



BOOK REVIEW: SPATIAL PLANNING SYSTEMS IN EUROPE. COMPARISON AND TRAJECTORIES

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Alexandru-Ionuț Petrișor 

Doctoral School of Urban Planning, Ion Mincu University of Architecture and Urbanism
Str. Academiei nr. 18-20, sector 1, cod 010014, Bucharest: Romania

Department of Architecture, Faculty of Architecture and Urban Planning, Technical University of Moldova
Bd. Stefan cel Mare si Sfânt, nr. 168, cod 2004, Chisinau: Moldova;

National Institute for Research and Development in Constructions, Urbanism and Sustainable Spatial
Development URBAN-INCERC

Sos. Pantelimon, nr. 266, sector 2, cod 021652, Bucharest: Romania

National Institute for Research and Development in Tourism
Str. Apolodor, nr. 17, sector 5, cod 050741, Bucharest: Romania
alexandru_petrisor@yahoo.com

Comparing the planning systems of different countries may prove to be a challenging task, because planning has cultural ties, and culture has local variations. Nevertheless, it is also a rewarding activity, as ‘no one properly understands their own nation’s planning system without comparing it with others’ (Nadin et al., 2024, p. 290). Although rewarding, it is, first of all, difficult, and this difficulty explains the scarcity of attempts at comparing the planning system of different countries. Due to the challenges, such attempts succeed usually in comparing more countries on very general issues and from a bird’s eye perspective, or fewer countries in more depth. For example, recently Nowak et al. compared the planning systems of Eastern-European countries in general (Nowak et al., 2022, 2023a), and those of Poland, Ukraine, and Belarus in more depth (Nowak et al., 2023b).

In addition to its dependence on the cultural particularities, the planning system of a country is influenced by the political system of that country. In fact, planning policies are just a territorial reflection of the sectoral policies of a certain country, tributary to its political system, and subject to local cultural particularities. Top-down governing versus governance, derogatory practices versus strict rules are only some examples showing that a country may change its planning practices. In fact, “one of the most important drivers for change is the need to tackle the ‘spatially blind’ character of other sectoral policies, and engage in territorial governance through planning to encourage sectoral policies to work in complementary ways” (Nadin et al., 2024, p. 16).

For example, Munteanu and Servilo (2013) hold the Europeanization process responsible for changes of the Romanian planning system following its accession to the European Union. This process can be seen as threefold, including “(1) the downloading effect of law, policy and discourse from the EU institutions to Spatial planning systems: a European perspective the nations and regions, (2) the uploading of ways of thinking about and working in spatial planning from nations up to the EU level, and (3) the circulation of the same ideas and practices horizontally between domestic actors, largely through cooperation platforms that have been established by the EU” (Nadin et al., 2024, pp. 12–13).

Although Europe may be seen as an unit, there are traditional divisions, such as the historical or political separation of East and West, to name only the most recent one, and there are areas individualizing themselves, such as the Pentagonal, the Danube region (former South-East Europe, or Balkan region), to name only few of them. Even these units consist of countries with different planning systems, as the three analyses by Nowak et al. (2022, 2023a, 2023b) indicate. The Europeanization process changed planning practices and systems, but did not result into a uniform European planning system. In this context, the enterprise of comparing the planning systems across Europe seems almost adventurous.

This gap is filled in by the book *Spatial Planning Systems in Europe. Comparison and Trajectories*. Such a courageous adventure requires dedicated and well-versed people. The editors are Vincent Nadin (Emeritus Professor of Spatial Planning and Strategy and former Head of the Department of Urbanism, TU Delft, the Netherlands, and Visiting Professor at South China University of Technology School of Architecture, and Birmingham City University, UK, and also co-author of *European Spatial Planning and Territorial Cooperation* – Dühr et al., 2010), Giancarlo Cotella (Associate Professor at the Interuniversity Department of Regional and Urban Studies and Planning of Politecnico di Torino, Italy, who also worked in several ESPON projects), and Peter Schmitt (Professor in Human Geography with focus on Urban and Regional Planning at Stockholm University, Sweden, also co-author of *Territorial Governance across Europe* – Schmitt & Van Well, 2016).

