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Working Paper

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ICAE Working Paper Series, No. 175

Provided in Cooperation with:

Johannes Kepler University Linz, Institute for Comprehensive Analysis of the Economy (ICAE)

Suggested Citation: Hager, Theresa; Porak, Laura; Pühringer, Stephan; Terhorst, Carlotta (2026) : Contested transformative imaginaries: Economic reasoning and actor coalitions in Austria's corporatist setting, ICAE Working Paper Series, No. 175, Johannes Kepler University Linz, Institute for Comprehensive Analysis of the Economy (ICAE), Linz

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/339371>

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Contested Transformative Imaginaries: Economic Reasoning and Actor Coalitions in Austria's Corporatist Setting

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February 2026

Contested Transformative Imaginaries: Economic Reasoning and Actor Coalitions in Austria's Corporatist Setting*

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Abstract

Despite widespread acknowledgment of the climate crisis, ambitious climate action remains constrained by competing visions of socio-ecological transformation (SET). Drawing on critical state theory, which conceptualizes the state as a "strategic terrain" where social forces struggle over hegemonic visions, this paper analyzes how transformative imaginaries shape political opportunity structures for climate policy in Austria's corporatist setting. We address two critical gaps in the SET literature: existing research discusses transformation visions abstractly without linking them to concrete policy-relevant actors, and the economic reasoning underlying these imaginaries remains largely unexamined. Using the SETER framework, we conduct a mixed-methods analysis combining discourse analysis with social network analysis to identify actor coalitions among Austria's major political parties and organized interest groups. Our findings reveal three distinct coalitions: Market-Driven Transition (emphasizing markets and innovation), Just Transition (prioritizing state intervention and distributional justice), and Ecological Modernization (emphasizing urgency and international cooperation). Despite differences in transformation pace and quality, substantial hegemonic consensus exists across actors – particularly regarding market-state tandems, techno-optimism, and growth orientation. This consensus reflects deep path dependencies and explains Austria's shift from environmental leader to climate laggard, demonstrating how economic reasoning and material interests constrain the political opportunity space for transformative climate action.

Keywords

Socio-ecological transformation, economic reasoning, transformative imaginaries, Austria, actor coalitions, discourse analysis, critical state theory

* Acknowledgements. Many thanks to Hendrik Theine for comments on an earlier draft, and to the SET Lab and ICAE colleagues at Johannes Kepler University Linz for ongoing discussions and support. This research was supported by the FWF (STA80-G), the JKU, LIFT_C (LIFT_C-2002-1-114), and the Austrian Academy of Sciences (DOC-team 120).

1. Introduction

Although the climate crisis was identified as early as 1972 in the Club of Rome's report *Limits to Growth*, meaningful political action did not emerge until the 1990s. Climate issues were then merely treated if immediate environmental effects were caused (for instance, acid rain) (Levy and Spicer 2013). Only after the UN-Summit in Rio de Janeiro (1992), the climate crisis became a central topic for policymakers and international climate governance started. After the Paris Agreement (2015), which declared the goal of reducing GHG emissions to net-zero by 2050, climate ambitions across the globe have been heightened with the European Union (EU) positioning itself as a global "climate leader". Subsequently, different forms of sustainability transitions dominated political agendas and strategies for some years; it seemed as if global climate governance could actually be fruitful.

But while the effects of climate crisis can increasingly be seen for instance in intensified extreme weather events around the globe or a rapid loss of biodiversity, challenges to successful (international) climate governance have also intensified, also in the EU: The economic situation, particularly in Central Europe, never really recovered from the euro crisis (2010), while the EU economy also lacks innovative capability compared to key competitors in green technologies (Eder and Porak 2025), most prominently China. A rightward political shift across Europe has further reduced the political opportunity structure for climate policy. The Covid-19 pandemic as well as the Russian invasion of Ukraine have reshaped energy politics and heightened concerns about security and resource autonomy. Thus, the political-economic situation in the EU is averse to a successful transformation, while geopolitical instability and a changing international order create new pressures and further political challenges so that climate policy currently simply has no priority. This is, for instance, reflected at the EU level where budgets for the 'green transition' are reduced while those for military and security are being expanded. Hence, the goal of climate change mitigation is displaced at the expense of other goals such as security.

Although political space for ambitious climate policy is shrinking, these multi-faceted crises demonstrate the necessity for fundamental transformation – an insight that is also largely acknowledged by policymakers. Yet how this process should unfold and where it could lead remains deeply contested. Different visions about how the future should look like and their corresponding policy measures compete for dominance, while social power relations and fossil path-dependencies constrain transformative potential, quickly reaching what Hausknot (2020) calls the "glass ceiling of transformations." Currently, it is unclear which vision of the future will succeed eventually – and if it is able to "burst the ceiling".

What unites these visions is that they are all not merely abstract ideas but fundamentally shape how their proponents understand socio-economic and -ecological systems and hence, also guides the practices of actors in the real political economy, realizing these ideas. This underlines the importance to pay close attention to these so-called *transformative imaginaries* (Pühringer and Bäuerle 2025), encompassing assumptions about economic institutions, the role of the state and markets, the relationship between humanity and nature, and what constitutes desirable change. The Economic Reasoning (ER) within these imaginaries constitutes a central aspect since current economic structures are hardly compatible with sustainability. At the same time, economic structures and the capitalist accumulation imperative impede real change. Since currently visions of how – and whether – to pursue

sustainability transformations are becoming increasingly polarized, it is crucial to examine the economic reasoning that underpins different transformative projects. By analyzing these imaginaries, we can identify which actors share similar economic assumptions – and thus form coalitions – and where fundamental conflicts lie. Both coalitions and conflicts help explain the possibilities and limits of climate action. By doing this, we address a research gap in the literature on visions of sustainability transformations. Existing research has examined different understandings of transformation (e.g., Hausknost et al. 2017, Wilgosh et al. 2022), but systematic analysis of policy-relevant actors' visions through a political economy lens as well as approaches considering economic reasoning remain limited.

Austria provides a particularly revealing case for assessing which transformative imaginaries exist, how coalitions form around them, and what common ground exists among competing visions for two reasons. First, long viewed as an environmental leader, Austria has become one of Europe's climate laggards, increasing its greenhouse gas emissions between 1990 and 2017 while most neighbors achieved reductions. Second, Austria's strong corporatist tradition makes it particularly interesting for studying how different imaginaries clash in climate politics. The institutionalized participation of organized labor and capital in policymaking grants these actors significant influence and embeds compromise as a central political mechanism. While corporatism facilitates coordination and stability, it may also undermine the scope of transformation by privileging continuity over rapid structural change. Understanding how actors within this system envision transformation – and how their imaginaries align with or diverge from those of other key players like political parties and environmental organizations – is crucial for explaining Austria's climate policy trajectory.

Against this background, this paper focuses on Austria as a case study to analyze the constellation of actors involved in climate policy and the transformative imaginaries they hold. The central objective is to identify which actors share similar visions of transformation and form coalitions around these imaginaries, how they position themselves relative to one another, and what economic reasoning underpins their visions. By mapping these coalitions and their underlying imaginaries, the paper aims to shed light on the political-economic forces that shape Austrian climate policy and help explain both its achievements and its limitations – particularly its decline from environmental leader to climate laggard. To achieve this, we apply a mixed-methods design that integrates qualitative discourse analysis of strategic documents with social network analysis, enabling us to identify actor coalitions and trace their shared transformative imaginaries.

