

“BE SMART, AND AGE WON'T MATTER”

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Interview with **Dmitry Vasilenko**
Held by **Irina Mironova**



Abstract:

Conferences, in the most general sense, are needed for knowledge exchange, networking, professional development, staying updated, testing your research and receiving feedback from peers, as well as inspiration. Of course, all of this is relevant for conferences in the field of energy research as well. In addition, a conference is a platform for dialogue for various participants of the energy markets, and it is extremely important to preserve dialogue when all channels of communication between Russia and the West are being cut off. We usually imagine a conference as a flow of speakers and topics, but behind every conference there is an idea, a history and people. Today, we will discuss the idea, history and people behind the “Energetika XXI” conference with its organiser and founder Dmitry Vasilenko. Dmitry is the Vice-Rector at the Saint Petersburg State University of Economics (UNECON). The interview was held by Irina Mironova.

Keywords: conferences, “Energetika XXI”, knowledge exchange, networking, professional development

«Думай головой, а возраст не важен»

Аннотация: Конференции в самом общем смысле нужны для того, чтобы обмениваться знаниями, расширять сеть знакомств, развиваться профессионально, вдохновляться. Конференции, в том числе и конференции в сфере энергетических исследований, помогают нам оставаться в курсе событий, тестировать результаты своих исследований и получать обратную связь от коллег. Кроме того, конференция – это площадка для диалога между участниками энергетических рынков. Сегодня, когда все каналы коммуникации между Россией и Западом практически перекрыты, крайне важно сохранять оставшиеся возможности для диалога. Конференция «Энергетика XXI» – пример такой возможности. Обычно мы представляем себе конференцию как некий набор спикеров и тем, но важно помнить, что за каждой конференцией стоят люди, идеи и история. Вот об этом мы и поговорили с организатором и основателем «Энергетики» Дмитрием Василенко, проректором Санкт-Петербургского государственного экономического университета. Интервью провела Ирина Миронова.

Ключевые слова: конференции, нетворкинг, обмен знаниями, профессиональное развитие, «Энергетика XXI»

Irina Mironova: *Today, we are exploring the “Energetika XXI” conference with Dmitry Vasilenko, Vice-Rector of Saint Petersburg State University of Economics. Dima, could you please share with us how it all began? When did the conference start, and what was the initial idea behind it? I understand this conference is your brainchild. How did the concept originate and how was it first brought to life?*

Dmitry Vasilenko: The inaugural “Energetika XXI” conference took place in 2008, and by 2023, we celebrated our sixteenth edition. The idea originated during a visit from Mr. Alexey Miller, CEO of Gazprom and our Alumnus ‘84, who has a strong affinity for our university. During one of his annual visits, he posed a question to our rector about organising an energy conference with a distinct economic focus,

unlike the technical conferences prevalent at that time. This conversation, captured in a photo featuring Mr. Miller, Dr. Blekhtsin, Miller's academic advisor, our rector and myself with much more hair, marked the inception.



UNECON's Rector I. Maksimtsev, Gazprom's CEO A. Miller, Dr. Blekhtsin (A. Miller's Academic Advisor) and D. Vasilenko

Initially, I was puzzled by my selection to spearhead this effort. The logical explanation lies in my dissertation on the Algerian-Russian gas cartel and my background in international management, making me a suitable choice for running an international conference.

The conference's evolution saw early impractical ideas like hosting it at the palaces and museum premises and university-served meals transition to more pragmatic standards. This included selecting neutral venues with top-tier service in hotels, ensuring impeccable organisation, which became our hallmark.

In its nascent years, the conference attracted a diverse array of participants, from esteemed experts to emerging voices. Over time, it evolved into a more expert-focused gathering.

Irina: So, does that mean you are a Gazprom conference?

Dmitry: The conference is primarily funded by Gazprom. While other sponsors, such as Lukoil and Integra, have been involved in the past, Gazprom eventually took over the majority of the funding. However, Gazprom does not dictate the conference's topics or speakers. While they have the right to send their main speaker or other representatives, they do not interfere into discussion of topics. This autonomy in planning has been greatly appreciated.

Irina: How have the conference's themes evolved?

Dmitry: Initially, our focus was on the economics of energy, despite not having a dedicated program at the university. As early as 2008, Gazprom, Integra, and even Lukoil expressed interest in establishing a double degree program with a reputable university. While exploring various options, including Columbia, MIT, Grenoble, Paris Dauphine and Oxford, we expanded our network of contacts, which later influenced the conference's program content and participant selection.

