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Differential Europe: Domestic Actors and Their Role in Shaping Spatial Planning Systems

Dominic Stead, Giancarlo Cotella

Abstract: Spatial planning systems across Europe are very diverse and reflect local policy-making styles and cultures as well as specific territorial conditions and priorities. Reforms to these planning systems are commonplace: few remain totally unchanged for long periods of time. Since most reforms to planning systems are in response to common issues and challenges facing many, if not all, planning systems, it might easily be assumed that they are leading towards a gradual convergence of spatial planning objectives, tools and/or procedures. However, the situation is more complex since reforms, and the local outcomes of reforms, are also shaped by local and national circumstances. This paper examines the potential contribution of actor-centered institutionalist approaches in explaining how spatial planning systems can retain a very specific nature and form despite experiencing common forces of change and pressures for harmonization.

Introduction

Few spatial planning systems remain totally unchanged for long periods of time. This is certainly the case in much (if not all) of Europe, where spatial planning has recently undergone a series of reforms in response to new challenges such as globalization, sustainable development, economic competitiveness and demographic change. These reforms have been accentuated by the general processes of European integration (Sykes 2008). While there is no EU competence in spatial planning, the EU has played a key role in the promotion of a “European spatial planning agenda” (Colomb 2007) and has shaped various policy concepts and “spatial planning ideas” (Böhme et al. 2004; Jensen, Richardson 2004).

Although European spatial planning systems have evolved in response to challenges that are common to a large number of territories, the responses to these challenges have been far from homogeneous across Europe’s member states. The diversity of spatial planning systems and practices in Europe is still very much appar-

ent and seem unlikely to disappear since they are very much rooted in “the specific histories and geographies of particular places, and the way these interlock with national institutional structures, cultures and economic opportunities” (Healey, Williams 1993: 716). Propositions about the convergence of spatial planning systems seem unlikely to materialize. As various studies of the “Europeanization” of spatial planning show, impacts are felt in different ways and at different times (Böhme 2002; Dabinett, Richardson 2005; Giannakourou 2005; Hamedinger et al. 2008; Cotella 2007; Sykes 2007; Tewdwr-Jones, Williams 2001; Waterhout 2007), partly as a consequence of deeply embedded differences between European nations in terms of political, professional and administrative cultures and structures.

Spatial planning processes and decisions occur within frameworks of legally established objectives, tools and procedures that form part of national “planning systems” (Healey, Williams 1993; Newman, Thornley 1996; CEC 1997; Larsson 2006; Nadin, Stead 2008, 2009) which show considerable variation across Europe, particularly at the national level but also at the sub-national scale in certain cases (e.g. federal or regionalized states). The diversity of spatial planning systems and approaches in Europe is not just due to a wide spectrum of legal and administrative arrangements (Newman, Thornley 1996), it is also related to the variety of national policy styles (Richardson 1982), governance traditions (Sørensen, Torfing 2009), social models (Nadin, Stead 2008), planning cultures (Knieling, Othengrafen 2009) and actor configurations (Adams et al. 2011). The latter provides the main focus of this special issue.

While processes of change in spatial planning are increasingly being influenced by networking and cooperation initiatives at the international scale (e.g. INTERREG and ESPON), national and sub-national communities of actors still play a crucial role in shaping the nature and form of territorial governance. As the recent debate on evidence-based and evidence-informed planning suggests, the prevalence of certain ideas, concepts and approaches over

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others is increasingly determined by an heterogeneous array of communities of actors (Faludi, Waterhout 2006; Davoudi 2006). These communities – epistemic communities, communities of practices, advocacy coalitions, policy networks – differ in terms of actors involved, standpoint and focus, and their actions influence the evolutionary path of territorial governance and spatial planning systems in different domestic contexts (Adams et al. 2011).

Despite the increasing recognition that much can be learnt from studying differences in spatial planning systems (Newman, Thornley 1996; CEC 1997; Adams et al. 2006, Nadin, Stead 2008), only limited efforts have been made at the European level to capitalize on this diversity of spatial planning practices, which is more often presented as an obstacle to coordination capacity and mutual understanding rather than as an asset (Finka 2011).

