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Negotiating and Narrating Futures in Regional Energy Transitions. A Cross Case Analysis of the Central German Coal District and Extremadura

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Abstract

Energy transitions are not only shaped by socio-technical and institutional change, but also by narrative negotiations over which futures are imaginable and desirable. The local level constitutes a key arena in which these struggles unfold. Drawing on qualitative fieldwork in two peripheral regions – Zeitz (Saxony-Anhalt, Germany), shaped by the phase-out of lignite coal, and Cáceres (Extremadura, Spain), confronted with proposed lithium extraction – this paper examines how local actors articulate and negotiate future visions. Using a framework that foregrounds temporal, spatial, and affective dimensions of narratives, the analysis shows that narratives structure how transformation is envisioned, legitimize competing development pathways, and shape place-based identities. The findings demonstrate that negotiations over future pathways are closely tied to interpretations of the past. Historical experiences of loss and dependency shape whether transformation is perceived as an opportunity for agency or as a source of uncertainty and resistance.

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Narrative Aushandlungen von Zukünften in regionalen Transformationsprozessen. Eine vergleichende Analyse des Mitteldeutschen Reviers und der Extremadura

Zusammenfassung

Die Energiewende wird nicht nur durch soziotechnische und institutionelle Veränderungen geprägt, sondern auch durch diskursive Aushandlungen darüber, welche Zukunftsvisionen vorstellbar und erstrebenswert sind. Dabei erweist sich die lokale Ebene als zentraler Schauplatz. Aufbauend auf qualitativer Feldforschung in zwei peripheren Regionen – Zeitz (Sachsen-Anhalt, Deutschland), gezeichnet durch den Braunkohleausstieg, und Cáceres (Extremadura, Spanien), konfrontiert mit geplanter Lithiumgewinnung – untersucht der Beitrag, wie lokale Akteure Zukunftsvisionen artikulieren und verhandeln. Mit einem analytischen Fokus auf den zeitlichen, räumlichen und affektiven Dimensionen von Erzählungen argumentiert der Beitrag, dass Narrative Wandel interpretativ strukturieren, konkurrierende Entwicklungswege legitimieren und ortsbezogene Identitäten prägen. Die Ergebnisse verdeutlichen, dass Aushandlungen über künftige Entwicklungspfade eng mit der Interpretation der Vergangenheit verknüpft sind. Historische Erfahrungen von Verlust und Abhängigkeit beeinflussen, ob der Wandel als Chance zur Selbstbestimmung oder als Quelle von Unsicherheit und Widerstand wahrgenommen wird.

Schlüsselwörter: Regionale Energiewende ▪ Narrative ▪ Transformations-Governance ▪ periphere Regionen ▪ sozialräumliche Transformation

1 Introduction: Negotiating futures in energy transitions

Sustainable transformation processes are inherently marked by tension – between loss and new beginnings, the erosion of established socio-spatial structures and resource landscapes as well as the emergence of new spaces of possibility and contested visions of regional futures (Bridge/Bouzarovski/Bradshaw et al. 2013; Zilles/Drewing/Janik 2022). Energy transitions, in particular, are organized through multi-scalar governance structures that are characterized by a predominantly top-down decision-making logic. Technical and planning-related changes to local energy infrastructures are initiated at higher political levels (EU or national level), while their socio-spatial implementation and consequences are unevenly distributed and fail to address place-based specificities (Gailing/Röhring 2015). These dynamics are particularly pronounced in rural, structurally weak, shrinking regions, which frequently host energy infrastructures and resource extraction while possessing limited capacity to influence strategic development decisions (MacKinnon/Dawley/Pike et al. 2019). In such contexts, energy transitions may intersect with and potentially reinforce ongoing processes of regional peripheralization (Naumann/Becker/Bruns 2025: 100).

Against this backdrop, the local level emerges as the primary arena where conflicts over energy transitions unfold, and future visions and regional development pathways are interactively negotiated (Becker/Bues/Naumann 2016). Narratives play a pivotal role in this process as they become instruments of governance and societal shaping: They construct imaginaries of possibility, provide normative guidance for action, and influence socio-technical transformations (Healey 1996; Throgmorton 2003). Since futures do not yet exist empirically, they are articulated and negotiated in the present through language, interpretation, and storytelling (Grunwald 2009: 26; Anderson 2010: 784). Building on this perspective, this paper examines how future visions are narratively articulated and negotiated in the context of regional energy transitions and looks into how different local actors interpret and potentially challenge dominant narratives in this process.

To address this, we draw on empirical fieldwork conducted in two case studies of politically initiated energy transitions. Zeitz, a city in the Central German Mining District of Saxony-Anhalt (Germany), shaped by decades of structural change and most recently the phase-out of lignite coal (Görmar/Kinossian 2022). In contrast, Cáceres, a city in Extremadura (Spain) stands at the inception of a new extractive trajectory, driven by a recent EU raw materials policy shift and the anticipated onset of lithium mining (Noever Castelos 2023). Despite standing at opposite stages of resource-based transformation, both regions undergo far-reaching reconfigurations that extend beyond material infrastructures, affecting collective self-perceptions and expectations for their futures. In addition, in both cases structural patterns of peripheralization (Kühn 2015) and 'left-behindness' (Pike/Béal/Cauchi-Duval et al. 2024) persist – including socio-economic disadvantage, demographic decline, and outmigration – which correlate with recent electoral shifts toward far-right support (Ungureanu/Sanjaume-Calvet 2025; Weisskircher/Volk 2026).

This points to the limits of narrowly technical or economic responses, underscoring the importance of transformative governance and planning approaches that situate energy transitions within their broader cultural, historical, and socio-spatial contexts, taking into account social perceptions, local narratives, and regional visions of the future (Ameel 2021; Matthey/Ambal/Gaberell et al. 2023; Kelly/Mbah 2024: 131).

