



The future, the foreign and the public–private divide: Socio-political discourses around Skolkovo

Elana Wilson Rowe*

Norwegian Institute of International Affairs, Pb 8159 Dep, 0033 Oslo, Norway

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ABSTRACT

This article takes an in-depth look at the establishment of a technology and educational complex outside of Moscow dedicated to promoting innovation. The set of interrelated initiatives, which are referred to in this article as the ‘Skolkovo project’, were centerpieces of Medvedev’s much touted efforts to ‘modernize’ the Russian economy during his presidential period. While others have examined the Skolkovo project with a macroeconomic perspective and an eye towards predicting whether it (and Russia’s innovation policy more generally) can succeed, a different approach is taken here. Rather than evaluating Skolkovo’s viability, the aim is to identify elite socio-political discourses surrounding the construction of Skolkovo. How particular moments are navigated – for example, securing a balance between government and private actors in the Skolkovo project or seeking networks internationally – can be seen as illustrative of how broader challenges in Russian governance are being (or failing to be) addressed. The case study is based in a content analysis of 310 Skolkovo-related texts (interviews, political speeches, articles) published in the state-owned newspaper *Rossikaya Gazeta*.

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1. Introduction

The proliferation of efforts to ‘replicate’ Silicon Valley’s success – from Iran, to Russia, to the Ohio River valley – is a noteworthy trend. As Rosenberg argues in his study of these attempts, Silicon Valley has become a ‘symbol for the way forward...it is not enough to admire or envy Silicon Valley: countries that have any pretence of joining (or for

that matter remaining in) the ranks of the world’s advanced economies have no choice but to imitate it’ (Rosenberg, 2002, p. 1).

In this article, I take an in-depth look at one such project – the establishment of a technology and educational complex outside of Moscow, dedicated to promoting innovation. The set of interrelated initiatives, which are referred to in this article as the ‘Skolkovo project’, were centerpieces of Medvedev’s much touted efforts to ‘modernize’ the Russian economy during his presidential period. One might say that Medvedev, faced with the complexity of the economy, societal restrictions and the strictures of path dependency in realizing a modernist project, opted for ‘miniaturization’ (Scott, 1998). While historical modernizing leaders elsewhere have created model villages or model collective farms, the Russian leadership launched Skolkovo as a model of what a modern Russian economy ‘should’ look like.

* Tel.: +47 45004240.

E-mail address: ew@nupi.no.

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The Skolkovo complex, which includes the Skolkovo Innovation Center (a high-tech business incubator supported by the Skolkovo Foundation) and 2 educational institutions, is still under development and is frequently dismissed as a Potemkin village bound to fail. While others have examined the Skolkovo project with a macroeconomic perspective and an eye towards predicting whether it (and Russia's innovation policy more generally) can succeed, this article takes a different approach. Rather than evaluating Skolkovo's viability, the aim is to identify elite socio-political discourses surrounding the construction of Skolkovo. How particular moments are navigated – for example, securing a balance between government and private actors in the Skolkovo project or seeking networks internationally – can be seen as illustrative of how broader challenges in Russian governance are being (or failing to be) addressed.

The analysis in this article draws upon scholarly traditions in the history and philosophy of science (HPS)/science and technology studies (STS) and argues that a state's approach to science and to governance more broadly are mutually constituted phenomena.¹ In other words, how a state deals with questions of knowledge shores up and reinforces the approach to governance in that particular polity (and vice versa). This HPS/STS literature is reviewed briefly first, including both broader conceptual issues and studies on Soviet and Russian science relevant as backdrop for the Skolkovo project. Subsequently, we turn to the case study of socio-political discourses surrounding the Skolkovo project, which is grounded in an analysis of 310 media articles from state-owned *Rossiskaya Gazeta*. Three key themes in 'Skolkovo talk' are identified: 1) achieving balance between public and private steering of the project, 2) finding equilibrium between national and international influence and 3) envisioning the future of the project and, by extension, of Russia. The broader significance of these themes for the modernization project and state–science relations is highlighted in the conclusion.

2. Science and the state

In their examination of scientific debates in early modern England, Shapin and Schaffer famously asserted, 'solutions to the problem of knowledge are solutions to the problem of social order' (1985, p. 332). With these words, they were arguing for the broader significance of science studies. Their seminal book illustrated how approaches to science reflected broader socio-political trends and how science also supported or subverted approaches to social and political governance more broadly.