The collection of contributions in this special issue focuses on the role of these national and sub-national communities of actors who play a key role in shaping the evolution of spatial planning and territorial governance within Europe's member states. All of the contributions highlight the distinctiveness of the shifts in spatial planning that have occurred in five selected European countries – Finland, Greece, Italy, Latvia and Portugal – each of which is characterized by different policy approaches and priorities concerning spatial planning (CEC 1997; Nadin, Stead 2008). The shifts that have taken place in these countries can often be attributed to the nature and extent of engagement of domestic actors and the influence that they are able to exert.

The evolution of spatial planning in Europe

Aside from essays on comparative economic and regional planning (e.g. Bunbury 1938; Hoffman 1972), most comparative studies of spatial planning and territorial governance are relatively recent (Davies et al. 1989; Healey, Williams 1993; Newman, Thornley 1996; CEC 1997; Balchin et al. 1999). The majority of these studies consider the nature and operation of planning as a function of governmental and legal provisions, possibly influenced by professional culture, and generally address the classification of planning systems according to broad “families” of law and government structure (Nadin, Stead 2008). The studies often consider domestic contexts for spatial planning as static, and their influence on spatial planning outcomes are rarely considered

in detail. However, spatial planning systems are dynamic in nature and change in response to socio-economic, environmental, political and cultural shifts (Nadin, Stead 2008). At the same time, wider trends in government and governance have also affected the evolution of spatial planning and the reformulation of national (and sub-national) systems of planning in many parts of Europe. Building on Lidström (2007) and Fürst (2009), a set of general trends are summarized below which are generally considered to be influencing the dynamics of spatial planning and territorial governance across Europe.

- The influence of the European Union. Management and planning approaches in member states are being increasingly shaped by various European policies and initiatives (e.g. structural fund rules, environmental management and nature protection directives). This in turn has impacts on planning procedures and practices (Dühr et al. 2007).

- Redefining of the role of the nation-state. The establishment and gradual expansion of what now is the EU has limited the role of national borders and transferred decision-making powers to supranational bodies. In addition, states are challenged from inside, by groups with strong ethnic or regional identities demanding separatism or at least self-government.

- Strengthening lower levels of self-government. In many countries, functions have been decentralized from central government to local and regional levels of government. In some countries, this has gone hand-in-hand with reorganizations of sub-national levels of government, either by amalgamation of municipalities or regions or by introducing new regional levels of self-government.

- Accepting increasing diversity, variation and even asymmetry between how territories within the nation-state are governed. This tendency towards diversity can be seen as the empowerment of the lower levels of self-government but may also lead to greater differentiation. Not only is the scope for variation between sub-national units greater, some units are also permitted to follow their own paths that may differ quite considerably from the general national pattern.

- Increasing marketization of the public domain. Many functions that were seen as fairly stable public responsibilities during the peak of the welfare state era have either been privatized or are run jointly by public and private providers. Public organizations are increasingly limited to “enabling” other actors to offer services.

- The changing rationale for planning. Planning systems are being redefined in the light of

new challenges (e.g. sustainable development, climate change, social exclusion, territorial cohesion), new powers and responsibilities (see above) and new attempts to increase the societal relevance of planning. Across Europe, spatial planning is being recast as a way of managing the increasing interdependencies of actors involved in territorial development, which provides spatial planning with a new rationale for and presents a new opportunity to demonstrate the contemporary relevance of planning (Stead, Meijers 2009).

- The internationalization of planning education and practice. International exchange within the academic and practitioner communities of planning can also lead to shifts in spatial planning. Exchanges within the academic community may change mind sets and value systems and even lead to modifications in methodological approaches, with subsequent impacts on planning practice via education.

