

# **Challenging the Green Growth Discourse: How Discursive Strategies of Degrowth Matter**

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## Abstract

Embedded in an EU political context, this research paper sets out to investigate how the politically dominant discourse on green growth might be challenged and which discursive strategies are used to enable it. Therefore, the analysis is conducted as a Critical Discourse Analysis based on speeches held at the Beyond Growth Conference 2023. At this conference different actors discussed ideas of moving beyond growth, among them scientists, climate activists and even Members of the European Parliament. The analysis assembles these actors as a Beyond Growth Coalition and asks which discursive strategies they pursue in challenging the hegemonic green growth discourse of the European Commission. To perform the analysis green growth is understood as widely accepted and hegemonic. Nevertheless, the discussion about alternatives such as degrowth is gaining momentum. To touch upon the dynamics of the discourse, discursive strategies are analyzed as tools for change. The analysis argues that particular strategies matter to all involved actors, whereas some actors contain special agency in certain strategies. Thereby, the analysis draws on the interdigitation of science, activism and politics in the context of the emerging degrowth discourse.

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## 1. Introduction

Human-made climate change is undisputedly one of the biggest current challenges in politics and society. Evidently, it is one of the core topics of EU policy-making as the EU aspires to play a leading role in the global fight against climate change. Nonetheless, climate change in particular and how to respond to it, is an issue of constant struggle for interpretative sovereignty over the right approach to tackle climate change and to push for the climate targets to which the EU has committed themselves. The matter of climate change presents itself as a prime example for unearthing a discrepancy between scientific knowledge and the actual practice of policy-making.

The EU predominantly continues to rely on the paradigm of green growth in its strategy to meet the challenges of climate change. The idea of green growth conveys the understanding that the economy can be restructured by using “green” energy sources and the reduction of energy based on fossil fuels without harming or slowing down but further pursuing a growing economy (Jaeger, 2014). Particularly the much debated, prominent European Green Deal is considered an example of a policy following the strategy of green growth (Ossewaarde and Ossewaarde-Lowtoo, 2020). Accordingly, the assumption that green growth still has the upper hand in the prevalent discourse about how to realize a sustainable transformation within EU policy-making, suggests itself. On the other hand, more and more critical voices in the scientific world can be witnessed, questioning the dominance of green growth-narratives and -strategies while pointing to ideas which aim to shift the concentration on merely growth-focussed strategies to different parameters (Kallis, et al., 2018). These voices imply that green growth strategies will not be sufficient to reduce the green house gas emissions and to meet the climate goals of the European Union. Accordingly, other strategies are proposed, namely degrowth (Kallis, et al., 2018). While as of now the debate has been rather pursued in the scientific world as well as by social movements (Stevens, 2024), a conference titled „Beyond Growth“ was held in May 2023 in the European Parliament. This conference was organised by Members of the Parliament itself and aimed at taking the discussion of “beyond growth” to the political floor of the EU (15-17 May 2023 – Beyond Growth 2023 Conference, 2023).

Embedded in this EU-political context, this research project seeks to examine the question: *Which discursive strategies does the Beyond Growth Coalition pursue in challenging the hegemonic green growth discourse of the European Commission?* To answer this research question, the following subquestions are raised: What is the dominant green growth discourse and how it became hegemonic? How is degrowth an alternative to green growth and

consequently what does the Beyond Growth Coalition look like? Finally, it asks what role discursive strategies play in such a discourse? To conduct this research, a selection of speeches of the aforementioned Beyond Growth Conference are examined as exemplary parts of the thus held discourse.

What is the scientific and social added value of addressing this matter? The question deals with an emerging debate, an important politicum and a current and future challenge to EU policy-making. At the same time, the analysis uses a specific case, the case of degrowth or beyond growth, to show the implications but most importantly strategies in challenging a dominant discourse, a political climate. Even if the idea of beyond growth or degrowth is not a new one and its roots, theoretical demands and possible solutions have been scientifically touched upon, it is still a young field of research (Kallis, et al., 2018) with opportunities for further investigation. In a systematic literature review, Engler et al. have argued, research on degrowth is still primarily concerned with theoretical considerations than with its practical implementation (Engler et al., 2024). Precisely in this „knowledge gap“, the present scientific endeavor seeks to intersect. By looking into very recent, new material from the Beyond Growth Conference and through the analysis of discursive strategies of beyond growth proponents, this research attempts to highlight certain ways in which those are trying to influence policymaking in the EU. Thereby, the analysis intends to contribute as a bridge builder between theory and practice via the angle of discursive power. Furthermore, material will be systematised and could lead to further research on degrowth. As degrowth is a diverse movement and field of research (Weiss and Cattaneo, 2017) such an undertaking could point out discursive commonalities and consequently serve the degrowth community as a whole. Finally, from a societal perspective, such a research seems worthwhile in light of an escalating climate crisis and the need for more socio-ecological approaches.

To address the research question and subquestions the following architecture is developed: A theoretical foundation involving 1) a definition and explanation of the green growth paradigm and a perspective on how it became hegemonic, 2) a reflection of parts of degrowth-theory, 3) an explication of the Beyond Growth Coalition and 4) a framework of discursive strategies. Methodologywise, a Critical Discourse Analysis is conducted and finally the analysis and its core findings laid out rounded off by a conclusion and discussion.

## 2. Theory: Definitions, Concepts and Assumptions

The theoretical framework of this research aims to provide an understanding of the underlying theories, concepts and theoretical assumptions as well as expectations which are critical to the analysis of the research question. The theoretical framework sets the tone for the analysis drawing on the concepts of hegemony and counterhegemony. A proper understanding of hegemony seems critical to acknowledge the power relations with regard to the green growth/degrowth debate. Following this theoretical angle of hegemony, the green growth idea will be introduced. Further, it will be shown why it is possible to refer to green growth as hegemonic. This serves the purpose of showing what is actually being challenged. After establishing green growth as hegemonic in EU policies, this theory section will introduce degrowth as an alternative and counter theoretical position of beyond growth. Here, concrete elements of a degrowth agenda are introduced to give an idea of possible patterns of argumentation which will be relevant to the empirical analysis. After that, the actors involved in challenging this green growth discourse are construed as the Beyond Growth Coalition and defined in terms of their power. This appears as a necessary precondition to successfully conduct the data analysis and give clues why certain discursive strategies are deployed by these actors. Finally, the specific discursive strategies are presented theoretically in order to unearth them in the actual analysis.

### 2.1 Discourse, Hegemony and Counter Hegemony

A core theoretical element of this present work is the concept of discourse in relation to hegemony and counter hegemonic attempts laid out in the following section.

