

Alternative policy narratives of the future of climate change: Analyzing Finland's energy and climate strategy and news reports

Marjukka Parkkinen¹  | Suvi Vikström^{2,3}

¹Finland Futures Research Centre, University of Turku, Turku School of Economics, Turku, Finland

²Finnish Environment Institute Syke, Societal Change Unit, Helsinki, Finland

³University of Eastern Finland, Faculty of Social Sciences and Business Studies, Joensuu, Finland

Correspondence

Marjukka Parkkinen, Finland Futures Research Centre, University of Turku, Turku School of Economics, Turku 20400, Finland.

Email: marjukka.parkkinen@utu.fi

Funding information

Academy of Finland, Grant/Award Number: 325207 and 325208

Abstract

In this article, we examine the ways in which the futures of climate change and the climate change policy process are constructed as narratives—both explicitly and implicitly—in two different yet interconnected contexts that shape public climate discourse and debate: foresight-based political decision-making and journalism. The featured case is the National Energy and Climate Strategy of Finland for 2030. We employ and expand the Narrative Policy Framework to better understand the co-existent, implicit narratives of the future in the contexts of policy and media. We construct two co-existing yet contradictory underlying narratives of the future of climate change and climate policy. Our approach reveals that the prevailing master narrative of a desirable future is challenged by a co-existing counter narrative where policies in the energy and climate strategy prioritize shorter-term policy interests over climate change. Building on these findings, we argue that, in climate policy communication, communicators convey futures through narratives—both explicitly, as descriptions of what is perceived, hoped, and anticipated to happen, and implicitly, as the sum of the parts included and excluded.

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KEYWORDS

climate policy, future, media, narrative policy framework

INTRODUCTION

The scientific meaning of climate change—a global phenomenon of increasing average global temperature that occurs decades in the past and at least decades into the future—is not something that individuals can experience as such. The collective meaning of climate change is not only, or even primarily, understood through science, as it is embedded with the conceptualisations, memories, and presentiments through which people make sense of climate change (Jasanoff, 2010). The ways in which anthropogenic climate change is portrayed in climate communication are closely connected to how people ascribe meaning to climate change (Brüggemann & Rödder, 2020; Fløttum, 2017). Politics and journalism, in particular, represent spheres of communication that shape climate discourse and debate (Boykoff, 2011; Brüggemann & Engesser, 2017). Local, national, and global levels interact in both journalism and politics, creating a web of complex interactions that are further influenced by and connected to climate science.

One of the key nodes in this web is national-level strategic discussions, where local, national, and global discourses on the future of climate change meet. In this article, we examine how, by whom, and for whom the futures of climate change and its mitigation are constructed in climate policy communication: namely, Finland's national climate and energy strategy, as well as news media reports on the strategy. We use futures in plural to highlight the co-existence of several possible and sometimes contradictory trajectories. We argue that, in climate policy communication, futures are conveyed through narratives—both explicitly, as descriptions of what is perceived, hoped, and anticipated to happen, and implicitly, as a sum of the parts included and excluded. Although climate strategies imagine—or calculate—different futures with explicit policy devices such as scenarios, we are curious to see what kinds of implicit futures coexist with the explicit, foregrounded, and official future.

Our understanding of climate change both informs and is informed by future-thinking-based narrative communication (Coulter et al., 2019). In policy communication, narratives are powerful tools that enable sense-making by representing accounts of the past, present, and future of complex phenomena. The narrative form is significantly important for the study of political discourse because of its capacity to manipulate public opinion (De Fina, 2018). Public policy addresses phenomena that are relevant to societal development and change, and the formulation of policy narratives is expected to impact its audience (Smith-Walter & Jones, 2020).

Despite the important role of narratives in prospective decision-making, imagined futures have attracted less attention in the social sciences, despite the necessity of a novel focus on the relationships between narrative sense-making and prospective social action (Andersen et al., 2020). Furthermore, the social construction behind sense-making processes has not been investigated, despite the plethora of conceptual tools used to discuss ideas related to the future—social imaginaries, futures images, and scenarios, to name a few.

We aim to fill this research gap by developing an analytical framework to examine policy narratives with a focus on alternative accounts of the future. The case investigated is Finland's latest National Energy and Climate Strategy for 2030. The data consists of the National Energy and Climate Strategy document released in 2017 (Huttunen, 2017) and online news media reports

covering the strategy three weeks before and after its publication. The purpose of the strategy is to allow Finland to reach the energy and climate targets specified by the EU and the Finnish Government for 2030, and to achieve an 80%–95% reduction in CO₂ emissions by 2050. The media data were gathered from the news websites of the Finnish public broadcasting company (*Yle*) and *Helsingin Sanomat* (HS), the most widely read newspaper in Finland.

Finnish climate policy and communication provide an interesting case study, as Finland has been considered a pioneer in foresight-based policies. The media system in Finland is characterized by the relatively strong position of its quality press and a high level of trust toward the media, which are associated with the Finnish liberal democratic policy system that appreciates freedom of expression, transparency of the civil service, and a low level of corruption (Lyytimäki, 2023).

With qualitative content analysis, we examine the ways in which “futures” are used in climate policy communication in two different yet interconnected contexts: the governmental energy and climate strategy and the news reports on the strategy. We ask what types of alternative narratives concerning the future of climate change and climate policy, if any, are embedded in the strategy and the media.

To compare the narratives of the future across two different contexts, we first identify and categorize the different narrative building blocks, or *elements*, that operate in the strategy and the news reports, either supporting or resisting the main setting of the policy issue. This part of the analysis builds on the tools from the Narrative Policy Framework (NPF) (Jones et al., 2014; Shanahan et al., 2018; Smith-Walter & Jones, 2020). The NPF regards policy realities as socially constructed and focuses on assigned meanings, interpretations, and definitions (Jones, 2018).