By placing narratives at the centre of the negotiation of transformation processes within the broader context of energy transition, the paper makes both empirical and conceptual contributions. Empirically, it demonstrates how narratives actively shape how local actors interpret loss and change, negotiate place-based identities and imagine future visions and development pathways (Görmar/Kinossian 2022). Conceptually, it proposes a framework for interrogating the narrative dimensions of impact in energy transition governance and planning (Roessler 2024). By adopting an energy- and human-geographical perspective, the paper aims to contribute to the interdisciplinary research field on energy transformations, socio-spatial change, and planning cultures and practices.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows: Section 2 puts forward a framework of narrative dimensions to analyse negotiations processes. Section 3 situates the selected case studies within their historical and discursive contexts. After a brief methodological account in Section 4, Section 5 describes the narratives mobilized by different actors in both regions. Section 6 presents a cross-case analysis of the identified narratives and their contestations. The paper concludes by discussing implications for energy transition governance and planning.

2 Narratives as meaning-making in transformation processes

In the face of uncertain futures and planetary change, actors rely on narratives as a central mode of meaning-making. Contemporary scholarship ascribes narratives epistemological and ontological significance: they do not merely describe social processes, they actively structure how ac-

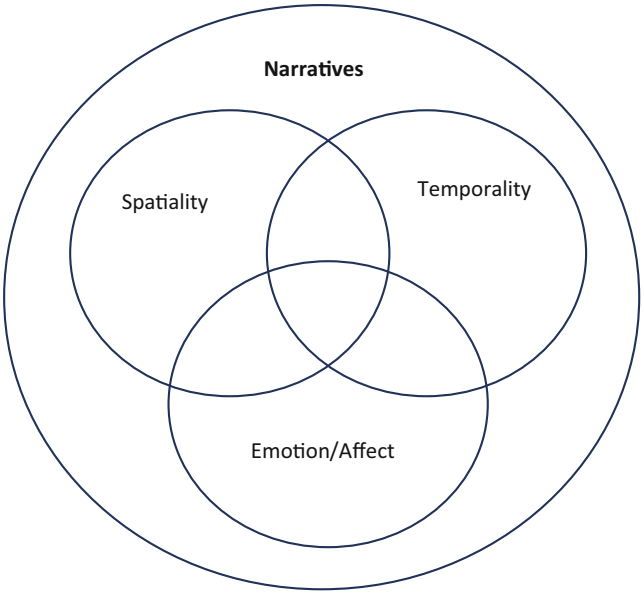


Figure 1 Impact dimensions of narratives in local negotiation processes

tors interpret change, assign responsibility, and imagine future development pathways (Somers 1994; Willett 2016: 436–437). This paper proposes a conceptual framework that examines these processes along three interrelated narrative dimensions – temporality, spatiality, and affect/emotion – which are introduced here as key analytical lenses for examining discursive negotiation processes in energy transitions and are elaborated throughout this section (Jarzebski 2020: 11) (see Figure 1).

Narratives organize sequences of events by selectively linking past experiences, present conditions, and anticipated futures. Through processes of emplotment, they create coherence and plausibility, thereby reducing complexity and providing orientation in situations of uncertainty (Gadinger/Jarzebski/Yildiz 2014b; Jarzebski 2015: 377; Groth 2019: 5). In doing so, narratives identify problems, attribute causality, and legitimize particular courses of action (Arnold 2012: 28). As such, narratives function as a key interface between interpretation and action, especially in contexts of socio-technical change such as energy transitions.

At the same time, narratives are inherently relational, dynamic and contested. They are co-constructed through ongoing processes of interpretation, negotiation, and reinterpretation, and are therefore continuously evolving. Multiple narratives can coexist, overlap or contradict, reflecting different positionalities, interests, and power relations (Gadinger/Jarzebski/Yildiz 2014a: 34). Their polyphonic character highlights their interpretive openness and political relevance, which are bridged by activating recipients' implicit knowledge and culturally shared repertoires, enhancing resonance and collective identification (Hochschild 2016; Willett 2016; Freistein/Gadinger/Unrau 2021: 108). From a relational perspective, narratives are embedded in broader socio-spatial contexts and both shape and are shaped by them (Jessop 2001). They connect individual and collective experiences to wider structural conditions, mediating between local agency and multi-level governance arrangements (Becker/Bues/Naumann 2016), and can thus be understood as both a medium and an outcome of political negotiation in processes of structural transformation.

These three dimensions structure the meaning-making work that narratives perform:

Temporality refers to how narratives link past experiences, present conditions, and future expectations. Actors selectively mobilize memory and project futures, constructing causal storylines that explain current situations and legitimize particular future pathways (Emirbayer/Mische 1998; Garud/Kumaraswamy/Karnøe 2010: 763). In this sense, narratives create a temporal bridge that interprets loss, articulates continuity or rupture, mobilizes visions of change and renders uncertain futures actionable (Arnold 2012; Jarva 2014; Willett 2016). This is especially relevant in transformation processes, where past trajectories and anticipated losses shape how future pathways are perceived and negotiated (Jarzebski 2015).

Spatiality captures how narratives embed transformation processes within specific places and scales. Through references to territorial identities, centre-periphery relations, and spatial imaginaries, narratives construct a relational understanding of place that shapes belonging, boundary-making, and claims to resources and recognition (Massey 1995; Paasi 2003; O'Dowd/Komarova 2013; Zerche 2022). In peripheralized regions in particular, narratives may reproduce or challenge dominant external representations, such as being 'left behind', thereby negotiating the symbolic and material significance of places, influencing both local self-perceptions and perceived capacities to act (Willett/Lang 2018: 259; MacKinnon/Kempton/O'Brien et al. 2022; Pike/Béal/Cauchi-Duval et al. 2024). Spatial references thus serve to legitimize development strategies and planning practices as well as position regions within broader socio-economic and political contexts (Albrecht/Kortelainen 2021; MacKinnon/Kempton/O'Brien et al. 2022).

