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Conceptual framework to study the politics of climate risk management in local government

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Contemporary climate risk management in local governments tends to fortify existing risk governance, normalize an extraordinary situation, and depoliticize the issue of climate change by favoring technical approaches. This paper introduces a novel conceptual framework based on securitization and riskification to empirically investigate the politics of climate risk management in local government. Despite the increasing importance of local action in handling climate change, this level of government has received limited attention in the riskification literature. By applying risk logic as an explanatory approach, this framework identifies the effects of climate risk management on climate change policy and action. Together with the discourse used, actors involved, and tools employed, this constitutes the politics of climate risk management. The findings contribute to ongoing debates on how increasingly threatening climate change futures are translated into a bureaucratic system characterized by a prevalence of risk governance. The paper concludes by suggesting reconsideration of referent objects as a future research avenue to advance climate risk management in local government.

Keywords: Climate change, riskification, securitization, politics, risk logic, climate risk management

1. Introduction

The increasing intensity and severity of extreme weather events, such as flooding, forest fires, and droughts, are stark materializations of climate change. Yet, these events are merely an introduction to the potential future catastrophes predicted by the IPCC's high emissions scenario, which warns of devastating climate disasters (IPCC 2021). Climate change is an unwanted future.

Concepts like risk, danger, uncertainty, and unsustainability translate unwanted futures, such as climate change, into policy and action (Villumsen Berling et al. 2021). The translation and subsequent handling of these futures follow a specific logic shaped by the translating concept. For example, local governments approach climate change according to risk logic (Karlson, Morsut and Engen 2023, 2024). This involves risk management such as incorporating climate change in risk assessments, estimating climate risks, and involving risk analysts in climate change responses. It tends to fortify existing risk governance, normalize an extraordinary situation, and depoliticize the issue of climate change (Karlson, Morsut and Engen 2023, 2024).

The research question of this paper is: How can risk logic be further developed to investigate the politics of climate risk management in local government? This paper builds on case studies of local government to advance the connection between politics and risk logic on climate change (Karlson, Morsut and Engen 2023, 2024). Importantly, the development of risk logic in this paper emphasizes that local governments already engage in risk governance, which derives from the risk management practices actors use to solve risk problems within the constraints of regulatory frameworks and through established routines (Boholm, Corvellec and Karlsson 2012). Additionally, risk logic is operationalized into analytical categories that capture its manifestations. This paper thereby contributes a novel conceptual framework for investigating the politics of climate risk management in local government as the importance of local action increases due to more intense and frequent extreme weather events. Local government carries a particular responsibility for preparation for climate change, as unwanted events should be handled at the lowest possible level of government (UNDRR 2015).

Concepts such as risk are inherently tied to politics in the sense that they shape government responses to an unwanted future (Villumsen Berling et al. 2021). These politics matter because they direct policies and action, informing who gets protected, measures, and the organizational setup of the responsible government level (McDonald 2024). Moreover, they shape the way to govern and accountabilities (Aradau, Lobo-Guerrero and van Munster 2008; Stiglund 2021; von Lucke 2020).

These politics are explored by the Copenhagen school of security, which studies how issues become widely viewed as security issues, i.e., securitized, focusing on discourse (Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde 1998). It is also the attention of the Paris school of security studies, albeit with a focus on bureaucratic routines in the face of unwanted futures (Balzacq 2005, 2010; Balzacq, Léonard, and Ruzicka 2016; Bigo 2002). Furthermore, literature on riskification shows that specifically risk management can be used to form a foundation for governance even for unwanted futures that are difficult to predict like terrorism or climate disasters (Aradau, Lobo-Guerrero and van Munster 2008; Rothe 2011; Villumsen Berling et al. 2021; von Lucke 2020).

The remainder of this paper is structured into the following five sections: first, the theory section reviews relevant existing literature. Second, the methods section describes the literature that the paper draws on. Third, the findings section further develops and defines risk logic on climate change, operationalizes it into four analytical categories and connects it to politics. Fourth, the discussion section assesses the analytical value and interconnections of the four analytical categories before discussing the framework's advantages, limitations, and implications. The conclusion summarizes the conceptual framework.

2. Theory

Risk logic can be understood as the logic underpinning a government's risk translation and response to an unwanted future, such as climate change (Corry 2012; Villumsen Berling et al. 2021). Corry (2012) proposed risk logic to understand the influx of risk in security issues, a process he terms riskification. Corry (2012) thereby extends the securitization framework.