For many aspects, the agenda of this study remains in familiar territories for the NPF (see Schlaufer et al., 2022): it is set in liberal democracy, it focuses on a single (European) country where NPF has been applied (Lyytimäki, 2023; Peltomaa, 2018; Peltomaa et al., 2020); it uses policy documents and media as data sources, and it investigates environmental policy, a field that has been the most popular policy field within NPF scholars up to date (Schlaufer et al., 2022). In recent NPF studies, scholars have shown that the NPF has neither been utilized for its full potential to study the aspects of temporality (Rupinsky et al., 2023), nor does it distinguish the policy substance and process (Kuenzler & Stauffer, 2022), both of which are at the core of strategic policy-making. Thus, this article tests and develops additions to the framework to better understand the co-existent, implicit narratives of the future in policy communication. First, we add two character categories to the analytical framework to propose a more precise temporal analysis of the narrative as well as a separation of the policy process and substance. Second, we construct two implicit alternative narratives of the future of climate change and climate change policy from these elements, in accordance with how they support or resist the main setting of the policy. The first extracted narrative is the culturally dominant master narrative, in which Finland successfully reaches its different climate targets. The second is a counter narrative, in which Finland prioritizes its shorter-term policy interests over climate change.

The next section outlines our theoretical framework for arguing the premises of our approach to narratives. It elaborates on the data, case, and analytical framework built on the NPF. In the third section, we present the results of our analysis: the categorized narrative elements, followed by two narratives of the future. We conclude our article with a discussion on the study of implicit and explicit narratives of the future in two different narrative contexts.

THEORY, DATA, AND METHOD

Locating alternative futures in policy narratives

Our study is based on the idea that narratives play a significant role in policy communication because they are used to construct futures. Uprichard (2011, Introduction, para. 3) notes that, for studying social objects in the present, acknowledging narratives of the future is vital, as “[...]the way the future of a social object is perceived feeds back onto how it is constructed in the present.” Most importantly, the social value of a story emerges from its capacity to affect the future (Andersen et al., 2020). Policy narratives are action-oriented as the language may shape and construct the world more than it corresponds to or represents it (Miller, 2020). Narratives have existential power, as they help us to understand what is possible (Meretoja, 2021). Simply put, future realities are embedded in present narratives as descriptions of what could and should be.

In the social sciences, there are several competing definitions of what a narrative is. However, episodes, interconnections, and temporal sequences are considered to be at the core of narrative analysis (Bryman, 2004). Narratives can refer to both concrete, temporally connected sequences and the more abstract cultural models underlying these concrete sequences (Meretoja, 2021). In this article, we are particularly interested in abstract narrative accounts. In politics, plans not only describe the future but also shape the future they describe.

In essence, the interpretation of narratives requires the acceptance of multiple perspectives embedded in the text (Miller, 2020). To enable a future-oriented examination of climate policy narratives in societal sense-making, it is necessary to acknowledge the co-existence of several, even contradictory, narratives within policy communication. As climate policy and its measures are conducted at the intersection of local, national, and international interests, these futures are contested. Thus, several different, alternative, and even contradictory futures may be simultaneously narrated in climate policy communication. We seek to clarify this through the concepts of implicit master narratives and counter narratives. According to Hyvärinen (2021, p. 27), master narratives “rather resemble abstractions of narratives than real, tellable, and recognizable stories”. They are “public dominant discourses about particular social issues” (De Fina, 2018, p. 236), or “abstractions that need to be constructed from concrete narratives, as an underlying script that the counter-narrative projects and resists” (Meretoja, 2021, p. 37). As collective representations, master narratives—utilized here in the sense of culturally dominant narratives (see Meretoja, 2021)—have the power to become frames that guide the ways in which individual stories are interpreted and understood (De Fina, 2018). Thus, in the context of political communication, the analysis of master and counter narratives explicitly becomes the analysis of the power that affects the future.

Meretoja (2021) further proposes a distinction between explicit and implicit master and counter narratives. Although explicit narratives are stories of concrete material form, implicit narratives are sense-making models underlying the explicit narratives (ibid.). This classification provides a suitable framework for analyzing climate change policy narratives. Climate change is a profoundly interconnected and complex policy issue that requires coordinated transition in several sectors as well as consideration and reconciliation of local, national, and international interests across varying time frames. According to Van Assche et al. (2020, p. 4), “[l]ong-term perspectives exist in society at large (e.g., long-term perspectives relating to global climate change), within the governance system as a whole (the climate governance

system) and within distinct domains of governance (e.g., renewable energy).” Because of this interconnectedness, it is worthwhile to critically examine the sum of these parts by analyzing the implicit sense-making models underlying the explicit accounts of the future. In the latter part of the analysis, we construct an implicit master narrative and a counter narrative from the data.

Case and datasets

The datasets used in this article comprise the strategy document, i.e., the National Energy and Climate Strategy of Finland for 2030 (Huttunen, 2017), and news media reports covering the strategy. The strategy document was originally published as a Government Report on November 24, 2016, and later on January 8, 2017 as a publication of the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment with a foreword and complementing images and figures (Huttunen, 2017). The 2017 version was used in the analysis. Both versions are available on the Government’s website. Conducted once during each parliamentary term since the release of the first strategy in 2001 (Kerkkänen, 2010) and prepared by the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment, the strategy is an institutionalized policy device in Finland. The strategy outlines the actions that Finland needs to take to reach the targets specified in the Government Programme (Prime Minister’s Office, 2015) and by the EU for the year 2030 and beyond. The EU has set out to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by at least 40% from the level recorded in 1990 by 2030, and Finland has received a binding target from the EU to reduce the emissions of sectors outside of the EU emission trading system by 39%. The Finnish Government has outlined its own energy targets in its Government Programme (Prime Minister’s Office, 2015). By 2030, Finland aims to increase the share of renewable energy to over 50% in end consumption; increase its energy-related self-sufficiency to over 55%; abandon the use of coal in energy production; increase the share of renewable transport fuels to 40%; and halve the use of imported oil. According to the strategy, Finland’s ultimate goal is to become a carbon-neutral society.