A very prominent conceptualization of discourse is provided by the French philosopher Michel Foucault. He portrays discourse as a certain expression of knowledge, which is shaping the understanding of social reality as well as constructing it (Foucault, 1971). Consequently, discourse seems to be both: a form of power itself and an expression of power structures as discourse limits and determines *what* can be discussed and *who* can discuss something (Hall, 2004). Discourse as a reflection of power relations is closely intertwined with the concept of hegemony. Hegemony is a certain expression of power and dominant power relations. The concept of hegemony is coined primarily by the Italian, marxist-inspired philosopher Antonio Gramsci (Dzudzek et al., 2012). The understanding of hegemony by Antonio Gramsci makes an important distinction as his conceptualization is not confined to the understanding of „coercion“ only, but conceived as an articulation of power, fueled by a broad acceptance of

particular hegemonic power relations (Casula, 2012). Consequently, hegemony is given when a particular perspective is widely accepted by a diversity of actors or groups. Moreover, hegemony is constituted and manifests itself via discourse (Nonhoff, 2006). Especially, hegemony as a discursive practice offers an understanding of the notion not as the power of for example specific people, governments or regimes but as institutionalised narratives, perspectives, interpretations or even paradigms. Conversely, this also means hegemony is not a static phenomenon (Nonhoff, 2006). Subsequently, hegemonies can be questioned and challenged. The idea of changing hegemonic structures comes with the ideal of transforming the status quo. Counter hegemony thus manifests itself in taking opposition to dominant structures and imperatives (Carroll, 2009). According to the political theorist Chantal Mouffe, a successful counter-hegemonic project consists on the one hand of criticizing and denouncing existing hegemonic structures, but at the same time of showing alternatives and the quest to take part in shaping the political sphere. Mouffe puts an emphasis on the relevance of political and social movements to empower such a counter hegemonic agenda (Flügel-Martinsen, Marchart, 2014).

## 2.2 Green Growth: A Definition

As the research question implies, green growth can be interpreted as the dominant strategy for environmental programmes in the EU. The term shall shortly be defined and an explanation offered why it seems so dominant.

A prominent definition of green growth is provided by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development: „Green growth means fostering economic growth and development, while ensuring that natural assets continue to provide the resources and environmental services on which our well-being relies“ (OECD, 2011, Jaeger, 2014). Thereby it entails the idea that sustainability and economic development are not contradicting each other but can be achieved without harming the objectives of the respective other (Jaeger, 2014). With the concept of green growth comes also the idea of decoupling which promises to enable economic growth and reduce the natural resource demand as well as ecological destruction (Fabozzi et al., 2022). Aiming to realize green growth and decoupling, green growth theory ascribes particular relevance to technology and innovation (Fabozzi et al. 2022). The concept of green growth relies generally on the measurement of prosperity via GDP (Capasso et al., 2019, Fabozzi et al. 2022).

### 2.3 Green Growth - The Hegemonic Paradigm in EU's Environmental Discourses

Green growth appears to be the leading strategy and paradigm in regard to environmental policies in the European Union and is particularly emphasized and desired by the European Commission. This proves especially the European Green Deal which was developed and formulated by the European Commission in 2019 as it sets out the European Union's game plan to become climate-neutral by 2050 with the aim to play a pioneering role and become a global leading force in the fight against climate change (*Der Europäische Grüne Deal*, 2021). The introduction to the European Green Deal already states: „it is a new growth strategy that aims to transform the EU into a fair and prosperous society“ (European Green Deal, 2019). However, the discourse on green growth as the dominant strategy of the EU did not just begin with the Green Deal, it came into fruition after the financial crisis in 2009 and shows in subsequent sustainable and economic EU projects such as Europe 2020 (Ossewaarde and Ossewaarde-Lowtoo, 2020). Furthermore, the EU is not the first and only international entity to embrace the idea of green growth, in fact other high-ranking international organizations such as OECD or the World Bank in particular have heavily promoted this green growth idea (Ossewaarde and Ossewaarde-Lowtoo, 2020, p. 3, Fabozzi et. al.2022). By such International Organizations it is portrayed as a widely accepted idea to pave the way for sustainability (Wanner, 2015). Bearing in mind this „high-ranking“ origins of the green growth discourse, Ossewaarde and Ossewaarde-Lowtoo emphasize the discourse „is a discourse that was born among the powerful and perpetuated by them“ (Ossewaarde and Ossewaarde-Lowtoo, 2020, p. 4) and therefore has been hegemonic from the start.

What is more, this green growth hegemony can be related to its compatibility with current neoliberal and capitalist ways of economic production. It thus seems as an approach neither questioning existing hegemonic power relations nor seeking to truly reform them (Ossewaarde and Lowtoo, 2020). According to Wanner, green growth serves „as another ‘passive revolution’ where neoliberal capitalism adjusts to crises arising from contradictions within itself“ (Wanner, 2015, p. 23). Another related argument for why green growth is particularly pursued by policy makers in general and the European Commission as well is, it promises a „win-win“ (Wanner, 2015, p. 27) situation and the possibility to align both economic growth and sustainability with each other. Such a „win-win“ situation and story seeks to maintain and justify capitalism and the status quo in the context of an escalating climate crisis (Wanner, 2015). This is mainly achieved by selling sustainability as an economic opportunity (Stegemann and Ossewaarde, 2018). Finally, „The traditional green growth pathway is a most popular discourse because it



does not evoke fearful images of loss and less“ (Ossewaarde and Ossewaarde-Lowtoo, 2020, p. 11) and is thus understood as a discourse that can achieve greater consensus and political backing. green growth is also an important aspiration and promoted by e.g. the European Greens in the context of the European Elections in June 2024 as they argue for a „greening“ of the economy (*An Economy That Works For All - EU Election Manifesto 2024*, 2024) which gives another clue on how predominant the discourse currently is even among those mostly advocating for sustainability.

## 2.4 Degrowth: An Alternative to the Hegemonic Green Growth Paradigm

The following section sheds light on the emergence and theoretical implications of degrowth as they are relevant to understand the underlying theoretical claims appearing in the empirical analysis. Despite the reality of green growth as the leading hegemonic strategy within the EU's sustainability policies as illustrated in the previous sections, attempts are made in challenging and taking opposition to this green growth paradigm as well as providing alternatives (Demaria et al., 2013). These alternatives appear and materialize in degrowth- or post-growth debates (Koch, 2018). The present analysis will primarily center degrowth as a growth critical approach. The term “degrowth” refers to a school of thought which questions the mere focus on the parameter of GDP to assess progress (Van den Bergh, Kallis, 2012). Degrowth as an approach reasons for a rethinking of traditional, neoliberal means of production and consumption and emphasizes the departure from the resource and energy wastage of current economies (Martínez-Alier et al., 2010).

### 2.4.1 The Emergence of a Term, Discipline and Movement

After the previous short introduction to the idea of degrowth the following section highlights the emergence of the concept and its development into a scientific and social movement. When it comes to retrace the origins of the degrowth idea, one can not avoid mentioning the well-known *Limits to Growth* report published by the Club of Rome in 1972 which addressed the tension between finite planetary resources and the pursuit of economic growth (Meadows et al., 1972). The seminal report stated that inherently to growth is the continuation of material and resource demand (Kallis, 2017). Thereby, the report basically set off a first avalanche inspiring growth critical thinking. It reveals that even though the degrowth debate seems like a newly inflamed discourse, it actually is held in some capacity for several decades already (Demaria et al., 2013). The term degrowth emanated from the french language and the word *décroissance* (Martínez-Alier et al., 2010). Since the early 2000s, the term has been applied in activist

campaigns in France and subsequently gained an activist notion and in 2008 the first Degrowth conference took place in France, the “mother country” of the movement. From there it has evolved into a global international phenomenon (Demaria et al., 2013). Today there is also a global engagement in the scientific field of degrowth research. It is an interdisciplinary endeavor influenced by a wide array of disciplines such as sociology, philosophy, anthropology, economics or ecology (Weiss and Cattaneo, 2017, Kallis et al., 2018).

This short recapitulation of the emergence of degrowth showcases the mergence of science and academia as well as politics and activism synergised under the movement of Degrowth (Martínez-Alier et al., 2010) and thereby relevant to this research as it focuses on the links between science, activism and politics.