Affect and emotion[1] highlight the role of feelings and affective attachments in narrative construction and reception (Freistein/Gadinger/Unrau 2021). Narratives mobilize emo-

[1] This paper does not distinguish analytically between affect and emotion, as both are examined in their articulation within local future narratives. It assumes that affects, like emotions, are not purely pre-discursive but contribute to the constitution of social relations (Bargetz/Eggers 2023).

tions such as fear, anger, hope, or care, which generate resonance, enable collective identification, and provide orientation by directing attention to relevant aspects of a given issue, thereby reducing complexity (Eggert/Zweck 2022: 91; Neuhaus 2022: 23). Emotions can be strategically deployed to stabilize particular interpretations, legitimize power relations, or foster resistance (Bargetz/Eggers 2023). These affective dynamics are central to understanding processes of acceptance, resistance, and collective mobilization.

By integrating these three dimensions, the framework provides a systematic approach to analysing how transformation processes are interpreted and contested, revealing how actors shape regional change and spatial planning practices (Anderson 2010; Willett 2016). In the context of energy transitions, narratives mediate not only conflicts over resources, infrastructures, and development pathways, but also struggles over participation, belonging, and perceived justice that formal governance instruments rarely capture (Bulkens/Minca/Muzaini 2015), including the affective and non-representational dimensions of how actors imagine and relate to possible futures (Marotta/Cummings 2019).

Building on Throgmorton's (2003) understanding of planning as "persuasive storytelling about the future" recent scholarship argues that spatial planning practices are inherently narrative and contested processes (Ameel 2021; Matthey/Ambal/Gaberell et al. 2023).[2] Which future narratives gain visibility, legitimacy, and influence is therefore always a question of power (Sandercock 2003; Ortiz 2023) and of the planning cultures that provide the institutional and cultural conditions under which narratives enable, constrain, or prevail over particular forms of future-making (Knieling/Othengrafen 2009; Reimer 2013). Moreover, narrative planning practices materialize in infrastructures, landscapes, and resource spaces that in turn produce their own stories to be retold or contested (Bridge/Gailing 2020; Ameel 2021).

3 Case studies: Local context of transformation

To further examine the transformation dynamics discussed above, we briefly contextualize the two structurally comparable yet contextually distinct regions (see Table 1). Both regions exhibit archetypal patterns of peripherality and 'left-behindness', characterized by long-term economic marginalization, demographic challenges, and structural dependencies, while differing in their historical trajectories and resource contexts (Velthuis/Le Petit-Guerin/Royer et al. 2023). While transformation dynamics unfold at the regional scale, their socio-political negotiation becomes particularly visible at the local level. The empirical analysis therefore focuses on the cities of Cáceres (Extremadura) and Zeitz (Saxony-Anhalt) and their surroundings, which serve as key local arenas in which the phase-in and phase-out of resource extraction are negotiated and unfold strong narrated storylines for regional development.

Cáceres, a provincial capital in Extremadura (western Spain), hosts one of the largest lithium deposits in Europe (Gourcerol/Gloaguen/Melleton et al. 2019) and has therefore become central to recent EU strategies – within what Riofrancos (2023) describes as the "security-sustainability nexus" – to secure lithium as a critical raw material for the energy transition. These efforts are particularly advanced through initiatives such as the European Green Deal and the EU-Critical Raw Materials Act (CRMA) (Voskoboynik/Andreucci 2022; Eyselein/Dorn 2025). While lithium extraction is framed politically as part of a sustainable transformation and 'green' industrial development, proposed mining and infrastructure projects in Cáceres have triggered intense local contestation over ecological impacts and biodiversity protection (Noever Castelos 2023; García-Arenal 2024).

These debates are deeply embedded in Extremadura's historical trajectory: Long-standing ownership of land structures dominated by large-scale landholders known as *señoritos*, economic marginalization, and political dependency on external actors continue to influence regional development dynamics (Beltrán Tapia/Díez-Minguela/Martinez-Galarraga et al. 2021). The region, often associated with stigmatizing labels such as "empty Spain" (Castelló 2023), is characterized by high unemployment, rural depopulation, and limited economic diversification. Despite accounting for 22 % of Spain's current solar power production, renewable growth has contributed little to benefit the local economy (Gurría Gascón/Nieto Masot 2020: 21).[3]

Zeitz, located in the Central German coal region in Saxony-Anhalt, is shaped by long-term processes of industrial restructuring, most recently linked to the phase-out of lignite coal. Although the economic importance of the lignite industry and its associated sectors have declined significantly in recent decades (Otto/Werner 2022: 154), it con-

[2] We use *governance* for the broader, multi-scalar distribution of authority over energy transitions (cf. Becker/Naumann 2017), and *planning* for the more specific institutional practices that translate governance decisions into spatial strategies (cf. Healey 2006). The two are analytically distinct but empirically entangled, which is why we frequently address them jointly.

[3] https://www.sistemaelectrico-ree.es/es/informe-de-energias-renovables/sol/potencia-instalada/solar-fotovoltaica-solpotencia (09.09.2026).

