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Untangling regional opportunity spaces: The role of narratives and place leadership

Max Roessler^{1*.*.*}, Markus Grillitsch^{2**.*.*}, Johan Miörner^{3**.*.*}, Daniel Schiller^{4*}

Abstract

This paper aims to identify micro-level processes shaping the narratives about regional opportunity spaces. A process perspective is applied to investigate how place leaders engage in shaping narratives to influence the perception of regional opportunity spaces. The empirical research is based on a comparative case study of four peripheral regions in Germany including ninety-two interviews with regional stakeholders complemented by two cross-regional focus groups. Our findings emphasize the central role of place leadership in influencing the perception of regional opportunity spaces, show two pathways of changing dominant narratives (outside-in and inside-out) and provide a multiple-phase framework for their analysis.

Keywords: *opportunity spaces, narratives, place leadership, agency, peripheral regions*

JEL codes: R11, P52, O33, R58

Correspondence to: max.roessler@uni-greifswald.de

*Chair of Economic and Social Geography, University of Greifswald, Germany (4 daniel.schiller@uni-greifswald.de)

**Department of Human Geography, Lund University, Sweden (2 markus.grillitsch@keg.lu.se, 3 johan.miörner@keg.lu.se)

***CIRCLE - Centre for Innovation Research, Sweden

1. Introduction. New regional opportunity spaces outside agglomerations

Peripheral regions play an increasingly important role in the green transition because of specific resources that enable, for example, the transition to renewable energy or the bioeconomy (Glückler et al. 2023; Vale et al. 2023). While all regions are exposed to this push for a green economy, opportunities and challenges vary between regions, which is captured by the notion of place-based opportunity spaces (Calignano et al. 2022; Kurikka et al. 2022). Furthermore, recent literature suggests that regional opportunity spaces can be shaped by local agency over time (Grillitsch and Sotarauta 2020).

Studying the forces that influence the perception of regional opportunity spaces in peripheral regions is of scientific and societal relevance as it contrasts the supposedly negative outlook of peripheral regions captured in notions like “*left behind regions*” or “*places that don’t matter*” (MacKinnon et al. 2024; Rodríguez-Pose 2017) with new possibilities through the green transition. Variations in the perception of opportunity spaces between regions with comparable

structural preconditions are the starting point of such an investigation. This paper is therefore based on a human agency perspective, which suggests that shaping processes of local actors are an important explanation of how tensions related to perceived and expected regional development trajectories are resolved (Grillitsch et al. 2023).

Theoretical and empirical insights into processes behind the perception of regional opportunity spaces are still limited, although such processes have an important impact on decision-making and accordingly influence the formation of agency and thereby regional development trajectories (Akerlof and Snower 2016; Casagrande and Dallago 2023). Previous findings suggest that the perception of opportunity spaces is connected to social filters and interactions between actors embedded in regional structures (Grillitsch and Sotarauta 2020; Kurikka et al. 2022). However, there is still limited knowledge on whether and how local actors and place leaders, in particular, influence the perception of regional opportunity spaces. This is where we see an important research gap, which we address by investigating the role of narratives in place leadership processes.

In this context, peripheral regions are particularly suitable as a research case because actor characteristics and leadership are both important in and expected to differ between peripheral regions (Nilsen et al. 2022). We further expect to see distinct patterns of place leadership because of the relatively limited number of actors (organisational thinness) compared to core-regions, (Grillitsch and Sotarauta 2020) and distinct opportunity spaces related to transition fields and structural characteristics of peripheral regions, e.g. biomass and energy production.

Narratives take on an important role in the perception and shaping of regional opportunity spaces (Hermwille 2016; Rosenbloom et al. 2016; Häyrynen and Semi 2019; Nilsen and Njøs 2022). They are collective stories about the successful or not so successful past, the expectations for the future and where local actors see opportunities within and around the region (Volchik 2017; Shiller 2017). Peripherality itself is often associated with negative narratives (Akerlof and Snower 2016), which is why we examine to what extent this has changed in terms of new opportunities. Changing narratives in peripheral regions could be related to new opportunities arising from a green transition (Artelaris and Mavrommatis 2020; Glückler et al. 2023) but could also be about threats to existing economic models in connection to rising discontent in many peripheral regions (Vale et al. 2023; MacKinnon et al. 2024).

The green transition thereby affects almost the entire economy, but some sectors are more affected than others. In relation to recent political efforts (DG Energy 2019; JRC 2021), we assume that we will be able to identify particularly powerful narratives in the transition fields

of *green energy* and *bioeconomy*. We trace back the shaping process of opportunity spaces on a regional level in four regional case studies, identify patterns linking agency and opportunity spaces, and the role of place leadership within that process. Our research perspective contributes to the understanding and use of narratives for shaping regional opportunity spaces and complement the still scarce literature in this field (Casagrande and Dallago 2023).

In the following chapter, we introduce and link the underlying theories and discourses on regional opportunity spaces, narratives and place leadership and present an analytical framework. Then we introduce our methodical framework of four regional case studies in Germany within two transition fields analysed by qualitative content analysis focused on narratives and path tracing of the observed regional opportunity spaces. The empirical results are presented in the fourth chapter with outlines of the specific shaping processes in each case study region followed by a comparative synthesis. Our findings are then discussed by emphasising the role of place leadership and highlight how the shaping process of narratives influences the perception of regional opportunity spaces. That shaping process of narratives is characterised as either outside-in or inside-out and has resulted in remarkable differences in the perception of regional opportunity spaces across the analysed regions and transition fields. In the final chapter, we conclude with policy implications and recommendations for place leaders.

2. Conceptual background. Opportunity spaces, narratives, and place leadership

2.1 Opportunity spaces and narratives from a place-based perspective

The notion of opportunity spaces has been used increasingly in regional development to establish a link between historically developed structures such as institutions, knowledge, or infrastructure, and human agency (Grillitsch and Sotarauta 2020; Kurikka et al. 2022). The focus on human agency has become prevalent to understand not only the reproduction, but in particular the transformation of regions (Miörner 2022). In line with influential work (e.g. Emirbayer and Mische 1998, Garud and Karnøe 2001), human agency is perceived as a process of social engagement which is framed by the past and the current situation, but also motivated by perceptions and aspirations for the future. With an interest in regional change, Grillitsch and Sotarauta (2020, p. 713) define opportunity spaces as the “*time or set of circumstances that make change possible*”.