Because many of these trends are common to most, if not all, countries in Europe, and since many of the priorities for policy are similar across the European continent, it might be easy to assume that these various common forces of change might be leading to convergence in planning policies and/or practices. Indeed, some authors have been speculating about the likelihood (or existence) of policy convergence in the spatial planning arena for some time. Davies for example postulated “a gradual convergence of planning policies and practices” as a consequence of mutual learning and cooperation at the regional and local levels of governments and suggested that “[e]vidence for this is already beginning to be apparent” (1994, p.69).¹ Meanwhile, Koresawa and Konvitz have claimed that approaches in national and regional planning systems are converging in Europe, which they explain in terms of “the growing influence of EU and other intergovernmental initiatives” (2011, p.30). Adams (2008) presents a case both for and against the convergence of different planning systems in Europe, arguing that while there has been some convergence towards more collaborative and communicative forms of planning within Europe, certain other aspects of the planning process, such as implementation, monitoring and review, continue to remain largely place-contingent.

Hard evidence for policy convergence in the area of territorial governance and spatial planning is scarce, and various authors remain sceptical about the extent to which European planning systems or planning outcomes are actually converging. Fürst, for instance, is uncon-

vinced that policy convergence is taking place in spatial planning, stating that much conjecture about convergence seems “to be based on thin grounds” (2009, p.31). Meanwhile, Nedović-Budić et al take the view that policy convergence across Europe “remains more of an intellectual notion than a concrete reality” despite shifts in “mass communication and culture and the extensive flows of goods, capital and people, as well as... grand regional (pan-European) policies such as the European Spatial Development Perspective” (2006, p.14). Various explanations have been suggested for the lack or limited degree of policy convergence in spatial planning. Fürst (2009) for example contends that spatial planning processes are relatively slow to change and are restrained by high transaction costs while Adams (2008) claims that differences in socio-economic conditions, cultures and histories between countries form considerable barriers to the convergence of approaches to planning (which is closely related to Healey and Williams’ ideas about local institutional structures, path dependency, culture and local socio-economic conditions as potential constraints to policy convergence – see above).

The limited amount of empirical evidence available and the fact that convergence may relate to a number of different dimensions of policy-making (Bennet 1991) are among the reasons why theoretical debates on the situation of, and the mechanisms behind, policy convergence in relation to spatial planning have not yet reached any firm conclusions. With the specific aim of contributing to these debates, this special issue approaches the topic from an actor-centered perspective that builds on middle-range theories of European integration and policy transfer, upon which the contributions to this special issue have been based.

Spatial planning policy shifts – an actor-centered perspective

Grand theories of neo-functionalism and intergovernmentalism provide one way of examining EU polity European integration at the “macro-level”, but these theories are often unable to provide detailed explanations about how planning policies are made or how decisions are taken (Dühr et al. 2010). Consequently, various authors have drawn on middle-range theories instead, such as networking, learning and policy transfer in order to understand the evolution of European and national spatial planning (e.g. Cotella, Janin Rivolin 2010; Faludi 2001, 2010;

Nadin, Stead 2009; Pallagst 2006; Waterhout, Stead 2007). These middle-range theories focus on the working of European and domestic institutions and provide an alternative way of examining the influence of different institutional settings and actor constellations on EU and domestic policy-making.

Various recent, competing neo-institutionalist approaches² have focused on the role of actors and institutions in explaining shifts in European governance and policy processes. Examples include *sociological institutionalism* (see for example Hall, Taylor 1996; Thelen 1999; Tolbert, Zucker 1983), *historical institutionalism* (see for example Collier, Collier 1991; Krasner 1988; Sydow et al. 2005) and *actor-centered institutionalism* (see for example Mayntz, Scharpf 1995; Scharpf 1997). The first of these approaches, sociological institutionalism, was developed from organization theory and conceives of institutions as cultural constructions (e.g. norms and values) which determine the identity of individuals and organizations. Historical institutionalism, on the other hand, considers the participation of a wide range of actors in explaining sequences of social, political, economic behavior and change over time using the concept of path dependence. Of particular interest to this approach is examining the conditions under which a particular trajectory was followed and not others.