The media data were collected from the online news archives of the Finnish broadcasting company (*Yleisradio, Yle*) and *Helsingin Sanomat*, Finland’s most widely read newspaper. According to Yle (2021), their online and mobile services reached 3.1 million Finns monthly on average, and 73% of Finns aged 15 and above on a weekly basis in 2020. *Helsingin Sanomat* had a daily circulation of 340,000 copies in 2019, including both print copies and digital subscriptions (Media Audit Finland, 2020). It can be characterized as a prestigious newspaper, independent of political parties. The studied period covered three weeks before and after the publication of the strategy document (Nov 3–Dec 15, 2016). The search strings included the terms “climate” and “energy”. The searches resulted in 280 hits for the term “climate” and 456 hits for “energy”. Any items that did not cover the strategy, duplicate results, and non-journalistic hits were removed. The final sample consisted of 32 news articles that covered and reported on the strategy’s preparation and content, 17 from *Yle* and 15 from *Helsingin Sanomat*. The data from *Helsingin Sanomat* included five editorials that presented and summarized the perceptions of its editorial board. A summary of the media articles is provided as supplementary material.

Fundamental differences exist between the two narrative contexts under scrutiny. Boykoff (2011) defines the journalistic norms that shape the content and narrative of a news article as personalisation, dramatization, novelty, authority-order bias, and balance. While media outlets typically create news stories of current events, concerns, or ideas, strategic

policy documents are not constructed as story-like narratives per se. Nevertheless, strategies communicate the future through narrative fractures and elements of what may or should happen in the future, based on what we know or want in the present. As Smith-Walter and Jones (2020, p. 360) suggest, narratives also exist “in the most technical of bureaucratic reports”. Although politics and the media are in constant dialog and reciprocal interaction, where politics create societally relevant content for the media and the media sways the topics of societal interest, we focus on policy narratives that flow from a policy document towards the media, and not vice versa.

Method: NPF-informed qualitative content analysis

To identify the implicit narratives of climate change and the climate change policy process, our qualitative content analysis is structured and guided by the Narrative Policy Framework (NPF). According to the framework, narratives are communicative tools aimed at changing the prevailing system or achieving a goal for policy actors (Nagel & Schäfer, 2023). NPF was developed over a decade ago, as “[...]a quantitative, structuralist, and positivist approach to the study of policy narratives” (Jones & McBeth, 2010, p. 330). It approaches “narrative truths” as socially constructed phenomena, allowing for their study in an empirical and systemic manner (Jones et al., 2014). The analysis can be conducted on micro (narratives of individuals), meso (narratives of a policy subsystem, e.g., a coalition), or macro (grand, cultural level narratives) levels (Shanahan et al., 2018). This study addresses the meso level, by investigating the strategy conducted during one electoral period. Within NPF, content analysis is a frequently used method in meso-level studies (Shanahan et al., 2018).

For this study, three universal narrative elements—*setting*, *characters*, and *morals*—were adapted from the NPF as a starting point. The categories within *characters* were customized to better respond to the purpose of this study. Despite recent developments to analytically separate the policy substance and process (Kuenzler & Stauffer, 2022), we analyzed narrative elements related to both climate change as a socio-ecological problem and the process of climate policymaking. However, the political issue and process were distinguished through our additions to the character framework. From the results, we identified two co-existing, context-related *policy narratives* of climate change and climate change policy. These four analytical tools, the modifications made to them, and their purposes are elaborated below and summarized in Table 1.

Setting

According to Jones et al. (2014), a policy narrative addresses a specific policy problem and situates the problem in a particular context, which is referred to as a setting. This setting is the particular context where the policy problem is situated (Jones et al., 2014), or “the stage on which the characters act out their roles” (Smith-Walter & Jones, 2020, p. 349). A setting includes the unchallenged elements of a stage: generally accepted facts, legal or constitutional parameters, geographical settings, environmental characteristics, demographics, and “other facts or rules that most parties agree on” (Jones et al., 2014, p. 6). The setting was identified from both datasets with the help of open coding, by searching for the parts of the texts that referred to the “unquestioned” context of the policy problem.

TABLE 1 Coding schema.

Variable	Definition	Coding and categories in the coding schema
Setting	The context where the policy problem is situated; the “stage” where the characters act out their roles ^a	Open coding
Characters	Participants in the policy narrative. They are not necessarily individuals or even human ^a	Coding schema: <i>Participants within the policy process</i> 1. Policy influencer: formulates, influences, or comments on climate change as a policy problem, the strategy, and/or its implementation <i>Participants within policies</i> 2. Hero: aims to reduce the policy problem ^a 3. Villain: increases the policy problem ^a NaN. Victim: suffers from the policy problem ^a <i>Future participants after the policies have been realized</i> 5. Beneficiary: potentially benefits from the policies or the reduction in the policy problem 6. Loser: potentially regresses due to the policies or the reduction in the policy problem
Morals	Policy solutions offered for solving the specified problem ^a	Open coding
Policy narratives	How interactions between the characters and setting are arranged ^a	Master narrative and counter narrative

^aDefinitions adapted from Jones et al. (2014), Shanahan et al. (2013), Shanahan et al. (2018), Smith-Walter and Jones (2020), Weible et al. (2016).