Grillitsch and Sotarauta (2020) argue that opportunity spaces are stratified and suggest distinguishing between different levels for regional development. The actor-specific level refers to the perceptions and abilities of individual actors to affect development trajectories. The place-specific level captures all place-based characteristics such as capabilities and interests of

actors present in the region, traded and untraded interdependencies between these actors and their multi-scalar embedding as well as local institutions. Finally, the time-specific level is concerned with the global stock of knowledge or macro-level institutions. This suggests that opportunities differ not only in time and between places, but also between actors in the same place. Yet, opportunity spaces are not simply “out there”, but formed, perceived and used by individual agents or groups of agents and thus serve as a bridge between structure and agency (Kurikka et al. 2022).

A regional opportunity space is collectively perceived and involves “*shared institutional practices or ways of thinking*” (Kurikka et al. 2022, p. 3), which, however, does not mean that the necessary agency to realise the opportunities exists automatically nor that all actors have the same view of opportunities and act accordingly (Lagendijk 2007). These individually and collectively perceived opportunities are shaped by social filters and narratives of what people imagine and affect how they act and interact within the region (Garud and Giuliani 2013). In this context a narrative is a constitutive element and shaping mechanism of regional opportunity spaces, which entails spreading a story “*aimed to explain an aspect of reality or to interpret events, and it is able to influence the opinion and behaviour of people*” (Casagrande and Dallago 2023, p. 126).

The analysis of narratives has been developed and mostly used in social sciences. It embodies an important methodology far beyond the boundaries of the discipline and has also been applied by geographers (Wiles et al. 2005; Artelaris and Mavrommatis 2020). Casagrande and Dallago (2023) argue that the importance of research on narratives will increase, because studies have already shown that narratives have an essential impact on decision-making and social norms (Akerlof and Snower 2016). Studies mostly differentiate between forward-oriented and backward-oriented narratives as well as between (dominating) common and contra narratives (Herman 2009). Ryan et al. (2016) even argue for more place-based approaches analysing narratives, which is an important inspiration for this paper. A process perspective further allows to analyse how narratives around regional opportunity spaces change over time and trace them back, which is applied by various studies showing the evolution *from narrative to action* (Luederitz et al. 2017; Tàbara et al. 2019; Hinkel et al. 2020).

It is important to note, however, that a regional opportunity space is more than the narratives behind it, which do not need to adequately represent what changes are possible in a particular context. Narratives are socially constructed based on interpretations of learnings what might be possible. There may be dominating narratives about a regional opportunity space based on false

information or assumptions, which could influence regional agents and become a self-fulfilling prophecy (Fløysand and Jakobsen 2016), because actors can only engage in regional development processes on the basis of what they see and know. Hence, narratives are not only an account of how opportunity spaces are perceived, narratives also have a causal power in influencing what people do. Changing narratives about what is perceived possible in a region can thus be influential in shaping the direction of future development (Rekers and Stihl 2021).

Time-, place- or agent-specific levels of opportunity spaces (Kurikka et al. 2022) are expected to manifest themselves in the emergence of dominant time-, place- or agent-specific narratives used by local actors (Hermwille 2016). This has several implications. First, it suggests that the narratives of actors about opportunity spaces will often vary in regional contexts, allowing for mindful deviations from the dominant narrative (Garud and Karnøe 2001). Second, there is a dialectic between agent-specific and regional narratives because agents are embedded in a regional context, which influences the way they see the world. Yet agents can also influence the dominant narratives in a region (Kurikka et al. 2022). Third, giving attention to narratives related to different levels of opportunity spaces and how these narratives interact will shed light on the emergence of regional opportunity spaces, for instance whether the narratives originate to a larger extent inside the region through mindful deviation of local actors from dominant narratives, or whether they are mainly imported from outside by actors less embedded in the local context. Previous studies examined narratives in the energy transition, their legitimation and acceptance (Nilsen and Njøs 2022; Hermwille 2016) and whether and how these processes have been driven by external or internal dynamics (David and Schönborn 2018).

2.2 Place leadership and the role of narratives

There is also growing literature on place leadership (Sotarauta 2021) which argues for more place-specific approaches (Hambleton et al. 2021). Since place leadership operates by surpassing institutional, organisational and sectoral boundaries and has decision-influencing power (Collinge et al. 2010), it is an agency defining element (Grillitsch and Sotarauta 2020) and can shape and change the direction of regional development (Beer et al. 2019). In that context, place leaders are political, economic or scientific actors seen as regional leaders, because of their position and ability to influence a development process and mobilise other actors, resources and power. However, these leaders do not necessarily need to occupy formal positions, but may also acquire influence through their social position in a place. Place leaders provide a direction focussing on common interests, while place leadership is an emergent property of interacting individuals based on multi-actor, multi-value and multi-vision constellations (Sotarauta 2016).

Narratives affect and exist in all forms of political, as well as in public sector and non-state leadership (Hambleton et al. 2021) and are used by regional leaders to influence the public opinion and regional agents to create a certain agency (Casagrande and Dallago 2023). They shape the collective identity and values of a region (Pfothenhauer et al 2023), which becomes central, while looking at connections between communities and leadership in the area of agency and legitimacy (Sutherland et al. 2022). From a scientific perspective, it is of interest who creates and uses the plurality of narratives and why a certain narrative becomes dominant (Casagrande and Dallago 2023). The ability of place leaders to affect regional development trajectories depends on the extent to which they can shape interpretations and dominant regional narratives. Sotarauta (2009) referred to this as interpretative power, which is a medium to shape collective action (Hermwille, 2016; Luederitz et al. 2017) and how actors perceive and engage with regional opportunity spaces. Additionally, leadership and narratives condition common institutions, providing a framework for interpreting and responding to regional opportunity spaces (Rosenbloom et al. 2016).