The securitization framework proposes that when a securitizing actor presents an issue as an existential threat to a referent object deemed worthy of protection, it warrants exceptional measures (Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde 1998). A prime example of this type of securitization is the Bush administration's war on terror (Balzacq, Léonard, and Ruzicka 2016).

The central elements of the securitization framework are the securitizing actor (who presents an issue as a threat), the referent subject (the threat), the referent object (what is in danger), the audience (whose acceptance is needed), the context, and the adoption of a customized policy in response (Balzacq, Léonard, and Ruzicka 2016). Empirical analyses of securitization expose politics in terms of these elements (Wæver 2011).

Riskification is distinct from securitization because it follows a risk logic rather than a security logic (Corry 2012). Security logic focuses on protecting referent objects from existential threats (Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde 1998), while risk logic focuses on managing potential future harms and uncertainty (Corry 2012). According to Corry (2012), the characteristics of risk logic are: (1) there is no direct relationship between an existential threat and security, as risks are more diffuse; (2) actions focus on governing the conditions of possibility of harm, thereby altering the characteristics of the objects deemed worthy of protection; and (3) a governmental policy of long-term societal engineering is preferable.

When approaching an unwanted future as risk, governments subsume appropriate forms of governance, such as risk governance. By contrast with security, risk does not warrant exceptionality but rather permeates the ordinary practices of government (Aradau, Lobo-Guerrero and van Munster 2008). Nevertheless, it represents a new kind of politics because it shifts the focus from decision-making to managing contingency, thereby changing governance and accountability toward the public (Aradau, Lobo-Guerrero and van Munster 2008; Corry 2012; Diez, von Lucke and Wellmann 2016; Stiglund 2021).

Local governments handle unwanted futures such as terrorism and natural disasters through risk governance, which involves using risk regulatory frameworks, administrative tools, and methods of risk assessment to manage risks (Aven 2020; Boholm, Corvellec and Karlsson 2012;

Renn 2008), effectively approaching these issues according to risk logic.

A critique of the literature risk logic has emerged from is that it fails to account for the distinct and preexisting concepts and logics of the unit of analysis (Barquet et al. 2024; Rhinard et al. 2024). Instead, it assumes that logics emerge as a result of successful securitization or riskification (Guzzini 2011). While this assumption might have been valid when securitization was introduced to explain how security was incorporated into non-military sectors after the Cold War, it is questionable in today's context.

Security has in recent decades expanded to encompass challenges such as pandemics, immigration, terrorism, and climate change (Villumsen Berling et al. 2021). These issues have grown increasingly interconnected and complex, resulting in intersections between traditional adversaries, climate change, pandemics, and terrorism (Lund Petersen 2012; Villumsen Berling et al. 2021). In tandem with the emergence of new security issues, security practices have permeated areas mirroring these concerns, such as healthcare (Bengtsson, Borg and Rhinard 2018) and immigration (Bigo 2002). This paradigm shift toward multifaceted security challenges and actors ushers in a new era in security studies where boundaries between security and safety, threat and risk are increasingly blurred, and potentially erased (Morsut et al. 2024, Villumsen Berling et al. 2021). Security is no longer tied to existential threats but to unwanted futures (Villumsen Berling et al. 2021). Villumsen Berling et al. (2021, p. 8) therefore suggest that contemporary studies of risk logic should avoid predefined notions to "observe [them] in all their nuances, variations and messiness."

Due to the increasing empirical intertwining of securitization, riskification, risk logic, and risk governance, Morsut and Engen (2023) suggest that there are theoretical interfaces in terms of discourses (how an unwanted future is spoken of), actors, and tools. Still, while risk governance provides decision-makers with analyses of risk descriptions and arguments for certain risk management strategies (Morsut and Engen 2023), it does not critically investigate the politics vested in the concepts and practices it promotes. By contrast, securitization and riskification critically question and challenge these politics by proposing that risk ultimately is a particular political practice (Villumsen Berling et al. 2021).

This is the theoretical point of departure for developing a conceptual framework to analyze the politics of climate risk management in local government. Risk logic was introduced to capture an influx of risk in security by extending the securitization framework. Today, it is integral to how governments handle a wide array of unwanted futures. Local government handle these futures through risk governance, which interfaces with riskification and risk logic in discourse, actors, and tools. However, the risk governance literature does not account for the politics that arise when this existing practice is extended to new issues, such as climate change. This gap must be addressed to investigate the politics of climate risk management in local government, and risk logic is further developed for this purpose.