Shapin and Schaffer specify that science occupies the same 'terrain' as politics in three key ways. Firstly, scientific practitioners and their activities contribute to creating and maintaining the polity in which they operate. For example, the fact that the Soviet leadership was saturated with engineers and technical specialists may have propagated and sustained the state's traditions of social engineering and

rigid long-term planning. Secondly, the products of science become parts of the political activity of the state. An obvious example here, explored in detail by historians of Soviet science, is the role of nuclear weapons in maintaining a balance of power between the USA and the Soviet Union during the Cold War (Roberg, 1998). Thirdly, scientific endeavors are supported (financially and politically) and valued 'insofar as the state or its various agencies see a point in them' (Shapin & Schaffer, 1985, p. 339, see also p. 332). A greater push for commercial relevance of science (nanotechnology, innovation) is one clear, recent manifestation of this in Russia today (Connolly, 2013; Graham & Dezhina, 2008). These clear manifestations of the 'shared terrains' identified by Shapin and Schaffer suggest that seeking to understand broader political trends in Russia through the lens of science and knowledge projects is a fruitful and legitimate avenue for analysis, and the article takes its point of departure in this assertion.

2.1. Soviet science

As background for the Skolkovo case that follows and to further explore the science-politics 'terrains' identified above, we now turn to first Soviet science heritage and then current Russian science politics in greater detail. In the most recent comprehensive work on the Soviet/Russian science establishment, Graham and Dezhina pick up on this point about the overlapping terrains of politics and science. They argue that the Soviet system of science reflected the broader economic and political order of Soviet society, in that it was 'centralized and authoritarian' (Graham & Dezhina, 2008, p. 163). Although it is notoriously difficult to measure, the Soviet science establishment was also comparatively large, and represented a high cost to the Soviet state, with between 10% and 30% more scientists and engineers than the United States by the 1980s (Graham & Dezhina, 2008, p. 5). These researchers were distributed across three main locations of scientific activity: a university system devoted primarily to pedagogy (Dezhina, 2011), the Academy of Sciences system of research institutes, and research bodies within the ministries of industry and defence.

With the advent of post-war 'big science' challenges, like space exploration and atomic physics, there was a push to move from a system of science research that was narrowly organized by discipline to more integrative, large-scale research 'cities' (*naukogrady*). These research clusters – often built to be examples of the modern or even futuristic city – were based in the tradition of both scientific utopias and shaped by the frameworks and demands of Soviet political, economic and ideological developments (Josephson, 1997).

In describing one such 'city of science' built in Siberia, Akademgorodok, Paul R. Josephson points to the central yet precarious position that science held in the Soviet project. Although Akademgorodok was initially meant to be a place of free exchange and flow of ideas and received top political support for this from its political champion, Nikita Khrushchev, this 'city of science' saw its freedom curtailed in the Brezhnev era, with an increasing emphasis on applied research and the insistence that Soviet scientists

¹ See Jasanoff (2004) for a more detailed discussion and examples of the 'co-production' of scientific and political order.

distance themselves from work ‘tainted’ by western scientific or political thought’ (Josephson, 1997, p. xvii). The changing fate of Akademgorodok illustrates a key characteristic of the Soviet state’s relation to science more generally: an ‘ironic tension between the view of science as a supremely rational endeavor...and the insistence of many administrators, economic planners and scientists alike that science is inherently political since it must reflect broader social goals and cultural aspirations...’ (Josephson, 1997, p. xviii).

Khrushchev’s support for the Akademgorodok project, and for ‘big science’ more generally, grew from his first-hand impressions from a trip to the United States in 1959. The Soviet research centers of Troitsk, Dubna, Puschchino and Akademgorodok were, in part, inspired by his visits to American universities which he ‘took to be cities of science’ (Josephson, 1997, p. 9). This all has a certain parallel to Medvedev’s own 2009 visit to Silicon Valley, which gave form and impetus to the Skolkovo project (Zavrzhin & Kuz’mín, 2010a, 2010b). As we shall see below, these modernistic science cities serve in part a model for Skolkovo, but also represent a heritage from which Skolkovo proponents actively attempt to distance themselves.

2.2. Science in the post-Soviet period

To bring us swiftly up to the context in which Skolkovo has been proposed and partially realized, a brief review of the fate of the Soviet science establishment in the intervening 20 years since the Soviet collapse is necessary. The established science system of the USSR was challenged seriously in the immediate post-Soviet period. The federal budget for science was reduced by nearly 80% and a dramatic out-migration of talented scientists took place (Graham & Dezhina, 2008, p. vii; Gerber & Yarsike Ball, 2002, p. 185). Although the three main pillars of Russian science (universities, Academy of Science system, and industrial/defence research establishment) remained relatively unchanged in their structure, Russian scientists found themselves navigating a sea-change in terms of the amount of funding available and how it was to be acquired (Graham & Dezhina, 2008).