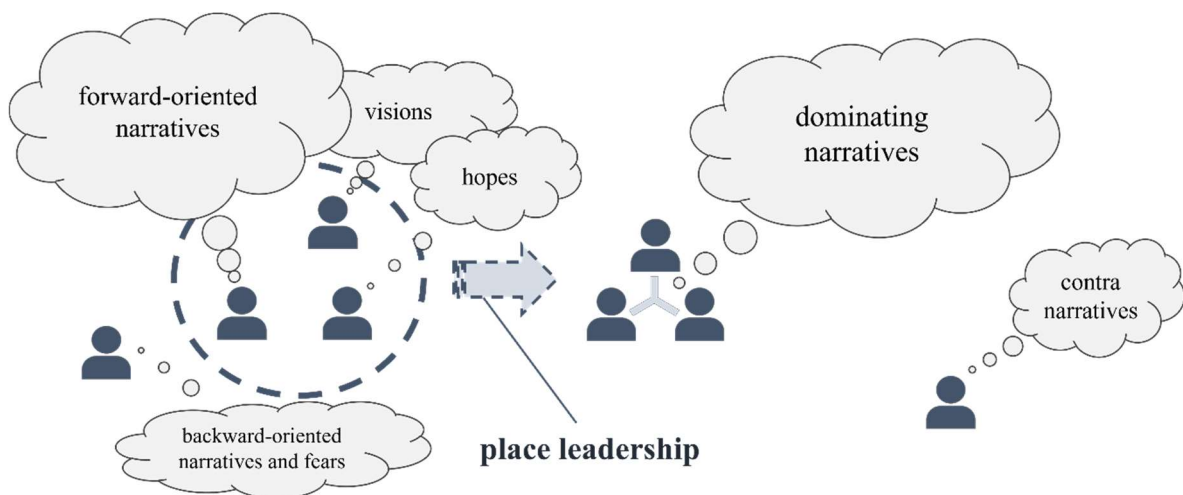


Figure 1: Shaping of a dominating narrative through place leadership

Figure 1 illustrates this process graphically. The focus is on place leadership as a process aimed at transforming dominant regional narratives. Place leaders are embedded in a context, where dominant and contra-narratives, backward- and forward-oriented narratives co-exist. Place leadership is then a process (Sotarauta 2021) where place leaders actively use forward-orientated narratives from different actors to shape or transform the dominant regional narrative, out of an interest in shaping regional opportunity spaces and driving regional development processes. This process strives to create transformative narratives (Luederitz et al. 2017) and thereby an agency of change to utilize the perceived opportunity spaces (Grillitsch and Sotarauta 2020).

2.4 Synthesis: regional opportunity spaces shaped by place leadership

Regional development presents an ongoing challenge as actors have partly conflicting visions, individual interests, and ideas, which makes it difficult to establish a shared vision and engage in collective agency with a sense of direction (Liddle 2012). Place leadership refers to the engagement of actors to resolve this puzzle, find a common ground for collective action, and mobilize and pool resources in regional development efforts. In their endeavour to give a new direction to regional development, place leaders engage in shaping dominant narratives. These narratives can further create justification and legitimation and can be used to shape new regional opportunity spaces (Pfothner et al. 2023).

Referring to the dynamics and actor constellations in the context of peripheral regions, which tend to be less diversified and more homogeneous than large cities, we expect the emergence of dominant regional narratives. We further expect that narratives in peripheral regions are especially powerful because of actor-based thinness (Eder 2019) and denser local networks (Westlund and Kobayashi 2013) with consequences also for place leadership, because individual actors and leaders are especially important in these regions. Therefore, place leaders may have more leverage to shape dominant narratives as well as the perception and engagement of other local actors.

Conceptually, a regional opportunity space is embedded within a wider, time-specific opportunity space, while it depends on place-specific conditions and leadership if and how a region can capitalise and shape a regional opportunity space within the external framework. The wider, time-specific opportunity space exists e.g. on the basis of a technology, transitions in the economy, political conditions and frames the regional opportunities. Thereby, especially in the initiation of a regional opportunity space, different mobilities of narratives can be distinguished (Figure 2). Thereby narratives differ in their direction, either entering the region from the outside (*outside-in*) by challenging or building up on existing narratives within the region, or emerging from inside the region among local actors and challenging or strengthening existing narratives and becoming a dominating regional narrative, which then has effects on the perception of the region outside its borders (*inside-out*). These narratives are mobilised and picked up by place leaders and are expected to possess a particular transformative potential and a driving function (Luederitz et al. 2017) transporting an engaging vision and provide concrete space where a region wants to go (Tàbara et al. 2019; Hinkel et al. 2020). Establishing narratives from the *outside* as dominant ones *in* the region is expected to be more challenging because of a limited fit with local preconditions or a ‘not invented here’ mentality, but especially they have the potential of breaking existing negative regional lock-ins and dominating backwards-

oriented narratives. While a dominating narrative emerged *inside* the region, is expected to have a higher legitimacy and likewise can affect the *outside* (e.g. acquire external funding).

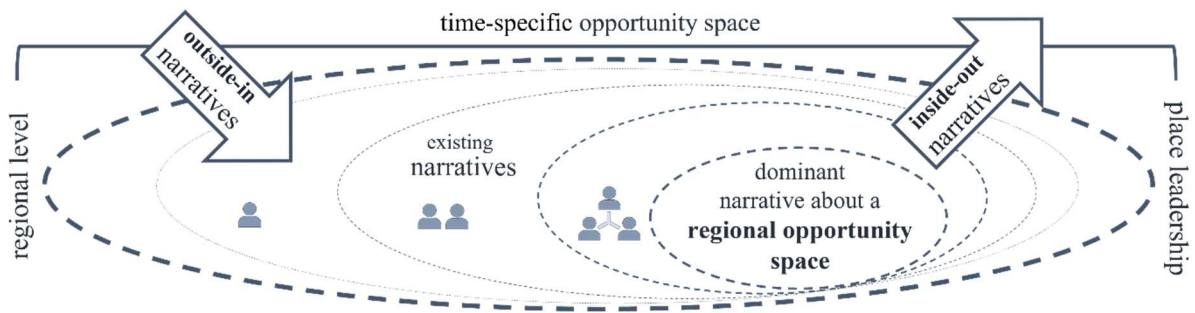


Figure 2: The role of place leadership in shaping dominant narratives

We differentiate this process in four phases (Figure 3). The initiation process is explained above. Next, place leadership entails a mobilisation phase, which focusses on spreading the (new) narratives and forming a joint purpose. After the mobilisation, place leadership works towards increasing the adoption of the narrative by more actors. Eventually the narrative becomes established as the dominant perception of a regional opportunity space. However, it is also important to note that narratives and actors' intentions may change in each phase so that the dominant regional narrative may also deviate from the initial perception and intention of place leaders. Furthermore, place leaders are not operating in a vacuum, but are themselves embedded actors, which is why regional preconditions and pre-existing narratives about opportunity spaces are assumed to influence these processes.

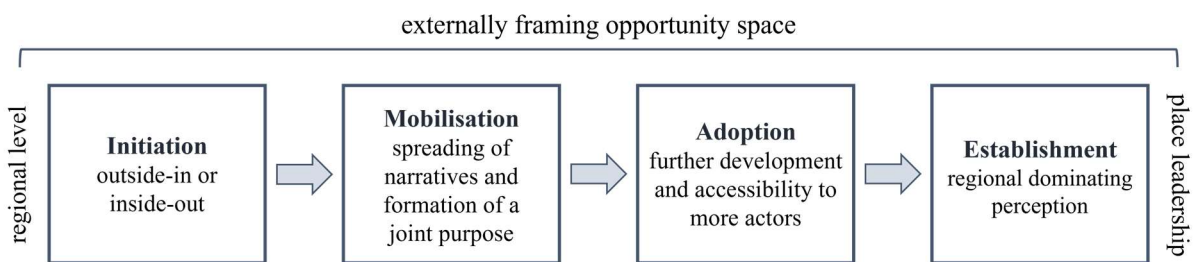


Figure 3: Shaping process of a regional opportunity space

Based on this conceptual framework, the empirical analysis is organised around the following research questions:

- How are the processes shaping dominant narratives about regional opportunity spaces initiated and which are particularly effective?
- Who is engaged in shaping these narratives and how?
- How are these processes conditioned by place-specific contexts and place leadership?

