

The Sustainability of the Unfit: The transition of Estonian energy system and the dominance of oil shale

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The case of Estonia reveals the national peculiarities and complexities of energy geographies. Estonian energy system is largely dependent of unconventional fossil energy generated from oil shale, which carries heavy environmental and social burden. However, the practices, infrastructures and politics constructed around the dominant technology are very slow to change and affect the perception of potential alternatives. Oil shale has deeply cultural - but not entirely uncontroversial - role in the unfolding energy system of Estonia and Baltic states.

Somewhat surprisingly Estonia has emerged as one of the first member-states to reach European Union renewable energy targets for 2020. This is largely due to use of biomass in new district power-plants and rapid advances in the construction of wind-parks, but also to opening of electricity markets to competition. Also, the co-firing of wood with oil shale in Narva power plants was among the strategies used to increase the share of renewables. However, the phasing out of oil shale is not part of the energy politics, as the reactionary aim has been merely to adapt the technology and production system to changing environmental norms of international environmental regime.

Based on field-work and policy analysis, this paper provides analysis of recent developments in sustainable energy production and carbon reductions in Estonia. Could the technological lock-in be unlocked? How far can sustainability transition carry? What is the role of culture?