Scholars of Russian science argue that in many ways Russian science has ‘recovered’ from this post-Soviet upheaval and that the brain-drain of scientists has been reduced dramatically (Gerber & Yarsike Ball, 2002; Graham & Dezhina, 2008). However, little research has been done on the broader political significance of state–science relations in post-Soviet Russia. The question, then, is what to make of the Soviet past in shaping the Skolkovo present.

It is clear from the preceding sub-section that Soviet science–state relations were complicated and fraught with difficulties. The intensity of the interaction and the expectations the state had of science and scientists may have been especially pronounced in the Soviet Union, given the unique nature of the Soviet project with its pursuit of independent global dominance in all fields (from technology to resource development) and the highly centralized and authoritarian political system. As Graham (1993, p. 158) puts it, the relationship between science and political authority in the Soviet Union was characterized by drama in

large part because of the ‘obvious necessity for a modernizing state to rely on the technical intelligentsia to achieve its goals. But neither the tsarist nor the Soviet government was willing to accept the full political implications of this reliance’. The relationship between science and politics in the Soviet Union did not settle and fade into the unquestioned background as it has done in many other countries (evidenced by our difficulty in conceptualizing science as ‘political’), but rather remained an issue of periodically intense political focus.

While the connection between past and present should not be automatically assumed, policymakers and publics tend to be parsimonious in their interpretations. The number of rhetorical angles available is normally constrained (but not delimited) by pre-existing institutional and discursive commitments operating at group and individual levels (Krasner, 1988; Roe, 1991). On the other hand, debates in social science about the relationship between structure and agency remind us not to ignore the capacity of individual and collective actors to make fresh choices and even seek to change the rules of the game (Abbott, 1995; Wimmer, 2002). In sum, irrespective of the level of path dependency we ascribe between the past and the present in today’s Russia, it is this weighty and interesting Soviet heritage that serves as a referential backdrop for the Skolkovo project. As we shall see below, Skolkovo actors actively engage with this heritage, either to draw upon its glory or to distinguish their new project from any predecessor.

3. Skolkovo: discourses on the role of the state, the future and the foreign

In many ways, the Skolkovo project was the epitome of Medvedev’s modernization ‘campaign’. The idea of modernization has deep historical roots in Russia – from Peter the Great’s dream of a Europeanized Russia to the Soviet attempt at a leap from a peasant society to an urban industrial one. Under Medvedev’s presidency (2008–2012), the notion of modernization gained new currency in Russian politics. In autumn 2009, Medvedev published a liberal manifesto, *Forward Russia!* (Medvedev 2009). Its centerpiece was the idea that Russia had been increasingly lagging behind developed countries in science, technology and economics due to corruption and dependency on natural resources.

What modernization was actually supposed to mean as a vision for Russia’s future and as an engine for economic, social and political change remained ambiguous. In particular, the question of whether modernization was also to include a liberalization of Russia’s politics was at one point hotly contested, although optimism on that point has largely faded (Devyatkov & Makarychev, 2012; Malinova, 2012; Marganiya, 2010; Zaostrovtssev, 2010). As the case study in this section shows, the Skolkovo project itself embodies the ambiguities and aspirations of the modernization project more broadly.

The Skolkovo project was launched in Medvedev’s 2009 address to the Federal Assembly. Conceptual work and attending legislation then proceeded at what was proudly described by Kremlin top aide Arkady Dvorkovich as a

'record fast' pace (Emel'yanenkov, 2010a), with a number of concessions meant to address constraints to innovation in Russia. A laundry list of obstacles to innovation-based economic development includes: unfavorable legal and bureaucratic environment around imports/exports, unfavorable taxation regime, low investment in research and development (R&D), weakly developed property and intellectual rights, low domestic demand for the products of innovation, lack of coordination between government bodies, poor infrastructure and low levels of access to finance (Connolly, 2011; Dezhina, 2011; Klochikhin, 2012; Spiesberger, 2011). The *Rossiskaya Gazeta* (RG) coverage analyzed below included voices, especially from scientific establishments and private business associations, concerned about the feasibility of the project because of these existing constraints (Fyodorov, 2010; Kalysheva, 2011a, 2011b; Petrov, 2010).