Table 1 Regional Cross-Case-Comparison Cáceres/Zeitz

Category	Cáceres (Extremadura, Spain)	Zeitz (Saxony-Anhalt, Germany)	Commonalities	Different Paths and Transformation Dynamics
Demography	**Population:** ~96,000 (city), ~400,000 (province); **Trend:** Strong population decline (especially rural areas), aging, outmigration of young people ("Empty Spain") despite university; **Unemployment:** ~20–25 % (regional)	**Population:** ~28,000 (city), ~120,000 (Burgenlandkreis district); **Trend:** Shrinkage since 1990 (-30 %), aging, outmigration of young people; **Unemployment:** ~8–10 % (regional, but structural underemployment)	Peripheralization: Both regions suffer from long-term outmigration, aging, and economic marginalization.	Scale and focus: **Cáceres** faces higher unemployment and rural depopulation; **Zeitz** experiences stronger urban shrinkage (post-industrial).
Economic Structures	**Traditional:** Agriculture, (large-scale landowners "señoritos"), livestock, cork and olive production; **Current:** Lithium mining (one of Europe's largest deposits) + processing, renewable energy (solar/wind farms), tourism (UNESCO World Heritage); historically poor economic region; stigmatization as "Empty Spain"	**Traditional:** Lignite coal and chemical industry, mechanical engineering; GDR era: highest employment and production rate; 1990s: deindustrialization after reunification, mass exodus; **Current:** Structural change due to coal phase-out (by 2038), sugar industry, renewable energy (wind, biomass), logistics.	Dependence on traditional industries, structural change driven by external impulses (EU funding, energy transition).	**Cáceres** shaped by tourism and agricultural oligarchy, recently focus on raw materials (lithium) and planned processing and space (renewables); **Zeitz** focused on chemical industry, lignite legacy and energy transition.
Politics	**Cáceres** has seen a steady alternation between socialist PSOE- and conservative PP-led city governments; the current mayor is from the PP; seats are largely divided between the PP and the PSOE. Extremadura has been governed by the PSOE for nearly 40 years. In 2023, there was a shift to the right in the regional elections, and the conservative PP and right-wing Vox made significant gains.	**Zeitz** has been led by a CDU mayor since 2016. Since the 2024 local elections, the far-right AfD has held the most seats with 30 %, followed by the CDU (20 %) and the Independent Voters. Current projections for the state elections in Saxony-Anhalt put the AfD at around 41 % of the vote, more than double its 2021 results (20,8 %)	In both cities and regions, a political shift to the right has been evident since the last elections (2023/2024).	**Zeitz**: long-standing, structural dissatisfaction fuelling the growing shift to the right. **Cáceres**: missing stable majority for current mining and infrastructure projects and environmental protection
Resources and infrastructure	Lithium deposits (significant for Europe), planned converting and processing, solar and wind energy potential, agricultural land; **Cultural:** UNESCO World Heritage (Cáceres Old Town), **Transport:** good highway access (A66), but poor public transport	Lignite coal (being phased out), chemical raw materials, hydrogen, agricultural products (sugar beet); **Cultural:** Industrial heritage (e.g.), mining tradition; space; **Transport:** weak public transport in rural areas, good rail connection (Leipzig, Halle, Naumburg)	Resource wealth, but contested use (lithium vs. coal). Many transport and industrial infrastructures planned, due to fiscal and economic crisis future uncertain	Sustainability: **Cáceres** resources for energy transition; **Zeitz** transitioning from coal to green chemical industry and renewables
Transformation Processes	Lithium Mining: EU Critical Raw Materials Strategy (CRMA), Green Deal – but local resistance (environmental concerns, biodiversity); Renewable Energy: Boom in solar/wind, but low local value creation; Tourism: Cultural tourism as a niche	Coal Phase-Out: 40 billion Euro in structural aid (federal), new industrial settlements (e.g., hydrogen, recycling); Renewable Energy: Wind farms, biomass; Chemical Industry: Shift to green chemistry (e.g., PKN Orlen)	External control (EU/federal government), conflicts between economy and ecology, search for new economic sectors. Social resistance and fatigue to transformation	Actors and pace: **Cáceres**, EU and private investors, slowed down transition (local resistance); **Zeitz** federal and state government, faster transition (due to funding).

Sources: Sander/Schüler/Siebenmorgen (2021); Görmar/Kinossian (2022); Noever Castelos (2023)
https://statistik.arbeitsagentur.de/Auswahl/raeumlicher-Geltungsbereich/Politische-Gebietsstruktur/Bundeslaender/Sachsen-Anhalt.html (09.09.2026)
https://www.juntaex.es/w/datos-paro-mes-marzo?inheritRedirect=true (09.09.2026)
https://zeitz.allris.cloud/public/gr020?GRLFDNR=1 (09.09.2026)
https://www.ayto-caceres.es/ayuntamiento/corporacion-municipal/ (09.09.2026)
https://www.infratest-dimap.de/umfragen-analysen/bundeslaender/sachsen-anhalt/laendertrend/2026/mai/ (09.09.2026)

tinues to be closely tied to local identity (Sander/Schüler/Siebenmorgen 2021; Görmar/Kinossian 2022). As in many other East German cities, the prospect of renewed structural change is associated with past experiences, as the structural rupture following German reunification in 1989/1990 remains present in the region's cultural memory (Sander 2022: 187–189; Rood/Schmidt/Zabel 2020: 62). The profound processes of deindustrialization, population decline, and economic stagnation that followed the post-socialist restructuring are still reflected today in the continued outmigration of younger populations, demographic shrinkage, persistent vacancy rates, and limited municipal fiscal capacity. In recent years, however, a different dynamic has emerged: space pioneers, creatives and returnees have taken advantage of affordable rents and vacant space, using endogenous resources and networks to foster cultural innovation (Görmar/Kinossian 2022: 280–281).

The German government's decision in 2020 to phase out lignite-fired power generation by 2038 has initiated a new phase of transformation. Affected regions receive federal structural support, totalling 40 billion Euro (Sander 2022: 183). Municipalities such as Zeitz are required to elaborate and implement new development strategies under conditions of limited funding periods and local capacities (Haas/Neupert-Doppler 2022: 361). These strategies place particular emphasis in attracting business: while industrial parks get recently expanded and new companies are highly courted to settle, socio-cultural initiatives and the retail sector struggle for funding and survival (Kahlfuß/Everts/Pampus 2026).