Because actors' intentions, actions and motivations are defined to some degree by institutions, it is difficult to include institutional change within the two theoretical frameworks described above. An *actor-centered institutionalist approach* provides one way of addressing this issue. This approach conceives of institutions as being capable of shaping (but not able to fully determine) the behavior of actors: their behavior is also shaped by individual and collective priorities and desires to achieve certain outcomes. In common with rational-choice theory, actor-centered institutionalism shares a belief that actors may change institutions, while at the same time it acknowledges that this is a difficult process. Contrary to rational-choice theory, it assumes that the preferences of actors are dependent of actor, time and place. In this way, actor-centered institutionalism does not exclude institutions, but does not assign the same kind of explanatory power to them as other institutional theories do. Institutions rather construct a framework to describe influences on actors, while the focus of this approach remains on the interaction between the actors themselves. On the other hand, actors are characterized by ca-

pacities, perceptions and preferences, influencing their priorities and choice of action, while at the same time being subjected to institutional influence as well as to change due to learning and persuasion. Of particular importance for actor-centered institutionalism is the concept of actor constellations. As it is often impossible to undertake unilateral actions, actors act within arenas where they are surrounded by other actors, each with their own capacities, perceptions and preferences. Within these arenas, changes are determined by "the players involved, their strategy options, the outcomes associated with strategy combinations, and the preferences of the players over these outcomes" (Scharpf 1997)³.

Our view is that the actor-centered institutionalism approach provides an interesting framework for exploring the evolution of spatial planning and territorial governance systems within the context of European territorial governance. It complements both actor-based and socially-determinist approaches with a new interpretation of the institutional frame, based on a new conception of interactions between actors and institutions that form the basis of changes and evolutions in spatial planning. A few examples can be found where authors have started to use approaches based on existing relations between actor and institutions to examine issues related to spatial planning, such as the role of discourses in European planning systems (Servillo 2010) and the theoretical analysis of spatial planning instruments (Van den Broeck 2008, 2010). These approaches devote particular attention to the role of composite actors and actors' communities, as outlined below.

The nature and role of different communities of actors

An important characteristic of actor-centered institutionalism is that it does not exclusively conceive actors as individuals, but may also include collective actors and organizations. This is of particular relevance to spatial planning since this often involves interactions between composite actors, rather than individuals acting on their own account (Scharpf 1997). The notion of a composite actor implies a capacity for intentional action at a level above the individuals (Mayntz, Scharpf 1995). However, because only individuals are capable of having intentions, the capacity to act at a higher level must be produced by internal interactions between its members. The result is a multi-level conceptualization of actors with at least two levels:

individual and composite. Several authors have recently started to reflect on the role of composite actors in the field of spatial planning and on the role of communities of actors in influencing spatial planning policy shifts. Healey (2010), for example, has recently examined the notion of “cultures of practice” among “communities of experts, advocates, officials and lobbyists who promote or work in distinct fields” (p.2) while Adams et al. (2011) have employed the notion of “territorial knowledge communities” in the field of spatial planning, where actors’ engagement and activity within defined knowledge arenas are considered to “impart an influence on policy development as a result of having acquired the powers to shape or ‘frame’ new policy images or safeguard existing policy approaches” (p.41). These communities of actors include *policy networks* (Rhodes 1997), *epistemic communities* (Haas 1992), *communities of practice* (Lave, Wenger 1991, Wenger 2000) and *advocacy coalitions* (Sabatier, Jenkins-Smith 1993; Sabatier 1988).

The notion of policy networks indicates communities of actors clustered around a particular area of public policy, such as different actors’ coalitions within certain policy sectors that aim to influence policy outcomes (Marsh, Rhodes 1992). The actors involved in the preparation of the European Spatial Development Perspective (ESDP) have often been classed as a policy network (Faludi 1997, Williams 2000). More generally, governance by policy networks plays a crucial role at the European level, where a highly differentiated polity is characterized by joint action of a multitude of actors highly dependent on “government by committee” (Peterson 2003).