In seeking to address these challenges, the Skolkovo enthusiasts work included garnering substantial state funding and developing and gaining legislative approval for a number a number of key privileges for Skolkovo actors. Examples of these concessions are tax exemptions, simplified technical regulations, special sanitary and fire safety norms, special cooperation agreements (with the Ministry of Interior, Federal Migration Service, Federal Tax service, Federal Customs Service, Federal Patent Office), creation of new R&D centers and eased processes for hiring foreign specialists (Dezhina, 2011, 98). These concessions generated a lot of coverage in RG (RG, 2010a on tax incentives; Kukol, 2010a; RG., 2010b on the Skolkovo land grant; RG., 2010c; RG, 2010d; Kukol, 2010b on the relaxed visa regime).

The extent to which this massive funding and set of privileges will be enough for Skolkovo firms to overcome the challenges listed above is an important question for research. The case study presented in this article, however, takes a different tack and sees the importance of the Skolkovo project not in whether it succeeds or fails. Given the interlinkages between science and politics explored above (both conceptually and in the Soviet Union and Russia), the aim of the case study is to identify and analyze the socio-political discourses that have surrounded (and even been challenged by) the Skolkovo project. In other words, what can Skolkovo tell us about discourses of innovation and science as well as the wider political challenges and currents in Russia? After a brief note on methods, we turn to the key themes identified in the context of the media study, which are as follows: foreigners and foreign experience in Skolkovo, navigating the public-private divide, and visions for the future of Russia.

3.1. Methods

This study is based in a discursive and quantitative analysis of 310 newspaper articles that were tagged as 'Skolkovo-related' on the website of a government-owned newspaper, *Rossiskaya Gazeta* (date range: 2009–2012).² In addition to standard journalistic fare, *Rossiskaya Gazeta*

publishes information on behalf of the Russian government, like committee lists and new legislation, and also regularly prints extensive interviews with government actors. In this way, the newspaper is oriented towards readers who find such information of interest or use, for example those who are employed in or intersect with Russian government sectors.

As this chapter aims to trace the socio-political discourses around Skolkovo as propagated by Russia's political elite, rather than, say, reflecting the breadth of Russian discourses on Skolkovo, the official and relatively conservative status of the newspaper is an advantage for the analysis. The arguments and voices included in its pages are likely to be oriented towards and considered acceptable by officialdom. Furthermore, limiting the analysis to one, well-chosen media source allowed for a relevant and large sample, yet also represented a critical delimitation. This delimitation ensured that 'analytical cherry-picking' in assembling the sample was avoided (e.g. as opposed to casting a wide net to many news sources yet only choosing statements that are in line with pre-existing prejudices/expectations). The entire universe of statements about Skolkovo in RG had to thus be considered in the analysis.

The methodological approach was contextualist and explorative, in that I was creating the thematic tags and identifying topics of importance from the empirical material provided by the case study rather than taking a particular theory or hypothesis as the analytical starting point (Mjøset, 2009). After an initial read of all articles, the three themes identified below stood out as especially dominant topics within the media coverage. In a subsequent re-reading, the content was coded according to the three themes to ensure that all statements relating to these rather open topics would be considered in the analysis. Specific factors relating to international and domestic cooperation agreements were recorded, forming the basis of the two numbers-based figures below (presenting findings relating to the public/private and national/domestic divides in the Skolkovo project). The factors recorded were *who* was representing Skolkovo in a given networking event or agreement (for example, at the preparation or signing of a memorandum of understanding) and whether the network or agreement involved primarily *domestic* actors or *international* actors.

3.2. Foreigners and foreign experience in Skolkovo?

As Rosenberg (2002) explores in his study of 'new' Silicon Valleys around the world, Silicon Valley is an amorphous idea. While the esthetic of glassy, modern office buildings and the presence of a few multinationals and few government research institutes are easy enough to replicate and the problems of favorable tax framework, existence of venture capital and a skilled workforce are not insurmountable, there is still something ineffable about the 'basic chemistry' and how these pieces fit together in a way to achieve success (Rosenberg, 2002, p. 2). Clearly, any successful project in any new political setting would need to consider and relate to the experience of other states. This section explores the ambitions inspired and tensions introduced by foreign experience in the Skolkovo project.

² See www.rg.ru/sujet/4064/index.html for an overview of the Skolkovo tagged articles.