The paper proceeds as follows: First, we briefly introduce the most important insights of the relevant literature on ideational struggles around transformations and the role of the state in this context. Then, in chapter 3, we introduce our analytical framework focusing on economic reasoning and the political-economic context of Austria. We also describe our methodological approach. In chapter 4, we eventually present our empirical findings and discuss the results in chapter 5.

2. Literature Review

The socio-ecological transformation (SET) is a contested endeavour imagined in various ways. In the following literature review, we engage with scholarly work on SET visions and

identify the need to concretize this literature. By drawing on literature on the environmental state and critical state theory and a recent theoretical contribution in the field, we suggest that the first strand of literature would profit from a closer consideration of the economic reasoning underlying SET visions, as well as a concrete analysis of actor coalitions on these visions.

2.1. Visions for Socio-Ecological Transformation

Sustainability in general and SET more specifically are not approached as singular concepts in the academic debate, but as plural and contested ones, encompassing diverse narratives, imaginaries, and approaches resulting in different pathways and practices of change. A set of contributions relevant to our research endeavour focuses on the role of ideas about transformation. It revolves around several empirical contributions (Calisto Friant et al. 2020; Eckert and Kovalevska 2021; Hausknost et al. 2017; Kovacic et al. 2020; Levy and Spicer 2013; Wilgosh et al. 2022), on how the SET discourse is shaped by varying perspectives on, for instance, the depth, agency, and scope of change. Some scholars address questions related to the necessary scope or form of transition envisioned: Hausknost et al. (2017) assess different bio-economy narratives, Calisto Friant et al. (2020) and Kovacic et al. (2020) analyze different narratives on circular economy, and Eckert and Kovalevska (2021) identify different understandings of sustainability. Levy and Spicer (2013) choose a broader approach and assess the societal struggles between different climate imaginaries from a cultural political economy perspective. Other scholars focus on discourses related to distributional questions: Wilgosh et al. (2022) center their analysis on the Just Transition discourse, analyzing how labor, advocacy, private sector, and governmental actors frame and implement Just Transition across different contexts. More recent developments discussed under labels such as China's "Environmental-Authoritarianism" (Gilley 2012) or "Eco-Fascism and Eco-Nationalism" in the far-right scene (Rosamond and Davitti 2022, Forchtner and Kølvråa 2015) add new directionalities of SET.

These contributions on different conceptualizations of sustainability transitions emphasize the diverse nature of visions for more or less sustainable futures and the gap between sustainability visions and the prevailing growth paradigm. Although these contributions touch upon the political field, and the nation state seems to be considered as the main frontier to act on climate change mitigation (Stoddard et al. 2021), the conceptualization of the state as "strategic terrain" (Poulantzas 2014) for transition struggles is largely absent from these debates. In most contributions, the identified narratives, visions or imaginaries are broadly conceptualized but not linked to the politically relevant actors who support the vision. This means that this strand of literature on SET visions and imaginaries also fails to consider which actors have similar visions of SET, if coalitions on them exist, and how this influences scopes for action within a state, as well as subsequently chosen SET pathways.

2.2. The Capitalist State and the Glass Ceiling of Transformation

On a more abstract or meso-level, however, the state in the transformation has been addressed: The debate on the environmental state (Hausknost and Hammond 2020) and the decarbonization state (Brand et al. 2025) examines how modern states have integrated

environmental concerns into governance, evolving from regulatory approaches to more ambitious sustainability policies like emissions standards, subsidies for renewables, and international commitments (e.g., Paris Agreement). More recently, Brand et al. (2025) argue that the environmental state is increasingly replaced by the decarbonization state, characterized by a more stringent interest in decarbonization than environmental protection, often underestimating the material footprint of technological solutions. A main challenge, however, for both the environmental and decarbonization state, is to reconcile imperatives which are fundamentally at odds: to address environmental degradation and the climate crisis through the reduction of social metabolism, *and* preserve the stability of our economic systems and hence, ensure ongoing capital accumulation with given structures and incumbents (such as fossil infrastructure). This pushes the state to rely on strategies of ecological modernization alongside technological solutions like carbon capture and storage, which ultimately prolong fossil dependency at the expense of more radical transformative measures. We thus reach what Hausknost (2020) calls the “glass ceiling of transformation”.

The role of vested interests in stabilizing this glass ceiling is complemented by deeply-rooted accumulation imperatives of the state (Hausknost 2020). Stoddard et al. (2021) argue along the same lines, noting that resistance to more extensive forms of climate action is related to social power relations, particularly to vested interest groups in the fossil sector, but also, more broadly, to the economic sector.

Critical state theory gives a theoretical perspective on how and why these struggles take place within capitalist states: Critical State Theory (Jessop 2002, 2016; Poulantzas 2014) perceives the state not as a neutral actor but as a site of class struggle and contradictory imperatives. More precisely, the state is seen as a "material condensation of class forces" (Poulantzas 2014: 1) or “strategic terrain” (Poulantzas 2014: 135f), mediating contradictions between capital accumulation and social reproduction to sustain *hegemony*. Hegemony is a concept introduced by Gramsci (2012) to conceptualize power in bourgeois society. Put differently, it is argued that social order in capitalism is not maintained and reproduced by force, but by consent. Power relations are crucial for the shaping and reproduction of hegemony: Actors able to mobilize their power resources (e.g., capital, access to social infrastructure) will succeed in putting through their interests within a hegemonial consent; however, such a consent always rests on some form of compromise that is reached through material concessions made by powerful groups of actors. Once established, a hegemonic consent is beyond what can be questioned.

From the perspective of Critical State Theory, ecological policies need to fulfil the competing aims to serve accumulation (e.g., green growth via carbon markets) while legitimizing the system through symbolic environmentalism (= “glass ceiling” of the environmental state). However, deeper transformations systematically fail due to inherent growth dependencies and power asymmetries. This is underpinned by the hegemony of the "green growth" narrative that frames sustainability as compatible with endless accumulation, marginalizing alternatives like degrowth or eco-socialism; this sustains the "glass ceiling" by normalizing market-based instruments (e.g., emissions trading) while discrediting radical shifts that challenge elite power. However, this does not mean that (hegemonic) struggles on how to design a transformation are absent from the policy-making in the environmental state. A critical state theory perspective emphasizes how important assessing actors' interests in relation to their visions of transformation is, but also how coalitions crossing different interests are formed, in order to

understand political or hegemonic visions for transformation and the related outcomes in environmental policies.

In addition, critical state theory also hints towards a defining factor of SET visions or imaginaries: economic reasoning. Since any form of SET is closely linked to forms of production and consumption, its imagination is tied to the way economic activity within a state is (imagined to be) organized. This thought has been explored in a recent theoretical contribution by Pühringer and Bäuerle (2025), which will lay the groundwork for our empirical analysis. Considering economic reasoning also helps uncover how actors align or oppose each other within their visions of SET. In doing so, we address two literature gaps in the debate on SET imaginaries: we not only examine the concrete visions of policy-relevant actors, but also analyze the economic reasoning that underpins these imaginaries – a dimension largely absent from existing research.

3. Conceptual Framework, Case Selection, and Methodological Approach

Addressing the shortcoming of absent economic reasoning as well as the concrete actors level in the SET debate, we aim to examine coalitions among diverse actors within a state by analyzing their visions of SET taking also into account their economic reasoning. The following section explains in detail how we proceed. It first presents the conceptual framework, emphasizing the role of economic reasoning for SET, then discusses the political-economic context of our case, namely Austria, and finally explains our methodological mixed-method approach.