#### 2.4.2 Elements of a Degrowth Agenda

As previously shown, the degrowth discourse is not homogenous but complex. Consequently, this section attempts to exhibit a selection of the the most relevant elements of a degrowth agenda<sup>1</sup> important to the analysis as a theoretical basis and perspective. Here, green growth criticism, the notion of social and environmental justice and change and wellbeing are exhibited as such essential elements.

##### 2.4.2.1 (Green) Growth Criticism

Drawing on an environmental-ecological perspective degrowth perceives the green growth approach of decoupling economic growth from environmental harm as doomed to failure. It argues, such absolute decoupling is a theoretical construct as more efficient energy use does not automatically lead to the reduction of material. This, however, cannot be achieved in the given time frame necessary (Kallis et al., 2018). Therefore, degrowth proponents criticize the adherence to growth as inevitable which conveys misleading images about the possibility to reduce resource demand, pursue environmental protection, while further pushing economic growth (Hickel, 2020). In order to meet the climate targets agreed upon in the Paris Agreement, material and energy consumption must be scaled down massively, dematerialization and decarbonization are demanded instead (Kallis, 2017). Within this context degrowth theory draws on the Jevons Paradox, a study concluding that even though resources can be used more efficiently and conservative via (green) technologies, resource demand will still continue to

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<sup>1</sup> Here it is to be acknowledged that due to the time frame and scope of the analysis only a selection of elements of degrowth and its theoretical implications, which appeared to be especially relevant are covered.

increase (York and McGee, 2016). This explains why long-term systems based on growth can hardly be reconciled with sustainability.

#### 2.4.2.2 Social and Environmental Justice

One of the core characteristics of a degrowth agenda is to broach the issue of social and environmental justice, essentially climate justice. Therefore, degrowth is connected to decolonization theory as well. Within this framework, the Global North is considered the major contributing polluter and emitting force while the Global South is exploited in terms of their resources. Subsequently, the degrowth approach perceives degrowth as a responsibility of primarily the Global North (*Degrowth Is About Global Justice*, o. D.). Moreover, degrowth thinkers claim, the pursuit of economic growth gives rise to dependencies of the Global South on the Global North powered by a system of mastery (Muraca, 2012). In addition, degrowth theory defies the widely accepted idea that (green) economic growth will pave the way to reduce inequalities and diminish poverty. According to degrowth thinkers it is not an automatism but rather a question of distribution of wealth and resources that countervails inequalities (Lang, 2024).

#### 2.4.2.3 Change and Wellbeing

Every degrowth agenda seeks to create new images of societal change towards a future centred around the idea of human and social wellbeing beyond economic capabilities (Meredith, 2021). Therefore, degrowth proponents value matters of happiness or contentedness as leading motivations behind policies and guiding lights for a purpose of life beyond economic gain (Demaria et al., 2013). Production, it is argued, should prioritize human and societal relevance instead of profits. Matters of public transportation, a fair health care system and reduction of working hours are examples of degrowth ambitions to improve such wellbeing (Meredith, 2021).

### 2.5 The Beyond Growth Coalition

Derived from green growth criticism and guided by ideas of degrowth or beyond growth the aforementioned Beyond Growth Coalition, constructed for this analysis, constitutes herself. The coalition consists of three types of actors: scientists, climate activists and Members of the European Parliament united under their engagement in imagining a Europe heading beyond growth. There are two main motivations for the composition of these actors. First, beyond growth ideas are particularly supported by science and social movements (Stevens, 2024) and

slowly even by some politicians in the EU, which were involved in the organization and preparation of the Beyond Growth Conference (Mahon, 2023). Second, these actors functioned as the leading speakers at the conference collectively envisioning a new path for Europe.

Nevertheless, these actors and their position in terms of power structures shall be outlined. The science party can be viewed as external influences not holding direct political power within the European Union. However, the EU emphasizes its aspiration to lead policies based on scientific evidence (BMBF Internetredaktion, 2023). Such a standard then provides scientists with a certain authority on the grounds of their expertise in their field of knowledge. Science is perceived as a crucial building block to discover the right solutions to pressing issues (Edler et al., 2020). Therefore, scientists contain especially „conceptual impact“ (Edler et al., 2020, p. 3) and the power to alter the angle on how a political matter is understood and perceived.

Climate activists are actors embedded in the context of global social movements fighting the climate crisis. They are as well external actors, not directly involved in EU policy making. The power of social movements lies predominantly in their ability to shape and politicize public opinion and citizen engagement. What is more, climate activists employ a strong notion of „moral power“ through their advocacy and can serve as „norm entrepreneurs“ (Nisbett and Spaiser, 2023, p. 2). Thus they influence the moral standards and best practices policies politicians should adhere to (Nisbett and Spaiser, 2023).

The Members of the European Parliament are directly involved actors and hold immediate political power on the European level through their voting ability or their committee work. They take part in the adoption of legislation and accordingly are holders of legislative power (*Legislative Powers n.d.*). Based on such activities they are able to influence the political climate on an issue from within the democratic chamber of the European Union. Nevertheless, power is naturally also limited in terms of majorities and party affiliation.

Even though all actors hold slightly different forms of power and influence, they joined forces in the Beyond Growth Conference and came together as a discursive coalition urging to change the hegemonic discourse around green growth.

## 2.6 Discursive Strategies and How They Matter in Theory

There are different ideas about how policy change can occur. One stream of theory argues that policy change happens especially in times of crisis requiring a „paradigm shift“ enabled and pushed by discourse (Schmidt, 2011, p. 109). As mentioned before, discourse can be interpreted as a powerful tool to challenge and counter, maybe even change hegemonic power relations

(Machin, 2019). Such a counter hegemonic attempt necessarily requires certain strategies and an agenda on how to shape a discourse, namely discursive strategies. It can include challenging dominant belief systems and prevailing narratives (Schmidt, 2011). Discursive strategies generally compile to „a transformative move involving the semantic redefinition of an object“ (Carvalho, 2005, p. 3). Therefore, discursive strategies give a certain meaning to a matter qua language and provide an understanding of the particular way in which a discourse transpires. Discursive strategies thus offer a certain construction of reality with which the actors deploying such strategies convey a specific intention (Carvalho, 2005). Concerning our matter, especially a framework by Leipold and Winkel (Leipold and Winkel, 2016) provides valuable insights. Their approach develops a discourse analysis that primarily looks at narratives in relation to their respective actors and advocates. The focus is therefore on agency and the specific ways actors try to shed light on their claims (Leipold, 2021). It is crucial to this analysis to further investigate how discursive strategies particular in the context of the Degrowth debate matter. Accordingly, in the following part a framework of discursive strategies is offered as a theoretical angle to the empirical analysis. This selection of discursive strategies is presumed to be found during the data analysis as a form of discursive expectations.

- 1) *Scientification*: Via scientification, an actor aims at providing a scientifically sound explanation for his or her position that seeks to rationalize the actor’s agenda in order to justify and legitimize that position (Leipold and Winkel, 2016, p. 17). Therefore, such a strategy draws heavily on facts and scientific evidence as the core of the argument. Especially the use of evidence can incentivize a person to give credence to an argument. Accordingly, the strategy draws on expertise and depicts a position as factually supported. This can involve referencing numbers to give weight to the argument (Reyes, 2011). Scientification as a strategy is based on the understanding that (scientific) knowledge should influence policymaking and can be used as an argument of authority (Leipold et al., 2019).
- 2) *Counter Narrative*: The strategy of counter narratives seeks to present a phenomenon in a new light to challenge a dominant story and present an alternative to a predominant interpretation (Leipold and Winkel, 2016, p. 17). Therefore, such a strategy makes use of for example storytelling to create new perspectives, based on the understanding that narratives shape social reality. This can be particularly powerful as it entails the possibility to intertwine the narrative closely with social reality (Allen and Faigely, 1995). Accordingly, counter narratives and storylines provide an outlook on the future

and picture a way to move forward as well as possibilities of change (Barry and Elmes, 1997).