3. Methods. Four qualitative and comparative case studies

Our research design to study the questions raised and identify micro-level processes behind the perception and shaping of opportunity spaces in peripheral regions is shown in Figure 4 and presented in the following chapter.

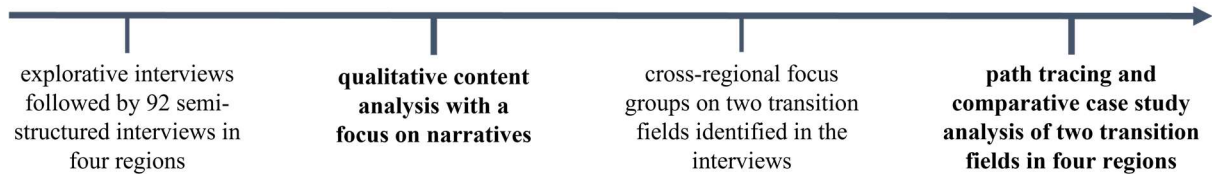


Figure 4: Methodical framework

3.1 Empirical data: a multiple case study design

We adopt a comparative case study design with the aim to ensure that the case study regions were comparable and represent different types of peripheral regions within the same national context. We selected four peripheral regions based on the criteria for comparable case study regions of Seawright and Gerring (2008). Decisive factors for the selection were regional preconditions as well as an immediate border location. Focussing on regional opportunity spaces related to the green transition, we especially looked at regions with at least some research institutions, larger firms, and existing strong networks, but without cities with more than 100,000 inhabitants. In combination with the different types of peripheral regions described by Nilsen et al. (2022), we have drawn up a list of sufficient conditions and tested the possible regions within a first round of informal explorative interviews. Against this background, we selected the four German border regions shown in Figure 5.

While *East Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania* is an example for organizational thinness and weak leadership, *Lower Bavaria*, on the other hand, is characterised by a relatively high diversity and strong small and medium sized enterprises. *Lusatia* serves as an example for a locked-in region specialized in lignite mining and energy production. Finally, *East Frisia and Emsland* is a region that has quickly caught-up largely based on green energy production. Additional regional characteristics are provided in Table 1.

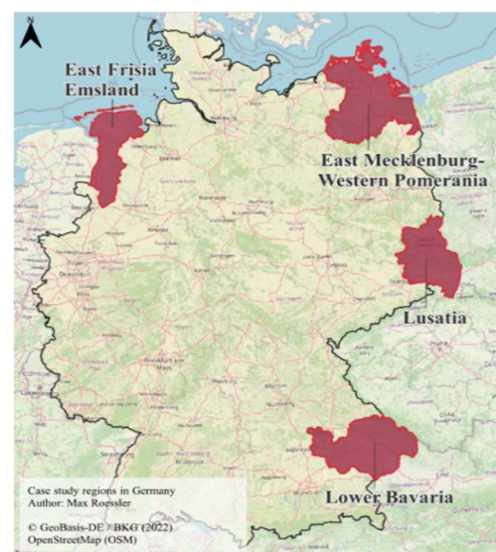


Figure 5: Location of the four case study regions in Germany

Table 1: Basic information about the case study regions (Source: BBSR 2019)

Region	Population density per km ²	GDP per capita in Euro	Main industries	Interviewees
East Frisia and Emsland	143.71	36,150	agriculture, maritime industry, energy technology	24
East Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania	56.75	27,200	agriculture, maritime industry, energy technology	25
Lusatia	115.88	29,640	open-cast lignite mining, energy production	21
Lower Bavaria	120.49	39,900	vehicle and machine shaping, metal industry, agriculture	22
Germany (average)	232.55	40,500	x	x

The main body of empirical data consists of 92 semi-structured expert interviews with different types of regional stakeholders that were aimed at gaining insights into their opinion, visions, and expectations for their region. With a minimum of 21 interviewed actors per region from June to November 2022 we identified regional gatekeepers and key actors and were able to collect narratives from political, scientific and economic agents. We selected our interview partners through a first round of explorative interviews and desk research as well as by snowballing. The in-person interviews were combined with an on-site research stay with a minimum of seven days per region and the attendance of various regional network events. To make the different regional and thematic cases comparable, we used a similar set of stakeholders (Table 2).

Table 2: Regional interview partners from all case study regions in Germany between June and November 2022

Type of actors	Interviewed agents within all four case study regions in Germany (92)
Firms (22)	Managing director of large companies (6), Managing director of small- and medium-sized enterprises (6), Founders (2), Entrepreneurs and members of regional economic initiatives (8)
Local- and regional government (11)	Representee of the federal state and ministry of economics (11)
Support organisations and intermediaries (28)	Representee of the chamber of industry and commerce (6), Representee of the chamber of crafts (4), Cluster- and network-manager (5), Heads of regional economic development agencies (11), Heads of start-up and business incubators (2)
Higher education institutions (31)	Heads of regional and supra-regional research institutions (10), Technology and innovation consultants (9), University professors and presidents (10)

The interview guideline contained twelve questions structured in four main parts: the near past of the region and of the interviewee, the current situation of the regional economy, a section on regional opportunity spaces, and a regional outlook against the background of the first three sections. Each interview had a length between 53 and 98 minutes and was fully transcribed for the analysis within MAXQDA (Kuckartz 2014).

The initial analysis of the semi-structured interviews revealed the importance of the plant-based bioeconomy and green energy as specific transition fields in all regions. Therefore, we invited

former interviewees from all regions to participate in thematic cross-regional focus groups related to these transition fields, listed in the Appendix I (A-I). We hosted both focus groups with guiding questions on regional drivers and challenges and an open discussion on what the regions could learn from each other with three to five participants per region in June 2023.

3.2 Qualitative content analysis: narratives and path tracing

The qualitative data was analysed using qualitative content analysis in MAXQDA (Kuckartz 2014) with a specific focus on narratives. Two separate rounds of analysis were carried out starting with an inductive followed by a deductive approach of a narrative analysis (Gadinger et al. 2014) to observe different patterns and uncover underlying mechanisms of regional opportunity spaces for each region as well as for each transition field.