3.1. Conceptualizing the Power of Economic Reasoning

As outlined above, different pathways of socio-ecological transformation require reconfigurations of the relation of economy, society, and ecology, and thus are closely related to different forms of economic reasoning (ER). Therefore, social and economic relations and power asymmetries between institutionalized interests frame the role and importance of the economy in society. In this paper, we apply a broad understanding of the performative power of ER as it is used in the interdisciplinary research tradition of Social Studies of Economics (SSE) (Maesse et al. 2022; Pühringer et al. 2025; Bäuerle 2023; Bäuerle and Maasen 2025) SSE investigates how economics - beyond its academic formulations and concepts - shapes societal realities, political decisions, and public perceptions of economic phenomena. SSE conceptualizes ER not as a neutral analytical framework, but as a socially embedded and politically influential practice that actively constructs and legitimizes particular ontologies and perspectives.

The interconnectedness between SET and ER constitutes a critical research area given the global challenges of climate change, inequality, and overconsumption. ER fundamentally shapes both the diagnosis of socio-ecological crises and proposed solutions. The interplay between ER and SET manifests particularly in tensions between growth-oriented and sufficiency-oriented imaginaries. While green growth emphasizes technological innovation

and market-based solutions, sufficiency approaches demand fundamental rethinking of consumption patterns and economic power structures.

SSE employs a multilevel definition of ER that encompasses academic knowledge production, policymaking, media discourse, education, and everyday social practices. This approach reveals ER's performative power: economic models, ideas, and narratives do not passively reflect reality but actively configure institutions, behaviors, and political outcomes through multiple interrelated mechanisms. Drawing on Jessop and Sum's Cultural Political Economy approach (Newell 2025; Jessop 2010; Sum and Jessop 2013), we differentiate between narratives (stories about change), imaginaries (broader guiding visions), and concepts (complex theoretical frameworks underpinning both). For instance, the "green growth" narrative derives from a sustainable capitalism imaginary, premised on the compatibility of economic expansion and environmental sustainability.

Economic imaginaries of SET frame problems, define viable solutions, and naturalize particular socio-economic arrangements. Once institutionalized, they shape policy design and public expectations, influencing SET trajectories. Since SET inherently involves reconfiguring economic processes of consumption, production, and distribution, different forms of ER exert formative impacts on SET imaginaries. Analyzing the underlying ER in SET debates in combination with an analysis of imaginaries of SET in core documents of relevant actors thus allows tracing possible transformation pathways. Therefore, we apply an actors-based approach and reconstruct SET imaginaries of the largest political parties and most important policy interest groups in the Austrian policy arena accounting for the "strategic terrain" aspect. Before we present our methodological framework and approach of reconstructing SET imaginaries of core political actors in Austria in more detail, we first introduce the specificity of the Austrian case and elaborate on why this case is particularly interesting for an actor-based analysis of countervailing SET imaginaries.

3.2. The Austrian Case

In terms of how policy processes are shaped, particularly the tradition of Austria as a conservative welfare state (Esping-Andersen 1990) with a long-standing tradition of social partnership needs to be emphasized. The system described as austro-corporatism is known for its consensual mode of conflict resolution in policymaking. Compromise between labor and capital is institutionalized by giving representatives of each formal power in policy processes (Talos 2006; Unger and Heitzmann 2003). In the Austrian case of "consociational democracy" (Andeweg 2000; Bogaards et al. 2019), employees (labour) are represented by the Austrian Federation of Trade Unions (ÖGB) and the Austrian Chamber of Labor (AK), both with close links to the Austrian social democratic party, SPÖ. The AK is internationally distinctive in that it is funded by the mandatory membership of all Austrian employees and provides economic expertise to represent workers' rights in corporatist parity bodies such as the public employment service (Rathgeb 2017). Employers (capital) are represented by the Austrian Chamber of Commerce (WKO) and the Austrian Chamber of Agriculture (LKÖ), though the Federation of Industries (IV) – despite not being a formal social partner – plays a more significant role in practice. All three organizations have close ties to the Austrian conservative party, ÖVP.

What should be noted, however, is that the peak of the austro-corporatist system was in the 1960s, 70s, and 80s, whereas the process of European integration and changing political

constellations, particularly the participation of the Freedom Party (FPÖ) in government, have led to a loss of importance. Moreover, while the institutionalized role of social partners remains distinctive in Austria, their influence on environmental policy has been less pronounced than in other policy fields, such as the labor market or social policy (Tálos and Hinterseer 2019). Turning to climate politics, Austria has long been viewed as an environmental role model or at least a leading country in environmental protection, partly due to the importance and widespread use of hydropower for energy production. However, this image has been undermined considerably, especially since climate change has emerged as the primary focus of environmental protection. Austria increased its GHG emissions in the period from 1990 to 2017, a time in which most European countries managed to decrease theirs. At the same time, ambitions for a far-reaching transformation of production and consumption modes beyond “ecological modernization” (Krenmayr et al. 2020) remain absent. Climate protection has not been prioritized sufficiently to emphasize mitigation over adaptation (Scherhauer and Clar 2021; Steurer and Clar 2018). The literature offers several possible explanations for this lack of transformation ambition, including the Austrian industrial structure, especially the importance of the automotive sector (Krenmayr et al. 2020), the above-mentioned corporatist structure (Brand and Niedermoser 2019; Steurer et al. 2023), and the country's federalist system, where state governments have considerable competencies with respect to climate protection (Steurer et al. 2023).

Several works have set out to identify the main actors in Austrian climate change mitigation. (Arnecke 2024) recounts the recent history of climate policy and develops an actor analysis. Abstiens et al. (2021) conduct expert interviews to identify the main policy players and their respective influence in the field. Steurer et al. (2023) analyze the governance of the climate crisis in the Austrian Panel on Climate Change. Theine and Verità (2026) identify actors and transformative imaginaries in Austrias media landscape. Drawing on these studies, we select actors based on two criteria: first, their relevance in SET discussions and their political and economic policy influence; second, their role in institutionalized policy advice, as exemplified by organizations like Global 2000."

3.3. Methodological Approach: An Actors-Based Reconstruction of SET Imaginaries

In order to identify existing coalitions on how the socio-ecological transformation in Austria is imagined, we apply a mixed-method approach of qualitative text analysis and social network analysis. More precisely, we first conduct a critical discourse analysis of strategic documents of core policy actors and reconstruct their SET imaginaries based on a theoretical framework of nine categories of SET and ER, which will be introduced below. Second, we use the results of our qualitative analysis of SET imaginaries for an actor-based social network analysis, which allows us to unveil potential actor coalitions in the debates on and the struggle over SET pathways.

Given the specific Austrian context and the long tradition of institutionalized balancing of interests of capital and labor, the actor analysis focuses on actors with formal political power or significant agenda-setting capacity in Austrian climate and industrial policy debates (Steurer et al. 2023; Arnecke 2024; Abstiens et al. 2021).

Among political parties, we include:

- the Austrian People's Party (ÖVP), a center-right conservative party
- the Social Democratic Party (SPÖ), a center-left social democratic party
- the Greens (Grüne), an environmentally focused progressive party
- the Freedom Party (FPÖ), a right-wing populist party and
- the New Austria and Liberal Forum (NEOS), a liberal pro-European party

On the organized-interest side, we include:

- the Austrian Chamber of Labor (AK), a mandatory membership organization providing economic expertise and representing employee interests
- the Austrian Economic Chamber (WKO), the official representative body for businesses and employers
- the Federation of Austrian Industries (IV), representing major industrial companies
- the Austrian Trade Union Federation (ÖGB), the umbrella organization for trade unions and
- Global 2000, Austria's largest environmental NGO

Regarding the analyzed documents, for political parties, the corpus consists of party manifestos and the parliamentary election programs from 2024, retrieved from official party websites and archived at the time of collection, with the NEOS only having a parliamentary election program from 2024. For the organized-interests actors, the corpus comprises two to three climate-relevant strategy documents or public position papers per organization. Examples include IV's "Industriestrategie," WKO's "Energienmasterplan," and AK's "Umbauplan." Only the most recent versions available were included (for a full list of documents included in the analysis, see Appendix A).