- 3) *Delegitimation*: The strategy of delegitimation seeks to portray the contrary position or perspective in a discourse as illegitimate (Leipold, 2021). Such a strategy seeks to diminish and reduce the credibility of the competing perspective and challenges and questions its wide acceptance. The strategy does not ignore the relevance of the other perspective but draws heavily on its problematics and negative consequences (Leipold, 2021, Leipold and Winkel, 2016, p. 16). Further it can involve refuting arguments and presenting counter-arguments (Löwenstein, 2022) to further criticize a certain perspective, argument or paradigm.
- 4) *Power of Norms and Values*: This strategy refers to the use of arguments that draw on the relevance of generally accepted norms and values (Leipold and Winkel, 2016). It can involve concepts such as social justice, responsibility (also political responsibility) or (in)equality. By drawing on such values, actors seek to support their arguments and give weight to their claims by referring to them and justifying them as a matter of such values. It can involve morally driven argumentation as well.
- 5) *Emphasis on Urgency*: Above all, this strategy seeks to emphasize the urgency and immediate need for action, to be able to counter certain consequences and threats or provide solutions to a pressing matter (Kwon et al., 2013). The strategy seeks to evoke a discussion on a matter and puts an emphasis on the issue as a top priority. It is a strategy that appears to be especially relevant in the context of debates around climate change.

### 3. Methodology

This section of the paper commits itself to a clear and detailed outline of the research design choices of this thesis. The examination of the research question: *Which discursive strategies does the Beyond Growth Coalition pursue in challenging the hegemonic green growth discourse of the European Commission?* presupposes certain methodological decisions.

#### 3.1 Research Design – Qualitative Textual Analysis and Critical Discourse Analysis

This research endeavor is situated in the context of qualitative research and textual analysis. In the spirit of qualitative research, this analysis follows an interpretative approach based on empirical data (Aspers and Corte, 2019) in order to uncover the aforementioned discursive strategies. In line with this interpretative approach the study opts for a textual analysis since the

empirical part of the research is mainly based on the analysis of speeches that are available in the form of video material and transmitted into text. This material consists of contributions of the Beyond Growth Conference 2023. A textual analysis emphasizes the relevance of language, speech acts and signs within texts. It draws on the interconnection of texts and their underlying meaning as they shape reality (Given, 2008a). This seems particularly appropriate in relation to the analysis of discursive strategies. Textual analysis seems relevant to the above mentioned research question, as the question deals with discourse, argumentation, language and its specific meaning.

With discourse and discursive strategies as core elements of this research project, it is hardly surprising that the work further employs a discourse analysis as a specific method of textual analysis. In accordance with the theoretical framework drawing on concepts such as power and hegemony, this analysis opts to perform a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). A Critical Discourse Analysis aims to uncover how forms of power and domination are encoded via text and speech (Blommaert and Bulcaen, 2000). Moreover, Critical Discourse Analysis is also based on a particular understanding of discourse. On the one hand, discourse constructs social realities, but on the other hand, it is not independent of them, but shaped and constrained by them (Blommaert and Bulcaen, 2000). However, what seems most important for this analysis is that CDA considers the relevance and significance of discourse for the struggle over hegemonic power. This form of analysis gives credence to the ability of discursive changes in shedding light on ways in which predominant power structures or relations can be challenged and countered (Blommaert and Bulcaen, 2000). This seems particularly important as this research concentrates on the counter hegemonic attempt of the Beyond Growth Coalition to alter the dominance of green growth. Therefore, a critical perspective sensitive to power relations is crucial to a successful analysis. Critical Discourse Analysis specifically takes into account discursive and argumentative strategies of actors involved in a discourse and how they occur and appear via the form of text and language (Fairclough, 2013). This methodological approach seems justified in comparison to other possible methods such as qualitative content analysis, precisely because it is so sensitive to power structures, the specific dynamics of a discourse and the relationship between hegemonic positions and those rather marginalized in discourse (Given, 2008b).

### 3.2 Data and Data Collection

As already indicated, the main corpus of data will consist of textual material, derived and transliterated from videos. Large parts of the Beyond Growth conference which serves as a

research object were recorded in the form of live streams and video excerpts. These video recordings are retrievable from Youtube or the official webpage of the conference. This material appears suitable to answer the research question, as speeches and participations of scientists, parliamentarians and climate activists are available. This makes it possible to shed light on the perspectives of the actors summarized under the term Beyond Growth Coalition. Since the conference ran over three days, an extensive possibility for material was encountered. However, in order to keep the analysis within a feasible scope and, above all, to analyse material that is tailored to the research question, a certain selection of material was made. The selection has considered primarily parameters such as availability, access and suitability. Therefore, five speeches by scientists were selected for the analysis. It includes speeches by Jason Hickel, Timothée Parrique, Kate Raworth, Tim Jackson and Giorgos Kallis. As well speeches of climate activists shall be considered. This involves three speeches: two by the Belgian climate activists Anuna de Wever and Adélaïde Charlier plus a speech by a climate activist from India, Vandana Shiva. In addition, Members of the European Parliament not only organized this event but also contributed to it. Therefore as well three speeches got selected one by Phillippe Lamberts from the European Greens and a key advocate and organizer of the event but also speeches by Manon Aubry from the Left and Aurore Lalucq from S&D (a clear overview of the material is referenced in the appendix). The data analysis considers slightly more speeches by the scientists, which seems justified as this may also reflect the fact that scientific insights made up the majority of the contributions. Furthermore, particularly scientists can be considered main drivers behind challenging green growth in Europe (Kallis et al., 2018). The analysis aims to consider this proportion too.

### 3.3 Operationalization and Systematization – Coding

To analyse the data in a systematic and structured way, this study seeks to make use of the method of coding. Hence, a coding scheme is developed. Within this coding scheme, codes are designed to reflect the content and, to a certain degree, a systematic interpretation of the data (Saldana, 2016). To make it feasible in the scope of this research the analysis draws on deductive coding for that matter. Since the required and chosen data to this analysis is available in video material, it needs to be converted and made available as text. As a complete transcription of all videos is too time-consuming, the videos are coded and the coded passages transcribed. These transcribed passages and statements then are in turn cited and compiled into a list. An overview will be provided in form of an Excel table attached to the extra data appendix in order to meet the goal of full transparency and reproducibility of the analysis. In the following, a table is



provided which entails the particular codes. The table mentions the broader category of discursive strategies, the specific strategies as subcategories and finally the selected codes tailored to each strategy. The codes are justified as they are based on – and directly result from – the theoretical expectations and background of both a degrowth agenda and the discursive strategies.