Characters

Characters are the participants in the policy narrative. They are not necessarily human, as they can also be broad categories or abstractions such as “the environment”, “the people”, or “liberty” (Jones et al., 2014). Although the inclusion of nonhuman objects has been criticized to muddle who is taking action (Weible & Schlager, 2014), anthropomorphised objects are included in the analysis of this study because assigning roles to nonhuman nouns instead of human actors or collectives is a deliberate choice in policy communication.

For characters, we used coding categories, partly based on the NPF and partly emerging from the data. The analysis of characters in the NPF focuses on three categories: *hero* alleviating the problem; *villain* causing the policy problem; *victim* harmed by the problem (Jones et al., 2014; Smith-Walter & Jones, 2020); and the more recently introduced *beneficiary*, “[...]that is actually or potentially the receiver of the action by a hero, but is not being hurt or in a position of distress” (Weible et al., 2016).

During the preliminary reading, the established character categories were deemed insufficient for an in-depth analysis of the complex participant roles in our chosen policy issue. Environmental policies are characterized by complex political commitments (Koskimaa et al., 2021). Accordingly, the investigated strategy proposes actions concerning several different sectors to attain targets set by both the Finnish Government Programme and the EU. Capturing the complexities of an immensely interconnected policy process in the intersection of varying interests requires enhanced precision beyond the classical NPF character categories.

To respond to this empirical necessity as well as to suggestions to increase the precision of the framework through character additions (Merry, 2016; Stephan, 2020), we enriched the categorization with two new character categories. First, the strategy and media data refer to both the policy issue and the policy processes around the issue. To examine these separately, the *policy influencer* category was added to the coding schema. Policy influencers formulate or comment on the strategy, its implementation, or climate change as a policy problem. Second, because the strategy reaches decades into the future, we considered it necessary to distinguish the characters acting in the narrated present from those in the narrated future.¹ Thus, a second post-policy character to mirror “beneficiary” was added: the *loser* hurt or hindered by the policies.²

Our additions resulted in six character categories in total, which were then used to code both datasets. The strategy under investigation spans from international agreements in the 1990’s to the projected future in 2050. For further clarification, the categories were divided into three temporal categories: past participants (policy influencers), present participants (heroes, villains, and victims), and future participants (beneficiaries and losers). Some participants were interpreted to play more than one role in the data, and were coded under various, even contradictory, categories. These contradictions allow us to access alternative, implicit narratives of the future. Notably, the meaning of a participant may vary according to the context at hand. For example, the term “Finland” can refer to a state, government, or entire nation. However, these variations are beyond the scope of our analysis.

Morals

The moral, or the moral of the story, is defined as “a policy solution offered that is intended to solve the specified problem” (Shanahan et al., 2013, p. 459) or a call to action linked to the actions made by the heroes (Smith-Walter & Jones, 2020). During the open coding of both datasets, we

gathered the solutions and calls for action that were presented to solve, alleviate, or mitigate the policy problem.

For these three element categories, the strategy and the news media reports were coded separately. Both bodies of data were analyzed by a different researcher using the NVivo suite. To ensure conceptual and analytical coherence, the researchers worked in close cooperation and engaged in regular dialog. In practise, the pieces of text were assigned to categories that were either pre-set (characters) or emerged from the data (setting, morals). The length of the analyzed units varied from a few words to short paragraphs, depending on the context. Whereas most of the coded data addressed similarities within the text, particular emphasis was placed on the parts of the text that differed from the rest. These differences indicated resistance to, friction with, or dissent against the preferred future.

From the results of the aforementioned three categories, we constructed two *policy narratives*. In the NPF, a policy narrative addresses the ways in which the interactions between the characters and setting are arranged (Smith-Walter & Jones, 2020) and how these characters connect to one another (Jones et al., 2014). The NPF commonly focuses on the plot as a narrative element and often differentiates between generic story types. However, scholars have been encouraged to look beyond story types and develop novel approaches for the analysis of simultaneous plots (e.g., Weible & Schlager, 2014).

Instead of fragmented, co-existing story types, we aim to understand the alternative, partially hidden contexts in which the policy problem is situated. Therefore, we focused on the broader and more abstract, *implicit* dimension of narratives underlying and consisting of the more *explicit* narrative accounts manifested as the elements of setting, characters, and morals (see Sections 3.1–3.3). Whereas explicit narrative accounts lie “on the surface” as scattered narrative elements, implicit narratives are manifested as the sum of these parts. Importantly, implicit narratives exist merely as interpretative constructions by the authors of this article. The two implicit narratives were constructed in an iterative process where the analyzed elements from both datasets were arranged as either supporting the main setting (the master narrative) or resisting the main setting (the counter narrative) and creating synopses of the main elements and their relationships.

Notably, both narratives are rooted in the same strategy, conducted by one government. Although some diversity of opinions is present in the media coverage, it mainly focuses on reporting on the strategy and reactions to it. Therefore, the elements of the master narrative outnumber the elements of the counter narrative. Importantly, the elements comprising the counter narrative are not explicit “acts of resistance” (Meretoja, 2021, p. 39), but rather elements that misalign with the main setting and manifest as notions of disagreements, uncertainties, conflicts of interests, considerations about risks, or critical opinions (in media).

RESULTS

Setting

The main purpose and setting of the strategy is to outline actions that will enable Finland to reach the climate and energy targets set by the EU and the Finnish Government. While in the strategy the setting is a complex web of international, national, institutional, technical, and legal factors, the media’s portrayal of the context is a reductionist one. The setting in the media is pinpointed by the political aims, plans, and actions of the Government and Finland. The strategy is

aligned with the Government programme (Prime Minister's Office, 2015). It outlines the three main dimensions of climate and energy policy that must be balanced when transitioning towards a carbon neutral society. The energy system should (a) be cost-effective and enable the growth of the national economy and competitiveness in Finland, (b) be sustainable “from the perspective of greenhouse gas emissions and the environment”, and (c) ensure an adequate level of security of supply (Huttunen, 2017, p. 14).

