

HABILITATION THESIS REVIEWER'S REPORT

Masaryk University

Faculty

Applicant

Habilitation thesis

Reviewer

**Reviewer's home unit,
institution**

Faculty of Social Studies

Hedvika Kodůusková, Ph.D.

Energy poverty: Causes, effects and policy solutions

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This cumulative, article-based habilitation thesis is part of a broad research program in the social sciences, focusing on the energy-society interactions, in the context of an imminent energy transition, necessitated by a combination of factors: ageing infrastructure, economic considerations, technological innovation, and last but not least, environmental concerns, primarily – climate change. Central European countries, in their journey from communist planned economy to market-based capitalist governance, have faced an additional set of challenges in the energy sector. All these factors combined have put vulnerable groups under pressure, and affected the distribution of burdens, oftentimes in ways which are far from rational, just and fair. Simply put, transition creates winners and losers, and the latter remain more exposed to new challenges.

This is where Dr. Kodůusková's research project comes in, highlighting the issue of *energy poverty*, cast as a public policy responsibility, and implicitly – as a governance and market failure. Her empirical research does not shy away from normative statements, in the sense of identifying unfair practices, wrongdoings, examples of bad governance and from assigning responsibility for these to different state institutions or policy approaches. As she posits "whilst considered necessary to solve some of the current problems in the energy sector, public policies can themselves be a contributing factor to energy poverty".

Despite the global increase in energy availability, energy poverty, characterized by insufficient access to essential domestic energy services, remains a persistent issue, even within the European Union. This issue could escalate if energy-poor households are neglected in the ongoing low-carbon energy transition or due to inadequate public policies. The first paper in the thesis shows a very clear departure point for the entire research endeavour of the thesis: it shows that despite the relatively good situation that might be read out from official statistics,

the Czech Republic has an important energy policy problem that needs to be noticed, recognized, diagnosed and addressed. This is characteristic for all the papers in the thesis, also the one on Slovakia: things are not as good and easy as they seem, we need to look beyond and beneath the numbers to grasp the realities of energy poverty and the lived experiences of energy injustice.

This cumulative habilitation thesis aims to deepen our understanding of energy poverty and scrutinize related policies, using the Czech Republic (primarily) as a case study. It is composed of five parts – four journal articles, published in major, impactful journals in the field, *Energy Research and Social Science* and *Energy Policy*, and one book chapter in a volume looking at the problem of energy poverty in post-communist countries. It is important to note that *ERSS* is the most important global forum for the topics and approaches that Dr. Koďoušková deals with, and we can say without hesitation that she contributes to the current mainstream in her field.

As the candidate attests in the Commentary, much of her research adopts an interpretivist perspective and uses exploratory, mostly qualitative research methods to provide a comprehensive view of energy poverty. The aim is identifying non-material factors contributing to energy poverty and the various routes leading to energy vulnerability in Czech households. The research also contributes to mapping the national discourse on energy poverty, often neglected in economic and policy studies, by presenting diverse stakeholder perspectives. This discourse-orientation is important and should not be dismissed as methodologically “soft”. In fact, as some of the studies forming this thesis show, it can be more policy relevant than studies of energy poverty built on statistical methods. Dr. Koďoušková highlights the complexities in finding effective solutions due to conflicting views, such as the disparity between the experiences of vulnerable households and official narratives on energy poverty. The thesis also provides initial insights into the policy-making process by analysing how energy poverty is framed and critically evaluates emerging policies aimed at addressing energy poverty. It shows that these policies have not fully achieved their potential in tackling the issue.