### 3.4 Coding Scheme

Category	Subcategory	Codes
Discursive Strategy	Scientification	expertise, scientific evidence, scientific studies and results, facts, numbers, statistics, diagrams
Discursive Strategy	Counter Narrative	Form: story telling, use of metonymies, metaphors and allegories  Contents: new images of progress, possibility of change degrowth as an alternative, alternatives to growth, benefits and possibilities of degrowth/beyond growth, future beyond growth
Discursive Strategy	Delegitimation	Absurdity of infinite growth, green growth as a myth, problematization of green growth, questioning hegemonic power, criticism of GDP/growth, irrationality of growth,
Discursive Strategy	Power of Norms and Values	climate justice/injustice, social (in)equality, wellbeing, responsibility of the Global North, political responsibility, (democratic) values
Discursive Strategy	Emphasis on Urgency	need for action, pressure of time, threats due to climate change, (artificial) scarcity of resources, priority, EU lacking behind

## 4. Data Analysis

In the following section the analysis of the underlying empirical material related to the theoretical framework will be laid out as the centrepiece of this work. In the analysis the discursive strategies and their practical appearance are inspected more closely to approach the research question. The actual analysis will be preceded by a brief contextualization of the inspiration and source of material, the Beyond Growth Conference 2023. This allows considering the discursive strategies embedded in their own empirical context.

### 4.1 Context – A Short Introduction to the Beyond Growth Conference

The Beyond Growth Conference was a three-day conference which took place in May 2023 and was planned and executed by an array of 20 Members of the European Parliament. These Members of the Parliament originated from different political groups and were supported by a variety of external foundations in the organisation of the conference (Mahon, 2023, *15-17 May 2023 – Beyond Growth 2023 Conference*, 2023). The Conference was held in the democratic heart of the European Union itself, the European Parliament. In addition to the organizers, the conference was also attended by various other stakeholders, such as scientists, climate activists, interested members of the public and representatives of the business community, high-ranking politicians and more (*15-17 May 2023 – Beyond Growth 2023 Conference*, 2023). The participants came together to envision a Europe that develops beyond GDP growth and puts social aspects and well-being at the forefront of an EU policy agenda. A declared aim of the conference among others was to build connections between stakeholders, make a difference and provide alternatives to the current focus on growth based approaches as well as most importantly for this analysis „shift the discourse towards a future-oriented economic policymaking“ (*15-17 May 2023 – Beyond Growth 2023 Conference*, 2023). The conference attracted also a large online audience, which was able to participate in the conference via livestream broadcast. In the aftermath the conference was metaphorically named the „Woodstock for systemchangers“ (Schmelzer, 2023) as many of the international luminaries of the degrowth and postgrowth movement held speeches at the conference. The conference was organized in several plenary sessions and so called focus panels which were dedicated to a variety of matters concerning a beyond growth agenda (*15-17 May 2023 - Beyond Growth 2023 Conference*, 2023). Some of the thus held speeches are used as the empirical material to this analysis.

## 4.2 Data Analysis – How Discursive Strategies Matter in Practice

After this short introduction to the Beyond Growth Conference which serves as the empirical point of reference and source of material, an in-depth analysis and presentation of the key object of interest, the discursive strategies deployed by actors of the Beyond Growth Coalition, is conducted. The data analysis will be structured according to the different actor groups of the coalition. This intends to accomplish the purpose to follow the method and procedure of coding systematically, to portray the data and material in a structured, accessible and robust manner while being sensitive to the previously conceptualized different forms of power inherent to the actors and how they might be reflected in the examination of the discursive strategies. This structure appears to be particularly useful in the light of the theoretical background with the established heterogeneity of the beyond growth movement. The analysis will start out presenting the data of the science party followed by the climate activists and ultimately considering the Members of the European Parliament. Subsequently, a paragraph shall be dedicated to a comprehensive inspection of the discursive agency expressed through the discursive strategies of the Beyond Growth Coalition as a whole.<sup>2</sup>

There is to note, in accordance with the research question of this work, the analysis seeks to primarily unearth discursive strategies. The codes provided in the coding scheme are primarily means to carve out these strategies. For this reason, the analysis does not focus specifically on the codes but on the strategies and their overall use.

### 4.2.1 Scientists – Discursive Strategies

Analyzing the speeches of leading growth-critical scientists such as Jason Hickel, Timothée Parrique, Kate Raworth, Tim Jackson and Giorgos Kallis, it can be stated that all of the discursive strategies of scientification, counter narrative, power of norms and values, delegitimation, and emphasis on urgency conceptualized as expectations in the theory section and coding scheme appeared to be relevant in their line of argumentation.

Nonetheless, especially two of the discursive strategies stood out, namely delegitimation and counter narrative.<sup>3</sup> The strategy of delegitimation revolved mostly around deconstructing,

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<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that the analysis, in order to remain in the feasible scope of this research work, considers only a selection of speeches held at the Beyond Growth Conference and therefore refrains from claiming completeness. Nonetheless, the analysis attempts to provide valuable in-depth clues about certain strains of argumentation structure in form of the discursive strategies applied in practice by the before established Beyond Growth Coalition.

<sup>3</sup> Here it shall be justified shortly why this analysis refrains from quantifying these strategies in numbers. This is done in view of the high individuality of the speeches and in the sense of the research question, which aims to investigate which strategies are used. Therefore the research is also interested in the effect they imply rather than on the exact indication in numbers.

criticizing and dismantling growth and green growth approaches as (to put it in the words of Jason Hickel) „a recipe for disaster“ (GreensEFA, 2023a). This strategy aimed at challenging the dominant perception of (green) growth as the adequate policy solution to environmental matters and to unearth its actual destructive ways and consequences. This particularly resonates with the conceptualization of the science party as holding „conceptual impact“ (Edler et al., 2020, p. 3), the power to shape and possibly even redefine the ways in which an important issue, a political matter is understood. Therefore, the strategy of delegitimation could be interpreted as an exercise of such „conceptual power“ (Edler et al., 2020, p. 3). This becomes apparent especially in depicting green growth as a myth and irrational idea not even realisable in reality aiming to diminish the power of its prevailing narrative. One example is the statement by the economist Timothée Parrique: „the idea of economic growth fully decoupled from nature is a fairytale“ (GreensEFA, 2023b); or Tim Jackson arguing: „This is the myth of our time, the myth of growth, the mantra that guides our political thinking, our economic science our sense of progress that more and more is always possible“ (GreensEFA, 2023d). Accordingly, delegitimation of a growth based argumentation seems to turn into a powerful strategic practice to question and challenge the hegemonic green growth discourse as such a strategy intends to lead the idea *ad absurdum*.

Following the delegitimation strategy, the science party also put attempts of counter narratives to the forefront of their argumentation strategy seeking to thwart dominant images of green growth by new concepts and visions of progress. These arguments for a new narrative served to present degrowth or postgrowth scenarios as an actual and necessary alternative to the predominantly pursued green growth strategy followed by the European Commission. Such countering strategies by these scientists and experts involved the aim to show what benefits and social values such different approaches could entail. Jason Hickel, for example, sought to illustrate degrowth or postgrowth and its benefits and possibilities with very specific examples as he argued moving beyond growth „allows us to achieve ecological objectives but it also abolishes unemployment“ (GreensEFA, 2023a). He emphasized on even personal benefits affecting the day-to-day life of citizens such as reduced working hours (GreensEFA, 2023a). Creating Counter Narratives included concrete overarching alternatives and models to growth strategies as well. Subsequently, Kate Raworth presented the „doughnut-model“. An economic model, which is explained through the metaphor of a „doughnut“ respecting planetary and ecological boundaries as well as social needs (Raworth, 2017) with a new objective: „it is not endless growth, it is thriving in balance“ (GreensEFA, 2023c). What is more, the Greek scientist and degrowth scholar Giorgos Kallis emphasized the fact that such alternative approaches are

not even out of reach but might already exist especially in non-western southern cultures (Kallis et al., 2022). Accordingly, he introduced in his speech the Mediterranean approach to prosperity. A model of prosperity which „is rather based on simplicity, relating and sharing“ (GreensEFA, 2023e). Consequently, counter narrating strategies and arguments appeared to portray beyond growth scenarios as an opportunity holding real benefits and not a matter of renunciation or sacrifice. In sum, these counter narratives challenged the „win-win“ narrative (Wanner, 2015, p.27) of decoupling environmental harm from economic growth with a green growth agenda by almost creating and constructing a new contrary „win-win“ narrative of degrowth as the path and opportunity to reconcile ecological necessities with social means and a functioning economy created towards the goal of social prosperity.