4 Methodology: Exploring narratives in energy transitions

Our research interest lay in understanding politically induced energy transition and decisions made at European and national level from the perspective of those affected in their everyday environments (Harrison/Birks/Franklin et al. 2017: 6). We adopted an exploratory qualitative research design aimed at reconstructing how individuals interpret, narrate and experience transformation processes. The paper employs a multiple case study design, focusing on two case studies (Zeitz in Saxony-Anhalt and Cáceres in Extremadura) as analytically contrasting examples of non-metropolitan areas in transition, allowing us to examine narrative negotiation at the opposite ends of the same resource-extraction cycle.

To capture the dynamics in energy transitions and their discursive negotiation, we opted for triangulation, using qualitative methods (Grounded Theory and narrative analysis) and empirical data (Czarniawska 2004; Flick 2011). Between September 2022 and May 2023, a total of 31 semi-structured interviews – combining face-to-face, group and walking interviews – and seven participant observations were conducted as part of the broader research projects from which this paper's comparative analysis draws. Of these, 14 interviews and two participant observations were integrated into a single comparative framework for this paper and constitute its data corpus.[4] Due to the research agenda the interviewees were local and regional actors engaged with transformation processes in various capacities. They were identified through desktop research and expanded via snowball sampling, ensuring both targeted coverage of key institutional positions and access to less visible local actors. Interviewees occupy distinct positions within these processes – representing politics, science, business and civil society – selected to provide maximum contrast across the perspectives on challenges and opportunities associated with structural transformations in both regions. The 14 interviews were distributed across four actor groups: politics (5), business and industry (5), civil society (3), and science (1) (for an overview see Table 2).

Following an iterative research design inspired by Grounded Theory methodology (Glaser/Strauss 1967), concepts and categories were developed inductively through open coding in MAXQDA (Przyborski/Wohlrab-Sahr 2021: 266). In a subsequent step, the empirical material was analysed using narrative analysis, drawing on political science approaches (Gadinger/Jarzebski/Yildiz 2014b; Jarzebski 2020) and complemented by a human-geographical perspective on the socio-spatial embeddedness of narratives (Massey 1995; O'Dowd/Komarova 2013; Willett 2016). The analysis examines both narrative structures and narrative processes, focusing on how meaning is produced and communicated within local transformation debates (Jarzebski 2020: 66–68).

To ensure comparability across cases, the empirical analysis reconstructs key narrative elements, including causal plots, problem definitions, actors and their attributed roles, as well as the spatial and temporal settings (Squire/Andrews/Davis et al. 2014: 12; Di Giulio/Defila 2022: 11). It further considers place-based identities and the affective resonance of narratives including overlaps, tensions, and discontinuities across different narratives (Gadinger/Jarzebski/Yildiz 2014a: 34). In addition, Table 1 contextualizes both case studies and provides a cross-case comparison.

[4] For the purposes of this study, all interviews were anonymized and assigned a corresponding code as well as a number (C for Cáceres and Z for Zeitz). The distribution across the two regions (four interviews in Zeitz, ten in Cáceres) reflects the different research contexts from which the underlying fieldwork originated.

Table 2 List of interviews and participant observations

Interview and Participant Observation ID	Occupation and function	Date of interview / place
Z1	Regional planning	05.09.2022 / Zeitz
Z2	Entrepreneur and management	05.09.2022 / Zeitz
Z3	Management local housing corporation	07.09.2022 / Zeitz
Z4	Management municipal project	09.09.2022 / Zeitz
C2	Member of the regional government	17.02.2023 / Cáceres
C18	Researcher, University of Extremadura	07.03.2023 / Cáceres
C24	Anti-mining activist, local initiative	14.04.2023 / Cáceres
C25	Member of the regional parliament	13.06.2023 / online
C26	City council Cáceres	17.05.2023 / Cáceres
C27	Ecological farmer	22.05.2023 / Cáceres
C21	Leader manager	04.05.2023 / Placencia
C14	Mining expert, regional NGO	22.05.2023 / online
C19	Executive Management mining company	13.03.2023 / Cáceres
C20	Member of chamber of industry and commerce	26.04.2023 / Cáceres
B1	Workshop with local stakeholders	03.11.2022 / Zeitz
B2	Workshop "Future projects with territorial impact for Extremadura" with stakeholders (Research, Entrepreneur, Politics)	17.02.2023 / Cáceres

5 Findings: Narrative negotiations of structural transformation

The narrative analysis identified six distinct local narratives related to transformation processes in Cácares and Zeitz. These narratives differ in their thematic focus, temporal orientation and the actors mobilizing them, yet all articulate locally situated interpretations of current transition processes. In the following section, these narratives are introduced and substantiated with empirical material.

5.1 Zeitz (Saxony-Anhalt)

5.1.1 Narrative of loss and dependence

A dominant interpretative framework shaping place identity and local interpretations of socio-economic change in Zeitz is the narrative of loss and dependence, rooted in the aftermath of German reunification. The storyline centres on the abrupt transition from a socialist planned economy to a capitalist market system, which triggered rapid deindustrialization, unemployment, and outmigration. For many residents, the dissolution of industrial structures meant that "life trajectories were completely disrupted" (Z2). Within this narrative plot, former industrial enterprises function as key symbolic protagonists: once sources of stability, pride, and identity, their collapse is interpreted as both an economic and a social rupture.