Irina: Could you tell us more about Ralf Dickel, "Energetika 21" co-organiser? I'm quite interested, having interned under Ralf during my master's studies and later reconnecting professionally when he began visiting St. Petersburg regularly.

Dmitry: I first met Ralf through a series of connections. The renowned expert and professor Manfred Hafner had visited our university multiple times, even before the inception of the "Energetika" conference. Around 2011, he invited us to a major seminar in ERI RAS, where what I call the 'usual suspects' – people who later became regular participants in our conference – were present. There, I met Professor Andrey Konoplyanik. Each year, we extended invitations to Prof. Konoplyanik for "Energetika", and each year, he politely declined. He once again declined my invitation, but suggested someone who might find our conferences interesting. That's how I came to know Ralf Dickel who was concluding his tenure at the Energy Charter.

That was the beginning of a beautiful friendship. Initially, Ralf joined us as a speaker – a common pathway for newcomers in our traditional 'traveling circus'. They observe, integrate, and over time, become regular contributors. We have what I call a 'circle of friends of Energetika' who consistently engage with us. For the first couple of years, Ralf attended as a participant. Then came year 2014, which prompted a significant exodus of experts from our conference. The leading British expert was the first to withdraw, citing impending sanctions affecting those engaged with Russia's energy sector. It was understandable; many other European experts also withdrew at the last moment, despite already having their travel arrangements covered, with reasons ranging from 'I've broken my leg' to 'I've broken my arm', reminiscent of my students' excuses. It was a rather subdued conference with minimal international participation. Subsequently, Gazprom ceased attending European events as a responsive measure. Both me and Ralf were upset about the matter during the event and thus we decided to make "Energetika" great again together. Since 2015, Ralf and I have co-organised the conference.

Mr. James Ball and Mr. Petter Nore later joined us, showing interest in program development and speaker engagement. Over time, our team solidified and continues to operate, albeit with some members preferring to remain behind the scenes. This is how the conference has evolved into its present form.

Irina: Has the format always been the same?

Dmitry: In 2020, we conceptualized 'Energetika Light', intended for a small gathering of up to forty experts outdoors during the summer, focusing solely on discussion panels tackling current, pressing topics. This encapsulates the conference spirit: open, unrestricted dialogue on pertinent issues.

COVID-19 thwarted these plans, delaying its launch to 2022, although the idea garnered interest from experts.

But in 2022, we did not get to it due to the well-known circumstances.

Irina: *How did you approach the conference organisation in 2022?*

Dmitry: The immediate challenge was how to proceed given the increasing difficulty of hosting a conference with broad European participation in Russia. We recognised the need to relocate.

Irina: *Does Europe remain a primary partner?*

Dmitry: Yes, naturally. Given Russia's role as an energy supplier and Europe as the primary buyer, our close connection with Europe is pivotal. By 2022, we deliberated on our next steps, opting not to turn southeast towards China, Southeast Asia, or ASEAN initially. This strategic decision may evolve in the future.

Our discussions with friends of "Energetika" underscored the importance of maintaining cooperation channels, ensuring seamless resumption post-challenges. Energy serves as a key platform for sustaining these dialogues, built over time and delicate to preserve.

Irina: *How has the balance between interim seminars and the main conference changed for you? Previously, there were small seminars held between the main conferences, and I participated in them both before the current crisis and after 2022. As a participant, I certainly notice a significant difference between what was in Copenhagen about five years ago and what was happening in Baku or Almaty in 2022–2023. From an organizer's perspective, how has the balance between these seminars and the main conferences changed?*

Dmitry: The balance has changed radically. Essentially, all serious matters have been moved outside the main conference.

Regarding the seminars, it depends on what you compare them to. The seminar in Copenhagen was basically an exception; it was one of the most serious ones we did. We had simpler seminars as well, to be straightforward.

The difference here lies more in the host's readiness and partly in academic culture. It is very important that the partner hosting the event wants to utilise the seminar for their benefit. That is a key point. The partner needs to understand very well what they've received as an event, who the audience is, and what should be extracted from the event. In Bishkek, we had great involvement of local partners with clear articulation of research and consulting needs. Therefore, in my opinion, the result was more systemic and impressive. In Almaty, there was significant attention from the audience, especially in February 2023. Many attendees came from engineering circles and small energy companies.

Additionally, we have also changed the themes. Previously, for the plenary session, we took three or four outlooks from different expert centers, they presented them, and we criticised and discussed what did not come true last year. It was a lively and interesting discussion. We also discussed markets, transportation (especially gas transportation), and sales, albeit trying to push geopolitics a bit to the side.

