

Common Grounds of the Energy Transition

How Public Discourses Shape Our Democratic Future

Swiss-US Energy Innovation Days, 6-9 October 2019

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The poster features the ZHAW logo (zhaw) in blue, with the text 'School of Applied Linguistics' and 'Interdisciplinary Energy Research Board ZERB' to its right. Below this is the main title 'Common Grounds of the Energy Transition' in a large blue font, followed by the subtitle 'How Public Discourses Shape Our Democratic Future' and the event dates 'Swiss-US Energy Innovation Days, 6-9 October 2019'. The presenter information reads: 'Prof. Peter Stücheli-Herlach, Member of the Board ZERB & Team of "Energy Discourses in Switzerland" Project (co-funded by the Swiss Federal Office of Energy SFoE)'. To the right of this text are the logos for the Swiss Confederation in four languages (German, French, Italian, Romansh) and the Swiss Federal Office of Energy. At the bottom, there is a photograph of a brick building with trees in front, partially overlaid by a blue rectangle on the left containing the text 'Zürcher Fachhochschule'.

With this short presentation, we would like to provide some insights into our interdisciplinary project about public discourses about energy in Switzerland. The current project has been running since 2016 and will reach its official conclusion at the end of this year. However, follow-up projects are already planned.

What are we talking about?

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What are we talking about? Public discourses and the energy transition

Public discourses about energy policies play a key role in the successful implementation of the energy transition, especially for ...

- ... decentralized markets
- ... multi-level democracies
- ... inter-/transdisciplinary innovation systems

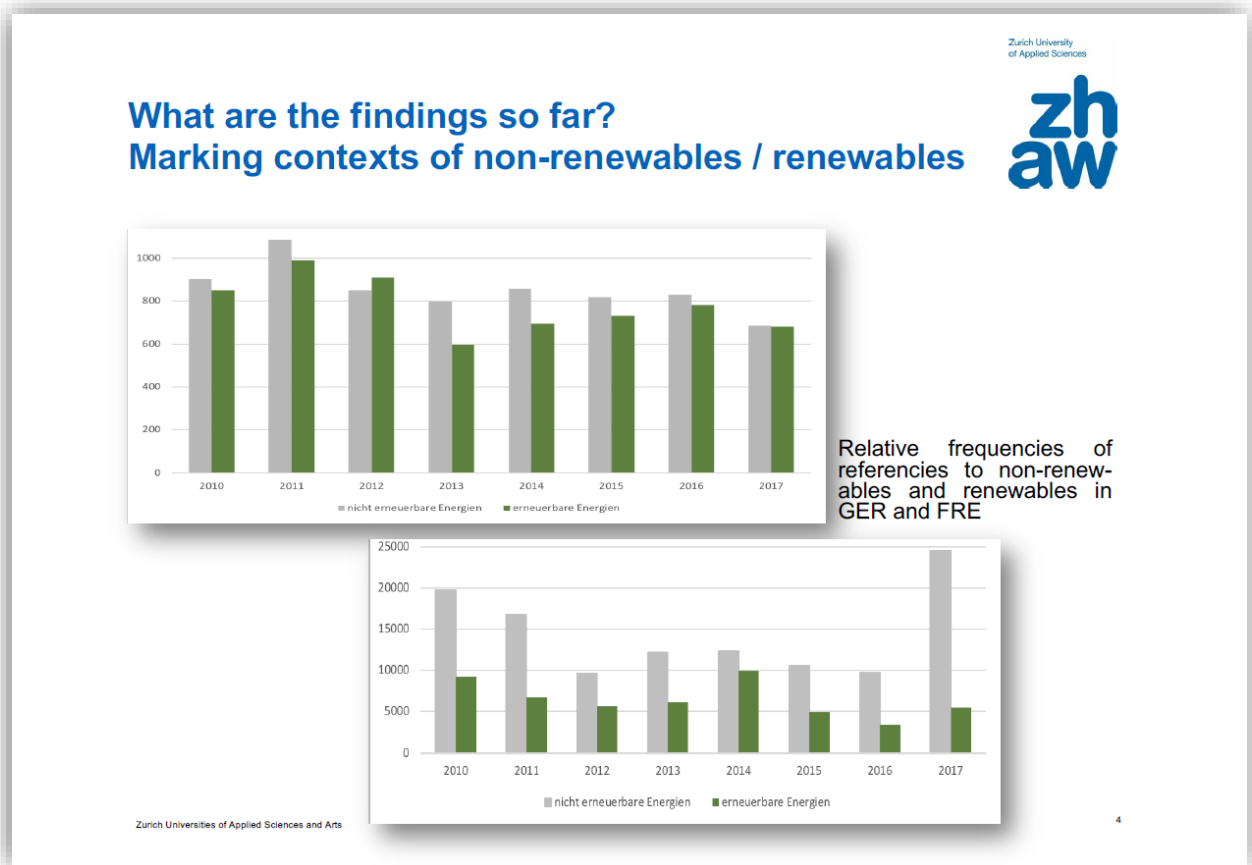
Visualization of main objectives of the Swiss energy strategy 2050.