To analyze these documents, we apply the Socio-Ecological Transformation and Economic Reasoning (SETER) framework ((Pühringer and Bäuerle 2025), which is designed to capture SET imaginaries by taking into account the economic logic underpinning it. We used this framework as a coding scheme to categorize and compare SET imaginaries. We used MAXQDA to code the documents (n = 20) according to the nine categories of the SETER framework. In the first round, each coder independently coded all documents for three to four actors using the predefined codebook based on the categories above. In the second round, a different coder cross-checked each already coded document. Disagreements were discussed in team meetings and resolved by consensus, with refinements to code definitions. This two-step procedure served to enhance intercoder reliability and align interpretive standards. After coding, the team read and interpreted all coded segments for each category and actor and discussed them to specify qualitative characteristics, such as, for instance, preferred modes of state intervention, that then translated into the manifestations formulated by Pühringer and Bäuerle (2025) During this process we applied two adaptations to the categories of the SETER framework in order to stay closer to the empirical material. More precisely we split the category 'transformative dynamic' into two categories: transformative dynamic pace and transformative dynamic quality. For an overview of the categories and the manifestations, see *Table 1*. The identified manifestations of the respective actor imaginaries were summarized in a comparative spreadsheet, which enabled systematic cross-actor comparison and the identification of convergences and divergences in SET imaginaries. Since in empirical analysis of strategic policy documents in many instances the ideal-types of manifestations are not

perfectly matched, we distinguished between main references, strong references and weak references for manifestations and used this scheme also for the quantitative analysis of actor coalitions (see below).

Category	Manifestation 1	Manifestation 2	Manifestation 3	Manifestation 4
Economic Goal	Security	Economic Growth	Social Provisioning	Living within Planetary Boundaries
Decisive Economic Institutions		Market	State	Commoning
Role of State	Zero State	Regulatory	Intervening	Planning
Spatial Scope of Economic Transformation	Regional/local	National	International	Global
Role of Technology	Techno-Centred	Techno-Optimist	Techno-Agnostic	
Economy-Nature-Nexus	Domination	Interdependence	Post-Humanism	
Socioeconomic Cohesion	Cohesion Neglected	Distribution by Chance	Distribution by Design	Egalitarian by Design
Transformative Dynamic - Pace	Agnostic	Stagnant	Slow	Swift
Transformative Dynamic - Quality	Regressive	Superficial	Structural	Systemic
Transformative Agency	Individualism	Technocracy	Representative Democracy	Radical Democracy

Table 1: The adapted SETER framework (Pühringer and Bäuerle 2025) with the categories and respective manifestations we used to analyse the documents and to distill socio-ecological transformation narratives.

In a second step, we applied two methodological approaches to highlight actor coalitions. On the one hand, we visualized actor-level SET imaginaries displaying the qualitative characteristics across the now ten dimensions of the SETER framework through a consistent color scheme. Therefore, we applied our scheme of main-strong-weak reference to manifestations and used color shadings in the tables. On the other hand, we applied a social network analysis, for which we constructed a two-mode network of actors and their related manifestations, coded in the SETER framework (*Figure 1*). We used the scheme of main-strong-weak reference for the network analysis and therefore translated the intensity of alignment with manifestations into weighted edges within the network. More precisely, we weighted main references with 1, strong references with 0.5 and weak references with 0.25. We then used the network software Pajek (Mrvar and Batagelj 2016; de Nooy et al. 2018) to analyze actor coalitions based on their different understanding of SET imaginaries. Technically, we applied the commonly used Kamada-Kawai algorithm (Kamada and Kawai 1989) which graphically sorts nodes (actors and their SET positions) according to the similarity

of their positions (shared and weighted manifestations). This network analysis shows the similarity of different actors based on their respective SET imaginaries and also allows to reconstruct potential actor coalitions in this field in a consecutive step.

4. Results: Imagining Transformation

In our actor analysis along the lines of the SETER framework from (Pühringer and Bäuerle 2025), we identify three distinct imaginaries that serve as ideal types around which different actors align to form policy-relevant coalitions (see *Figure 1*): market-driven transition (right circle), ecological modernization (middle circle), and just transition (left circle). In *Figure 1* shows how different actors relate to concepts of the SETER framework and broader social imaginaries. The respective manifestations that actors exhibit and on which the network in *Figure 1* is based are shown in *Figure 2, 3* and *4*. Individual actors' positions show variation and do not align perfectly with the imaginaries. At the same time, the figure also illustrates that between the three circles, there is some common ground in visions of transformations to which all actors agree at least to some degree.

In the following section, each imaginary is introduced, and its nuances in the empirical material are discussed. Then, in a second step, the three imaginaries are compared, revealing overlaps and some hegemonic common ground of imagining transformation in Austria.

4.1. Market-Driven Transition Imaginary

ÖVP					NEOS					FPÖ				
Category	Manifestation 1	Manifestation 2	Manifestation 3	Manifestation 4	Category	Manifestation 1	Manifestation 2	Manifestation 3	Manifestation 4	Category	Manifestation 1	Manifestation 2	Manifestation 3	Manifestation 4
EG	Security	Economic Growth	Social Provisioning	Living within Planetary	EG	Security	Economic Growth	Social Provisioning	Living within Planetary	EG	Security	Economic Growth	Social Provisioning	Living within Planetary
DEI		Market	State	Commoning	DEI		Market	State	Commoning	DEI		Market	State	Commoning
RoS	Zero State	Regulatory	Intervening	Planning	RoS	Zero State	Regulatory	Intervening	Planning	RoS	Zero State	Regulatory	Intervening	Planning
SPS	Regional/local	National	International	Global	SPS	Regional/local	National	International	Global	SPS	Regional/local	National	International	Global
RoT	Techno-Centred	Techno-Optimist	Techno-Agnostic		RoT	Techno-Centred	Techno-Optimist	Techno-Agnostic		RoT	Techno-Centred	Techno-Optimist	Techno-Agnostic	
ENN	Dominance	Interdependence	Post-Humanism		ENN	Dominance	Interdependence	Post-Humanism		ENN	Dominance	Interdependence	Post-Humanism	
SEC	Cohesion Neglected	Distribution by Chance	Distribution by Design	Egalitarian by Design	SEC	Cohesion Neglected	Distribution by Chance	Distribution by Design	Egalitarian by Design	SEC	Cohesion Neglected	Distribution by Chance	Distribution by Design	Egalitarian by Design
TDP	Agnostic	Stagnant	Slow	Swift	TDP	Agnostic	Stagnant	Slow	Swift	TDP	Agnostic	Stagnant	Slow	Swift
TDQ	Regressive	Superficial	Structural	Systemic	TDQ	Regressive	Superficial	Structural	Systemic	TDQ	Regressive	Superficial	Structural	Systemic
TA	Individualism	Technocracy	Representative Democracy	Radical Democracy	TA	Individualism	Technocracy	Representative Democracy	Radical Democracy	TA	Individualism	Technocracy	Representative Democracy	Radical Democracy