The method includes an analytical set up to look at all forms of content, structure, and function transporting a certain story (Rodriguez 2015). Processes grounded in deeper structures that are not directly observable are of particular interest and require an analytical framework (Pentland 1999) based on the conceptual discussion on narratives in chapter two. We structured the factors underlying the narratives in different sets of categories as suggested by Hermwille (2016) and Clandinin (2019), shown in detail in Appendix IV (A-IV).

In a second step, we applied a process-oriented perspective of path tracing as a methodological approach to explore the complex interplay between structure and agency (Sotarauta and Grillitsch 2023). Therefore, the material on regional opportunity spaces was coded in the way presented in Figure 3. This allows us to study the long-term development in the regions and transition fields and reconstruct the development of a regional opportunity space. We thereby trace the narratives back to key events and relate them to agents and actions, which shaped regional development trajectories, in depth presented in Appendix III (A-III).

As a final step, the findings from the individual cases were synthesised by applying comparative case study analysis which involves analysing similarities and differences among cases that share common indicators systematically (Eisenhardt 2021). This method was used to identify variations and similarities among the cases, which are outlined in detail in Appendix II (A-II).

4. Results. Differences in shaping processes of regional opportunity spaces

In the following, we examine the four case study regions individually and illustrate the shaping process of exemplary opportunity spaces. We are doing this based on the framework presented in the second chapter and the results of the extensive content analysis, which are shown in detail in Appendix II and III (A-II and A-III). We will highlight patterns regarding the shaping of

dominant narratives, show how place leaders are involved in this process and how these processes are conditioned by regional context.

Historical preconditions must be considered for understanding regional paths (Martin and Sunley 2022) particularly regarding the investigation of case study regions in Eastern and Western Germany. The division into two distinct national states between 1949 and 1990 has resulted in persistent disparities between East and West. Furthermore, the investigated regional opportunity spaces are embedded in a national, European and global context that has been affected by megatrends like decarbonisation, digitalisation, and a new era of globalisation confronting peripheral regions with new risks and opportunities.

4.1 East Frisia and Emsland: The catching-up region

Emerging from formerly being perceived as the “*poorhouse of Germany*” (A-II-1a) and build around flagship companies (e.g. Meyer-Werft, VW, and Enercon), which are important as a role model, East Frisia and Emsland emphasise a strong innovative SME structure. This is one reason for strong actor-based narratives identified and used by regional agents referring to the biggest drivers and perception of current opportunities. In combination with place-based narratives (“*through land, wind and sun*”, A-II-2a), the region of Emsland is dominated by a narrative of “*catching-up*” and even “*overtaking*” (A-II-1a), which is driven by the perceived potential of becoming a leading green energy region. This results in transformation processes in that transition field, which are driven from within the region (A-III-2). Especially the regional opportunity space in green hydrogen is framed through regional funding mechanisms (e.g. Ostfrieslandplan).

“We always describe this as growth from within the region. [...] We had the special situation that there was the so-called Ostfrieslandplan, where 15 million euros were offered by the state of Lower Saxony, according to the motto: If you can think of something that can be done with it to promote innovation, then we will give you the money.”

(cluster and network manager)

That process, as well as most of the central political, economic and scientific agents, is further embedded in an overall regional development association (Ems-Achse e.V.), covering the whole region “*like an umbrella*” (A-II-3a), which enable an institutionalised way of thinking and unified action. This contributed equally to a stronger visibility and led to some narratives shaped inside the region that spread outside the region and legitimise its position.

“They made a very conscious decision not to become a member of the metropolitan region of Bremen in the north-west at the time, but decided to develop in the opposite direction as rural areas. The so-called Ems Achse was then founded to distinguish it from the metropolitan region.”

(entrepreneur and member of regional economic initiative)

The dominating narrative of a green energy region likewise covers the entire region. Driven by various activities in the field of green energy, most actors perceived a direct or indirect connectivity. Green hydrogen is even building up on and expanding the dominating and forward-oriented narrative of an “*overtaking region*” into a “*pioneer region*” (A-II-1a).

"With hydrogen we are playing Champions League. [...] We have lots and lots of great projects and lots of players in the region. And I believe that we are also pulling together on this topic."
 (head of a regional economic development agency)

In the context of narrative building, East Frisia/Emsland is the only case study region where favourable effects of being a border region were explicitly mentioned. This is due to the cooperation with the Dutch province Groningen on similar thematic focuses, while the region is “*standing together in competition with the neighbouring Dutch*” (A-II-3a). That positive narrative combined with a strong umbrella association unites the border region and creates collective agency, which brings local actors together. In combination with the history, this seems to be part of the explanation for a strong regional identity and a powerful regional opportunity space (A-III-2).

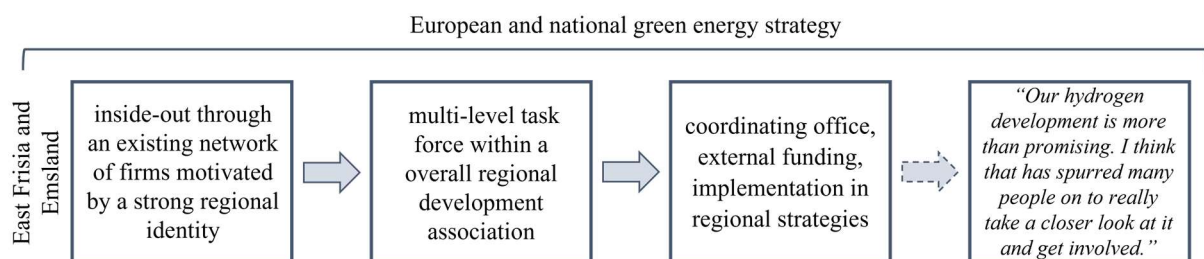


Figure 6: Shaping process in East Frisia/Emsland: green hydrogen (Appendix III-2)

4.2 East Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania: The vulnerable region

Despite some historically grown negative narratives that generally do not support transformation processes like “*we have always done it this way*” and being “*unwilling to transform*” (A-II-1b), partly caused by the experiences in the aftermath of the German reunification, the transition fields of bioeconomy and green energy are perceived as “*promising*” by many local actors (A-II-1a). They offer potential to challenge existing backward-oriented narratives and initiate an economic transformation process. In this regard, we identified dominating place-based narratives referring to the “*available space, wind or sun*” or “*coastal location*” and not so much on existing projects, stakeholders or structures (A-II-2b). The two perceived regional opportunity spaces are further primarily shaped through outside-in processes driven by national policy or universities and research institutes with strong extra-regional networks, which underlines the “*very small-scale structure*” and “*lack of entrepreneurial lighthouses*” often emphasised by local actors (A-II-3b).