The list of authors includes, apart from the editors, other prestigious names: Maria Bednarek-Szczepańska (Assistant Professor at the Institute of Geography and Spatial Organization, Polish Academy of Sciences), Erblin Berisha (Assistant Professor at the Interuniversity Department of Regional and Urban Studies and Planning of Politecnico di Torino, Italy), Kai Böhme (Founder and Director of Spatial Foresight), Nataša Čolić Marković (Urban planner and Research Associate at the Institute of Architecture and Urban and Spatial Planning of Serbia), Marcin Dąbrowski (Department of Urbanism, Delft University of Technology, the Netherlands), Gavin Daly (Research and Policy Manager at the ESPON EGTC), Bożena Degórska (Professor at the Department of Spatial Organization, Institute of Geography and Spatial Organization, Polish Academy of Sciences), Ana María Fernández-Maldonado (Guest Researcher and former Senior Researcher at the Spatial Planning and Strategy section of the Department of Urbanism of the Faculty of Architecture at Delft University of Technology, the Netherlands), Umberto Janin Rivolin (Professor of Spatial Planning at the Politecnico di Torino, Italy), Tomasz Komornicki (Professor and Head of the Department of Spatial Organization, Institute of Geography and Spatial Organization, Polish Academy of Sciences, and Professor at the Faculty of Earth Sciences and Spatial Management, Maria Curie-Skłodowska University in Lublin, Poland), Katarzyna Krasnodębska (PhD Student at the Institute of Geography and Spatial Organization, Polish Academy of Sciences), Christian Lür (Policy Adviser for regional policies at the Federal Ministry of Finance in Germany), Zorica Nedović-Budić (Professor Emerita of the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, USA, and Visiting Full Professor at University College Dublin, Ireland), Kasia Piskorek (Assistant Professor of Spatial Planning and Communication

at the Faculty of Architecture, Wrocław University of Science and Technology, Poland), Przemysław Śleszyński (Institute of Geography and Spatial Organization, Polish Academy of Sciences), Lukas Smas (Associate Professor in Human Geography with a focus on urban and regional planning at Stockholm University, Sweden), Barbara Szejgiec-Kolenda (Institute of Geography and Spatial Organization at the Polish Academy of Sciences), and Wil Zonneveld (Emeritus Professor of Urban and Regional Planning, Department of Urbanism, Faculty of Architecture and the Built Environment, TU Delft, The Netherlands). In a nutshell, the backgrounds of authors cover the European diversity from North to South and West to East, but also the diversity of planning backgrounds, from practice to academia and research.

The book is the result of ESPON COMPASS research project (2016-2018) on Territorial Governance and Spatial Planning Systems in Europe and Cross-Fertilisation of Cohesion Policy and Spatial Planning, which attempted to answer three research questions: (1) What changes in territorial governance and spatial planning systems and policies can be observed across Europe over the past 15 years? Can these changes be attributed to the influence of macro-level EU directives and policies? (2) What are best-practices for cross-fertilisation of spatial and territorial development policies with EU Cohesion Policy?, and (3) How can national/regional spatial and territorial development policy perspectives be better reflected in Cohesion Policy and other policies at the EU scale? (ESPON EGTC, 2024). As Gavin Daly points out (Nadin et al., 2024, p. xvi), these questions originate in the fact that across time, especially after the 2009 Lisbon Treaty, ESPON gradually replaced its original goal, explicitly addressing 'spatial' development and planning to focusing on 'territorial' development in a broader way, reflecting the concept of 'territorial cohesion' and ultimately becoming the European Observation Network for Territorial Development and Cohesion. Nevertheless, the cohesion policy was criticized mainly for remaining "too 'spatially blind', with a need for greater cross-fertilisation with spatial policy orientated towards a more 'place-based' approach to territorial development" (Nadin et al., 2024, p. xvi).

The book is divided in three parts. The first one, *The rationale behind comparative planning research*, addresses the core concepts related to spatial planning systems (Chapter 1) and the approaches used to compare them across Europe (Chapter 2). The book addresses the very essence of planning; pages 4–6 attempt to establish a common understanding of the 'spatial planning' concept, which is at the core of the planning systems. Planning systems are, after all, structured based on the way policy makers understand the planning process and its role, and relate it to other concepts related to development, such as sustainable development or governance, also discussed in the chapter. Thus, apart from the main importance for practitioners, the book is important for academics too. In a typology of comparative studies including those designed to provide information on spatial planning systems according to a common framework without offering any meaningful comparison other than making a 'juxtaposition of data', those gathering information on national planning systems to provide information for one country sponsoring the research, and those aimed at cross-national comparisons concerned with theoretical development, the book reflects the fourth type, including cross-national studies encouraged by issues arising from Europeanization.