WKO					IV				
Category	Manifestation 1	Manifestation 2	Manifestation 3	Manifestation 4	Category	Manifestation 1	Manifestation 2	Manifestation 3	Manifestation 4
EG	Security	Economic Growth	Social Provisioning	Living within Planetary	EG	Security	Economic Growth	Social Provisioning	Living within Planetary
DEI		Market	State	Commoning	DEI		Market	State	Commoning
RoS	Zero State	Regulatory	Intervening	Planning	RoS	Zero State	Regulatory	Intervening	Planning
SPS	Regional/local	National	International	Global	SPS	Regional/local	National	International	Global
RoT	Techno-Centred	Techno-Optimist	Techno-Agnostic		RoT	Techno-Centred	Techno-Optimist	Techno-Agnostic	
ENN	Dominance	Interdependence	Post-Humanism		ENN	Dominance	Interdependence	Post-Humanism	
SEC	Cohesion Neglected	Distribution by Chance	Distribution by Design	Egalitarian by Design	SEC	Cohesion Neglected	Distribution by Chance	Distribution by Design	Egalitarian by Design
TDP	Agnostic	Stagnant	Slow	Swift	TDP	Agnostic	Stagnant	Slow	Swift
TDQ	Regressive	Superficial	Structural	Systemic	TDQ	Regressive	Superficial	Structural	Systemic
TA	Individualism	Technocracy	Representative Democracy	Radical Democracy	TA	Individualism	Technocracy	Representative Democracy	Radical Democracy

Figure 2: Visual of the transformative imaginary of ÖVP, NEOS, FPÖ, WKO and IV: Overview of the diverging characteristics of the different actors within the market-driven transition imaginary, based on the SETER framework. The color indicates the manifestation that actors exhibit in the respective category. The intensity of the color indicates our scheme of main-strong-weak reference: the darkest color signifies main reference to a manifestation, the in-between shade signifies strong reference and the lightest color signifies weak reference.

The first imaginary, *Market-Driven Transition*, is associated with actors oriented toward capital interests, including industry representatives (IV, WKO) and political parties (NEOS, FPÖ, ÖVP). Generally, this imaginary is driven by a belief in the market and its innovative capacity to ensure continued human prosperity within planetary boundaries. However, the need for change itself is often disputed or downplayed. A limited understanding of transformation – meaning a profound change of economic and social structures – is associated with this imaginary. It also shows the greatest inertia in terms of change and, in parts, even regressive tendencies. To emphasize its incremental pace and quality, if change occurs at all, we term it "transition" rather than "transformation".

As shown in *Figures 1 and 2*, the imaginary is characterized by a strong focus on economic growth and, to a lesser extent, on security in the sense of autonomy and independence of international resources as the goal of economic action. It focuses on markets as those institutions governing, managing, and allocating economic resources, while the state acts as a regulatory provider for the economy, and only has a limited capacity to drive transformation. The IV, for example, writes in its industry strategy paper that “there needs to be a shift away from the comprehensive insurance state, which inhibits personal initiative and risk-taking” (D10, p. 139)¹. Transformation is seen as a market-led and technology-driven endeavor, and agency for change is mostly associated with the economic elite, individual citizens or entrepreneurs. The ÖVP, for instance, argues in its election program for the 2024

¹The document numbers D01-D20 correspond to the List in Appendix A. All direct quotes from the analyzed documents were translated from German to English by the authors.

parliamentary election that “the key to sensible, effective climate protection is not more bans, but openness to technology and innovation. If climate protection is approached with common sense, it can also be a guarantee of prosperity.” (D12, p.232). This statement exemplifies how the imaginary often does not acknowledge the necessity of profound transformation, but focuses on technological fixes through innovation. Consequently, transformation mostly remains superficial in its quality and slow, almost stagnant in its pace. In addition, distributional aspects are not given much attention. WKO, IV and NEOS do not touch upon the subject explicitly at all, and FPÖ and ÖVP argue for limiting social welfare. The ÖVP party manifesto reads as follows: “Individuals may only demand from the community for what they cannot achieve on their own. We reject a free-rider mentality in all areas” (D11, p. 12). Lastly, this imaginary views nature as separate from humanity and existing to serve human needs and economic purposes. Humans here are understood as superior to nature, and environmental limits are believed to be addressable through innovation and efficiency gains.

However, among the actors in this coalition differences and nuances exist. The FPÖ shows with its agnostic or even regressive view of transformation itself the greatest divergence from this imaginary among the actors mentioned: Rather than advocating for superficial changes as the other actors in this coalition, the FPÖ even envisions the roll-back of climate policies. Another difference is that FPÖ and ÖVP attribute agency in the transformation solely to individuals (both as people but also individual firms/corporations), whereas other actors do see agency of economic institutions and actors. One category that is less clearly defined among this coalition is the spatial scope in which transformative change is imagined. Here, the views diverge from a solely national (FPÖ) to mostly national (WKO & ÖVP), and a mostly international (NEOS, IV) perspective.

4.2. Just Transition Imaginary

SPÖ					AK					ÖGB				
Category	Manifestation 1	Manifestation 2	Manifestation 3	Manifestation 4	Category	Manifestation 1	Manifestation 2	Manifestation 3	Manifestation 4	Category	Manifestation 1	Manifestation 2	Manifestation 3	Manifestation 4
EG	Security	Economic Growth	Social Provisioning	Living within Planetary	EG	Security	Economic Growth	Social Provisioning	Living within Planetary	EG	Security	Economic Growth	Social Provisioning	Living within Planetary
DEI		Market	State	Commoning	DEI		Market	State	Commoning	DEI		Market	State	Commoning
RoS	Zero State	Regulatory	Intervening	Planning	RoS	Zero State	Regulatory	Intervening	Planning	RoS	Zero State	Regulatory	Intervening	Planning
SPS	Regional/focal	National	International	Global	SPS	Regional/focal	National	International	Global	SPS	Regional/focal	National	International	Global
RoT	Techno-Centred	Techno-Optimistic	Techno-Agnostic		RoT	Techno-Centred	Techno-Optimistic	Techno-Agnostic		RoT	Techno-Centred	Techno-Optimistic	Techno-Agnostic	
ENN	Domination	Interdependence	Post-Humanism		ENN	Domination	Interdependence	Post-Humanism		ENN	Domination	Interdependence	Post-Humanism	
SEC	Cohesion Neglected	Distribution by Chance	Distribution by Design	Egalitarian by Design	SEC	Cohesion Neglected	Distribution by Chance	Distribution by Design	Egalitarian by Design	SEC	Cohesion Neglected	Distribution by Chance	Distribution by Design	Egalitarian by Design
TDP	Agnostic	Stagnant	Slow	Swift	TDP	Agnostic	Stagnant	Slow	Swift	TDP	Agnostic	Stagnant	Slow	Swift
TDQ	Regressive	Superficial	Structural	Systemic	TDQ	Regressive	Superficial	Structural	Systemic	TDQ	Regressive	Superficial	Structural	Systemic
TA	Individualism	Technocracy	Representative Democracy	Radical Democracy	TA	Individualism	Technocracy	Representative Democracy	Radical Democracy	TA	Individualism	Technocracy	Representative Democracy	Radical Democracy

Figure 3: Visual of the transformative imaginary of SPÖ, AK and ÖGB: Overview of the diverging characteristics of the different actors within the just transition imaginary, based on the SETER framework. The color indicates the manifestation that actors exhibit in the respective category. The intensity of the color indicates our scheme of main-strong-weak reference: the darkest color signifies main reference to a manifestation, the in-between shade signifies strong reference and the lightest color signifies weak reference.

