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## (Non-) Alternative energy transitions: Examining neoliberal rationality in official nuclear energy discourses of Russia and Poland

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## ABSTRACT

Neoliberal trends are a part of the sociopolitical contexts that shape present-day energy transitions. Economic arguments extensively used in nuclear energy discourses regarding the Nuclear Renaissance period may indicate that neoliberal trends have penetrated discussions about energy transitions. This article examines the presence of neoliberal rationality in the official nuclear energy discourses coming from Russia and Poland. These countries are interesting in respect to their relatively recent changes towards a market economy. Neoliberal rationality is defined in the article as the combination of market rationality, limited role of state, political consensus, governance structures and securitization, following Foucault and Brown. Discourse analysis of the energy policies and speeches of politicians that contain statements about nuclear energy development is carried out. The analysis confirms the significant presence of these themes in nuclear energy discourses as well as discourses reflecting the specificities of the two countries. The combination of the defining features of neoliberal rationality in official nuclear energy discourses seem to leave limited space for challenging nuclear energy development and discussing alternative energy transitions.

### 1. Introduction

Energy transitions provide an opportunity for understanding how energy systems function and how they may develop in the future. They are understood as “a shift in the nature or pattern of how energy is utilized within a system” [1, p. 112]. One of the most discussed systematic changes in the energy sector for almost seventy years has been the introduction and expansion of nuclear technology for electricity production [2–4]. The “Nuclear Renaissance” rhetoric, appearing at the turn of the century [5], has revitalized debates about the development of this technology and possible energy transitions [e.g. 6–8]. Nuclear Renaissance is considered here to be a discursive construct since it is difficult to assess whether it indeed takes place at all or to the extent anticipated by the industry, as it takes considerable time from announcing the plans to build a nuclear reactor to the actual reactor start-up. While the future of transitioning to a revival of nuclear energy is opaque, discourses of Nuclear Renaissance are observable in the official political energy discourses in a number of countries, among them Russia and Poland. To understand what drives such discourses of energy transitions, official nuclear energy discourses are of significance since they may reveal dominant sociopolitical thinking about energy systems and their underpinning rationalities.

Energy transitions are shaped by the sociopolitical contexts in which they take place [9–12]. Nuclear energy discourses seem to have evolved

throughout history in tight connection with their sociopolitical contexts [4,13]. Using the UK as an example, Blowers summarizes how nuclear energy discourses have developed historically [13]. The first discourse of trust in technology was replaced by distrust of nuclear energy and the rise of anti-nuclear movements. Later it turned to a discourse of consensus and cooperation at the end of the last century and finally to concerns about security [13, p. 166]. Similar developments in nuclear energy discourses are observed in other contexts. The rise of anti-nuclear sentiments and further mobilization of anti-nuclear movements in the 1960–80s took place in many countries around the world [2,3]. These years are also characterized by large numbers of protest events. Concerns about energy security that appeared at the turn of the century overlap with the general rise of awareness about security issues, in particular after the events of 9/11. Currently nuclear energy development is legitimized, for instance, through its potential contribution to climate change mitigation [4,14,15]. Economic arguments, energy security and potential contributions to climate change mitigation are the core themes in present-day nuclear energy discourses [4,7,14–17]. The spread of economic arguments in discussions about nuclear energy development may signal the penetration of neoliberal trends in these energy transitions. Neoliberal ideas are associated with trust in market forces and ascribing economic values to factors not previously considered in economic terms as well as an emphasis on political consensus and governance [18,19]. While neoliberal reasoning has been studied,

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for example, in the educational and healthcare sectors, it has received much less attention in connection to energy policies and even less to energy transitions, although there is some research available [e.g. 20–22].

This article examines the presence of neoliberal rationality in the official nuclear energy discourses of Russia and Poland. Both countries provide an interesting combination, where they are among other cases where the rhetoric of Nuclear Renaissance is observable. In 2006, it was announced that 26 new reactors were planned to be built in Russia by 2030 [23]. The Polish government included nuclear energy in the Energy Policy of Poland in 2005, 15 years after the idea to build a nuclear power plant for the first time was abandoned, and in 2010, when the Polish Nuclear Energy Program was made public. However, while approximately 15% of Russian electricity comes from nuclear power plants, there are no nuclear reactors in Poland. The significant dependence on coal in Poland is considered unsustainable and therefore diversification of the energy mix is the cornerstone of their energy transition [24, p. 7]. The need for diversification of energy sources and electricity producing technologies and an increase in energy efficiency is articulated in Russian energy policy as well [25]. The turn to nuclear energy in both countries can be regarded as the intention to carry out energy transitions since, in both cases, systematic changes are implied. In Poland, the construction of the first nuclear power plant implies a significant re-organization of the energy sectors since, for instance, the introduction of nuclear technologies may mean a greater centralization of the energy sector. In Russia, an increased share of nuclear energy is presented as a means to transform the energy sector that is, to a significant extent, based on exports of oil and gas to the sector that is based on knowledge and technologies.