The second part, *Spatial planning systems in Europe: key components and change*, deals with the results of comparing spatial planning systems across Europe, by looking at the meaning of spatial planning in the law of European countries (Chapter 3), the multi-level nature of spatial planning and territorial governance (Chapter 4), the diversity of spatial planning instruments across Europe (Chapter 5), and the relation between spatial planning and sectoral policy fields in Europe (Chapter 6). An important topic relates to the understanding of plans as binding or not (Chapters 1 and 3), in

relationship to the different legal systems of European countries; this issue results into classifying planning systems, but also legal systems (Chapter 3). Another important criterion differentiating between the planning systems of European countries is the territorial organization of respective countries (Chapter 4). The results illustrate ‘how spatial planning is a clear case of multi-scalar or multi-level governance’ (Nadin et al., 2024, p. 102). However, the scale issue is better understood in connection to different planning instruments appropriate for each territorial or policy level (Chapter 5). In this case the authors find out that, despite differences, planning systems are organized in a top-down manner, with lower level plans subordinated to higher level ones, and there is a consistent trend towards more strategic planning and multi-purpose instruments (Nadin et al., 2024, p. 122). With respect to the coordination of spatial planning and other sectoral policies, differences are found between the national and sub-national levels, without identifying a clear pattern (Chapter 6). The final chapter in this section, *Reform of European spatial planning systems: integration, adaptation and participation*, links the section to the next and final one, *The Europeanisation of territorial governance: dynamics and trajectories*. This chapter explains particularly how ‘concerns about the costs of non-coordination in European institutions and some national governments are reflected in planning reforms’ (Nadin et al., 2024, p. 150), especially the state of cross-fertilization in Europe.

The final section discusses European territorial governance from a theoretical perspective, based on its influence on spatial planning systems (Chapter 8) and from the practical perspective of the relationship between cohesion policy and spatial planning at the local and regional level (Chapter 9), the potential future enlargement reflected by spatial planning in the Western Balkans (Chapter 10), returning to the core by relearning policy learning when analyzing spatial planning in times of disruption (Chapter 11). In the end, the book presents the main outcome of ESPON COMPASS research projects, i.e., the classification of spatial planning in Europe (Chapter 12). The European influence is found on the structure of planning systems and on planning instruments and discourses (Chapter 8). From a practical perspective (Chapter 9), ‘cohesion policy has had a positive influence on most of the thematic issues that are related to the Territorial Agenda 2020’ (Nadin et al., 2024, p. 211). Also, the Western Balkan countries (Chapter 10) ‘have advanced in innovating their territorial governance and spatial planning systems’ by introducing new and more coherent governance mechanisms and spatial planning tools better suited to ensure territorial development and the implementation of plans, and the perspective of EU accession can be used by each country to further adapt their national planning systems towards multi-level governance and enhancing public participation using the EU pre-accession and cohesion policy funds to continue implementing the required reforms (Nadin et al., 2024, p. 239). The COVID-19 pandemic produced a disruption, challenging the established inter-play between policy learning and policy change in European spatial planning. The authors conclude that policy learning on European spatial planning can be an important lever to strengthen spatial planning, but only if policy learning becomes more dynamic and overcomes its slow pace and high transaction costs, and the communities and networks of European spatial planning policies open up and become more inclusive (Nadin et al., 2024, pp. 260–261). Putting all the pieces of the puzzle together, Chapter 12 stresses out the role of institutional conditions, general character of planning instruments, and expert perceptions of the general characteristics of practice in classifying the European planning systems, showing that the complex varied combinations of elements in each system makes generalization difficult. This is why the approach to classification using the ESPON COMPASS data looks at the ‘degree and direction of change in spatial planning systems over time, in terms of their level of sectoral integration, adaptiveness and citizen engagement’, more exactly at how much

‘governments are reforming planning to engage with the spatial planning approach and broaden the scope of planning’ (Nadin et al., 2024, p. 283). The approach focuses on two key features, i.e. ‘the emphasis on coordinating the spatial impacts of sectoral policies, and adaptiveness in the system that allows for responses to changing conditions’ (Nadin et al., 2024, p. 283). The main finding is that spatial planning systems changed a lot during 2000-2016. ‘The conclusion from this classification is that there is an overriding tendency for countries to reform planning to enable more integration with sectoral policy and more adaptiveness, an indication of movement towards a spatial planning approach.’ (Nadin et al., 2024, p. 285).

In a nutshell, the book does a great job in showing that the planning systems of European countries can be compared, and providing scholastically the bases for a realistic classification, which also has the advantage of presenting a dynamic picture, offering the possibility to forecast changes even under uncertainty conditions. As a result, *Spatial Planning Systems in Europe. Comparison and Trajectories* makes an important addition to the field from a theoretical perspective, but especially for practitioners, who are most likely the main potential audience. The results can serve as a lesson for countries that, although physically situated in Europe, are not part of the European Union, showing the advantages (but also the challenges) of changing their planning system; Chapter 10 is especially useful in this regard.

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