The second imaginary, which we term *Just Transition*, is found among labor-oriented actors – the AK, the ÖGB, and the SPÖ. Out of all coalitions, the actors in this group show the most overlap in manifestations. This imaginary reflected the concept of Just Transition as developed and used by labor movements: The focus of the *Just Transition* imaginary lies on a

transformation that is just and takes into account the interests of the working class. This is typically coupled with planned approaches to the re-structuring of production and the corresponding reskilling of workers. Therefore, this does not represent an abrupt or disruptive change to the system, but changes are incremental. However, the positions also contain elements that challenge the capitalist organization of the economic system itself and hence envision a transformation that is structural and in some aspects systemic since it attempts to push back capital accumulation at the expense of social provisioning and is open to state planning (in some areas): The goal of economic activity in this imaginary is the provision of fundamental needs to all members of society rather than a sole focus on economic growth. The AK documents especially reveal a rather progressive stance: “Averting the climate crisis while improving the lives of the many can only be achieved through a fundamental reorientation of the economy” (D02, p.32). The state acts as the decisive economic institution here in the sense that it governs, manages, and allocates economic resources. As such, the state is actively intervening and, to some extent, even planning. The ÖGB, for instance, argues in its position paper on climate policy for “conscious control not only of industrial production, but also of energy provision, research, education, public ownership, as well as the provision of necessary infrastructure such as railways, ports, roads, broadband, and the requisite social institutions by political actors, embedded in a democratic process” (DO3, p.36). Only the production and distribution of goods and services not satisfying fundamental needs may be coordinated by the market. Further, as also reflected in the quote, agency for transformation lies in democratic institutions in both national and international arenas. However, these changes should be implemented in a slow, gradual manner, which aligns well with dominant visions of JT, oriented at the successive reskilling of workers. Furthermore, the imaginary centers distribution in the necessary transformation and hence, actively questions existing ownership structures. A vivid example of such is a passage in the SPÖ party manifesto: “Politics requires fundamentally questioning existing structures of wealth and power, redistributing income and wealth, and democratizing the economy” (D13 2018). It shows how redistribution is seen as an explicit goal of transformation and, beyond that, needs to be ensured through redistributive policies.

Although the three actors identified in this coalition share these views generally, nuances exist. The SPÖ, for instance, seems to be closer to the status quo in its perspective on transformation, while the AK and the ÖGB push towards state planning, direct democratic elements, aspects of commoning to organize economic activity, and generally a more systemic transformation of production and consumption structures. In addition, the AK is the only actor that envisions a system with a more egalitarian organization of society.

4.3. Ecological Modernization

Grüne					Global 2000				
Category	Manifestation 1	Manifestation 2	Manifestation 3	Manifestation 4	Category	Manifestation 1	Manifestation 2	Manifestation 3	Manifestation 4
EG	Security	Economic Growth	Social Provisioning	Living within Planetary	EG	Security	Economic Growth	Social Provisioning	Living within Planetary
DEI		Market	State	Commoning	DEI		Market	State	Commoning
RoS	Zero State	Regulatory	Intervening	Planning	RoS	Zero State	Regulatory	Intervening	Planning
SPS	Regional/local	National	International	Global	SPS	Regional/local	National	International	Global
RoT	Techno-Centred	Techno-Optimistic	Techno-Agnostic		RoT	Techno-Centred	Techno-Optimistic	Techno-Agnostic	
ENN	Domination	Interdependence	Post-Humanism		ENN	Domination	Interdependence	Post-Humanism	
SEC	Cohesion Neglected	Distribution by Chance	Distribution by Design	Egalitarian by Design	SEC	Cohesion Neglected	Distribution by Chance	Distribution by Design	Egalitarian by Design
TDP	Agnostic	Stagnant	Slow	Swift	TDP	Agnostic	Stagnant	Slow	Swift
TDQ	Regressive	Superficial	Structural	Systemic	TDQ	Regressive	Superficial	Structural	Systemic
TA	Individualism	Technocracy	Representative Democracy	Radical Democracy	TA	Individualism	Technocracy	Representative Democracy	Radical Democracy

Figure 4: Visual of the transformative imaginary of Grüne and Global 2000: Overview of the diverging characteristics of the different actors within the ecological modernization imaginary, based on the SETER framework. The color indicates the manifestation that actors exhibit in the respective category. The intensity of the color indicates our scheme of main-strong-weak reference: the darkest color signifies main reference to a manifestation, the in-between shade signifies strong reference and the lightest color signifies weak reference.

The third imaginary we name *Ecological Modernization*; it describes a shared vision of transformation held by actors historically rooted in environmental protection movements: the Green Party (Grüne) and the environmental NGO Global 2000. This imaginary goes beyond the first and second imaginary in that it acknowledges the urgency and necessity of change to avoid climate crisis fully setting off, recognizing that maintaining current trajectories is unsustainable. While having a very broad understanding of the climate crisis (including biodiversity and other factors), in terms of the mechanisms and approaches they propose in the field of economic policy, they do not go much further than the first imaginary (see Figure 4). As such, this imaginary broadly describes what is understood as “ecological modernization”: an adaptation of current structures to climate-neutrality, without fundamentally changing the structures that have produced the crisis in the first place. However, two aspects clearly distinguish this imaginary from the others: the spatial scope of transformation and the pace at which it should occur. Transformation is seen as an inherently international and even global phenomenon that is to be governed through international institutions. And both share a sense of urgency regarding climate action since time for effective climate mitigation policy is running out. Global 2000 is, for example, explicitly calling for “swift and effective climate protection decisions. After all, what needs to be done has long been known and examined in countless studies. There are only a few years left to achieve ambitious targets. Given that measures take time to implement, the focus must therefore be on the rapid and consistent implementation of effective climate protection measures” (D06, p.2).

This swift change is seen to be brought about by democratic agency, consisting of elected officials and direct democratic decision-making. In contrast to *market-driven transition*, this imaginary recognizes the mutual dependencies of ecological and economic systems and the downsides of technology. However, at the same time, variance within this imaginary regarding the other categories is higher than for other imaginaries. Whereas the Grüne aligns with the market-driven transition imaginary on economic goals, the role of decisive economic institutions, the state's role, and transformative dynamics, Global 2000 tends towards the Just

Transition imaginary in these dimensions. More precisely, the Grüne sees the market as the central institution, as it can allocate scarce resources efficiently and drive technological innovation. Accordingly, they advocate strongly for a higher carbon price as the most effective way to tackle the climate crisis in their election program for the parliamentary elections. It says: “CO₂ pricing ensures that a first step towards cost transparency is taken for CO₂-intensive products” (D16, p. 39). In addition, the role of the state is considered rather limited, and economic growth remains the central goal of economic activity. In contrast, Global 2000 sees the state as a much more decisive actor in the transformation. Its role goes beyond regulation by actively directing public resources and investment. Furthermore, their perspective challenges the economic growth paradigm and calls for a fundamental rethinking of the capitalist economic system to prioritize ecological integrity and intergenerational equity. This makes them the only actor in the sample to clearly prioritize living within planetary boundaries.

4.4. Overlapping and Divergent Manifestations

In our analysis, there are several manifestations that many actors share. In almost all transformation understandings, we see reference to markets – in varying degrees – as decisive economic institutions alongside the state. This tandem can also be observed as a fundamental feature within Austria's current system, illustrating the strong tendencies of persistence reflected across all imaginaries. Almost all actors are also optimistic regarding the role of technology, though some also recognize that technology requires accompanying measures driven by societal guidance. Another commonality is the focus on the national and international level – more precisely, the European Union – as the appropriate scales for transformation measures. The only outlier here is the FPÖ. What we can also observe, shaped by global circumstances and the shifting geopolitical order we are currently witnessing, is a reference to security concerns in almost all transformation understandings. This primarily concerns autonomy and independence from strategic resources such as critical raw materials and energy; this focus is unsurprising, as it can be directly traced to ongoing wars and political instability.