Taking a closer look at the whole region of East Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania, the importance of "regional agglomerations" (A-II-3b, e.g. Greifswald) as starting points for structural change is comparatively high. In these larger cities, divergent narratives tend to be created: The knowledge-based innovative players in the university locations versus the small-scale, traditionally oriented SME structure, with a fear of contact and relatively low willingness to transform through outside-in initiatives, caused by their negative historical experiences (A-II-1b). This and the comparison between the two transition fields shows a high degree of regional fragmentation and polarisation. Looking at the whole region, bioeconomy activities are implemented more widely, while green energy is seen more as a coastal topic. From a macro-regional perspective on the shaping processes, bioeconomy may have a higher potential to be perceived as a common regional opportunity space, because it covers the entire region.

“We can actually talk about a region rich in raw materials because we have [...] the availability of space and we have all the possibilities. We also have every opportunity to try things out here, which is somewhat more difficult in other regions.”
 (technology and innovation consultant)

Some actors, therefore, perceive the bioeconomy as a “unifying topic” (A-II-1b). However, this is currently only supported by a small number of key actors, many of them with a background from outside the region, and is missing an overarching driving force that reaches all actors in the region equally. The underlying process illustrated in Figure 7 shows a comparatively weak regional opportunity space due to a lack of unified place leadership.

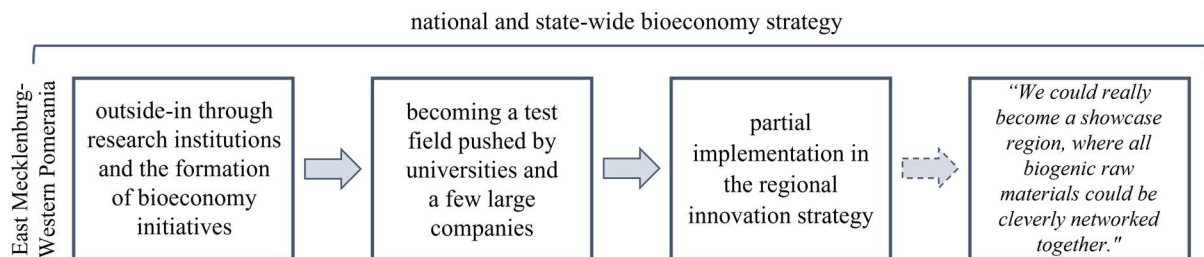


Figure 7: Shaping process in East Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania: plant-based bioeconomy (Appendix III-3)

4.3 Lower Bavaria: The well-balanced region

Lower Bavaria is characterised through a strong, innovative and often family-run SME structure and a university of applied sciences with a concept of small, specialised campi across the region that serve as knowledge-based drivers, strongly connected to local firms.

“[The specialised campi] simply make this connection between industry and university easier and lower the hurdles, because especially the smaller SMEs never came to the [main campus of the] university. That simply didn't work. The hurdle was too high. When the campi are on site, it's relatively unproblematic because the heads of the campi also approach industry much more closely.”
 (university professor)

Against this background, our empirics show dominating actor-based narratives where new opportunities are perceived and shaped on the basis of or around actor-constellations, who drive that process (A-II-3c). This is also evident in the primarily inside-out driven processes identified, which are supported by a strong overall framework (e.g. Fraunhofer Institutes, bioeconomy campus of the TU Munich in Straubing), which is very company-oriented, and particularly connected to Munich as an important factor for mobilising resources and knowledge in the transition field of plant-based bioeconomy (A-II-1c).

“It's not a region of renewable resources for nothing, it's a kind of network and there are companies in it, there are these institutions in it, such as TUM, but also [the regional energy cluster] and Fraunhofer, the city, the regional politicians and the city administration and many others who also identify strongly with the region and want to promote the region. And the fact is that we all work closely together and want to promote innovation for the region.”
(managing director of a small- and medium-sized enterprise)

An initiating and strategic framework in which companies innovate and act independently in a decentralised structure has been created through strong place leadership, politics and universities mainly, but not exclusively in the bioeconomy. That caused a strong and powerful perception of the bioeconomy as a regional opportunity space surrounded by many forward-oriented narratives covering the whole region (Figure 8).

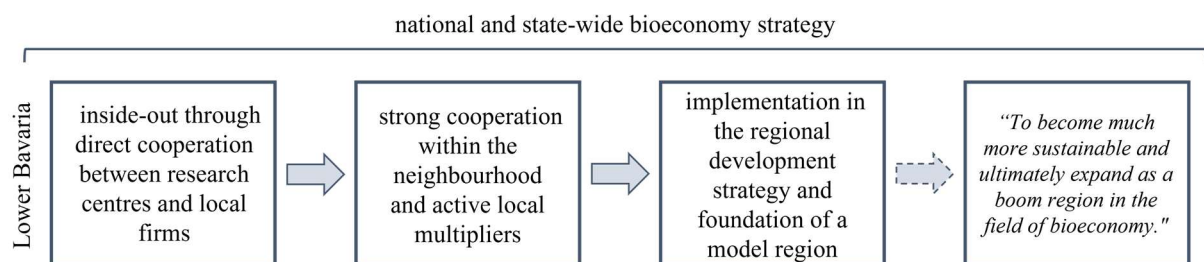


Figure 8: Shaping process in Lower Bavaria: plant-based bioeconomy (Appendix III-4)

4.4 Lusatia: The locked-in region

The region of Lusatia is shaped by the second biggest lignite deposit in Germany and the overall transformation process of the region is strongly influenced exogenously. Due to the reunification of Germany and the accompanying economic transformation, the internal and external perception of the region changed from an *“important and booming energy region”* before 1990 to a *“problem”* and *“left behind region”* (A-II-1d). The historically negative transformation experience shaped a strong backward-oriented narrative of an *“unwillingness to transform”* (A-II-1d). The national policy of a complete phasing out of lignite mining in Germany by 2038 partly bypassed regional decision-makers and reinforced already dominant outside-in driven transformation processes (A-III-1).

“Of course, national politics is having a massive influence at the moment on structural change in Lusatia. I was just thinking that this is actually quite a unique experiment that is happening right now.”

[...] if you look at the per capita funding, especially in this sparsely populated rural area, then it is historically quite unique."