The narrative is structured through retrospective references to the socialist past, which serves as a benchmark for evaluating present condition and future prospects (Massey 1995). These experiences are embedded in the broader meta-narrative of a failed post-socialist transformation in Eastern Germany (Blümel 2021). A local planning staff member summarizes the lasting impact of these experiences on local outlooks: "The average person in Zeitz who experienced the GDR and reunification finds it difficult to look positively into the future because they know things used to be better and easier than today" (Z1).

Current challenges such as demographic decline, vacancy, and infrastructure deterioration are thus framed as the continuation of this trajectory. Through processes of socialization, affective memories such as "*Wendeschmerz*" (the pain of reunification) (Z1) are transmitted and incorporated into place-based identities, contributing to a shared sense of vulnerability toward externally initiated change (Kubiak 2020; Bogner/Kump/Beekman et al. 2024).

In the context of the coal phase-out, this narrative gains renewed relevance, as planned structural change is frequently framed as a struggle for recognition, resources, and influence, as local actors seek to position themselves within externally defined decision-making structures (Gürtler/Luh/Staemmler 2020; Schiedlowski 2025).

5.1.2 Industrial region narrative

A second storyline conveys a future-oriented vision of economic stability through the continuation of the region's industrial legacy. In contrast to the loss narrative, it depicts the energy transition as an opportunity to restore prosperity

through renewed industrial development. As one interviewee states, the transition is largely perceived as "an economic process [...] mainly aimed at creating new industrial jobs" (Z4).

The narrative builds on the region's industrial heritage as Central German Coal Mining Region, with lignite ("coal") functioning as both economic driver and symbolic foundation. Coal extraction enabled a diversified industrial landscape, including chemical production, and manufacturing. As one interviewee notes, "everything was built on the lignite [...] and when that collapses, a very, very large gap emerges" (Z3).

In the context of the coal phase-out, the narrative translates this legacy into a post-fossil future. Renewable technologies such as hydrogen, electromobility, or bioeconomy are framed as opportunities to maintain industrial competitiveness while achieving climate goals (Guske/Jacob/Hirschnitz-Garbers et al. 2019; Sander 2022). Central to this storyline is the symbolic role of employment as the primary metric through which the success of structural change is evaluated: "the currency that people calculate in here is jobs" (Z1).

The narrative also reflects and stabilizes existing power relations and institutional path dependencies typical of old industrial regions (Wirth/Černic Mali/Fischer 2012). Established actors, particularly the regional lignite company MIBRAG, occupy central roles, appearing both as "victims" of energy transition policies and as "defenders" of local employment (Schweiger/Schecke/Bönisch 2019: 141–144). This indicates to close networks between industry, municipalities, and political actors that reinforce a shared commitment to preserving the region's industrial profile.

5.1.3 Open space narrative

A third storyline outlines an alternative development path that reinterprets vacancy and unused buildings as resources for urban development – as the city's "unique selling point" (Z2). In contrast to the previous narratives, vacancy is not merely an indicator of decline but a potential for experimentation. This perspective is linked to Zeitz's spatial position within Leipzig-Halle metropolitan region. The proximity to larger urban centres is seen as advantageous, as affordable housing and available space may attract new residents. As one project manager puts it: "There is space here [...] and combined with the trend of some people moving away from larger cities, this could represent an opportunity" (Z4).

The central protagonists of this narrative are civic actors, including creatives and so-called spatial pioneers, who appropriate unused spaces and initiate new development pathways (Görmar/Kinossian 2022: 280; Noack/Schmidt 2016: 156). The narrative emphasizes cultural production, endogenous development and local experimentation as alternative pathways within the energy transition, centred on the cultural and creative economy (Kozina/Bole/Tiran 2021).

These ideas have been partially incorporated in municipal planning strategies, which describe Zeitz as a "city of open spaces" (Stadt Zeitz 2020). At the same time, interpretations differ: While civil society actors mobilize the narrative to counter stigmatizing representations, municipal actors employ it in place-marketing strategies (Willett 2016; Groth 2019). Generational differences further shape its resonance, with younger actors perceiving vacancy as opportunity space and older residents associating it with decline and post-socialist transformation.

5.2 Cáceres (Extremadura)

5.2.1 Narrative of colonial exploitation ("Extremadura saqueada")

A prominent narrative in Cáceres outlines planned lithium mining, and related energy projects as a continuation of a colonial model, wherein peripheral regions serve as resource frontiers or "green sacrifice zones" supplying raw materials and energy to urban centres in Spain, Europe, and global markets (Zografos/Robbins 2020; Andreucci/García López/Radhuber et al. 2023). It invokes past experiences of extraction and socio-economic marginalization to highlight persistent structural inequalities in the current regional transition process. As an opposition politician observes: "Once again, we are giving away our strategic resources [...] to a private market that has interests other than the common good of the region" (C25).

While representatives of the regional business community expect economic gains from incoming investors, opposition groups question employment promises and point to unequal profit distribution. As one activist notes, "the stock market values of these minerals ultimately determine the future of our lives" (C24). By linking current developments to earlier extractive dynamics, the narrative suggests that the green transition reproduces colonial extraction dynamics, where local development is held hostage to speculative global capital (Andreucci/García López/Radhuber et al. 2023).

By recalling past injustices and uncertain futures, the narrative mobilizes strong affective responses such as distrust, frustration and feelings of being economically and politically bypassed – thereby reinforcing perceptions of dependency and marginalization (Noever Castelos 2023: 5).

5.2.2 Narrative of green industrialization

The narrative of "green industrialization" frames Extremadura as a region at a developmental turning point: renewable energy production, lithium extraction and related industries are presented as opportunities for place-based

economic development and to position Extremadura as a leading region of the green transformation (Barandiarán 2019; Noever Castelos 2023). As one regional politician asserts, the region must not "miss the fourth industrial revolution" and should seize the opportunity to break with its colonial development model (C2).

