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Research programmes should heighten their focus on the political and social dimensions of the energy transition.

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Research in the social sciences contributes to transformations in the industrial and energy sectors in Germany and Europe, yet it is frequently neglected in research funding. It is time for programmes to intensify their focus on the political and social dimensions of the energy transition, write Lukas Hermwille (Wuppertal Institute), Rainer Quitzow (RIFS/TU Berlin) and Andreas Goldthau (Universität Erfurt/RIFS).

Opposition to the ambitious goals of the energy and industrial transitions in Germany and Europe is growing. While the technical feasibility of the energy transition is now widely understood and accepted, **the political, economic and social consequences of this far-reaching transformation** are proving increasingly controversial. The political debate is shifting away from technical issues to the complex **societal challenges** that arise on the ground and in communities.

Although the social, economic, political and legal aspects of this transformation play an important role in shaping policy developments, research funding in Germany and Europe continues to place a strong emphasis on technological innovation. Under the energy and climate programme of the European research framework programme "Horizon Europe", projects are required to indicate the extent to which they address issues relevant to the social sciences and humanities. However, this means that **social science expertise is often viewed as an "add-on"**, thereby limiting this research to a supporting role. What is lacking are calls for research proposals that address questions relevant to the social sciences and humanities.

The situation in the German research funding landscape is somewhat better. The Federal Ministry for Economic Affairs and Climate Action has launched a new research network and funding priority programme that will focus on interactions between the energy transition and society. However, when it comes to research that looks beyond this narrow focus on energy issues and tackles the broader challenges of industrial transformation, things quickly become thin on the ground. With the exception of issues relating to energy efficiency, **industrial topics have been removed from the energy research programme**. An equivalent programme for social science research on industrial transformation and the resulting socio-economic changes is still lacking.

1.1.1.1 **Social science research is indispensable for effective long-term energy and climate policy**

Without a deep understanding of the social and political implications of transformations, there is a risk that policies will be poorly designed, meet with resistance, and fail to achieve their intended goals. Social science research can help here: For example, it analyses public perceptions of transformative change against the backdrop of changing social and individual values. It analyses complex power dynamics and questions of (in)justice in relation to the distributional effects of transformations and policy instruments, interdependencies with existing social and regional inequalities - and it develops opportunities for participation. The **political debacle** surrounding the **Building Energy Act** is a striking example of how relevant such issues can be in **political reality**.

Social science researchers are also investigating why climate action – both nationally and internationally – is not being driven forward with sufficient ambition and why the **implementation** of agreed measures frequently fails. These issues are fundamental to

developing effective policies and this research should not be placed in a merely supporting role. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (**IPCC**) has acknowledged this and has announced that it will give greater consideration to political science and sociological research in future.

1.1.1.2 **Research programmes must address social science issues**

Against a backdrop of escalating political conflicts, investment in social science research must be urgently increased. Over the next few months, the new EU Commission will draw up the main features of the next **European Research Framework Programme**. The Commission should seize this opportunity to bolster research in the social sciences by introducing **thematic calls for proposals that focus on social science and humanities issues**. Otherwise, social and political dimensions that are central to the success of the energy transition risk being marginalised.

In addition, the German government should make research on the social and political aspects of industrial transformation in the context of the energy transition a particular focus of its funding. **Geo-political and geo-economic competition** between the leading industrialised nations has **intensified considerably** in recent years and threatens to escalate even further following the election of US President Trump. **Germany and Europe could well be left behind**. Social science research can help to better understand the challenges for industrial policy, conflicts in economic policy and regulatory options for action. This kind of knowledge is needed in order to develop viable political and social strategies to make manufacturing and industry in Germany sustainable, climate-friendly and competitive over the longer term – while effectively mitigating the social impacts of structural change in industrial regions.

This also includes **promoting a better understanding of the broader political and societal contexts of transformations in countries outside Europe**. After all, Germany and Europe are increasingly dependent on international cooperation, and not just for the energy transition. However, international cooperation frequently fails due to diverging interests and world views. Social science research undertaken in cooperation with international partners not only enables us to develop a better understanding of the political and social conditions in other countries, **scientific cooperation and exchange** can also serve as a **basis for later political and economic cooperation**, for example with emerging countries in the Global South such as India, Brazil, Indonesia, but also with China.

1.1.1.3 **We need to understand the “political will” better**

While it is true that technological progress and falling costs and prices are key drivers of the unfolding transformations, we must remember that institutions, ideas, values and discourses are equally important. Often enough, we know what can be done and how to do it – but the political will to make things happen is lacking. And **this is precisely where social science research comes into play** by helping us to **recognise where the limits of the politically feasible lie** and – ideally – how we can shift them. The EU Commission and Germany would therefore be well advised to afford greater priority to the political and social dimensions of their research programmes. Not for their own sake, but for the success of the energy transition.

The authors are co-initiators of an open letter by the Research Network on Energy Politics, Policy and Governance (Energy-PPG) of the European Consortium for Political Research (ECPR) and the Sustainability Transitions Research Network (STRN) to the EU Commissioner responsible for the Directorate-General for Research



and Innovation, Ekaterina Zakharieva . Over 300 European scientists have signed the letter.

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