Certainly, Russian actors were cautious about the notion of replicating Silicon Valley. During a visit to Silicon Valley – from which he twittered his first ‘tweet’ and was the first Russian to gain possession of an iPhone 4 – then President Medvedev put it this way: ‘No one is planning on copying Silicon Valley, because that is truly impossible. But some principles would be nice to apply to Russia...The most important is that our idea about Skolkovo preserves the spirit that exists here’ (in *Zavrazhin & Kuz'min, 2010a*). At the same time, he emphasized that there was to be a learning curve: ‘We are not afraid to learn. We have to acknowledge that in many ways we have fallen behind’ (in *Zavrazhin & Kuz'min, 2010b*).

Medvedev also worked to promote a vision of Skolkovo as a place where the categories of national and international are effectively elided and rendered irrelevant, in which it would not matter whose experiences were used and talents employed. Medvedev argued: ‘This is not an effort to copy the experience of Silicon Valley...our task is broader. The formation of conditions attractive to scientists, engineers, construction workers, programmers and also establishing a stimuli for cooperative projects with business managers and financiers...We won't distinguish between who is ‘ours’ and who is an ‘outsider’ (in *Emel'yanenkov, 2010a*).

Then chief Kremlin ideologist Vladislav Surkov side-stepped the tricky issue about the adoption of foreign experience this way: ‘We want to establish at Skolkovo a new atmosphere – and this is not to insult or go against anyone in Russia. This is a blank page project, unique like Silicon Valley in the USA and Shanghai in China’ (in *Zakatnova, 2011*). Asserting that the Skolkovo project was something fundamentally new was a response to a critical discussion in the Duma about Skolkovo remaking the wheel and overlapping with existing science cities (an issue of how Skolkovo relates to the past to which we will return below). Surkov later felt it necessary to address complaints about foreign involvement at Skolkovo more directly, refuting the logic of these criticisms: ‘We will not be operating here with a false concept of patriotism. In my view, to be a patriot today is to wish for as many foreigners as possible working in Russia’ (in *Shkel', 2010a*).

Key Skolkovo actors also engaged in this debate about foreigners and foreign experience in the project, evidencing both an awareness of the political terrain around the issue. Head of the Skolkovo Fund, Russian oligarch Viktor Vekselberg, in describing Skolkovo Innovation Centre's educational cooperation with MIT, felt it necessary to underline that ‘from the very outset, we have insisted that this will be a Russian university with the possibility of active cooperation with specialists from other Russian institutes of higher education. Russia has a strong scientific tradition and Americans will not be in key posts in the running of the institute’ (in *Kalysheva, 2011a, 2011b*).

At the same time, Skolkovo actors frequently and proudly emphasized the international nature of the project. One Skolkovo head stated plainly: ‘We have two languages at Skolkovo – English and Russian. And precisely in that order – speaking English is an absolute condition for participation in the Skolkovo project’ (in *Arganovich, 2011*; see also *Gerasimenko, 2010*; *Roze, 2012* on the international nature of science). The appointment of foreigners

also attracted (largely positive) attention, with appointments of international innovation stars such as Nobel Laureate Roger Kongberg to the Skolkovo Scientific Board (*RG, 2010e*) and Craig Barrett, former CEO of Intel (*RG, 2010f*), to a top position in the Skolkovo Foundation and Innovation Centre. Furthermore, as *Fig. 1* shows, networking activity with international actors certainly outweighed domestic networking activity.

An interesting aspect of the domestic agreements reported by RG is that they were nearly absent at the start of the project (2009) and became increasingly prominent in the years thereafter. This likely has to do with domestic backlash against the international nature of the project and an increasingly obvious need to keep disgruntled domestic stakeholders on board. For example, at a regional scientific meeting in St. Petersburg, the head of Mordovia (Nikolai Merushkin) noted that Skolkovo was done ‘without any diplomacy...[Moscow] practically didn't consult’ with regional government on Skolkovo issues (in *Emel'yanenkov, 2010b*, see also *Titov, 2010*). The uptick in domestic agreements shows that a positive reputation for Skolkovo within Russia's borders was also deemed important and pursued by Skolkovo's proponents.

The tension around foreign experience (and foreign talent) in the Skolkovo project is a prominent one. Skolkovo's proponents attempted to soften the international image of the project through engagement with domestic audiences and distancing the project from international experience, and worked to refute the underlying logic of such criticisms. This skepticism towards the international relates to the practical difficulties of copying any kind of political or economic experience in an entirely new location, but also likely to the potential political pitfall of appearing to wholeheartedly embrace a foreign economic model. While national pride or patriotism may make foreign models a touchy case in many countries, this skepticism may be particularly pronounced in Russia, where many Russian politicians and citizens felt let down by models of ‘Western’ democracy and markets after the tumultuous 1990s. Furthermore, and despite the international nature of much of the scientific endeavor, we see that the issue of national versus international science, which was prominent during the Soviet period (*Josephson, 1997*) and is discussed above, continues to be a salient one in Russian policy circles (see also *Wilson Rowe, 2013*).