In several news items, Yle describes the national climate policy as subordinate to the international target setting: “In the climate and energy strategy, the Government outlines the targets and actions by which Finland will meet its obligations under the EU climate policy and the Paris Climate Agreement” (e.g., Yle 24 Nov. 2016). Curiously, both datasets leave the scientific meaning of climate change as well as its consequences in the background. The strategy mentions the need to mitigate the increase in average global temperature as the background for the Paris Agreement, not as a reason for the strategy itself. Thus, the policy problem is argued through processes, aims, and policies instead of the reasons behind them, positioning the main setting in both datasets as that of climate politics, not climate change itself. Although climate change and its consequences are not challenged, they are backgrounded as a policy issue in both datasets. Action is framed as a necessity because of the obligations arising from the EU/Paris Agreement rather than for the purposes of ensuring the future of our society and ecosystems. This aligns with the results of an interview study by Koskimaa et al. (2021), according to which international commitments to the UN and the EU in particular are among the main enablers of Finnish future-oriented environmental policy.

Characters

Past participants: Policy influencers

In both datasets, the EU and its institutions represent key policy influencers. At the national level, the policy process is in the hands of the Finnish Government, featured as units of ministries in the strategy, and as individual ministers in the media. Representatives of all large and medium-sized political parties are presented in the news reports. No political parties or their members are present in the strategy, although it is a product of party politics.

According to the strategy, science, knowledge, and experts influence the policy process, while stakeholders and citizens are referred to as being heard during the creation of the outlines of the policies. The media specifies these categories with various terms, such as “consultant” and “researcher” as well as “energy company representative”, “advocacy group”, and “NGO”. However, they also use value-based labels, such as “climate change denialist”, “wind power opposer”, and “nuclear power supporter”. The media's explicit descriptions reveal contradictory positions as seeds of non-hegemonic futures and the implicit counter narrative, while the strategy utilizes general and neutral categories, such as “citizen” or “stakeholder representative”. Whereas the strategy focuses on the participants directly formulating the policy process, the media includes actors who are not mentioned in the strategy, further expanding those involved in the debate.

By featuring critical and even opposing voices on the policy process in contrast to the single-voiced strategy, the media contains more elements manifesting resistance to the main setting. The aspects that evoked critiques include insufficient actions, actions that are too ambitious, and prioritizing policy targets other than mitigating climate change. In the strategy, opposing voices are presented mostly implicitly, through indirect references to the acceptability of certain

measures. Any criticism concerning the policy process is directed at the EU. In the strategy, Finland is “extremely displeased” with the EU’s proposal on accounting rules regarding carbon sinks in the Land Use, Land Use Change and Forestry (LULUCF) sector. In Finland, the land use sector was a net sink at the time with forests being the largest sink within that sector. On the other hand, the national policies that pursue to increase the use of renewable energy emphasize bioenergy, and approximately half of the increase is based on wood-based materials. Thus, the proposition would result in a significant additional burden and changes in plans concerning the use of the forests. The media portrays accounting rules as a potential “cold shower” for Finland, stating that “it was feared [by the Government and several companies] that the EU would give these massive bioenergy plans a clip round the ear” (HS 4 Dec. 2016).

Present participants: Heroes, villains, and victims

At first, both datasets frame Finland as the main villain because of its then-insufficient climate action. By responding to the climate and energy targets, Finland—and the Government in particular—transforms from villain to main hero, with policies either directly affecting climate change or its outlying effects. In the media, actors who choose to stay the course are depicted as villains, despite, or perhaps because of, their inactivity: the Government continuing its fossil subsidies, coal-fired power plants remaining in use, and car manufacturers and drivers who continue using fossil fuels. However, the proposal concerning the accounting rules for the LULUCF sector by the EU is framed as an impediment to national climate policy plans.

In the strategy, different sectors responsible for energy consumption pave the way for Finland, turning from villains to climate mitigation heroes. The transport sector is given the biggest role with its significant potential for reducing emissions. Instead of sectors, the media highlights companies that manufacture electric cars, pioneering electric car drivers, and people who use low-emission fuels. Fossil fuels and the current fossil-heavy transport system are among the main villains in both datasets. Both datasets present bioenergy and biofuels as heroes, particularly if they are forest-based. Finland’s forest resources are seen as an asset, providing energy and acting as a carbon sink. In the strategy, peat is a villain compared to forest energy, but a hero next to fossil fuels. The current and planned uses of forests are framed villainously only in the media, by actors such as politicians, eNGO representatives, and scientists. The strategy is skeptical only towards the most excessive scenario calculations concerning forest cuts. Certain energy sources, such as solar power, are considered heroes in the strategy, but they are also seen as insufficient for reaching expectations.

The strategy presents several Finnish characteristics as factors that either hinder or promote desirable change. The global isolation of its national market, long distances, cold winters causing consumption peaks, and an energy-intensive industry hinder climate mitigation. Meanwhile, Finland’s raw material resources and forests are particularly useful in achieving the set targets. Accordingly, economic factors such as competitiveness, “market terms”, technology, and investments are seen as heroes. However, the “poor economic situation” also benefits the greater good, as it contributes to lower emissions. The strategy frames consumers, companies, and the public sector as being in need of activation to become interested in issues related to energy efficiency or renewables. Although the participation of consumers is considered vital, the strategy explicitly states that many wish to remain passive.