In 2022, we began discussing issues that remain relevant for all countries, regardless of strained relations. These are primarily issues of compliance and implementation of the Paris Agreement and cooperation in areas where it is still possible. We do not refuse to discuss the role of natural gas, but we understand that gas should be discussed in conjunction with hydrogen. In its pure form, natural gas will play its role, but now is not the time to discuss that role.

In 2023, several topics at the conference and seminars drew the most interest from the audience.

The first one is hydrogen, as mentioned. We have been dealing with this topic for the past six years. The first time we brought hydrogen to the conference, people openly laughed at us, saying, "fools, what hydrogen". But each year, it became less trendy and more relevant. Now, everyone wants to deal with hydrogen, even those who should focus on coal. In Central Asia, in particular, this direction is of great interest.

The second topic is the decarbonisation of the transport sector. This is a significant project for us, especially with Gazprom's focus on natural gas as a motor fuel. UNECON is heavily involved in transportation decarbonisation research itself.

The third is the decarbonisation of the heating sector and hence municipal focus. For example, the session you moderated referred to this context. The energy efficiency of buildings and structures is of great interest to the public, especially in Kazakhstan. In Almaty, we had a whole session devoted to municipal heating, with several reports specifically on energy efficiency initiatives. This is a very topical issue for all post-Soviet countries.

In the last two years, we have actively discussed cooperation with Central Asia in a broad sense – Russia and the five countries. Colleagues react extremely sensitively to any mention of problems in their relations. This indicates that these problems exist and that they are painful. Russia will use this region to transfer resources. Transport corridors will be developed through Central Asia to the south or east. In any case, these countries need to change. They can only change together because they have been very interdependent since Soviet times. Practice has shown that division has not led to anything good. I mean, not in a political context of course, but in an energy context – i.e. the disruption of the energy ring.

Irina: *What are the key takeaways from the conference held in early December 2023 (the 16th Energetika Conference in St. Petersburg)?*

Dmitry: I always start every "Energetika" event with: "We didn't come here to teach you how to live. We bring the best cases, the best practices on the table". Our regular contributors have been addressing various topics from municipal heating to electric vehicles and through the years their presentations have evolved. You can trace how false and good decisions were taken and what consequences they led to. Conferences allow participants to see how others handle

things and try to correct similar situations in their practices. That is the first takeaway.

Secondly, no matter what we are talking about now, international cooperation will be needed. I ask everyone: “Do you believe that international aspects are still important in energy?”. It is absolutely clear that yes, they are important. No matter what projects we’re talking about, everyone will need partners. Some have technologies, others have resources and infrastructure. Whether it is carbon capture, storage or transport, it is expensive to do it alone. Except for maybe Russia or the United States, few can handle all stages of the process by themselves. Others will need international partners. This was not a revelation for me, but it is important in the current context.

Irina: *We have a lot of young people reading our journal. At least I hope so. What would you say to them?*

Dmitry: The idea of our conference has always been that we do not invite big bosses. Our conference brings together experts from the ‘neck’ level. The neck turns the head, you know. So, we are always open to the work of young researchers. If their research meets the conference standards, we fully support their participation.

Irina: *When you started organising the conference, you had just defended your PhD, right?*

Dmitry: Nope! I defended it only two years later. When I started organising the conference, I was still writing my dissertation.

Irina: *Let me record this for posterity. So, the person who organises a conference that has been around for over 15 years and gathers people from all over the world, contributing to maintaining dialogue between Russia and Europe amid chaos, started this conference four years after finishing university and even before defending a PhD. I guess this would be my message for the young readers of this journal.*

Dmitry: Oh, I just came up with a message for organisers of pretty much anything. Every long-running project must have a father or mother. If it is a shared effort between many people, it will never really take off. There should always be someone who constantly thinks about it. There might be two of them. If there is not this person, the long-running story won’t happen. Someone must think and develop, and age does not matter at all. It can be either very young or not very young. I always hear ‘we must give way to the young’. If a person is young and smart, that is good, but if he is just young? Should we give them money for that reason? Honestly, it does not sound right. Be smart, and age doesn’t matter.

Irina: *We need to grow together with our projects, right?*

Dmitry: Yes, I agree with that.

Irina: *Well, thank you! Much of what we discussed today, you’ve told me before, but now it is all recorded. We can immortalise it!*

Dmitry: Thank you!

About Dmitry Vasilenko

Dmitry Vasilenko is the Vice-Rector at the Saint Petersburg State University of Economics. He is also an organiser and founder of the “Energetika XXI” conference.

Address for correspondence:

dvasilenko@finec.ru