3.3. Navigating the public-private divide

One could also argue that the question of foreign versus domestic experience in shaping the Skolkovo project has to do with the ‘identity’ of the project or how the project was meant to be perceived by outsiders and experienced by those involved in Skolkovo. Another key point of this identity – and yet another dichotomy – is the question of whether the project is a state or private endeavor. The vast majority of Skolkovo's funding comes from governmental budget lines, yet governmental actors actively worked to promote the ‘private’ sector identity of the project. Drawing a line between business and the state seems to have been important for those involved.

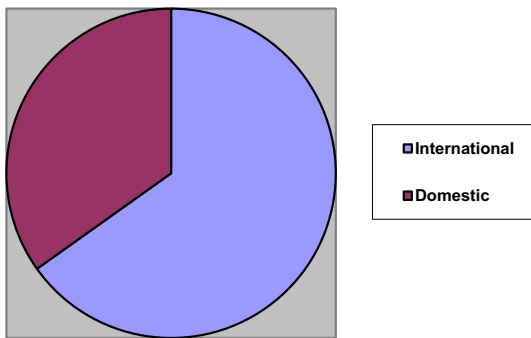


Fig. 1. Relationship between number of domestic networking meetings/agreements (#) and international meetings/agreements (#) carried out by Skolkovo representatives.

For example, in the early days of the project, Surkov was clear about who should head the Skolkovo fund, stating that ‘we need a businessman’ (RG, 2010g). The businessman appointed turned out to be the Russian oligarch Victor Vekselberg, who also pursued this line of concern about delineating between Skolkovo’s business and governmental status, albeit with a sense of humor about the issue. For example, Medvedev and Vekselberg had this exchange in 2012 while evaluating the first year of Skolkovo’s activity (in Kuz’min, 2010):

Medvedev: On the whole, it isn’t going badly. Skolkovo officials are working well.

Vekselberg: Dmitry Anatolievich, a request. Don’t call us officials. We struggle against this.

Medvedev (smiling): You are not officials. You are representatives of a non-commercial organization.

Medvedev also later underlined that a key to the success of the Skolkovo project will depend on government knowing when to withdraw: ‘I underline that it is very important for the government in this issue to determine when to drop this work, when to leave this field so that private business feels peaceful and comfortable’ (in Kuz’min, 2011a).

Both top political leaders (Medvedev, Putin, and governmental ministers) and Skolkovo’s own set of representatives have been active in promoting the project to potential international and domestic partners. In an effort to trace the balance between state and private sector intervention in this public and outwardly oriented networking activity, the ‘lead’ person in a networking activity was identified as either private sector or state sector.

As we can see in Fig. 2, private actors clearly outweighed state actors in this representative function. Of course, how decisions were made regarding Skolkovo and the balance of power or degree of collaboration between state and private actors must remain in the realm of speculation. However, what we can take from this figure is that it was important to give Skolkovo top leadership support while maintaining a largely private-sector outward face to the project. This relates to another aspect of Skolkovo that key state actors, for example Medvedev and then Kremlin aide Arkady Dvorkovich, were at pains to stress – the centrality of values

of openness and transparency in the Skolkovo project. Medvedev put it this way. ‘Skolkovo – it’s not a closed get-together. It is a public project, around which should develop our entire modernization direction...If we achieve this, the Skolkovo effect will be colossal’ (in Kuz’min, 2011b; see Sidibe, 2011 for Dvorkovich’s take).

While Putin’s presidencies were marked by an effort to regain state control of the ‘commanding heights of the economy’, particularly in the energy sector, state actors involved in Skolkovo demonstrated awareness of the challenges involved in this aspiration to control. Given the tricky relations that Russia’s brand of state capitalism entails and the fears that it has fostered amongst foreign investors, Skolkovo actors seem to realize that a highly interventionist state seemed at odds with the vision of a new Silicon Valley outside of Moscow. Values of openness and transparency – and the government ‘leaving the field’ at some point – were seen as valuable and important techniques for attracting private sector investment in the project. As we shall see in the third and final discursive theme identified below, the Skolkovo project may have been a roundabout way of talking of the importance of these values for Russia’s future development as well.