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Public discourses about energy policies play a key role in the successful implementation of the energy transition. Remember the major challenges that stakeholders have to overcome on the road to a sustainable energy supply. You have to perform in *decentralized markets*, where “prosumers” of energy constantly and quickly choose between competition and cooperation. You have to evolve sufficient acceptance of new rules and technologies in *systems of federalist and multi-level democracies*, where citizens form their opinions through increasingly individualized channels of digitalized media. And you have to promote and implement *technological and economic innovations* within the framework of *interdisciplinary teams and organizations*.

We are dealing with all of this in Switzerland, where we are in the process of implementing the government’s Energy Strategy 2050. The experience we have gained might also be valuable for others with comparable political transformation projects.

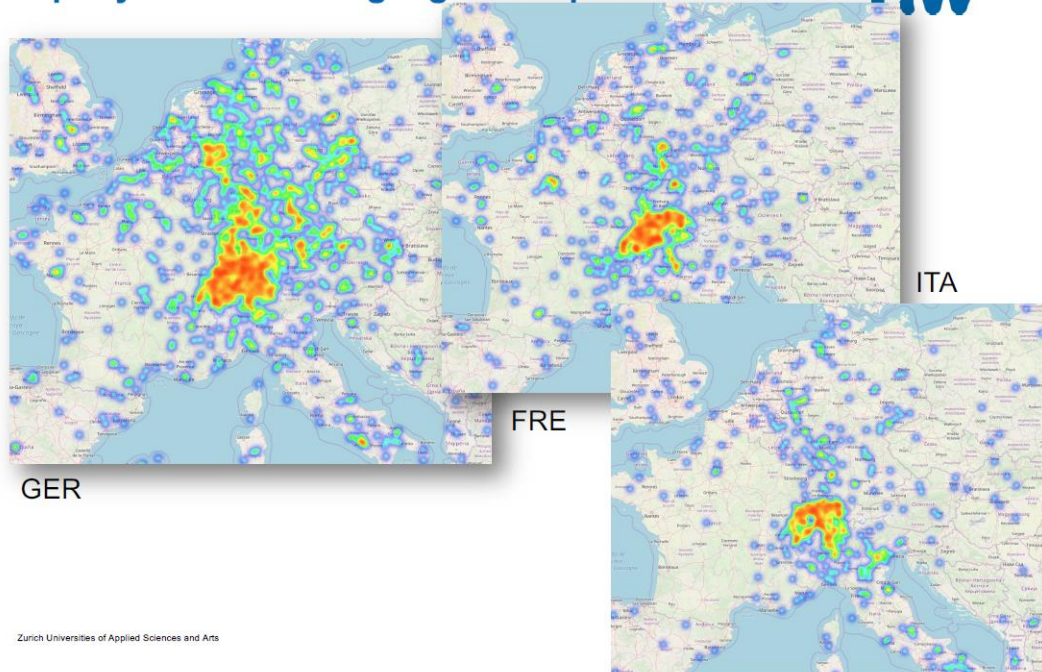
What are our findings so far?



We would just like to give you a few examples of our analyses and findings.

We can see that the discourses evident in our German-language corpus have become increasingly balanced with respect to *non-renewable and renewable forms of energy* over the course of the past decade. However, in the French-language corpus, we observe that predominance of mentions of non-renewable energies, especially nuclear power, has actually increased recently.

What are the findings so far? Toponyms across languages and political borders



As another example of the types of analyses we are doing, we have examined which *places (towns, cities and countries)* play a role in public discourses in the three languages in Switzerland. In the corresponding "heat maps" you can clearly see that the German-language discourses in Switzerland refer heavily to their own country, but also to Germany and Austria. French-language discourses do not have this strong reference to Germany but rather refer more frequently to France, Paris, and the Benelux countries. Discourses in Italian, on the other hand, do this less frequently and seem more focused on northern Italy.


These findings are not really surprising. However, they make it clear to us that the frames of reference for the actors in a federalist democracy are strongly dependent on the respective geographical region and linguistic-cultural character. This represents a great challenge for the promoters of a national, federalist, and democratic transformation of the energy system!

What conclusions can we draw?

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What conclusions can we draw?

Tasks and strategies to manage the transition



- ✓ The dependence on the common ground of public discourses has increased by leaps and bounds.
- ✓ Adequate practical tasks of observation and analysis of the environment have become core tasks for the energy industry and policy-makers.
- ✓ Strategies for the acceptance of innovations and for discursive positions and coalitions play a key role in the governance and strategic management of the energy transition.

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In short, we have become more aware of *the importance that public communication and language patterns have* in successfully shaping market mechanisms, democratic decisions, and interdisciplinary innovation for the energy future. This has several crucial consequences for the strategies to manage the transition:

- The dependence on the common ground of public discourses has increased by leaps and bounds, especially *in the course of digitalization*.
- Adequate practical tasks of *observation and analysis of the communicative environment* have become core tasks for the energy industry as well as for policy-makers.
- *Strategies for the acceptance of innovations and for discursive positions and coalitions* play a key role in the democratic governance and strategic organizational management of the energy transition.

Thank you for your interest and attention!