Compared with other participant categories, references to participants suffering from climate change are sparse. The strategy depicts Finland as a victim, as “both the natural environment

and society” (Huttunen, 2017, p. 74) suffer from rising temperatures and the resulting extreme weather. “Finland-as-a-victim” highlights the urgency to act to mitigate climate change. There are no mentions of any characters inhabiting a victim role in the media.

Future participants: Beneficiaries and losers

The three basic dimensions of Finnish energy and climate policy—cost-effectiveness and economic growth, environmental sustainability, and security of supply—not only have an impact on the policy process (see Section 3.2.1) but they are also seen as beneficiaries in both datasets. Similarly, the heroes are framed as those who will benefit from the future: renewables, bio and forest energy, and domestic, small-scale and decentralized production. This triple role as gainers, heroes, and policy setters indicates that what is fed into the policy process is also expected to strengthen the future while also strengthening itself in the future.

However, these basic dimensions are prioritized differently in the datasets. The strategy frames the environment and environmental sustainability as beneficiaries more often than the media. In the media, the environment is believed to regress because of the current, planned, or potential ways in which the bioeconomy is enacted in Finland, mainly in quotes from politicians, eNGO representatives, and scientists. In particular, forests as ecosystems, natural resources, and carbon sinks are expected to regress if there is an increase in forest cutting for energy production. According to one eNGO representative, “the adverse climate effects of halving the carbon sinks outweigh the combined emission reductions from transport, agriculture, building-specific heating, and waste management” (HS 28 Nov. 2016). The media frames the environment as benefiting from fuel consumption choices: “some motorists consider [fuel price increases] justified for environmental reasons” (Yle 24 Nov. 2016).

Altogether, the beneficiaries are often discussed in economic terms in both datasets. The national economy is seen as one of the main winners in terms of its economic growth, competence, exports, market, employment, and so on. It is economic aspects that elevate the most cost-efficient renewable energy projects above others. The media not only highlights Finnish companies in the biofuel and forest industries as beneficiaries but also sees the potential success of the biofuel energy industry as an important motivator for Finland to take action to reduce its emissions. While the strategy and the media do not always see eye to eye on the future of environmental sustainability, neither question the necessity of economic success. Implicitly, economic success outweighs environmental success.

Yet, both datasets position Finland’s economy as a potential loser. They anticipate a downturn in the national economy and an increase in domestic costs, as climate action is costly. The strategy predicts that private consumption will decrease if the economic situation worsens and employment decreases. The strategy states that general living conditions will be affected by the severity of climate change mitigation policies and that the income gap will become even greater. In the media, taxpayers are expected to benefit from certain incentives. For example, according to one politician interviewed by Yle (13 Nov. 2016), “the subsidy lowers everyone’s electricity bill and thus becomes cheaper for the taxpayer.” In the case of consumers, those dependent on “villainous” energy sources are destined to become losers in the future: people who travel long distances by car in the media, and diesel users and those relying on oil heating in the strategy.

In summary, the role of some narrated participants is ambivalent, for example, in the negotiation of who actually hinders progress. There is little discussion about the victims suffering from climate change in the narrated present, but a great deal of discussion about the losers (mostly

financially) in the narrated future. Neglecting present victims as an argument for the transition backgrounds the wider policy frame. Instead, economic aspects tend to take space from climate change as the main policy issue: beneficiaries and losers only exist in the future and are defined by their economic success or failure. Ultimately, success depends on the effectiveness of the policies suggested in the strategy.

Morals

As stated in Section 3.1, the policy solutions in the strategy are ultimately targeted towards mitigating climate change. The strategy evaluates the adequacy of existing measures and further outlines additional required actions. These futures are depicted through two mathematical scenarios: the basic scenario with current policy measures (With Existing Measures/“WEM”) and the policy scenario with new suggested measures (With Additional Measures/“WAM”). The additional measures mainly aim to increase the share of certain energy sources (renewables, wood energy, biogas, biofuels), decrease the share of other energy sources (coal, imported oil), or cut emissions in sectors. Some policies aim to impact EU-level policymaking on carbon sinks. Influencing the results of EU-level negotiations is important because after ratification, national governments have little power to overturn decisions (Koskimaa et al., 2021). Measures for adapting to climate change are presented in the strategy; however, the focus is on mitigation.

The suggested measures—and the desirable future by proxy—are guided by national governmental politics. In the media, the policy solutions are more often framed as the means of achieving a topical political goal, instead of solving the actual policy problem. Of several measures, incentives are most foregrounded in the media, perhaps because readers consider incentives more interesting than policy solutions that address more general issues. News reports address morals mostly in a neutral manner, framing them in conditional terms, as potentials, or as the intentions of respective actors, often the government. The media frames the policy solutions more implicitly than the strategy, through the journalists' foci, framing, questions, and the voices of the selected interviewees or other actors. Overall, the policy solutions are not taken as fixed by the media. Rather, it is inherent that the political and social debate on policy solutions will continue.

As stated in Section 3.1, the declared policy problem of the strategy is climate change. Although most of the policy solutions primarily aim to mitigate it, many solutions also serve other purposes at the same time. In the strategy, these parallel goals relate mainly to national-level economic and security policy, and the energy system. For example, the increase in renewables is stated to result in improved self-sufficiency in Finland's energy supply, and conducting the policies “on market terms” is often mentioned.