(representative of the regional chamber of commerce)

There is a strong collective perception that external economic policy actors and funding programmes are of high importance, which are repeatedly referred to as "*crucial*". Ultimately, this also shaped a narrative of "*dependency*" (A-II-3d). Along with the external funding came the national decision to strategically localise various research facilities to create new economic opportunities within the region. However, according to most of the interviewees, these are expected to have difficulties embedding into the region as local actors are often characterised by their "*reservedness*" (A-II-3d) and specialisations of new research institutes are perceived as unfitting with local preconditions. Place leadership is also hampered by the state border between Brandenburg and Saxony that cuts through the region and results in the lack of an organisational structure and development perspective for the whole region of Lusatia, while the two states are perceived to be more interested in competition than cooperation (A-II-1d).

"In the days before the bag of money was placed in the middle, the region did not present itself as a region with a lot of cooperation."

(head of a regional economic development agency)

Founded on dominating time-based narratives like "*this has always been an energy region*" (A-II-1d) the support programme to compensate for the coal phase-out could potentially open the door for a new narrative around green hydrogen as a transition field for the future (A-II-1d).

"The energy topic is currently flaring up again and it is also the case that Lusatia is more strongly rooted in this energy topic in terms of its regional identity."

(university professor)

On this basis, the outside-in shaped regional opportunity space of green hydrogen presented in Figure 9, is characterised by its exogenous nature like in the past when the initiation of lignite mining was also decided externally (A-II-2d). Within the analysis we further identified a potential divergence between the outside-in narratives accompanying green hydrogen and the acute needs of regional stakeholders, while local actors do not perceive these new opportunities as their own or even promising. This could reinforce the unwillingness to transform, which raises the question whether focussing on other transition fields shaped by regional actors would lead to a higher willingness to transform or if this is prevented by a locked-in development path in the field of energy. The case shows how weak place leadership and the lack of unification and involvement of local actors are decisive factors behind the weak perception of regional opportunity spaces.

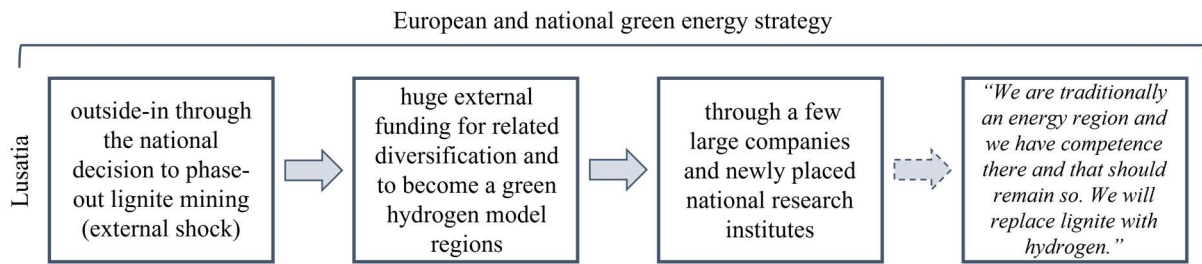


Figure 9: Shaping process in Lusatia: green hydrogen (Appendix III-1)

5. Discussion: The role of place leadership in shaping dominant narratives

In this section, findings on the shaping of narratives and the role of place leadership in establishing them in the region are discussed across the four cases and reflected against the conceptual background.

5.1 Cross-case analysis of shaping processes and dominant narratives

The four regional cases presented in the previous chapter strongly differ regarding the perception of regional opportunity spaces. This is particularly a result of differences in their shaping process – especially during the initiation phase. Based on these cases, three factors have been identified that influence the shaping of dominant narratives about regional opportunities.

First, *referring to place-specific context factors is a powerful tool for shaping narratives*, but comes with varying results. In all four regions, place-specific pre-conditions have been woven into the narratives. In some cases, reference to the natural environment or regional history was foregrounded. In other cases, established regional competences and related diversification was highlighted. Place-specific opportunities related to peripherality or rurality were reinterpreted by place leaders in a productive way to mobilise forward-looking narratives. Nevertheless, time and place-based references also contributed to backward-oriented narratives and regional lock-ins, which underlines a core assumption of the paper that place leadership can make an important difference in shaping regional opportunity spaces despite a set of preconditions that may not be favourable (c.f. Martin and Sunley 2022). In particular, an East-West divide became visible with the two Eastern German cases being influenced by a dominance of time-based and backward-oriented narratives. Conflicting narratives between their perceived regional identity and external forward-oriented narratives surrounding new regional economic opportunities frequently surfaced. Overall scepticism against an external framing of opportunities is expected to be related to a slower economic and societal transformation in these regions.

Second, *the early initiation of narratives tends to permeate throughout the process of shaping regional opportunity spaces*. Narratives that emerge inside the region seem to be more effective in aligning actors towards common objectives and facilitate the implementation of supporting

visions and strategies (c.f. Sotarauta, 2018). Outside-in narratives however, are more dependent on effective place leadership to translate them into local discourses and spaces for interaction and collaboration among regional actors. In the process that unfolded after outside-in initiated narratives in our cases (e.g. Bioeconomy in East Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania) the structuring effect of place leadership was dependent on repeated reinforcement by agency throughout the process (Hermwille 2016), which was not always successful. In these regions, it becomes particularly important that influential regional actors “*apply the capacity to frame thinking and may end up having a leadership position that often goes beyond their formal mandate*” (Sotarauta 2016, p. 49) and act on behalf of wider interests (Liddle 2012). A key factor for initiating forward-oriented narratives that strongly deviate from pre-existing regional structures is then the ability of place leaders to translate and anchor narratives originating from the outside. From the case studies (e.g. Green Hydrogen in East Frisia/Emsland) we can observe that in order to translate such narratives into concrete policies and other socio-material artefacts, it is important to first engage in local sensemaking activities, including navigating the local ecosystem of actors with different ideas about the future, to anchor the exogenous narrative in local discourses and develop supporting narratives that take place-specific contexts as point of departure. This step was largely missing in the case of Lusatia, which we argue is an important reason for why outside-in narratives could not get a hold in shaping opportunity spaces there.

Third, *dominant- and contra-narratives tend to develop at different stages of development*. In regions where narratives were primarily initiated inside the region, the initial narrative was further specified, reinforced, and translated into socio-material conditions throughout the four phases. In the case of Lower Bavaria, the forward-oriented narrative about the bioeconomy was also reinforced by aligning with narratives elsewhere for mobilizing resources (in particular research funding) that was beyond reach of local SMEs. The cases of Lower Bavaria and East Frisia/Emsland also provide evidence for an inside-out shaping process of narratives which reinforced internal dynamics. Contra-narratives emerged primarily at the periphery of regional discourses and the initial narrative stayed dominant in the four phases. In regions where narratives were initiated outside-in, however, backward-oriented narratives kept their dominance longer in the process. It was possible to observe how strategies to deal with them evolved over time, but how SMEs remained sceptical about narratives that were felt as being imposed on them from the outside. Local universities and research institutes that adopted and tried to implement such narratives did not have the capacity, at least not on their own, to anchor and translate narratives locally.