3. Method

The foundation of this paper is empirical case studies of climate risk management in local government (Karlson, Morsut and Engen 2023, 2024). To extend this work, the conceptual framework presented here draws on two groups of literature.

The conceptual framework primarily draws on literature related to securitization, riskification, and subsequent developments. This includes the original securitization framework (Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde 1998), related works by Wæver (2011, 2022), and studies focusing on bureaucratic routines (Balzacq 2005, 2010; Balzacq, Léonard, and Ruzicka 2016; Bigo 2002). Villumsen Berling et al. (2021) has emerged out of this. Additionally, discussions specifically addressing riskification, such as writings by Corry (2012) and Aradau, Lobo-Guerrero and van Munster (2008), are emphasized. Given the focus on climate change, literature on the securitization and riskification of climate change, including works by Diez, von Lucke and Wellman (2016), Rothe (2011), von Lucke (2020), and Morsut and Engen along with others (Barquet et al. 2024; Morsut and Engen 2023; Morsut et al. 2024; Rhinard et al. 2024), are included.

To address a gap in the literature regarding how local governments extend preexisting risk governance practices, the framework also incorporates risk analysis literature. This

includes Aven (2020), Renn (2008) and Boholm, Corvellec and Karlsson (2012).

Building on the first group of publications, this paper develops and discuss the concept of risk logic and its relation to politics, operationalizes it into analytical categories for empirical studies, and identifies the types of findings the analysis conditions. Drawing on the second group of publications, the conceptual framework is supplemented with insights from risk analysis.

4. Findings

To further develop risk logic to investigate the politics of climate risk management in local government, I propose the following definition. Risk logic on climate change is the translation of climate change into risk, in combination with actions and tools drawing upon the discipline of risk analysis.

This definition implies that the context allows for a translation of climate change into risk; otherwise, it would not be acceptable. Hence, risk logic is not universal; it requires specific contextual conditions (Balzacq 2014), such as relevant practices, routines, and legal frameworks related to risk governance.

Furthermore, the definition suggests that, while specific contexts make risk logic appropriate, similar manifestations can transcend contextual differences as a risk translation and actions and tools drawing upon the discipline of risk analysis must be present. For example, the risk approaches to climate change of Norway and the Netherlands might be comparable. Similar translations, actions, and tools reflect how risk logic operates as a framework for approaching climate change in diverse settings.

Building on this definition and its contextual requirements, a governmental level or department that engage in risk management might extend it to an emerging unwanted future, like climate change. For instance, in Norway, Sweden, and the Netherlands, "ordinary" risk governance frameworks and related bureaucratic routines, such as Risk and Vulnerability Assessments (RVAs), are extended to include climate change (Karlson, Morsut and Engen 2024). This demonstrates how similar manifestations of risk logic such a RVAs can occur in different contexts.

While risk logic underpins a way to translate climate change into government policy and action, it manifests in risk discourse on climate change, the involvement of risk actors, the employment of risk tools and risk effects. This is illustrated in Figure 1. These manifestations serve as analytical categories that operationalize risk logic.

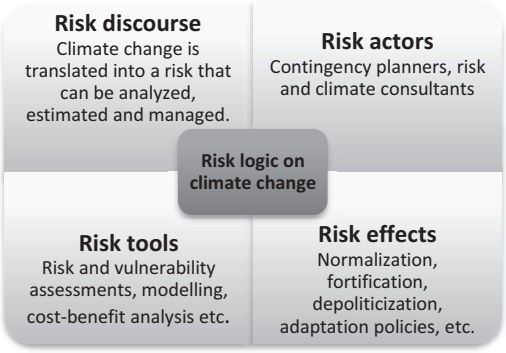

Fig. 1. Conceptual framework to investigate the politics of climate risk management in local government.

The three first analytical categories—risk discourse, risk actors, and risk tools—are drawn from the framework of Morsut and Engen (2023) of interfaces between risk logic, riskification, and risk governance. Starting with these categories for operationalizing risk logic, the conceptual framework of this paper build on securitization and riskification literature while also allowing empirical studies to utilize interfaces from risk analysis and risk governance literature.