Through their action, policy networks may develop by processes of mutual learning that can, in turn, lead to the development of epistemic communities (Héritier et al. 1996). While policy networks and epistemic communities are closely related concepts, the latter add the aspect of knowledge to the network concept, indicating “a network of professionals with recognized expertise and competence in a particular domain and an authoritative claim to policy-relevant knowledge within that domain or issue-area” (Haas 1992: 3). Such a view builds on the assumption that, in many policy areas, policy-makers often do not have the time and capacity to engage with knowledge resources and therefore need specialist advice to inform their decisions. The concept of epistemic communities is also useful in trying to understand and assess the diverse degree of engagement of different actors with EU spatial planning discourses. Ac-

ording to Schimmelfenning and Sedelmeier (2005), the more that domestic policy networks have institutionalized relationships with epistemic communities, the more likely it is that domestic structures are conducive to the influence of new ideas.

Similarly, the concept of “communities of practices” presupposes “a system of relationships between people, activities and the world; developing with time and in relation to other tangential and overlapping communities of practice” (Lave, Wenger 1991: 98). In this light, a community of practice indicates a community of diverse actors engaging in a task, job or profession and is characterized, more than in epistemic communities, by social and interactive aspects of the practice. Examples of communities of practices include groups of practitioners dealing with similar tasks within a specific domestic context, who exchange information and ideas and lobby other groups in the interest of their community.

Lastly, the concept of advocacy coalition refers to communities of actors who are motivated by core policy concerns rooted in normative views and perceived causal relationships in their representation of policy problems (Sabatier, Jenkins-Smith 1993; Sabatier 1988). Such communities are composed of different interest groups such as lobbyists, politicians, journalists and activists who come together to influence policy-making according to a collective goal or normative position. Communities of actors can be found in almost all major planning decisions.

It is important to note that the boundaries between these different types of policy communities are extremely porous (Adams et al. 2011). For instance, epistemic communities and communities of practices may have a mutually reinforcing and interacting nature as they can both focus on the knowledge dimension. However, while epistemic communities share common beliefs and interests, the same does not apply to communities of practice whose interests are usually varied and unshared. Similarly, epistemic communities can exercise an element of advocacy using their expertise to advance particular policy objectives whereas advocacy coalitions can incorporate scientifically based knowledge through the inclusion of expert actors in advancing their interests.

The nature and course of action of these actors’ communities are context-dependent and can often proceed along trajectories shaped by existing political alliances and/or the arrangement of sectoral institutions or government departments (Almendinger, Tewdwr-Jones 2000;

Benz 2000). The thinking behind this special issue has been shaped by these elements and particularly by the ideas and concept behind actor-centered institutionalism and the role of actors' communities. However, this is not to say that the individual papers are framed according to an actor-centered institutionalist approach. Nevertheless, each of the papers examines the role of actors (both individual and composite) in shaping the specific nature and trajectory of national spatial planning systems. All of the contributions clearly demonstrate that the role and influence of actors is very specific in every case, and that their peculiar nature and course of action can often perpetuate the context-specific nature of spatial planning approaches and practices.

Outline of the special issue

The special issue comprises five case study papers from authors with expertise in territorial governance and spatial planning in their respective countries and beyond, especially in the context of EU territorial governance. Each of the contributors provide critical and reflective commentary on the evolution of, and future challenges and opportunities for spatial planning in their respective domestic contexts, as well as in-depth consideration on the influence exerted by the European Union and the role played by domestic actors and actor communities in shaping planning policy shifts.

In the first paper, Matti Fritsch and Heikki Eskelinen discuss the case of Finland, exploring the influence of the EU on the process of evolution and framing of spatial planning policy debates after the country's accession in 1995. They argue how Finland's accession put an end to the country's territorial and institutional relative isolation and gave rise to a period of change and reform in terms of politics, economy and the social sphere, each of which has had important implications for territorial governance and spatial planning. Significant reforms were undertaken both in terms of institutional structures that set the spatial planning agenda and the surrounding policy debate that guides activities in spatial planning and territorial governance. The paper clearly indicates that the Finnish system of territorial governance has been significantly affected by European influences while Finnish epistemic communities and policy-makers (predictably) attempted to steer European debates towards national interests, such as the Russian/Eastern dimension.