5.2 The role of place leadership for the perception of regional opportunity spaces

Our study resonates with previous studies (e.g. Sotarauta, 2018) by emphasising that developing narratives is a potent tool that place leaders can use to shape regional opportunity spaces. Based on our findings, we can further refine this argument in several important ways.

First, the existence of established organisational structures and intermediary ‘umbrella’ organisations can be of utmost importance when it comes to effectively anchoring new narratives among other regional actors. The example of East Frisia/Emsland has been the most illustrative case in this regard with its regional development organisation which has over a long period of time resulted in a coherent regional network in which place leadership could flourish. This is in line with findings by Dobroć et al. (2023) on the relevance of intermediaries as enablers and multipliers of visions and narratives of change. A sufficient degree of decentralised, but still well-connected structure has also proven beneficial as shown in the case of Lower Bavaria. If the regional actor landscape becomes too fragmented or even polarised, like in the case of East Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania, place leaders face difficulties to mobilise forward-oriented narratives and challenge dominating narratives within the region.

Second, the domain to which place leaders belong also seemed to play a role for establishing forward-oriented narratives. In regions where some key firms (especially SMEs) were involved in forward-oriented narration, other regional firms were considerably easier to get ‘on board’ than in regions where narratives were initiated by policy actors. For example, in Lusatia, the process of shaping the regional opportunity space was dominated by policy actors, while in East Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania it was driven by academic or research actors. This had a substantial impact on the relationship between emerging narratives and the existing organisational structure of the regions – which in the two latter cases became somewhat more contested than when SMEs are involved. In the case of outside-in narratives, the involvement of place leaders from the policy domain even contributed to a perception of dependency which proved to be detrimental particularly in the case of Lusatia.

However, the results also show that the dedicated involvement of place leaders can mobilise outside-in narratives under certain circumstances. Their role is of particular importance for the adaptation of these narratives to the place-specific context and for breaking up lock-ins. This confirms findings by Pfothenauer et al. (2023) who argue that this adaptation is important for gaining legitimacy and public support. Outside-in narratives require a sufficient ‘fit’ with regional identities, socio-economic legacies, regulatory concerns, and political cultures. In the

case of weaker local structures, the successful regional anchoring of outside-in narrative has proven to be very difficult.

6. Conclusion. Untangling regional opportunity spaces

The findings of this paper contribute to a better understanding of interdependencies between narratives and regional opportunity spaces and emphasize the central role of place leadership in influencing the perception of regional opportunity spaces. The study empirically explored two pathways of shaping and changing dominant narratives (outside-in and inside-out) and conceptually frame these processes for their analysis. It has been demonstrated by results from four peripheral regions in Germany that outside-in narratives depend on dedicated efforts by place leaders. But if successfully mobilised, they could make a substantial difference regarding the perception of regional opportunity spaces. Inside-out narratives have an additional effect of creating legitimacy that should not be underestimated for the broader mobilisation of actors within the region. Place-specific contexts are powerful in conditioning these processes, but not deterministic as they can be altered or reinterpreted in a productive way by place leaders. In addition, strong inside-out narratives can have an influence on the external framework and serve as a catalyst because of a better alignment of external conditions (e.g. institutional framework or funding) to regional needs. In this regard, place leaders are of particular importance because of their access to extra-regional networks.

The key contributions of this paper to the literature can be summarised as follows. First, it is important to consider how narratives are initiated and shaped for understanding their specific prerequisites for a successful establishment in the region. Narratives initiated outside-in require much more local translation and anchoring by place leaders than inside-out narratives. Second, it is crucial that place leaders are not perceived as alienated from the region by other groups of actors. In this regard, place leaders from the academic or policy domain alone cannot develop convincing forward-oriented narratives. Third, by focussing particularly on peripheral regions, it can be derived that place-specific contexts are powerful elements of regional narratives. Specific context conditions related to peripheral regions can either be utilised as a seedbed for backward-oriented contra narratives or reinterpreted by place leaders in a productive way and support the breakthrough of forward-oriented narratives. Nevertheless, actor-based thinness has also led to fragmentation and polarisation in some of the analysed cases and served as a barrier to establishing new forward-oriented narratives.

The understanding of how narratives are initiated and regional opportunity spaces are shaped by place leaders is crucial for policymakers and practitioners to tailor strategies to specific

contexts and legitimise them. The significance of inclusiveness has been highlighted and a careful translation of global discourses on green transition into specific local contexts should be considered as early as possible to avoid regional polarisation and blockages. The ability of place leaders to proactively mobilise forward-oriented narratives in peripheral regions with challenging preconditions has been underlined, but it has also been shown that local firms (particularly SMEs) need to become a part of these narratives in order to enable them to become sufficiently dominant for shaping powerful regional opportunity spaces. Support for a decentralised, but still well-connected regional structure of place leaders is required as a fruitful seedbed for these dynamics to flourish. In this context, Grillitsch et al. (2023) also highlighted that how development is framed and who is engaged makes a substantial difference and call for a broader perspective on discovery processes of new opportunity spaces which involves also smaller actors and grassroot organizations who are often overlooked or have limited agency.

Within this paper, narratives were utilized as a lens, mechanism, and sensemaking-vehicle for regional agents to communicate, transport their perception and thereby shaping a specific story within a region. As their emergence, the very beginning, remains often in the dark, we particularly shed light on the initiation phase. It has been shown that this contributes to the understanding of regional opportunity spaces. Acknowledging the crucial role of narratives in development processes could be a starting point for more research on the influence of micro-mechanisms on the formation of agency, decision-making and development trajectories.

Finally, the empirical research based on four peripheral regions in Germany was explorative in nature. While the selected cases showed a wide variety of processes and outcomes, there is great potential to study these mechanisms in a broader set of peripheral regions beyond the German case and in other transition field than the bioeconomy and green energy.

Acknowledgements

We gratefully thank all our interview partner in East Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania, Lower Bavaria, Lusatia, East Frisia and Emsland for their commitment, cooperation and invitations to numerous regional events to get to know the regions even better! Likewise, we would like to thank all participants from the four case study regions who took part in the thematic focus groups and especially our project partners at the Fraunhofer ISI for jointly organising them.

Funding

This work is funded within the project “[The significance of change agency for innovation and transformation in relationally peripheral regions](#)” by the German research foundation (DFG), under Grant 490864816.

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Appendix

The authors can provide the appendix including their anonymised empirical data on request (mail to: max.roessler@uni-greifswald.de).