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Original research article

# Consumers, citizens or citizen-consumers? Domestic users in the process of Estonian electricity market liberalization

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### ABSTRACT

This study analyses the development of domestic customers' energy-related performances and understandings during the transition from centralized, monopolist electricity provision to a liberal market in Estonia in 2012–2013. Liberalization brought about not only a new institutional and legal framework for electricity purchases, but also a significant price rise. The study proceeds from the assumption that these structural changes catalyzed shifts in the electricity-related practices of consumers and citizens. Theoretically, the analysis builds on practice theory and positioning analysis. We investigated how domestic electricity purchasing and consumption were positioned in media texts and consumers' self-positionings vis-à-vis media discourse, including their resistance to what was interpreted as acceptable conduct. To code media texts, diaries and interviews, we employed the concept of *performance positioning*. The results reveal that learning the new social practice of purchasing electricity as a service made electricity more salient and visible, both as an object of consumption and as an object of media-inspired public discussion and critique, encouraging a search for new solutions, such as collective mobilization to bargain with suppliers. The paper's further contribution lies in discussing the issue of a supportive communicative environment in the development of citizen-consumer self-positionings conducive to socially innovative forms of energy governance and usage.

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## 1. Introduction

A large part of social scientific research on electricity transitions is focused on pro-sustainability attitudes and values (e.g., [42,50,52,19]), and on aligning consumption using various technological means, especially smart meters (e.g., [37,23,8,17]). There is relatively little recent social scientific research on the liberalization of the electricity market for domestic customers. Since this step was taken in most EU countries many years ago (by 2007), consumer choice of electricity suppliers and the formation of the social practice of electricity purchasing seems to be a phase that has already passed without much examination of its potential to reconfigure other practices of consumption and citizenship. By providing a critical analysis of one late market liberalization case—Estonia, which opened its electricity market on 1 January 2013 with an ensuing price increase of nearly 40% for domestic consumers, one of the steepest in the EU [1]—this paper looks at how the emergence of the

“sovereign” consumer in the area of electricity is related to public understanding of energy issues and energy citizenship.

Eastern Europe is a relative blind spot in the primarily US—and “old” EU member-dominated energy consumption research area. Similar to many other Eastern European countries, Estonia is obliged to comply with the EU energy policy and its low carbon agenda, yet its economic and political systems are built on locally mined oil shale energy. In many Eastern European countries, environmental sustainability is not a significant issue among the general public with regard to energy supply and consumption: e.g., the proportion of people who highly value governments' targets of increasing the use of renewable energy is generally lower among Eastern European countries than in their Western counterparts [15]. On the other hand, lower incomes make energy usage economically contested consumption. The relation between energy issues and people's everyday lives as citizens has been under-discussed.

These countries' structural and cultural conditions do not favor quick advancement towards “energy citizenship” and socio-technological innovations that aim at emancipatory energy projects [30]. The initiatives of energy cooperatives and decentralized micro production are in their infancy, not only due to the lack of relevant skills among people and legal barriers, but also due to deeply

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ingrained socio-cultural habits of individual coping without trusting collective agency [54].

These problems have their roots in the way lay public involvement in energy-related issues is conceptualized in society and reflected in the mass media [63]. Public engagement in discussions of a particular topic depends largely on the “state of the instruments of perception and expression available and on the access that different groups have to these instruments” [4]: 172). In the field of energy efficiency, scholars have reported a very narrow conceptualization of the public on the part of political decision-makers, who discursively construct lay people merely as passive consumers lacking agency (well explained in [5]. According to Bourdieu’s analysis of the discursive practices in the political field (1991), the construction of people as mass consumers is part of the symbolic fabrication of a collective that makes it possible to delegate the power allocated to people, through the logic of a democratic system, to political and technological professionals. Energy citizens (such as micro-producers) who enter the political field may thus meet with resistance from both political professionals and the public, who are used to consumerist “instruments of perception and expression”, according to Bourdieu. Today, energy citizens and citizen-consumers are mainly products of a scholarly “symbolic fabrication of new collectives” and the instruments of the public perception of these phenomena are still being formed (about problems of energy-related citizen empowerment see [64]. This paper looks at the potential of the development of public engagement in energy issues as consumers and as citizens through the prisms of the mediation of electricity market liberalization and the theory of social practices. It has two mutually interrelated aims.