The scientists and experts unsurprisingly supported such strategies and arguments considerably by the use of scientification and rationalization as discursive means. These mostly entailed demonstrating how their claims and arguments are not mere ideas but backed up by scientific evidence. As science and scientific studies are considered as a *sine qua non* condition to inform policies (Edler, et al, 2020), the use of such strategies were important to make their case for a beyond growth based policy-making. This can be exemplified by a reference made by Hickel stating: „recent research shows that millionaires alone are on track to burn 72% of the remaining carbon budget for 1.5 degrees“ (GreensEFA, 2023a) or Parrique claiming that the proposition of decoupling „is scientifically baseless“ (GreensEFA, 2023b). These citations illustrate how facts and numbers were considered paramount to give further weight to an argument and to emphasize the need for alternatives, not only from a moral but more importantly a logical point of view.

Nevertheless, moral arguments or questions related to the strategy power of norms and values were not omitted by scientists even though less frequently used. Such norms and values encompassed aspects concerning climate justice such as „Governments of the Global South also need the freedom to organize their own production around human needs and ecological objectives“ (GreensEFA, 2023a), emphasized by Hickel, or matters of wellbeing as an essential foundation of societal life.

The science party has accordingly relied slightly more on scientific explanations instead of moral and value-based discursive strategy. Unexpectedly, the strategy that was least likely to be detected through the procedure of systematic coding was the strategy emphasis on urgency.

#### 4.2.2 Climate Activists – Discursive Strategies

The analysis additionally conceptualized climate activists as a key actor of the Beyond Growth Coalition. These actors perspectives were represented and acknowledged at the Beyond Growth Conference by exemplary speeches held by climate activists. The selection of three of these speeches form the basis of this analysis section and were examined with regard to the discursive strategies apparent and inherent to these speeches.

For the climate activists, too, it can be observed that all discursive strategies were used in their contributions, but with a slightly different focus. The most obvious discursive strategy concealed in the speeches by climate activists appears to be the strategy of *power of norms and values*. In terms of content and strategy, these contributions focussed in particular on the notion of climate justice and global justice referring to the uneven relationship between the Global North and the Global South. Especially in a speech by Vandana Shiva, a climate activist from India, the perspective of the Global South was shared. She described how economic growth has always been as well a story of colonialism as it was a story to the detriment of nature and indigenous communities (GreensEFA, 2023h). This results in the responsibility of the Global North to actually learn and observe from the Global South to build a relationship with nature beyond growth and exploitation (GreensEFA, 2023h). Adélaïde Charlier, a climate activist from Belgium, emphasized the historically evolved responsibility of Europe and the Global North to tackle the climate injustice between polluters and those who suffer. She stated: „We can not be satisfied as long as Europe does not recognize its historical responsibility [...] but also in the exploitation of resources from countries that are today mostly suffering the consequences of climate change“ (GreensEFA, 2023g). Here, the power of norms and values by drawing on matters of justice is used to make it very clear how degrowth or beyond growth policies should be perceived as a responsibility the EU should not withdraw from. Such implementation of the power of norms and values as a discursive strategy corresponds particularly well with the understanding of climate activists as holders of „moral power“ (Nisbett and Spaiser, 2023, p. 2) by which they can attempt to have a part in shaping what norms and values should matter in policy making. This component of climate justice and global justice is a major issue that is reflected in a degrowth agenda, as already described in the theory section as well. Consequently, climate activists seem to strongly pursue value based and justice oriented argumentation to challenge the dominant green growth discourse upheld by the European Commission.

The climate activists further deployed a wider range of discursive strategies. Subsequently, delegitimation appeared to be a relevant one also connected to the power of norms and values

and therefore to climate justice. Those delegitimation strategies seek to dismantle growth not only as an absurd goal or a „daydream“ according to Charlier (GreensEFA, 2023g), but essentially as a driving force of injustice, summed up by Anuna De Wever as „infinite growth on finite resources is not only a myth but its extractivist and ruthlessly oppressive by design“ (GreensEFA, 2023f). It is used to unearth the negative consequences that accompany the constant pursuit of economic growth. This criticism of growth-based models then leads to the establishment of degrowth and beyond growth as a counter-project and counter-narrative. Here, the counter narrative of moving beyond growth and alternatives to current (green) growth models almost appears as a story of hope, a narrative that change is, in fact possible. This suggests for example the following quote: „I have a dream that moving away from the business as usual model of infinite growth is possible for all European Nations“ (GreensEFA, 2023g) by Adélaïde Charlier. For the climate activists also the strategy emphasis on urgency appeared to be of relevance, highlighting and recalling how important immediate action and change is to fight the climate crisis and move away from the focus of growth. This is reflected for example by Anuna De Wever arguing “we have little time, we have many forces” (GreensEFA, 2023f). Also the strategy of scientification could be traced back, but it played a somewhat less relevant role in the discursive practice of the actors.

#### 4.2.3 Members of the European Parliament – Discursive Strategies

The data analysis investigated on the basis of three exemplary speeches laid out in the method section how present Members of the European Parliament as key organizers of the conference and part of the established Beyond Growth Coalition, engaged in trying to challenge the hegemonic green growth discourse. The selected speakers originated from different political parties to ensure a certain level of pluralism and therefore meaning. Concerning the analysis of the speeches held by the Members of the European Parliament, it can be stated that the analysis turned out to be more difficult and less fruitful as with the other two actor groups presented before. The main reason for this seems to trace back to the fact that they gave less substantive speeches, but rather addressed a lot of technical questions about the course of the conference as well as acknowledgements amounted to their contribution, where the coding was less applicable to. Despite this factor, discursive strategies could also be uncovered within the respective speeches and useful conclusions drawn, which are presented in more detail in the following.

The analysis of the speeches revealed the strategy of delegitimation as the most common and frequently deployed strategy. Accordingly, the strategy was strongly directed against the idea of perpetual growth, including green growth, but appeared to be also linked to a genuine

institutional criticism materializing in sharply denouncing the road currently taken by the European Commission with regard to its growth-based policies and legislation. A quote by Manon Aubry from the Left showcases that „this reminds me of a quote from an American economist, Kenneth Bolding who said anyone who believes exponential growth can go on forever in a finite world is either a mad-man or an economist, maybe we can add that it can be a European Commissioner“ (GreensEFA, 2023j). Such strategic argumentation not only criticized the idea of growth but also strongly served to question its hegemonic power upheld by the Commission at present. In order to stress such delegitimation strategies and criticism, the parliamentarians made use of scientific arguments as a form of critique itself and to give authority to their argumentation. To this aim, the Member of Parliament, Phillipe Lamberts from the Greens made clear: „it was 1972 [...] when the limits to growth report was issued. Science was then already warning us of the deadly contradiction between growth and life“ (GreensEFA, 2023i). Here an imminent growth critique is combined and underpinned by the reference of a seminal scientific study.