In general, all these overlaps are unsurprising given our sample of political parties and (mostly) institutionalized interest groups – all actors that are well versed in compromise and coalition-building and deeply embedded in the current system.

At the same time, several manifestations are quite rarely exhibited, and it is precisely these that span our analytical space. Living within ecological boundaries as an economic goal, for example, is part of only Global 2000's vision. Similarly, a distributional setup that goes beyond redistribution by design and envisions a more fundamentally egalitarian arrangement is only slightly present in the AK's transformation understanding. Likewise, the FPÖ hints at the state having no role at all, a position no other actor approaches.

Generally, we observe that many of the imaginaries are oriented toward the status quo across several categories. As such, certain manifestations that the original SETER framework envisions are never present in our sample. Examples include: no imaginary positions, private economic agents as the decisive economic institutions; we find no actively anti-technology stance regarding the role of technology; none of the actors views nature and humanity as completely separate entities; and none envisions an autocratic regime. This status quo-

oriented or less utopian character of our results is again expected given our sample composition. Therefore, we observe restraint at both ends of the spectrum: we see no visions of an autocratic system, but also no embrace of degrowth ideas.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

This paper analyzes how different actors in Austria's corporatist political system envision socio-ecological transformation (SET) by also examining the economic reasoning (ER) underlying their visions. Building on the SETER framework developed by Pühringer and Bäuerle (2025) we conduct a mixed-methods analysis combining qualitative discourse analysis of strategic documents with social network analysis to identify actor coalitions and their shared transformation imaginaries.

Our central finding is that Austrian policy actors cluster into three distinct coalitions, each characterized by a specific transformation imaginary: Market-Driven Transition, Just Transition, and Ecological Modernization. These imaginaries differ significantly in their understanding of transformation pace, quality, the role of state and markets, distributional justice, and the urgency of climate action. However, all three coalitions share substantial common ground that reflects deep embedding in Austria's current political-economic system, revealing why the country has shifted from environmental leader to climate laggard despite widespread acknowledgment of the climate crisis.

In line with political economy literature on the political power balance in contemporary climate policies (Kallis et al. 2024; Brand et al. 2025; Hickel and Kallis 2020), the market-driven transition imaginary is the most broadly endorsed position in the Austrian political economy. It revolves around the idea that markets are central agents of transformation because of their innovative capacity and their ability to efficiently allocate scarce resources to maximize collective welfare. Apart from this, concerns for distribution (particularly, for redistribution) are sidelined. Overall, this imaginary clearly exhibits neoliberal ideas towards transformations (Pühringer et al. 2021; Wiedmann et al. 2020) and envisions the least changes regarding the structures of the existing capitalist system. However, if we look at the actors supporting this imaginary, the lack of an ambitious transformative vision is not surprising: Particularly, this coalition includes resource-rich actors from the capital side and political parties closely aligned with capital interests. As such, this finding is in line with the asserted dominance of market-driven transitions in the EU (Kallis et al. 2024; Porak 2025; Gräbner-Radkowsch et al. 2023)

The just transition imaginary is represented by all actors aligned with labor interests, connecting to global efforts of the labor movement to push for Just Transition as a transformation strategy (Wilgosh et al. 2022). In comparison with other imaginaries, actors here share the highest level of categorical overlaps in our analytical framework. Likewise, the imaginary clearly reflects the Just Transition debate. Overall, the role of the state - vis-a-vis that of the market - is clearly emphasized as an actor able to guide or shape the economic transformation process and economic activity more broadly. Markets are seen as appropriate only for coordinating production and distribution of goods and services beyond fundamental

needs. This coalition envisions transformation that is structural and, in some aspects, systemic, as it attempts to push back capital accumulation in favor of social provisioning.

Therefore, redistribution and the provision of basic services is seen as a task of the state. In regard to the envisioned necessary transformation, this imaginary offers the broadest or most systemic perspective but the pace is quite slow, in order to ensure that no one is left behind. These findings are particularly interesting in comparison with Wilgosh et al. (2022), who argue that just transitions are at odds with incremental approaches favored by the capital side. A possible explanation for the higher level of caution displayed in the current debate, might be their roles in the Austrian political economy either as part of the government or social partners.

The third imaginary, Ecological Modernization, characterizes actors historically rooted in environmental protection movements: the Green Party (Grüne) and the environmental NGO Global 2000. This coalition fully acknowledges the urgency and necessity of change to avoid catastrophic climate breakdown, recognizing that maintaining current trajectories is fundamentally unsustainable. However, the imaginary shows the greatest internal variation among the three coalitions, particularly regarding economic goals, decisive institutions, and the role of the state. Actors sharing this imaginary can be clearly distinguished from others in two central aspects: A swift pace and a global scope of transformation. These actors also display the most comprehensive understanding of the climate crisis, not only focusing on issues related to GHG emissions, but also considering aspects such as biodiversity and soil sealing. Yet, this broader understanding of ecological transformation does not apply to the depth of change that seems to be necessary. Within the coalition, we can observe very different stances - with the Green Party being closer to the market-driven imaginary and Global 2000, being closer to Just Transition.

When contrasting and comparing the different imaginaries and underlying struggles within the discursive space of the Austrian political economy from a critical state theory perspective, three key points emerge from our analysis:

First, despite the contrasting visions of the three transformative imaginaries outlined above, our analysis reveals substantial hegemonic consensus across actors. Nearly all reference markets – in varying degrees – as decisive institutions alongside the state, reflecting Austria's current political-economic system and strong path dependencies. Thus, the imaginaries we identified display a clear status quo orientation, which has important implications for the scope of transformative action. For instance, most actors display techno-optimism and identify the national and EU levels as appropriate transformation scales, with security concerns regarding resource autonomy appearing across nearly all visions. The FPÖ being the sole outlier in its exclusively national focus. These overlaps reflect the sample's composition of institutionalized actors deeply embedded in Austria's corporatist tradition of consensus-seeking and coalition-building, which shapes positions toward preserving core systemic features. Moreover, these overlaps also reflect their institutionalized power to varying degrees, meaning they can actually shape transformative processes to a larger (political parties, and particularly, SPÖ, ÖVP and NEOS who are currently in government) or smaller (interest group representatives) extent. Although some actors show tendencies toward more far-reaching changes (e.g. living within planetary boundaries in Global 2000's vision or a concept of fundamentally egalitarian distribution only weakly in the AK vision), these remain rather limited, and the imaginaries largely follow established trajectories. While this is to be expected given our sample selection of actors relevant to the policy field, it also demonstrates how the existing material

configurations shape what can or wants to be imagined. The lack of fundamentally different imaginaries of transformations (for instance, entailing approaches to economic planning) illustrate how powerful the current politico-economic system's tendency to persist is – and the role the inability to imagine alternatives plays in this persistence. This relates to (Hausknot 2020) concept of the environmental state's 'glass ceiling': the inability or un-desirability to imagine alternatives means that the scope for political action remains bounded by existing structures and incumbent interests. Therefore, the scope for transformative action in a European corporate state such as Austria is very much limited by the status quo.