In general, these national advantages are not contradictory to decreasing emissions and mitigating climate change, but rather the opposite. However, some of these goals compete with climate change as the main policy problem. Disagreeing with the accounting rules proposed by the Commission, Finland seeks more favorable rules that will allow it to increase its use of domestic forests for bioenergy. Thus, influencing the EU's legislation is seen as necessary for the benefit of Finnish climate policies, which seek to promote stronger roles for biogas and carbon sink calculations. Influencing the proposed land-use, land use change and forestry (LULUCF) regulation by the EU is seen as a measure that will “ensure [...] increasing, sustainable and diverse use of the forests will be possible[...],” and that “the accounting rules will reflect the actual sinks and emissions[...].” (Huttunen, 2017, p. 65). In the media (Yle 18 Nov. 2016), the discussion on

accounting rules is also considered political arm-twisting on the calculatory and actual future role of Finland's forests as either a sink for or source of emissions.

Here, national political interests are positioned *in opposition to* or *over* the main policy problem instead of serving them *in addition* to the main policy problem. Peat and coal are examples of goals that contradict climate change mitigation. In the strategy, the plan is to use taxational measures to ensure that peat remains more cost-effective than coal and fossil fuels—to enhance Finland's energy self-sufficiency—but less competitive than forest-based energy—to ensure the competitiveness of forest chips and to increase the use of forest-based energy. The strategy's inclusion of alternative goals alongside the goal of emission reduction causes confusion when the measures enter the media sphere: in a HS editorial (24 Nov. 2016), peat is listed as one solution to decrease emissions. A news report from the following day (HS 25 Nov. 2016) addresses the contradiction between climate change and peat as an energy source, emphasizing that burning peat will result in more emissions than burning coal.

Master narrative and counter narrative on the future of climate change and climate policy

The fragmented narrative elements presented above were organized according to their support for or resistance to the main setting of the policy narrative. The elements supporting the main setting form the master narrative as the dominant discourse concerning climate change and climate change policy. The counter narrative of the future is comprises narrative elements that resist or misalign with the main setting.

The master narrative summarizes elements supporting the main setting: Finland reaching the climate and energy targets set by the EU and the Finnish Government. It depicts a desirable future in which Finland successfully implements the required actions for reducing its emissions and mitigating climate change. These goals will be reached with sustainable energy sources, improved practises, innovations, tools for renewable energy, and domestic resources, as well as through the concerted effort of each sector that was previously responsible for Finland's emissions. Finland is portrayed as a climate actor who successfully manages to negotiate its position between obligatory international climate politics, global development, the policies of other states, national party politics, and prevailing circumstances. Any critical voices remain marginal and do not challenge the larger picture of climate policy. Thus, in this narrative, Finland wins it all: it reaches its climate and other targets with the policy measures preferred by the Government in power.

The counter narrative revolves around the main conflict of interest discussed in both datasets: differing opinions by Finland and the EU on the proposed accounting rules. The ambitious climate goals set by the EU are presented as a hindrance to national climate policy plans. What follows is a negotiation of the real villain in this narrative. From Finland's perspective, the uncertain decisions concerning the calculation rules for carbon sinks set by the EU are the real villains that could prevent its national vision and hinder the growth of the Finnish economy.

What follows is that secondary, even alternative, shorter-term policy interests are chosen in opposition or over climate change and emission reduction. In practise, these interests strongly intertwine with the desired changes in the national energy system. Out of the three main dimensions to be balanced in Finland's energy and climate policy—sustainability, economic growth, and the security of energy supply—the economy is framed as the most important in this narrative. Climate change is mitigated in “economic terms”, and the economic gains and losses from the

policies represent the narrative's primary societal interests. Thus, the future of climate change is positioned as a question of economic redistribution and competition; of beneficiaries and losers.

STUDYING IMPLICIT NARRATIVES OF THE FUTURE

In this article, we utilized an experimental research design in which the analytical tools of the Narrative Policy Framework were modified to better understand the co-existent, implicit narratives of the future of climate change and climate policy. Our approach revealed the real-world tensions of policymaking in the form of an implicit counter narrative. These tensions emerge from clashes between local, national, and global interests. In the national energy and climate strategy and its news coverage, all these levels are present. However, as shown above, these levels are not necessarily aligned. While these misalignments are emphasized as opposing opinions in the media, they are ignored in the strategy. In the strategy, the counter narrative that we have constructed is not an alternative to the master narrative. Rather, these two accounts of the future co-exist in the strategy as parts of the desirable future, depicted in the policy scenario. However, the targeted future within the strategy cannot include, for example, two completely different carbon sink calculations.

Although comparing the two data sources was not the core intention of this study, our results show that the media and the strategy vary as narrative contexts. First, their scope of characters differs. No participants are named in the strategy, whereas the media personifies the participants by highlighting their individual voices. While the strategy refers to, for example, “the transport sector” in a heroic manner, in the media, an interviewee working for a car company can assume the role of a policy influencer and position themselves, their company, or its products as heroes. Although both datasets use a great deal of passive language to de-emphasize the actors, the media personifies the strategy's setting through individual politicians, who remain in the background of the official policy process. According to Boykoff (2011), media narratives tend to highlight individual viewpoints and claims over the underlying issues of power, context, and process. Despite the individual viewpoints presented, power issues are explicitly addressed only by the media.

Jones et al. (2014, p. 9) refer to policy narratives as “strategic constructions of a policy reality promoted by policy actors that are seeking to win (or not lose) in public policy battles.” The strategy, aligned with governmental politics, places any public policy battles in the background. Explicitly, the future in the strategy is not questioned by the opposition or any previous or future governments. Indeed, the media frames the strategy preparation process as part of a parliamentary democracy with a multi-party system. It positions the strategy as a subject of political debate: first, between the coalition government parties; second, between the government and the opposition; and third, between policy actors and society. For this interaction, the media itself is one of the arenas. Therefore, including both datasets in the study was crucial for accessing the implicit narratives. Furthermore, the climate policies suggested in national strategies concern the future lives of all citizens. Yet, the Government's climate and energy strategy is not aimed at the public, even if it is openly available. Instead, its contents reach the wider public mainly through mainstream media coverage.