Both countries have gone through political transformation after the collapse of the previous political regimes and then a rapid adjustment to market economies. They differ, however, in their political outlook and the stages of nuclear energy development. Moreover, energy transitions and nuclear energy discourses, in particular in the context of Nuclear Renaissance, are relatively understudied in these countries in comparison to the studies of Western European countries [e.g. 7,26]. The specificities of both countries as well as their seeming difference from the more often studied countries can contribute to an understanding of the rationalities that drive energy transitions, in particular taking into account that both cases are less obvious choices for assessing neoliberal rationality in discourses regarding energy transitions.

This article proceeds with placing the study in the context of energy transitions research and research on nuclear energy discourses. Then neoliberal rationality is defined using the work of Foucault and Brown. Discussion on method and materials follows. The next section presents and discusses the nuclear energy discourses of Russia and Poland structured after four aspects of neoliberal rationality. The article concludes with a discussion of findings.

## 2. Politics of energy transitions and nuclear energy discourses

Energy transition is an emerging field in energy studies [1,27]. It has been examined from historical, economic and social perspectives [e.g. 28–30]. The focus has often been placed on conditions that drive energy transitions as well as the socioeconomic implications of energy transitions. Political aspects and the politics of energy transitions have also been highlighted [9–12,31–33]. Studies of political aspects have mainly examined how energy transitions are managed and governed, how decisions in the energy sector are made or, in other words, the governance of energy transitions [10,12,33–35]. Relations of agency and power are in focus in the studies of the politics of energy transitions [e.g. 21,33] as well as political relations between the multiple dimensions of transition processes [31,33]. Hess brings attention to not only the formation of political coalitions in driving sustainability transitions forward but also effective political opposition, and industry and grassroots mobilization [21]. The role of social movements that may

campaign for greater sustainability is also put forward by Smith and Stirling [33]. Among other political aspects of energy transitions that have been scrutinized are policy instruments [32,36], institutional conditions and institutional change [34], and institutional and political factors for analyzing energy backcasting [11].

Politics can be understood in broader terms through power defined beyond the dichotomy of agency and structure and more as knowledge and discourses [37]. In the case of energy transitions, it means that the *politics* of energy transitions is shaped by *discourses* of energy transitions. Cultural approaches that focus on meaning making processes are used to a lesser extent in the literature on energy transitions. Visions, framings, storylines and discourses of energy transitions have been analyzed [7,38–41]. Geels and Verhees analyze how technological changes in the energy sector are framed and legitimized [39]. Ideologies of political parties may matter for visions of energy transitions and sustainability that political parties put forward [38]. Although visions and framings of energy transitions do not provide a lens that would allow the scrutinizing of rationalities that drive energy transitions, discourses on energy do.

While not necessarily focusing on energy transitions, the literature on nuclear energy discourses is extensive. Nuclear energy discourses are known for putting forward the notions of cost effectiveness, technological development and progress in general [e.g. 42]. Among other arguments, such as energy security and contribution to climate change mitigation, economic argumentation has manifested in the studies of recent nuclear energy discourses, for instance through examples from the UK [7,17], France and Finland [17], Poland [16,41,43] and Russia [16]. Nuclear energy has been argued to be framed as a “sustainable energy source” [e.g. 7]. Johnstone argues that the prevalence of “consensus” in the discourses of sustainability and banking on governance structures constructs the “post-political” thinking about nuclear energy, therefore creating a democratic deficiency in nuclear energy governance.

The apparent “consensus” on sustainability appears to foreclose discussions on multiple and divergent political imaginaries into a single shared vision. This is symptomatic of the wider conditions of the post-political and the post-democratic, where debate is reduced to managerial and technocratic particularities in which, regardless of public engagement, nuclear power becomes an “inevitability” [7, p. 91].

While Johnstone argues that the discourse of sustainability “ultimately includes the assumptions of neoliberalism” [7, p. 98], he does not discuss usage of economic arguments in this respect nor does he develop which features of neoliberalism account for this closure of discussions on nuclear energy. It is not surprising that discourses of sustainability are based on assumptions of neoliberalism in the case of the UK, one of the birthplaces of free market policies. It remains unclear how neoliberal rationality appears in present-day nuclear energy discourses and shapes energy transitions in other contexts, such as Poland and Russia. No similar studies connecting nuclear energy discourses and neoliberal trends in Central and Eastern Europe have been found. As this region has been characterized by new democratic or hybrid political regimes and rapid changes in the economic sector after the change of political regimes, it promises to be particularly interesting to assess nuclear energy discourses in regard to neoliberal trends in these contexts, as they are quite different in contrast to the UK. The studies of nuclear energy discourses in Poland and Russia point in the direction of the possibility of similar conclusions as Johnstone. Maciejewska and Marszałek denote the democratic deficit in Polish pro-nuclear discourses [43, p. 239] as claims of anti-nuclear movements are neglected and society is not considered an equal partner. Considering public debate on nuclear energy in Poland from the perspective of law, media discourse and civil society, Wagner et al. arrive at similar conclusions [41], claiming that deliberation on nuclear energy is limited and analyzed discourses of nuclear energy can lead to depoliticization of the

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