3.4. A city of the future – and a future for Russia?

Modernization projects tend to be, fundamentally, about the future. They are about departing from some backward present and marching towards a brighter tomorrow (Scott, 1998). The amount of attention paid to this brighter tomorrow was a striking aspect of how the Skolkovo project was presented in the pages of RG. Descriptions of Skolkovo were saturated with a language of ‘green’, ‘modern’ and ‘future.’ This applied to nearly everything from the housing that would be built around Skolkovo (ecological ‘smart’ houses from Denmark), through how recycling would be done (based on Swedish experience) to the way of life and persons that will be fostered there.

In many ways, a pleasant, modern infrastructure was seen as fundamental to attracting the kind of human capital that the Skolkovo project required. For example, Viktor Vekselberg, Russian businessman and head of the Skolkovo Fund, argued that Skolkovo will be ‘a city that is comfortable for work, life and relaxation – an example of the city of the future’ (in Blagoveshenskiy, 2010). Vice President of the Skolkovo Fund, Stanislav Naumov, forwards a vision of not only Skolkovo’s infrastructure but also its residents (in Zykova, 2012):

Sometimes I look into the eyes of a person and I understand that he will work at Skolkovo...[Who belongs in Skolkovo?] Two unique friendly faces. There is the 50 year old man in jeans from the Vysotsky generation, an established doctor of science who has a nice car and who has not left to work abroad...Skolkovo kindergartens will be the best, so that grandmas can bring their grandsons and bring them up there. I’m not joking. The second type of Skolkovets is a young person with a sense of their own worth...This person clearly understands that he could realize himself in any corner of the world, but wants to do this in Russia.

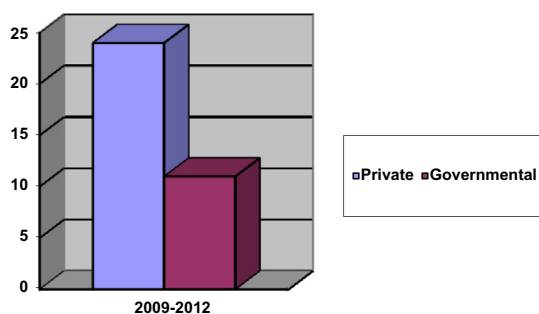


Fig. 2. Agreements or discussions of cooperation launched around Skolkovo by private and public actors.

Chief of Medvedev's Presidential Administration Sergei Naryshkin also made a clear link between creativity and a certain kind of utopian, ecological environment, stating that Skolkovo will attract: 'talented people, scientists, engineers – there is a lot of human capital around which the government places hope for achieving an innovative development path. These people do not want to live in industrial cities with a degraded ecology...they need a different environment, different cultural-informational spaces' (in [Zykova & Shadrina, 2010](#)). Skolkovo is to be a 'garden city' ([Eml'yanenkov, 2011](#)), and head of Skolkovo Fund Viktor Vekselberg underlined that the Skolkovo buildings will be of the 'highest caliber of green standards' (in [RG., 2012](#)).

Making Skolkovo a city of the future also, unsurprisingly, involves distinguishing it from the past. Historically, Soviet science-cities were also realized according to a particular modernistic esthetic with the city layout meant to facilitate fruitful scientific exchange ([Josephson, 1997](#)). In other words, these science cities too were meant to be cities of the future. The Skolkovo project's utopian vision of the new city of innovation that is to be built shares much with this Soviet heritage. However, the tradition of 'science cities' is also an historical element from which Skolkovo proponents have actively distanced themselves and the project.

Those involved in Skolkovo were at pains to underline that Skolkovo is a very different project from the traditional 'science city' built during the Soviet period. Vladislav Surkov put it this way (in [Omel'chenko, 2010](#)):

We have lovely scientific centers that were established back in the Soviet period in Siberia and around Moscow and in many other regions. There are lovely specialists working there. But our task is not to do superficial upgrades (*evroremont*) on our Soviet home, our task is to build a new house with a new economy. And for this sometimes it is useful to start from scratch.

An interview with three Skolkovo tops (Naumov, Sitnikov and Bel'tyukov) also spoke to this emphasis on the future and retreat from the past. Bel'tyukov noted 'we won't be working on something or another in our little garden, not showing it to anyone and not interacting... We have not only tried this once and it didn't work so well' (in [Panina, 2011](#)) Naumov seconded this point, stating, 'The government is

still putting money into our science cities that were established after the second world war in keeping with particular historical moments' tasks. We need to look for new models and Skolkovo is one of them' (in [Panina, 2011](#)). In other words, the emphasis is on the future and weight of the past (in this case, the Soviet science cities) is something that Skolkovo actors actively tried to shrug off.