Georgia Giannakourou, in the second contribution, focuses on the evolution of spatial planning and territorial governance in Greece. Her contribution analyzes the spatial planning reforms that have occurred in Greece over the last 15 years primarily through an actor-centered perspective seen in the context of Europeanization processes and related mechanisms of uploading, crossloading and downloading. She identifies the key agents involved in these reforms, systematizes the leading discourses in the policy-process and describes the main policy instruments that were proposed and introduced. Drawing on first-hand information (legal documents, case-law, official policy-reports, speeches, unpublished committees' reports and eye-witness accounts), Giannakourou's paper provides an account of the role of both interests and ideas at different levels and stages of the policy-change process. To this end, it considers different theoretical concepts and methodological approaches of policy change with a primary focus on epistemic communities and advocacy/discourse coalitions.

The third paper, by Giancarlo Cotella and Umberto Janin Rivolin, sheds light on the role of domestic actors and epistemic communities in promoting spatial planning policy shifts in Italy over recent decades. The authors discuss how, despite being traditionally characterized by a "conformative", prescriptive model belonging to the so-called "urbanism" tradition, the Italian spatial planning system has been increasingly challenged by the emergence of European spatial planning and the progressive establishment of a EU territorial governance framework. The authors argue that various episodes of "Europeanization" of Italian domestic planning have occurred from bottom-up through a set of complex changes that have progressively affected planning practice. Cotella and Janin Rivolin identify "discourse" and "practices" as two distinct and prominent dimensions characterizing the interplay between the EU and the Member States and explore the role of domestic actors and epistemic communities in these two dimensions.

The fourth paper, by Laila Kūle and Dominic Stead, concerns the case of Latvia and provides a discussion on the transposition of the European concept of territorial cohesion within the domestic context for spatial planning policy-making. Kūle and Stead argue how in Latvia, as in most other European member states, the concept of territorial cohesion is still relatively fluid in national policy and open to interpretation. In the Latvian context, the social dimen-

sion of territorial cohesion is a crucial issue due to a number of specific contextual factors. The paper reflects on Latvian national spatial policy developments and their connection to the territorial cohesion debates organized by the Commission. More specifically, the authors reflect on the role played by policy-makers and the planning community in the process of re-adjustment the Latvian territorial governance and spatial planning system since the collapse of the Soviet bloc.

In the fifth case study paper, focusing on the case of Portugal, Carlos Oliveira and Isabel Breda-Vázquez use the concepts of path-dependency and collective action to explore the evolution of domestic spatial planning and territorial governance. The authors argue that, while territorial governance in Europe is often subject to common pressures, it may diverge considerably, not just between European nations but sometimes also within them. Despite often being associated with some of the negative features characterizing Southern-European spatial planning systems, the authors point out how Portuguese territorial governance has experienced considerable change in the last few decades, which to a large extent is a consequence of EU membership. Some of these policy shifts have had implications for new policy instruments.

Finally, a conclusive paper closes the special issue by reflecting on the main recent trends in spatial planning policies and practices as they manifest in the domestic contexts. In doing so, the contribution reflects on the complexities implicit in the concept of policy convergence. It argues that the spatial planning systems analyzed in the five case study papers have been characterized by different patterns of Europeanization and that, while it is possible to see some similarities in certain elements of their evolution, evidence of convergence is hard to find. Particular attention is devoted to the influence of the different kinds of domestic actors' communities in the processes of changes, and the way they contribute to differential outcomes.

Notes

- 1 Davies does not, however, elaborate on the evidence for this assertion in his paper.
- 2 According to Jachtenfuchs (2002, p.651), these "different theories ... are only in part mutually exclusive or competing with each other", and demonstrate a certain amount of overlap and complementarity.
- 3 As actor-centered institutionism predominantly aims to explain the outcome of interaction and

decision processes, it is the mode of interaction and the strategic interdependence of actors in a given constellation that lies at its heart. Institutional variables play a crucial role with respect to actor constellations because they shape these constellations and to a certain degree they also define the rules of the interaction processes.

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