Also the power of norms and values played a role in supporting the critique of the adherence to growth. These strategies emphasize the need for alternatives as a kind of moral obligation as well. Especially Lamberts included notions of climate justice in his speech arguing „it can not be that we keep exploiting the rest of the planet [...] There is no reason why we should have more than our fair share of resources than this planet offers“ (GreensEFA, 2023i). As a result, matters of climate justice and global inequalities were stressed to incorporate a value-based perspective to the argumentation. In the selected contributions by the Members of the European Parliament, counter narratives and the emphasis on urgency played a rather minor role within their discursive behaviour, the focus was more on delegitimation, scientification and power of norms and values.

#### 4.2.4 Beyond Growth Coalition – The Discursive Triangle

Following the previous analysis of the different actor groups of the Beyond Growth Coalition and their argumentation through discursive strategies, this section is dedicated to the discursive relations within the coalition as a whole to grasp an overall sense of which strategies mattered in the attempt to challenge the dominant green growth discourse - and how they do.

To integrate the preceding analysis of the different actors, one should state that not only the scientists and experts, and the climate activists, but also the Members of Parliament have relied on the full range of discursive strategies set forth as theoretical expectations in the theory



section. Consequently, the involved actors in a sense were arguing with „one voice“ or with a similar discursive agency. Therefore, they can be perceived as a joint counter-argumentation front challenging the dominant green growth discourse, a coalition that longs for change, demanding a different path instead of accepting `business as usual`. It could be argued that the different actors are connected „through a commitment to struggle“ to put it into the words of Tim Jackson (GreensEFA, 2023d). This is particularly evident from the high frequency use of delegitimation as a strategy amongst all actor groups. Subsequently, the general focus appeared to be to unmask and make clear, how destructive and threatening a continuation of (green) growth based approaches will be to nature, society and human life. At the same time, the analysis revealed that the individual actors are in a way bound to their own rules of discourse, which could be attributable to their distinct power positions and relations.

In their arguments climate activists placed a particular focus on the power of norms and values as a discursive mean, as mentioned above. This can be attributed to the fact that they seek to compensate for what they might lack in actual political power as they arise as an external actor. However, norms must also be institutionalized in order to achieve greater impact (Nisbett and Spaiser, 2023, p. 2). It is interesting to note that the Members of Parliament have also relied on this strategy considerably, eventhough not as much as on delegitimation. This suggests the interpretation of them as an important link and bridge-builder to anchor these norms and moral principles brought forward by such external actors politically. It also unearths a possible connecting line between these two actors in the struggle to challenge the dominant green growth discourse.

Another interesting line of connection emerged through the application of discursive strategies between the science party and the Members of Parliament. Through the expertise that scientists possess in their field of research in regard to degrowth, postgrowth and beyond growth approaches, they could lean on that advantage in knowledge and scientification, to build or support a strong discursive position. Even for the Members of Parliament, the discursive practice of scientification did not seem entirely indecisive as laid out in the analysis. All this seems to emphasize the importance of science and its role to inform politics (Majcen , 2017, BMBF Internetredaktion, 2023) and politicians to bridge the gap between knowledge and power.

Likewise, a relation between the science party and the climate activists can be drawn. Even if the scientists have shed much more light on counter narratives, they also appeared as a not insignificant strategy among climate activists. This is further supported by the conjuncture that

the speeches of those actor groups entailed far more substantive themes. This may show how both parties function as important sources of ideas and creators pointing to a future beyond growth and to alternative propositions to the current green growth model, albeit to differing degrees.

Consequently, in addition to the individual rules of game in the discourse, there are also connecting elements and relationships among the actors and the coalition as one. What is more, by selecting the five discursive strategies explained in the theory section, the analysis naturally took a certain and in some respects limited perspective. The analysis was particularly attentive to the listed discursive practices of the actors. Although, the actors are more broadly positioned in terms of discursive strategies, which the analysis could not examine in more detail but is nevertheless worth mentioning. Such additional strategies were for example collectivising strategies like “we must abandon GDP growth as an objective” (GreensEFA, 2023a) reflected by Jason Hickel or the statement by Anuna De Wever “in our current systems our economies are growing for some of us on the backs of many of us” (GreensEFA, 2023f) to portray departing from the growth paradigm as a joint undertaking which should concern all actors.

## 5. Conclusion and Discussion

The subsequent conclusion serves the purpose to summarize and discuss the main findings of this work, to answer the research question, to reflect on the analysis, but also to give an outlook on the larger context and scope of this work.

Overall, the previous Critical Discourse Analysis as a whole was dedicated to the research undertaking of showing how a hegemonic political discourse, the discourse of green growth, is challenged, countered and shaped by beyond growth actors demanding a different path, a future of policymaking that overcomes such a strong focus on growth. The Beyond Growth Conference 2023 served as the empirical anchor and source of material to conduct the analysis. To approach the research question, certain conceptual premises and theoretical expectations needed clarification. Three in particular can be distinguished here. First, green growth and degrowth were initially positioned as hegemonic and counter-hegemonic elements of discourse. This was framed by a theoretical understanding of hegemony and counter-hegemony.

Green growth can be understood as hegemonic in environmental discourse due to its wide acceptance by a variety of actors. The appeal lies especially in its promise to achieve two goals with one strategy, to pursue economic growth while at the same time protecting the environment (Wanner, 2015). This is reflected in several EU political programmes (Ossewaarde and

Ossewaarde-Lowtoot, 2020). On the contrary, degrowth serves as a counter position and is currently mostly pursued scientifically and pushed for by social climate movements, but not really anchored in actual EU policies. As degrowth emphasizes a green transition via an economy that is scaling down instead of growing (Kallis, 2017), it follows a fundamentally different approach. Instead, degrowth avows to a new model which is concentrated rather on wellbeing and social needs. What is more, it adds on a perspective of climate justice (Muraca, 2012, Meredith, 2021). A second core premise to the analysis was the conceptualization of the Beyond Growth Coalition consisting of three groups of actors: scientists, climate activists and Members of the European Parliament, which can be understood as involved actors in changing the discourse. Nonetheless, these actors are tied to their own power structures. Finally, the third core premise was a framework inspired by Leipold and Winkel (Leipold and Winkel, 2016) (but further developed and tailored specifically to the research) of discursive strategies as means for discursive change. Those served as theoretical expectations to the data analysis. Such a framework involved a variety of strategies, namely scientification, delegitimation, counter narratives, the power of norms and values and the emphasis on urgency. These key conceptual premises turned out to be particularly suitable as well as fruitful to the data analysis. Consequently, the analysis led to two core findings and insights crucial for answering the research question: *Which discursive strategies does the Beyond Growth Coalition pursue in challenging the hegemonic green growth discourse of the European Commission?*

First off, all actors made use of the total variety of all expected strategies. Scientification, counter narratives, delegitimation, the power of norms and values and emphasis on urgency were important strategic means to the coalition. Especially delegitimation and thereby the attempt to truly criticize and deconstruct the idea of green growth was a shared commonality of all. This strategy appeared to be particularly important to the actors while trying to influence the hegemonic green growth discourse because it seemed suited for refuting entrenched structures and beliefs in regard to green growth. The common use of certain discursive argumentation patterns also presents the actors as owners of a common discursive agency, as a true argumentative coalition. Secondly, even if the entire range of discursive means was applied by the scientists, the climate activists and the Members of the European Parliament, however not to the same extent. Here, the scientists made special use of counter narratives and delegitimation as core argumentation streams to on the one hand dismantle the idea of green growth and at the same time provide alternatives to it via their expertise in the field. The climate activists on the other hand heavily relied on the power of norms and values as a strategy to draw attention to the social and global injustices perpetuated by the status quo and the constant

pursuit of economic growth. Thereby they deployed especially forms of „moral power“ (Nisbett and Spaiser, 2023, p. 2) to contest and challenge the hegemonic green growth discourse. The Members of the European Parliament also applied delegitimation strategies and thereby interestingly broad forward criticism towards the very institution they are part of, showing that also forces from within advocate for a path beyond growth against the dominant position of the European Commission. This short recapitulation may unearth how each actor is in a way discursively stronger in the exploration of certain discursive strategies than the others.