Within this storyline, lithium functions as key driver of modernization, associated with industrial growth and technological progress (Barandiarán 2019; Voskoboynik/Andreucci 2022; Saleth/Varov 2023). At the same time, it refers to a collective identity shaped by historical marginalization while presenting green industrialization as a unique pathway to greater economic autonomy. Socio-spatial characteristics, such as low population density, peripheral location and demographic decline ("the only thing growing is our cemeteries" C2) are invoked to discursively legitimize extractive development as a necessary pathway (Voskoboynik/Andreucci 2022).

In doing so, it mobilizes affective attachments such as regional pride and patriotism, linking industrialization to the rectification of past injustices (Koch/Perreault 2019; Andreucci/García López/Radhuber et al. 2023).

5.2.3 Narrative of the ecological alternative path ("Ecologismo")

In contrast, the "Ecologismo" narrative promotes an alternative pathway centred on environmental conservation and sustainable development. Drawing on principles of ecological economics, it challenges growth-oriented development models and reframes the region's non-industrialized status as an asset.

The narrative is primarily mobilized by mining opponents, environmental activists, ecological farmers and critical local politicians in Cáceres who question the short-term economic promises associated with lithium mining and other green industrial projects. The storyline emphasizes the protection of natural resources, regenerative agriculture, traditional farming practices, and the development of (eco-)tourism as alternative economic pathways (Araújo/Bento/Silva 2022). Particular concern is directed toward environmental risks such as water scarcity, biodiversity loss, and landscape degradation, as a city councillor notes, "we have little water, the summer months are getting longer […] the last thing we need to prepare the city for the future is a mine" (C26). This points to the discrepancy between the classification of lithium as a "critical raw material" under the EU energy strategy and the fact that, at the local level, access to vital resources such as water is considered critical (Eyselein/Dorn 2025). Supranational requirements for resource security thus appear to take structural precedence over local survival needs, engendering experiences of powerlessness and perceptions of external control among local populations (Noever Castelos 2023; Riofrancos 2023).

By valorizing Extremadura's rural heritage and landscapes, environmental resources and agricultural traditions, the narrative constructs a place-based identity grounded in ecological stewardship and local knowledge. At the same time, it mobilizes affective responses of care, responsibility, and ethical obligation toward nature and future generations.

6 Discussion: Cross-Regional analysis

Despite their different historical and geographical contexts, Zeitz and Cáceres share a crucial structural condition: both regions are widely perceived and narrated as peripheral territories within broader national and European economic and political structures. This perceived peripheralization provides the analytical point of departure for understanding how local actors articulate, negotiate and challenge future visions in the context of energy transitions and their governance (Kühn 2015; Görmar/Lang 2019).

Across both cases, narratives structure how transformation is interpreted by linking past experiences with present uncertainties and future expectations. In Zeitz, references to post-socialist transformation are closely tied to emotional experiences of loss, which shape interpretations of the ongoing coal phase-out. Similarly, in Cáceres, narratives of colonial exploitation draw on longstanding histories of extraction and dependency to frame current mining and "green" energy projects as a continuation of unequal development. These temporal linkages are interwoven with affective dimensions, as narratives connect individual experiences with collective memories of loss, thereby contributing to their durability and resonance (Görmar 2023). In both regions, past experiences are projected onto anticipated futures: In Zeitz, expectations of renewed decline are linked to previous deindustrialization, while in Cáceres, concerns about extractive dependency are extended to future mining scenarios. In this sense, "futures of the past" (Nettelbladt 2025) continue to structure present expectations and delimit perceived possibilities of transformation. At the same time, alternative future pathways, such as the narratives of open space or *Ecologismo*, emerge from shared historical reference points, focusing on civic engagement and endogenous potential. The open space narrative illustrates this in two ways: it shows how such alternatives can be absorbed into formal planning strategies (Ameel 2021; Bridge/Gailing 2020), and how its meanings and interpretations can shift depending on which actors mobilize and appropriate it, reflected in the selective use of plot sequences, differing narrative directions, and the polyphonic visions of development pathways it conveys (Garud/Kumaraswamy/Karnøe 2010).

Spatiality proves equally consequential in shaping how transformation is negotiated. Narratives play a central role in legitimizing competing development and planning pathways by connecting specific spatial characteristics, such as vacancy, resource availability, or ecological value, to particular visions of the future. Temporal settings are inherently interlaced with spatial references that indicate territorial positioning, peripherality and external control over governance decisions (Bridge/Gailing 2020). In Zeitz, the industrial region narrative draws on the collective memory of a "proud industrial city" to stabilize existing power relations. In Cáceres, the green industrialization narrative frames lithium extraction as a unique pathway to economic growth and emancipation from external dependency, linking industrialization to the rectification of past injustices (Koch/Perreault 2019; Andreucci/García López/Radhuber et al. 2023). These dynamics unfold across multiple governance scales: In Cáceres, EU-level policy frameworks construct lithium as a critical resource, thereby shaping local framings and legitimizing extractive development (Eyselein/Dorn 2025). In Zeitz, national phase-out policies contribute to the symbolic devaluation of coal, despite its enduring local significance for regional identity. In both cases, local narratives thus gain or lose force depending on whether they align with meta-narratives circulating at higher governance scales. In addition, the actual socio-economic significance of the resource is secondary to its discursive construction: Spatial meanings and resource values are externally imposed rather than locally planned or determined (Otto/Werner 2022; Eyselein/Dorn 2025).