Risk discourse, actors, and tools have been analyzed in relation to climate change adaptation in several European countries (Barquet et al. 2024; Englund and Barquet 2023; Jochemsen and Mees 2024; Mees and Surian 2023; Morsut et al. 2024; Rhinard et al. 2024). These studies provide practical examples of how risk logic on climate change manifests, shedding light on the politics involved. By explicitly establishing risk logic as a central concept and including risk effects as an analytical category, this framework builds on these practical examples to advance knowledge on the connection between politics, risk logic and climate change, providing a focused analysis of it.

A widely discussed effect of riskification and risk logic is depoliticization (Lidén 2022; Maertens 2018; Villumsen Berling 2011; Villumsen Berling et al. 2021; von Lucke 2020). As risk estimations usually are made by experts, they are seldom politically contested due to the privileged position of the expert (Villumsen Berling 2011). Moreover, these estimates appear to be objective, thus further reducing controversy (Villumsen Berling 2011). Finally, their technical nature can pose a barrier to non-experts in meaningfully engaging with the risk translation (Lidén 2022).

Other effects of risk logic can be normalization (von Lucke 2020), as the risk translation makes climate change manageable alongside other "ordinary" risks such as well-known flooding. Furthermore, there can be a decoupling from the wider issue of global warming (Karlson, Morsut and Engen 2023), increased surveillance of risk areas (von Lucke 2020), and climate adaptation policies (Diez, von Lucke and Wellmann 2016). These effects, derived from studies of riskification, can be tested against case studies of local government. Hence, building the conceptual framework on securitization and riskification literature provides a rich base for developing theoretical propositions to test against empirical studies.

Risk logic can serve as an explanatory approach to understanding and analyzing the politics of climate risk management as it explains how climate change is translated into a risk, the mobilization of actors and tools that follow from risk analysis, and associated risk effects (Karlson, Morsut and Engen 2024).

According to this conceptual framework, the politics of climate risk management encompasses the discourses, actors, and tools that identify, assess, and respond to risks associated with climate change, and their effects. This understanding of politics aligns with the securitization framework, which conditions empirical analyses to expose politics in these terms through the central elements discussed in the theory section above (Wæver 2011).

5. Discussion

The discussion begins with assessing the analytical value and interconnections of the four categories established in the previous section. This is followed by a discussion of the advantages, limitations, and implications of the presented framework for research and practice.

5.1. *The four analytical categories*

As illustrated in Figure 1, risk logic manifests in risk discourse where climate change is translated into a risk that can be analyzed, estimated, and managed. Analyzing risk discourse draws on securitization and riskification. The analytical value of this category lies in identifying who/what is to be protected (referent objects), from what (referent subject), by what means, and by whom.

The connection between risk discourse and the next category, risk actors, is that discourses are social structures within which actors operate. However, risk discourse can also be promoted by risk actors, reinforcing risk logic. As Figure 1 suggests, contingency planners and risk and climate consultants can act as risk actors, representing risk actions on climate change. The theoretical underpinning of this category is securitization, particularly the Paris school of security, which focuses on bureaucratic practices. This is complemented by insights from risk analysis regarding professions and their risk practices. The analytical value lies in capturing manifestations of risk logic not present in public discourse and establishing the relationship between identified risk discourse and risk actors.

The connection between risk actors and the next category, risk tools, is that risk tools demonstrate the methods and processes risk actors use to suggest climate risk measures. As Figure 1 states, risk tools can include RVAs, modeling, cost-benefit analysis, etc. The theoretical underpinning of identifying risk tools and their functions comes from the discipline of risk analysis. The analytical value of this category is to capture risk actions by both risk and non-risk actors because, as discussed in the theory section, the boundaries between these are blurred. It also aims to pinpoint which tools translate climate change into a risk, identifying how and when these are used.

The connection between risk tools and the next category, risk effects, is that the use of risk tools can favor a technical approach to climate change, integrating it into routine bureaucratic practices and depoliticizing decision-making processes. As Figure 1 suggests, risk effects can include the normalization of climate change,

fortification of existing risk governance, or depoliticization of the issue. The theoretical underpinning of risk effects is riskification studies. The analytical value of this category lies in seeing the implications of risk discourses, actors and tools on how decisions on policy and action are made while acknowledging that risk effects can also influence the three first categories. Risk effects can uncover specific challenges of risk logic on climate change, advancing discussions on the politics of climate risk management.