The research presented in this study has looked for the first time at how discursive strategies of degrowth have been applied by actors on the European level and can therefore contribute to the field of research on degrowth. The consideration of discursive strategies of degrowth has both political-theoretical and a practical implications. Thereby this research seeks to mitigate theory and empirical practice conducted to showcase were both are entangled. This circles back to the scientific and social relevance of this work. Overall, the research could help enable those involved actors (scientists, activists and politicians) to reflect and improve their discursive behaviour as the analysis showed certain strengths and weaknesses via discursive strategies. What is more, the analysis as well was concerned with the coalition-building of the respective actors in a theoretical and practical manner. Here, clues could be provided where argumentation aligns. This could help the degrowth community and its advocates to promote and further develop such joint argumentation past the Beyond Growth Conference. Since this research also portrayed coalition-building and the power of discursive strategies in a theoretical sense, it could be interesting to any counter hegemonic movement.

However, the analysis is not without its shortcomings. Subsequently, a short reflection suggests itself. As mentioned before, the analysis is – to a certain degree – limited in terms of content and methodology. In order to soften these limits, the scope of the analysis could be stretched and further material consulted to supplement the knowledge gained. Moreover, the analysis could be committed to a wider range of discursive strategies. Methodologically, the present analysis relied on deductive coding. In order to enable the consideration of strategies beyond this, inductive coding could be a way to guarantee more openness for results and the admissibility of further, perhaps more unexpected, discoveries. The analysis primarily took into account the counterhegemonic argumentation practice by the Beyond Growth Coalition. However developing this research further, a consideration of how the hegemonic discourse on green growth is maintained and upheld by the European Commission via discursive strategies would be an eligible counterpart, an important *addendum* to showcase the duality and wider

dynamics of the discourse. Furthermore, the analysis was concerned first and foremost with the appearance and the impact of discursive strategies rather than with their logical justification and reasoning in terms of content. Such a continuative research endeavor on logical argumentation analysis (Tetens, 2012) could add on an interesting philosophical dimension worth its own research. Consequently, even if this research had to leave certain questions open, it showcases how the degrowth discourse is a rich topic on the rise offering much potential for further research.

Finally, it should be noted that this research and the questions it raises are embedded in a specific political and social context. Even though beyond growth approaches might still be marginalized, such events as the Beyond Growth Conference are pushing discussions on the matter in the European Union. Even to the extent that the European Research Council facilitates a 10 million research project on degrowth (Deconinck, 2023). After the Beyond Growth Conference, other events and discussions on the matter have been launched (*15-17 May 2023 - Beyond Growth 2023 Conference*, 2023). Accordingly, some steps are being taken in regard to the recognition of beyond growth approaches. Simultaneously, the European Union is experiencing a shift to the right, mirrored by the recent European Election. Such a strengthening of right-wing forces can as well further undermine any attempts to shift the discourse from green growth to beyond growth; it can even put in jeopardy green or social projects in the EU in general. Consequently, challenging the discourse might become even harder in the future. It thus remains in question whether there is currently a momentum for degrowth in the EU. Perhaps in the end shifting the hegemonic green growth discourse is also a matter of either adhering to the *status quo* or having the courage to change. In the words of the Belgian climate activist Anuna De Wever: „We are talking about courage. European leaders if you lack political bravery to make paradigm shifting decisions then leave it to us“ (GreensEFA, 2023f).

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GreensEFA. (2023j, Mai 17). *#BeyondGrowth - Building post-growth macroeconomic governance framework* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GK9X0HaIRXI> , last retrieved 02.07.2024.

## 7. Appendix

This appendix provides a list of all the analyzed and coded video material structured according to the actor groups. A transparent overview on how they were coded precisely will be provided in an extra file. The most of the here cited video material was already cited under the references as they were mentioned in the analysis. They are listed here again in a systematic way because videos beyond them were part to the coding procedure eventhough not specifically referenced in the text.

### 1. Scientists

Jason Hickel,

GreensEFA. (2023a, May 17). *Best of #BeyondGrowth 2023 - Jason Hickel* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xszUWnSEJig> , last retrieved 02.07.2024. (13: 23)

Timothée Parrique,

GreensEFA. (2023b, May 17). *Best of #BeyondGrowth 2023 - Timothée Parrique* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vij3Q6bE6X4> , last retrieved 02.07.2024. (10:15)

Kate Raworth,

GreensEFA. (2023c, May 17). *Best of #BeyondGrowth 2023 - Kate Raworth* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b73YoklpIW4> , last retrieved 02.07.2024. (10:15)

Tim Jackson,

GreensEFA. (2023d, June 1). *Best of #BeyondGrowth 2023 - Tim Jackson* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PF5GUAw9-vM> , last retrieved 02.07.2024. (14:51)

Giorgos Kallis

GreensEFA. (2023e, Mai 15). *#BeyondGrowth - Changing the goal: from GDP growth to social prosperity* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=buKfE1aDUU>, last retrieved 02.07.2024. (59:00 – 1:09:00)

## 2. Climate activists

Anuna de Wever,

GreensEFA. (2023f, June 1). *Best of #BeyondGrowth 2023 - Anuna de Wever* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5BkixOvVBOM> , last retrieved 02.07.2024. (12:52)

Adélaïde Charlier,

GreensEFA. (2023g, May 17). *Best of #BeyondGrowth 2023 - Adelaïde Charlier* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9TWSj2-4P9c> , last retrieved 02.07.2024. (11:57),

Vandana Shiva,

GreensEFA. (2023h, May 17). *Best of #BeyondGrowth 2023 - Vandana Shiva* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KweRFQdSEwU> , last retrieved 02.07.2024. (12: 12)

## 3. MEPs

Phillipe Lamberts,

GreensEFA. (2023i, June 1). *Best of #BeyondGrowth 2023 - Phillippe Lamberts* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Abdn4QaHstY> , last retrieved 02.07.2024. (33:16)

Manon Aubry,

GreensEFA. (2023j, May 17). *#BeyondGrowth - Building post-growth macroeconomic governance framework* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GK9X0HaIRXI> , last retrieved 02.07.2024. (15:09 – 31:01)

Aurore Lalucq

GreensEFA. (2023k, Mai 15). *#BeyondGrowth - Changing the goal: from GDP growth to social prosperity* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=buKfE1aDUU> , last retrieved 02.07.2024. (11:25 – 17:21)