Within these constraints, actors' reference different spatial scales to gain recognition, resources, and political leverage (Massey 1995; Becker/Naumann 2017). In Cáceres, pro-extraction actors draw on resource regionalism to frame lithium as a regional asset, while oppositional actors invoke territorial rights against externally driven extraction (Koch/Perreault 2019). In Zeitz, actors invoke regional identity itself as a resource, framing the decline of the lignite sector as a collective loss that demands recognition and compensation at higher governance levels. Through these scalar discursive practices, local interests are projected onto higher governance levels, while reproducing established power structures and path dependencies (Buschmann/Oels 2019; Sander 2022), contributing to forms of discursive lock-in (Barandiarán 2019; Garud/Kumaraswamy/Karnøe 2010). As a result, narratives proposing a continuation of existing development paths tend to be perceived as more plausible and compatible – measured not only by their strategic future potential, but also by whether they are incorporated as part of regional identity (Paasi 2013).

These spatial and temporal dynamics are inseparable from processes of identity construction and affective mobilization. Narratives of being 'left behind' or peripheral may reinforce experiences of marginalization but are also actively contested. When external representations do not align with local self-understandings, they risk becoming stigmatizing, thereby reproducing power relations and constraining regional future visions (Eriksson/Pristed Nielsen/Paulgaard 2015; Görmar/Lang 2019). Through counternarratives, local actors seek to reshape both the symbolic and material trajectories of their regions (Willett/Lang 2018; Albrecht/Kortelainen 2021), positioning themselves as victims of exploitation, agents of sovereign development, or stewards of ecological and cultural resources, while relationally stabilizing these identities through references to external "others" such as investors, state institutions, or metropolitan centres (Eriksson/Pristed Nielsen/Paulgaard 2015). Narratives thus actively shape how regions imagine themselves and their futures – constructing collective senses of belonging and reinforcing imaginaries of "we" and "them" (Somers 1994). In Zeitz, emotions such as loss, resignation, and scepticism dominate (Görmar 2023: 1592), while in Cáceres, indignation, protest, and care are particularly salient. In both cases, the narratives also mobilize future-oriented affects such as hope, pride, and ambition, enabling proactive engagement in the transformation process. These affective dynamics not only legitimize specific development pathways but shape how local actors perceive and exercise their capacity to influence change. At the same time, they configure political orientations: feelings of being 'left behind,' combined with experiences of loss and insecurity, may contribute to political disillusionment and far-right attitudes (Mullis/Miggelbrink 2022). However, narratively constructed causal links between socio-economic insecurity and political attitudes risk oversimplifying complex processes and reinforcing spatial stereotypes (Salzmann 2021).

Taken together, the interplay of temporality, spatiality and affect gives rise to contested questions of justice, distribution and recognition. Narratives articulate conflicts over who benefits from transformation, who bears its socio-ecological costs, and whose voices count in shaping its direction. While debates in Cáceres foreground environmental justice and the risk of emerging "green sacrifice zones", narratives in Zeitz emphasize procedural justice, particularly participation, transparency, and equitable access to funding and governance decisions. In both contexts, struggles over material resources are inseparable from demands for symbolic and affective recognition, underlining that transformation is experienced foremost as a question of fairness, dignity, and belonging, not merely of economic restructuring or technical planning.

7 Conclusion

Drawing on two case studies – the coal phase-out in Zeitz and the anticipated lithium extraction in Cáceres: This paper has demonstrated that energy transitions in peripheral regions are not only socio-technical and institutional processes, but fundamentally narrative ones. How futures are articulated, contested, and appropriated at the local level shapes what becomes thinkable, desirable, and politically actionable, and thus constitutes a decisive yet often overlooked dimension of transformation governance and spatial planning practices (Throgmorton 2003; Matthey/Ambal/Gaberell et al. 2023).

Our cross-case analysis highlights that the three narrative dimensions of impact – temporality, spatiality, and affect – proposed in our conceptual approach are deeply intertwined in shaping how future visions are articulated and negotiated. Together, they structure processes of meaning-making through which development pathways are legitimized and place-based identities and agency are (re)constructed.

A central finding is that contestations over spatial future visions are simultaneously negotiations over the meaning of the past. "Futures of the past" (Nettelbladt 2025) continue to shape current expectations and constrain the perceived possibilities for change. These forms of discursive lock-in make established development trajectories, aligning with broader meta-narratives circulating at a higher scale, appear more plausible than alternative ones – despite polyphonic and continuously changing local future visions. In peripheral contexts marked by experiences of limited agency and asymmetrical governance structures, this dynamic is particularly pronounced: It shapes not only what is narrated, but whose narratives prevail and how they translate – or fail to translate – into concrete development pathways (Eriksson/Pristed Nielsen/Paulgaard 2015; Görmar/Lang 2019).

These dynamics carry direct consequences for justice and legitimacy: technical or political progress does not automatically translate into locally perceived legitimacy (Mundaca/Busch/Schwer 2018; Naumann/Becker/Bruns 2025), particularly when immediate and tangible burdens contrast with long-term, largely abstract and uncertain collective benefits. This temporal imbalance is made visible by narratives which influence whether transformation is approached as an opportunity for agency and reorientation or as a source of uncertainty, loss, and resistance. Conflicts over who holds agency and decision-making power are therefore constitutive of energy transitions, shaping them as much affectively as institutionally. A governance and planning approach that treats narratives merely as communicative instruments risks underestimating their role in shaping how transformation is experienced and contested. This points to the need for more inclusive, participatory, spatially sensitive, and genuinely open-ended energy transition governance in line with just transition principles (Kolde/Wagner 2021; Kelly/Mbah 2024), one that structurally grasps affective and identity-building aspects, takes into account marginalized storylines, remains flexible toward the plurality of local futures, and challenges entrenched power asymmetries (Marotta/Cummings 2019; Ortiz 2023).

In sum, this paper has shown that the future visions circulating in energy transition regions are inherently plural, contested, and continuously reshaped. Which of these visions gains institutional traction depends on the narrative negotiation processes, not solely on formal governance structures. Ultimately, these narrative contestations decide which stories about loss, continuity, and renewal come to define the region's future.

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