Second, the coalitions that form around specific imaginaries clearly illustrate the importance of economic reasoning for visions of transformations. Particularly for actors representing capital or labor, the social relations of production fundamentally shape their economic reasoning and, consequently, their transformation imaginaries. The way that the relation of states, markets, society and the environment is envisioned, shapes the possible visions of the future. Moreover, the actors' interests also fundamentally shape these visions, as reflected by the three imaginaries, either having capital interests, labor interests, or environmental concerns at their core. In this context, the specificities of the Austrian corporatist system and the continued importance of social partners are central: while they are closely aligned with their corresponding political parties and their role as mediators between labor and capital is institutionalized, *Figure 1* shows that they remain somewhat distinct from their respective political parties. In a similar vein also the climate NGO Global2000, much more radical than the Green Party, advocates for measures such as forbidding short flights and demolition of roads. These differences show that political parties must maintain a more status quo-oriented and coalition-friendly position, whereas social partners and NGOs can propose somewhat more pointed or extreme positions. Nevertheless, the corporatist system's emphasis on consensus-building and compromise, while facilitating coordination and stability in some policy domains, appears to function as a barrier to the rapid, structural transformation that climate science indicates is necessary. The formal power granted to capital representatives (WKO, IV) alongside labor representatives (AK, ÖGB) creates institutional veto points that privilege continuity over transformative change, particularly when such change threatens established economic interests.

Third, we argue that these imaginaries and the underlying discourse coalitions may be exemplary for currently ongoing hegemonic struggles on transformation in corporatist, Western European democracies. These struggles revolve around the question of how to design a transformation in an increasingly hostile global environment - hostile in two aspects: first, world market dynamics and institutions are becoming increasingly fragmented, creating new challenges for multi-lateral action, and second, the dynamic of the climate crisis is intensifying, making the consequences of insufficient climate ambition increasingly uncertain and potentially catastrophic. From our findings and related research, it appears that, given the current political-economic circumstances, the market-driven transition vision represents realistically the best-case scenario for climate action, while a fossil-warfare trajectory represents the worst case – not least since climate consequences of warfare itself are huge. The more progressive imaginaries simply do not have the power to create the necessary amount of cohesion among the various stakeholders at the EU level. However, further, possibly comparative, research is needed in order to reach a conclusion about which hegemonic project is going to dominate at the EU level and beyond.

In sum, our findings reveal significant constraints for climate policy in Austria and similar corporatist economies. The hegemonic consensus on market-state tandems, techno-optimism, and growth orientation suggests that even progressive coalition governments will struggle to pursue transformation beyond ecological modernization. Yet, breaking through the “glass ceiling of transformation” (Hausknost 2020) requires either fundamental shifts in powerful actors' imaginaries or institutional changes. Our analysis has shown that they are not on the plate in Austrian political discourse: The broad absence of degrowth, commons-based organizing, or radically democratic agency from institutionalized discourse indicates that these imaginaries as of today remain outside politically feasible boundaries, illustrating the resilience of the hegemonic consent on growth-paradigm. This is only questioned by Global 2000, who prioritize Living within Planetary Boundaries before all other goals.

It is important to note what our analysis captures and what it does not. We have identified how actors understand and envision transformation and how they cluster into coalitions based on shared imaginaries, but we have not examined how these actors actually behave in practice, how they mobilize these coalitions in the policy process, or for which specific measures they deploy their power. This distinction between imagined transformation and actual political practice – including the strategic use of coalition alignments – remains an important avenue for future research. Additionally, the static analysis of current positions cannot capture how these imaginaries might evolve in response to changing circumstances, such as intensifying climate impacts, economic crises, or shifts in international climate governance. The identified coalitions represent current alignments that may shift as political-economic contexts change. Furthermore, our focus on institutionalized actors with formal political power or significant agenda-setting capacity means that more radical voices from social movements, grassroots organizations, or critical civil society actors remain underrepresented. This likely explains the absence of degrowth, eco-socialism, or commons-based economic imaginaries from the sample. The analysis thus reveals the boundaries of institutionalized political discourse rather than the full spectrum of transformation imaginaries present in Austrian society. Likewise, we excluded other actor groups, according to critical state theory relevant to the reproduction of political power, such as administration (e.g., ministries, high-level officials and so on) or the judicative (e.g., judges, important legal cases). However, this was decided since we want to assess broad imaginaries rather than practical everyday decisions and documents.

Nevertheless, for transformation research, the paper demonstrates the value of analyzing economic reasoning underlying visions rather than accepting rhetoric positions. With its focus on economic reasoning as a central aspect of possible trajectories of socio-ecological transformation the SETER framework provides a systematic tool for uncovering fundamental divergences in actors' understanding of necessary economic and institutional changes, supporting critical state theory's emphasis on the state as “strategic terrain” (Poulantzas 2014) where class forces struggle over hegemonic visions (of green transitions).

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6. Appendix A. Overview of Analyzed Documents

Table A1 provides an overview of the 20 documents included in the analysis. The corpus consists of official publications issued by Austrian political parties and interest groups. The documents include policy papers, position statements, strategy documents, and publicly available reports relevant to the research topic. All documents were publicly accessible at the time of data collection and were selected based on their substantive relevance to the research question.

Table A1. List of analyzed documents (n = 20)

Nr.	Organization	Year	Title
D01	Austrian Chamber of Labor (AK)	2024	Eine Zukunft für die Vielen - Der Plan der Arbeiterkammer Wien für den sozialen und ökologischen Umbau
D02	Austrian Chamber of Labor (AK)	2024	Tätigkeitsbericht Bundesarbeiterkammer
D03	Austrian Trade-Union Federation (ÖGB)	2021	Klimapolitik aus ArbeitnehmerInnen-Perspektive - Positionspapier des ÖGB
D04	Global 2000	2019	Österreich Klimafit Regieren - Eine Handlungsanleitung für die künftige Bundesregierung von WWF Österreich, GLOBAL 2000, VCÖ-Mobilität mit Zukunft und Klimavolksbegehren
D05	Global 2000	2023	Klimaverpflichtungen im EU – Lieferkettengesetz: Chance für Klima jetzt nutzen!
D06	Global 2000	2023	Stellungnahme zum Entwurf des Integrierten nationalen Energie- und Klimaplanes für Österreich. Periode 2021-2030
D07	Austrian Economic Chamber (WKO)	2020	Zukunftsbild 2025
D08	Austrian Economic Chamber (WKO)	2025	Masterplan - Energie für Österreich Für die Wirtschaft. Für uns ALLE.
D09	Federation of Austrian Industries (IV)	2024	Standortfaktor-Wasser - Lebensader und Ressource der Industrie
D10	Federation of Austrian Industries (IV)	2025	Gesammelte Industriestrategien 2020 – 2024
D11	Austrian People's Party (ÖVP)	2015	Grundsatzprogramm 2015 der Österreichischen Volkspartei

D12	Austrian People's Party (ÖVP)	2024	Wahlprogramm zur Nationalratswahl 2024: Österreichplan: Das Programm Stabilität für Österreich
D13	Social Democratic Party (SPÖ)	2018	Grundsatzprogramm
D14	Social Democratic Party (SPÖ)	2024	Wahlprogramm zur Nationalratswahl 2024: Unser Plan für ein besseres Österreich.
D15	Greens (Grüne)	2001	Grundsatzprogramm der Grünen
D16	Greens (Grüne)	2024	Wahlprogramm zur Nationalratswahl 2024: Wähl als gäb's ein Morgen
D17	Freedom Party (FPÖ)	2011	Parteiprogramm der Freiheitlichen Partei Österreichs: Österreich zuerst
D18	Freedom Party (FPÖ)	2024	Wahlprogramm zur Nationalratswahl 2024: Festung Österreich. Festung der Freiheit. Kurzversion
D19	Freedom Party (FPÖ)	2024	Wahlprogramm zur Nationalratswahl 2024: Festung Österreich. Festung der Freiheit. Langversion
D20	New Austria and Liberal Forum (NEOS)	2024	Wahlprogramm zur Nationalratswahl 2024: Reformen für dein neues Österreich