Using the framework, with its four analytical categories—risk discourse, risk actors, risk tools, and risk effects— in which risk logic manifests, yields knowledge on the politics of climate risk management. Empirical studies might produce different findings for these categories, leading to varied configurations of risk logic and, consequently, varied politics of climate risk management. Examining these variations through empirical cases can enhance the understanding of risk logic and politics in contemporary society.

5.2. *Advantages*

As discussed in the theory section, due to contemporary developments in security, risks and unwanted futures, Villumsen Berling et al. (2021) suggest dissolving predefined logics and studying them in all their complexity. This is a maximally theoretically open approach. In this conceptual framework, I propose to define risk logic on climate change as the translation of climate change into risk, alongside actions and tools that follow from risk analysis. The purpose of this definition is to establish *how* to study risk logic on climate change to elucidate the politics of climate risk management in local government. The definition does not make claims to a universal risk logic, and implies a dependency on contextual features. The conceptual framework thus strikes a balance between theoretical openness, as suggested by Villumsen Berling et al. (2021) and the rigor necessary for empirical research such as multiple case studies.

An analysis based on securitization and riskification is conditioned to extract politics (Wæver, 2011), providing valuable insights into how climate change is translated into a risk issue. However, as mentioned in the theory section above, one critique of such an analysis is that it ignores preexisting concepts and logics in the unit of analysis. In local government, risk discourse, actors, and tools already prevail through risk governance. The development of risk logic through the proposed definition in this paper more accurately entails that risk logic can be preexisting and extended, while simultaneously capturing the politics of this.

5.3. *Limitations*

While the conceptual framework provides a structured approach to investigate the politics of climate risk management, it does not offer normative recommendations. Riskification, as an extension of securitization, critically investigates related political practices and questions their necessity (Wæver 2011). Nonetheless, given the catastrophic potential of climate change, there are debates on whether climate change should be securitized to receive appropriate prioritization (Albert 2022; Wæver 2022). However, neither normal governance nor securitization/ riskification may be normatively sufficient in the face of climate change. Instead, government must respond to the consequences of climate change and should also consider their own ecological impacts to not further exacerbate the situation (Dryzek and Pickering 2019).

Risk governance literature tends to suggest additional or revised risk management in response to a risk problem like climate change (Renn 2008). Hence, the normative recommendation is in contrast to securitization and riskification more or different risk management. However, empirical studies on the politics of climate risk management indicate that existing risk governance may be fortified rather than revised in the face of climate change (Karlson, Morsut and Engen 2024; Rothe 2011). Consequently, the normative recommendations from a risk governance analysis, like those from securitization and riskification, may not be apt for a politics that meets the governance challenges presented by climate change.

5.4. *Implications*

Policy responses and actions are shaped by the referent objects, which must be customized to protect them (Balzacq, Léonard, and Ruzicka 2016). In a European context, our previous work (Karlson, Morsut, and Engen 2024) identifies

referent objects for protection against "ordinary" risks as including individuals, the economy, critical infrastructure, and the environment. These referent objects are protected through contingency planning, and preexisting risk discourse in this policy area is extended to address the consequences of climate change. Related risk actors, such as contingency planners and risk consultancies, are involved, using risk tools like RVAs to facilitate the extension of risk governance to climate change. When existing risk governance is applied to climate change, the mentioned referent objects also become relevant for climate protection, with risk effects including normalizing the situation and fortifying existing risk governance and management. However, it is not clear that these referent objects are at immediate risk from climate change, suggesting a long-term policy approach may be appropriate. If entire ecological systems, including humans, or future generations were included as referent objects, immediate climate action might be pressing (McDonald 2021). Future research on the politics of climate risk management should therefore assess which referent objects create a politics fitting for the governance challenges of climate change.

6. Conclusion

The research question of this paper is: How can risk logic be further developed to investigate the politics of climate risk management in local government? To answer this question the paper presents a conceptual framework to study the politics of climate risk management in local government. The framework centers on risk logic which is further developed and defined as the translation of climate change into risk, in combination with actions and tools drawing upon the discipline of risk analysis. Risk logic on climate change is operationalized into the analytical categories risk discourse, risk actors, risk tools and risk effects. Findings from studies following the conceptual framework constitute the politics of climate risk management. While the conceptual framework suggests how to study the politics of climate risk management, it does not in itself offer normative recommendations. A suggested future research avenue to advance climate risk management in local government concerns reconsidering referent objects.

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