Analyzing both dimensions—the policy issue and the policy process—allowed us to go beyond a mere image of the future and include a meta level in the study. After all, the political effects of narratives are most powerful in institutional settings related to policymaking (De Fina, 2018). The introduction of two new character roles—“policy influencer” and “loser”—allowed us to examine the complex policy issue and its process in more detail by distinguishing more clearly

those affecting the policy process and those affected by the policy process. However, the added categories are also compatible for the analysis of less complex policy issues. Although more careful scrutiny of the transitions is yet to be conducted in further studies, arranging the characters in three different temporal levels enhances the understanding of the evolution of characters over time.

Finally, focusing on the elements that misalign with the prevailing narrative permitted us to distinguish between two co-existing narrative futures: one where climate change is the primary setting guiding the national policies of Finland, and one where national interests compete with the mitigation of climate change. As these narratives are interpretative constructions by the authors, several other narratives could be constructed from the datasets according to different criteria, for example, according to their stance towards the main setting, according to the success of measures, or around specific characters. Furthermore, analyzing the datasets separately would have shown a variety of counter narratives. For example, as in the media, the sufficiency of measures in relation to the targets is questioned as a resisting narrative for the whole strategy.

By acknowledging the implicit nature of narratives as well as the co-existence of alternative narratives, our approach allows us to see beyond the concrete, yet scattered accounts of the future of climate change within one governmental strategy and its media coverage. Although the alternative narratives would not have been identified without the analysis of narrative elements, the construction of alternative narratives is not dependent on the exact analytical advancements proposed in this study. Nevertheless, the proposed additions—two new character categories and temporal arrangement of the character categories—provide enhanced precision to uncover the implicit, even contradictory narratives in a vastly complex, long-term policy issue.

This study contains some limitations related to the datasets and our chosen method. Interviews or more thorough contextualisation through additional documents may have provided different results. Author backgrounds are also beyond the scope of the analysis conducted in this study. The modifications to the analytical categories of the NPF showcased the potential for analytical rigor in the temporality and alternative futures of policy debates. However, it is necessary to remember that the categorization was guided by the data, making it context-dependent while foregrounding certain narrative aspects. Focusing on two upper-level, underlying narratives resulted in less analytical attention being paid to diverse story types or character-related plots. However, these issues are partly addressed through the actions of the characters mentioned in the analysis.

As Miller (2020, pp. 488–489) emphasizes, “[n]arrative inquiry is an inherently interpretive activity”, and this study is no exception. The researchers were unable to ignore their backgrounds or current circumstances. Conducting a study on different futures on the basis of climate policy debates from half a decade ago carries certain ramifications, as the futures described, planned, and debated in our data may already be here, disregarded, or replaced with newer futures.

Despite the aforementioned limitations, our approach nevertheless shows potential for a thorough analysis of future-related narratives in policy communication. In summary, we have devised an approach that (1) acknowledges different temporalities in policy communication, and (2) reaches both explicit and implicit narrative dimensions. When interpreting climate policy communication, a better understanding of narratives as implicit, abstract accounts enables a critical investigation of grand contradictions that are often de-emphasized and disregarded next to more specific and explicit story types. To thoroughly understand the meaning-creation processes of climate change policy, it is necessary to address policy narratives as loci of contesting and constructing alternative futures, both explicitly and implicitly.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This work was supported by the Research Council of Finland through its funding for the “Towards Deliberative Climate and Energy Foresight (DECENT)” project, grants #325207 and #325208. We wish to express our gratitude to our project colleagues and peer doctoral candidates for their comments on our research design. We also want to thank Markku Lehtonen, Jari Lyytimäki, Katriina Siivonen, and the anonymous reviewers as well as Kerstin Cuhls, Pim Martens, and Petri Tapio for their valuable insights into the manuscript.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors report no declarations of interest.

ORCID

Marjukka Parkkinen  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8154-758X>

ENDNOTES

¹Weible et al. (2016) added precision to the NPF through their network-based ego-alter dyad, where ego characters act and alter characters receive the action. The authors classify victims as alter characters, hurt by the villains of the narrative (Weible et al., 2016). This study follows the conceptualisation of Jones et al. (2014) and Smith-Walter and Jones (2020), according to whom victims are harmed by policy problems instead of the actions of heroes and villains. Thus, beneficiaries and victims are not opposites in the analytical framework of this study, but are located in different temporal categories of the narrative.

²Importantly, Jones et al. (2014, p. 6) define victim as “[...]harmed by the problem[...]”, whereas Smith-Walter and Jones (2020, p. 349) define victim as a character that is “who is (or will be) harmed”. In the latter definition, it is unclear whether the victim is harmed by the policy problem itself or the actions taken to alleviate the problem. For conceptual clarity, we follow Jones et al. (2014) in this study: the victim is a character harmed by the policy problem, whereas our addition to the framework—the loser—is hurt by the actions that alleviate or aim to alleviate the policy problem.

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

Marjukka Parkkinen is a doctoral researcher at the Finland Futures Research Centre at the University of Turku. In her dissertation, Parkkinen examines the changing discourses of the future in environmental policy.

Suvi Vikström is a researcher at Finnish Environment Institute Syke and a doctoral researcher at University of Eastern Finland. Her research interests are connected to environmental policy and science-policy-society interface, with a focus on the co-production and use of knowledge.

SUPPORTING INFORMATION

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How to cite this article: Parkkinen, M., & Vikström, S. (2024). Alternative policy narratives of the future of climate change: Analyzing Finland's energy and climate strategy and news reports. *Review of Policy Research*, 00, 1–19. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ropr.12602>