Firstly, this paper seeks to contribute to a relatively neglected area within energy consumption research [48]—media<sup>1</sup> usage within everyday practices— and thus the overarching objective is to analyze both the positioning of end-users in mass media and how customers (re)-position themselves in relation to media discourse. We propose that the analysis of media discourses and their interpretation can be used to investigate how emerging practices are codified by journalists, the market and political actors. Secondly, this article aims to discuss what possible developments of citizen-consumer practices may emerge (both as crafted by the media and as reflected in personal narratives about performances).

The empirical analysis builds on interviews with domestic electricity users, diaries by the same informants and media texts from two major daily newspapers.

The text is organized as follows: first, we examine the concepts of “consumer” and “citizen” in the domestic energy use context, after which we outline our main theoretical sources: the theory of social practices and positioning theory. Then the Estonian case of market liberalization and the method and procedure, how the empirical analysis was conducted, are explained. The presentation of results builds on the ideal types of engagements of domestic users in electricity-related issues. The paper ends with conclusions and a theory-inspired discussion offering some assumptions and potential avenues for future research.

## 2. Energy consumers and energy citizens

Despite the fact that the “consumer” and “citizen” are contrasted in social theories, in media discussions and everyday language [56,59], they are intertwined, not only because the roles are performed by the same carriers, but also because of structural interrelations between the state and the market. Many proposed

<sup>1</sup> By media, we mean all publicly accessible channels of mediated communication, but the focus of the analysis was on nationwide newspapers, radio, television and Internet portals.

solutions to sustainability-related problems assume the emergence of citizen-consumers, who exercise political consumption [3]. In addition, it has been suggested to use different “cocktails of solutions” in energy-sustainability-related policy-making and interventions for different segments of the population that combine consumer and citizen engagements [55].

Spaargaren and Oosterveer distinguish between three modes of the appropriation and provision of social and technological innovations that aim to contribute to environmental problem solving: environmental citizens, political consumers and individual moral agents [49]. They see political consumption as a contribution to change through (existing) market structures, mainly by altering demand and supply. Ecological citizenship is revealed as an involvement in environmentally-related political actions, and “moral agency” is used to refer to a holistic lifestyle. The authors have proposed the term “citizen-consumer”, which unites all three domains [49]: 1890). This corresponds to van Vliet’s “citizen-consumers”, who are concerned about the climate impact of their energy usage (2010: 275). “Energy citizens” [7,18] are seen as co-providers of electricity [58], who try to change regulative frameworks by employing democratic mechanisms and organizational participation [50]. They are active participants in energy systems in other ways than end-use [18]: 22). We agree with [18] that these two action repertoires co-emerge. For example, [42] argue that consumers may not act only as single customers who interact with smart technology, but also as members of consumer cooperatives seeking transparent prices, participation in decision-making and the opportunity to buy from local suppliers. It is crucial how and to what extent these emerging phenomena are and will be publicly communicated. How much symbolic power do they obtain in society? What kind of discursive connections will emerge in relation to these new practices?

Brondi et al. who have analyzed the discourse of Italian policy makers and network operators, are sceptical as to whether the political and industrial will exists to see energy consumers as citizens, arguing that: “The political debate is characterized by argumentative ‘short-circuits’ that constrain individual and community actions to the acceptance or the refusal of top-down decisions and that leave little room for community empowerment and bottom-up innovation” (p. 1) [5]. Their results are in line with the deficit model of the public, which sees the consumer as unaware and not interested in energy issues, as well as lacking the agency to become involved in participatory processes [5]: 3). A recent study by Cotton and Devine—Wright also demonstrates very similar findings on how market actors (network operators and regulators) “conflate/.../‘the public’ with ‘customers,’ and also ‘hide’ DNO [Distribution Network Operator] roles in a manner that precludes direct citizen engagement” (p. 17) [6].

Electricity market liberalization offers a valuable case for scrutinizing how various market actors are represented, especially how consumers and citizens, as the sometimes conflicting faces of the public, emerge in various texts. Yet treating textual representations of the public as constructions of roles or identity alone would risk framing electricity usage as an individual and stand-alone activity detached from the complex nexus of everyday practices, which is well highlighted by the social practice theory. The concept of performance positioning is used to bridge the everyday activities and media discourse within the context of electricity market liberalization, which can be viewed as a basis for the emergence of the new social practice of purchasing electricity as a service.

## 3. Practice theory in energy consumption studies

Various authors (e.g. McMeekin and Southerton have pointed out that energy use and its change, particularly towards more

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