The Skolkovo project seems to have been one vehicle through which Russia's top leaders, especially then President Medvedev, also promoted a vision of a particular future for Russia. In an early speech about the establishment of Skolkovo, Medvedev argued, 'flexibility and adaptability are the words that have become more popular than stability and predictability. That does not make everyone happy, but the change will continue. We are not going to go backwards to past orders or models of development' (in [Kuz'min & Kosheev, 2010](#)). Medvedev later made his point more clearly, underlining that Skolkovo was more than innovation: 'I want Skolkovo to be an ideology...If we achieve this, the Skolkovo effect will be colossal' (in [Kuz'min, 2011b](#)). Surkov notes that Skolkovo is a project but also a potentially 'powerful social movement' (in [Kukol, 2010c](#)). To take another example, Tatiana Yakovleva, a United Russia Duma representative, put it this way after the Duma approved the Law on Skolkovo (in [Shkel', 2010b](#)): 'For contemporary Russia, this is without exaggeration the project of the century...a catalyzer...it will not only be a brand for modernization development but will also lead the country into a new orbit...allowing us to return to the avant garde.' Given that one of the Putin regime's most important sources of legitimacy has been that of providing for economic and political stability, the statements made about the significance of the Skolkovo project for Russia more broadly are striking.

Politicians and policy actors seemed to be talking about choices for all of Russia when they spoke about the future of Skolkovo, perhaps as a small nod towards the more open political system and the political modernization that remained conspicuously absent from modernization rhetoric of the time. At the same time, the change and 'colossal effect' that the Skolkovo project was said to possibly bring about remain somewhat unspecified. This shores up the observation that talking about modernization was a way of talking about change without promising anything in specific (and in that way it shared characteristics with most kinds of political slogans) ([Øverland, 2011](#)).

4. Conclusions

This article has examined socio-political discourses surrounding the Skolkovo project, as reflected in the pages of the state-owned newspaper *Rossiskaya Gazeta*. A context-based analysis of these 310 texts (interviews, political speeches, articles) revealed that there were three main themes or issues that attracted the greatest amount of discursive space. These were how to achieve the right balance between foreign and domestic experience and expertise, finding a private-sector face for a primarily state-funded and inspired endeavor and building a city of the future (that was distinguishable from the historical Soviet cities of the future). All of these themes also link up to the

wider challenges facing Russia that Medvedev's modernization campaign was meant to highlight and address. This underlines the point made at the beginning of the article about the importance of seeing how a state's approach to science and to governance are intertwined and actually occupy the same socio-political terrain.

Much of the modernization discourse was championed by then President Dmitry Medvedev, although the problems behind the modernization drive are well-acknowledged in Russian policy circles and key strategic documents. The choreographed switching of political roles effectuated by Medvedev and Putin (between Prime Minister and Presidential posts) in 2012 certainly dampened the hopes of analysts who wanted to see Medvedev as an independent, influential and more progressive political force in Russia. On the other hand, the move also demonstrated that Medvedev is an established and loyal member of Putin's political elite, which in some ways renders the modernization rhetoric of Medvedev's presidential period more interesting. Rather than the pet project of a political cowboy, Medvedev's modernization rhetoric may have been a controlled experiment of the Putin-Medvedev political team with Medvedev as a believable face to front the initiative. All this suggests that there is good reason to analyze the Skolkovo project not only for its import as a concrete project in innovation and modernization, but also as a location in which central socio-political discourses are forged, contested or reinforced.

While future research should address and analyze the causes of Skolkovo's eventual success or failure, the discourses around Skolkovo certainly show how Russia's challenges are understood by key actors. They are aware that there is a tension around questions of foreign expertise and government involvement in the economy – and attempt to see beyond these issues by envisioning a utopian future. Such political discourses about the future should not be simply dismissed as empty talk. Despite daunting political and economic institutional constraints, and the question of political commitment needed to achieve such a brighter tomorrow, Skolkovo and modernization rhetoric and visions of the future can still tell us quite a bit about Russia. As Lowenthal (1995) puts it: 'The nostalgic past and the hopeful future both help to redress today's disappointments and shortcomings; they mirror what we praise and reverse what we condemn in the present.'

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