Despite its rise in popularity over the last two decades, and the official acknowledgement of the problem by institutions such as the European Union, the International Energy Agency or various United Nations agendas, the concept of energy poverty remains contested. Many researchers and pundits still do not recognize the need to narrow down poverty through a specific focus on energy, arguing – from different ideological positions, both right and left – that when general deprivation is addressed, the problems of inadequate or unaffordable energy services will also disappear. Other still frame energy poverty only in economic terms, turning

a blind eye on both the material-infrastructure, spatial, and socio-cultural elements. Dr. Koďousková does not ignore these voices, but she does a very good job in demonstrating why they fall short in important ways, and why energy poverty needs to be treated seriously, as a “multidimensional” phenomenon and as something specifically connected with the materiality of energy systems.

Empirically, the thesis is rich and diverse and there are also important innovations made there, not just new material gathered, and new cases studied. The index of socio-spatial distribution of urban energy vulnerability presented in Koďousková et al. (2024) is a useful way to diagnose and better understand this problem not only in Central Europe. Meanwhile, both in the introductory Commentary and across the papers and chapters forming the cumulative thesis, she displays a mastery of the theoretical approaches underpinning current research on energy poverty and energy justice. Her contribution, however, is primarily empirical, as she herself admits. This is a pity, and I sincerely hope that she will, in her future work, find the confidence to use the important and now, thanks to her efforts – well-researched – Czech case to propose conceptual and theoretical innovation.

The main problem Dr. Koďousková identifies and the key questions she wants to answer are political in nature and relate to state responsibility for the wellbeing of its citizens, as well as the provision of basic services and welfare. But to answer these questions, she often ventures into other disciplines, drawing from them not only inspiration but also methodological tools and their unique vantage points. The three pillars of her work are political geography, for the diagnoses, normative political theory, for the benchmarks, and governance and public policy analysis, for the prescriptions. In her theoretical references, Dr. Koďousková draws heavily on the works and theories of human geographers. This is the main disciplinary homeland of what she calls the “assemblage” and “vulnerability approaches”. In fact, much of the writing on energy poverty is conducted by political and human geographers, with the primary reference of Dr. Koďousková’s commentary, the book by Gavin Bridge and colleagues being a good example. The influence of geographic work on her political science research is visible across the thesis in the emphasis on spatial relations and the attention given to spatialized inequalities. Methodologically, the thesis often ventures into almost ethnographic research on lived experiences of energy-poor households, and sociologically oriented discourse conceptualizations.

On the other hand, the candidate is open about her ambitions to connect the empirical diagnoses with political science in the strict sense. As a result, the overarching picture is that of a geographically defined overview of ‘what is’ and a more policy-oriented ‘what ought to be’.

There is still some potential that could be exploited in a more conscious combination of these two approaches, and in strengthening the policy-analysis side. So far, Dr. Kodůusková has offered evaluations of Czech public policy as more or less just, more or less effective etc., but has not ventured to explain why policies change or remain as they are – beyond mapping the discourses and paradigms that underpin current policies (which is an important first step).

Reviewer's questions for the habilitation thesis defence

- 1) You do a great job in identifying the way energy policy remains unseen or presented in a way that assigns the responsibility to its victims, or measured in ways which miss the scale and the point of the problem. What are the reasons for the lack of recognition and the misrepresentation of energy poverty in Czech and Slovak policies and decision-making circles? What are the differences between Czech and Slovak cases in this regard?
- 2) Making a further step in policy analysis, but going a bit beyond your own empirical research, what do you think are the interest groups that shape Czech energy and welfare policy which are responsible for this situation?
- 3) You look at materialities of the energy system, but also at discursive representations and conflicts over meaning. How do you negotiate these two approaches in your work? Do they need to remain distinct or are there methodologies and theoretical approaches that allow these to be merged and analysed as part of some whole?
- 4) You draw inspirations from the work of political and human geographers. How can attention to spatial relations and factors reinvigorate political science research on multi-level governance and public policy?

Conclusion

The habilitation thesis entitled “Energy poverty: Causes, effects and policy solutions” by Dr. Hedvika Kodůusková **fulfils** requirements expected of a habilitation thesis in the field of political science.

Date: 1 May 2024

Signature:

