 October 2008
NCS-08-11	Slovak Member of the European Parliament, Brussels, 8 October 2008
NCS-08-20	Deputy Permanent Representative, Permanent Representation of the Slovak Republic to the EU, Brussels, 16 October 2008

**Table A1:** *(Continued)*

NCS-08-23	Slovak Member of the European Parliament, Brussels, 2 December 2008
NCS-09-31	Ambassador, Permanent Representation of the Poland to the EU, Brussels, 9 March 2009
NCS-09-38	Counsellor, Enlargement and Institutional Affairs, Permanent Representation of the Poland to the EU, Brussels, 11 March 2009
NCS-09-39	Permanent Representative, Permanent Representation of the Czech Republic to the EU, Brussels, 11 March 2009
NCS-09-42	First Secretary, Permanent Representation of the Czech Republic to the EU, Brussels, 11 March 2009
NCS-10-49	Senior Official, Permanent Representation of the Czech Republic to the EU, Brussels, 14 May 2010
NCS-10-50	Representative to the Political and Security Committee, Permanent Representation of the Czech Republic to the EU, Brussels, 23 May 2010
