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Discursive regime dynamics in the Dutch energy transition



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ABSTRACT

Since its introduction in the National Environmental Policy Plan in 2001 the notion of 'energy transition' is firmly rooted in the Dutch energy debate. Despite political efforts to shift to a sustainable energy system, the Netherlands is lagging behind other European countries. Scholarly literature generally ascribes such slow developments to the dominant role of incumbents. In this paper we explore how prominent incumbents of the Dutch energy system discursively frame the energy transition by unravelling their existing and evolving storylines. Our results show that decarbonization in the context of a European energy market is currently seen as the dominant driver for the energy transition, linked to discursive elements on keeping the energy supply secure and affordable. We found tensions within this dominant storyline and emerging storylines with the potential to undermine the dominant one. In response, incumbents are discursively repositioning themselves, thereby restructuring coalitions – possibly indicating *discursive regime destabilization*.

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1. Introduction

Secure, affordable and clean energy is high on the political agenda in European countries after the alarming debates around energy supply, climate change and the implications of energy production and consumption for a healthy and safe environment. These debates gained new momentum in the wake of the Fukushima nuclear disaster. In 2009, the European Parliament and Council have agreed on specific targets to increase the share of renewable energy in the total energy supply in 2020 to 20%, to increase energy efficiency and reduce emissions of greenhouse gases with 20% compared to 1990 levels (Klessmann et al., 2011). These targets are complemented with two strategy papers: a *Roadmap 2050* and a *Power Perspective 2030* (EC, 2011; ECF, 2011), that show the commitment of the European Union to achieve the 20–20–20 energy targets and pave the ground for an even longer-term energy transition.

In the Netherlands, the notion of an ‘energy transition’ is firmly rooted in the country’s energy debate since its introduction in the National Environmental Policy Plan in 2001 (VROM, 2001). With that, the Dutch energy system was one of the first where transition management – a new governance approach for sustainability (Loorbach, 2007; Rotmans et al., 2001) – was applied in an integral manner (Kemp, 2010; Kern and Smith, 2008; Loorbach et al., 2008; Smith and Kern, 2009). However, despite the policy objectives, the Dutch energy transition is considerably lagging behind other EU countries: the Netherlands managed to only slightly increase the share of renewable energy in final energy consumption from 2.6% in 2006 to 3.8% in 2010, while the average share in the EU-27 has increased from 9.0% to 12.4% (Eurostat, 2012). Recent literature focusing on the Dutch energy system concludes that the main explaining factor for this lagging behind is a strong fossil fuel regime in which incumbents play a dominant role (Kern and Smith, 2008; Van der Loo and Loorbach, 2012).

On the surface, it seems that incumbent actors and interests are thus able to dominate the pace and direction of the energy transition and mainly promote a ‘greening’ of the fossil-based centralized system instead of a more radical transition departing from the existing system. This observation is in line with early transition studies in which regimes have (often) been conceptualized as homogeneous entities that are generally robust to change (Fuenfschilling and Truffer, 2014; Geels and Schot, 2007, 2010; Holtz et al., 2008; Kemp et al., 1998). Accordingly, a transition is seen as the result of regimes which destabilize or open up as a consequence of external shocks, internal structural problems or bottom up innovations (Smith and Raven, 2012; Turnheim and Geels, 2012; Verbong and Loorbach, 2012). More recent literature, however suggests that regimes can also be drivers of radical change (Stenzel and Frenzel, 2008; Van der Vleuten and Högselius, 2012). With this in mind, Loorbach and Verbong (2012, pp. 320–321) argue that: “operationalization of the regime concept in the context of the analysis of on-going transitions calls for developing a more refined understanding of regime structures and regime actors, as well as of their interaction with emerging niches”.

In this paper we address this theoretical need for a more refined understanding of regimes by conceptualizing a regime as a dynamic constellation of diverse actors characterized by shared values, expectations and understanding about the function the regime provides to meet a societal need (e.g. energy production and consumption) and its future development (Frantzeskaki and de Haan, 2009; Frantzeskaki and Loorbach, 2010; Hermans et al., 2010; van der Brugge, 2009). In this paper we specifically aim to analyse regime dynamics in the Dutch energy transition by investigating the language incumbents used to give meaning to the changing world around them, and ask whether changing discursive positions amongst incumbents might in fact offer opportunities for more radical societal change.

In the following sections, we first touch upon theoretical work on discourses and regimes to more specifically underpin our research question. We then introduce our method of argumentative discourse analysis to scrutinize the Dutch energy transition from the perspective of incumbent actors. We propose that our examination reveals discursive destabilization of the Dutch energy regime through observed tensions within the dominant discourse and challenges posed to it by newly emerging developments. We do not imply that a discursive shift witnessed amongst a group of incumbent actors directly implies a following transition, but rather argue that it could be a prerequisite for any transition to take place. In that sense any discourse analysis in the broader context of a transition is limited and in no way predictive, yet it does shed light on the underlying dynamics within a particular field and regime that might be a precondition for any transition to occur.

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