



## EDITORIAL: CURRENT CHALLENGES FOR SPATIAL PLANNING IN EU COUNTRY SYSTEMS

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**Abstract.** This article presents the key issues taken up in two volumes of the *Europa XXI* journal (nos. 46 and 47) devoted to *Current challenges for spatial planning in EU country systems*. It proves possible to distinguish between key directions to the research taken up in this context – in relation to spatial planning at the regional and local levels, the conditioning of spatial plans relating to transport, and the incorporation of values into systems of spatial planning. Very strong emphasis is here placed on ways of comparing the solutions and practices applied in what are disparate national systems. If there is no more precise defining of the instruments of spatial planning available at regional level in the states under study, it will be much more difficult to pursue objectives formulated at the EU level (in relation to Member States), as well as to integrate spatial planning with other sectoral policies. A need to continue with research is also noted, especially where that entails attempts to achieve a universal conceptualisation of barriers and challenges put before systems of spatial planning.

**Keywords:** spatial planning, spatial plan, urban planning, regional planning.

The comparison of systems of spatial planning in European states may represent the subject of diverse analyses (Nadin et al., 2018). The scientific debate over that poses ever-deeper questions as to the justification for – and means of – comparison between different solutions applied domestically in given countries (Reimer et al., 2014; Alterman & Pellach, 2022; Zimmermann et al., 2023; Nowak et al., 2024b). Thus, there are different ways of comparing between a larger number of countries (Silva & Acheampong, 2015; OECD, 2017), as opposed to the situation where just 2-3 are being considered (Muñoz Gielen & Tasan-Kok, 2010; Steele & Ruming, 2012; Blaszkę & Nowak, 2023). At the same time, what needs emphasising is the way in which the discussion of topics slated for consideration needs to be pursued regularly, updating in the face of all the changes brought in (Galland & Enemark, 2013; Nowak et al., 2024a). By developing comparative methods optimal in the face of particular needs, we are granted the opportunity to supply more in-depth responses to current trends and challenges in spatial planning, with the latter perceived from the point of view of Europe as a whole, or at least an identified part thereof (Cappelli et al., 2021). The situation also looks the same when it comes to multi-stranded academic discussion over the challenges faced by spatial planning across Europe (Faludi, 2020; Schmitt & Weck, 2023). That discussion is also well-developed in its reference to different scales and levels of spatial planning, and diversified issues and challenges. It is worth stressing the way space in European states is subject to much ongoing change, even as certain challenges intensify steadily (Fidelis & Roebeling, 2014; Nowak et al., 2022, 2024c). In this connection, there is indeed a need for the steady updating

of results, and compilations of results arising out of given studies. Analyses ought to address institutional matters on the one hand, but also – crucially – findings from areas with differing conditions and circumstances (Purkarthofer et al., 2021; Papadopoulou & Giaoutzi, 2024).

The two volumes of *Europa XXI* journal are not seeking to draw up any further universal methodological proposal for European states by which the systems of spatial planning can be compared. For that objective is being pursued in other publications, be those related to the EU Member States in general, or else selected European countries (Galland & Enemark, 2013; Granqvist et al., 2021) – not least the CEECs (Tosics et al., 2010; Auzins et al., 2022, Nowak et al., 2023, Altröck et al., 2017). Rather, these volumes have to offer more-detailed, subject-targeted and diversified conceptualisations that are nevertheless key to any comparison of Europe's spatial-planning issues. We encompass here both analysis of the roles that selected tiers of planning play (most especially regionally and locally) and a process that signals issues of a far broader nature. To be distinguished most particularly among these are:

- the need for legal formulae to be matched to spatial-planning objective and values (especially important at the regional level);
- the devising of responses to currently-existing (climatic, demographic, social and transport-related) challenges where spatial planning is concerned.

Both of the trends for analysis pointed to here have a priority role to play. They should also be adapted in line with the discussion surrounding space that has been ongoing from a European Union point of view. However, we must stress that any discussion of spatial issues taking place above the level of the state is at risk of over-simplification, albeit more seriously with some aspects than others. The cases presented in these volumes incline us to the view that pretty much each state has its specifics of spatial planning, such that only where full account is taken of these does it become possible to define spatial goals in a more concrete way.

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The first publications needing to be stressed here are those dealing with spatial planning at regional level. Zimmermann and Feiertag (2024) came out with a comparison of features of regional planning in Germany and France, with the role played by planning at this level noted, even as it is made clear that the opportunities available are not taken advantage of over large parts of the states studied. The French and German situations exemplify possible trends where institutional solutions are concerned – and in regard to both rules laid down, and the degree of flexibility pertaining in relations between the regional and local levels. An equally important review of the regional tier to planning is contained within the Casavola (2024) article devoted to institutional differentiation in the Italian regions, as well as in Gruber et al. (2024) – which deals with multi-functional management in Austrian regional planning.

And, when all of these states are compared, we may have little choice but to conclude that there are actually serious differences as regards regional-level spatial planning in different parts of Western Europe. What they have in common at that level, however, is the seeking of some holistic conceptualisation of the spatial challenges present, which is either impossible or inadequate from a local perspective. Our articles focusing on the local level – i.e. Čok et al. (2024) and Lukstina et al. (2024) – in turn deal with challenges encapsulated in greater detail. There can be no doubt that one such challenge – which most European states have to deal with (if to varying degrees) is suburbanisation.

So spatial planning is not merely an attempt to respond to core challenges, since the discussion around the institutional aspects must also pay attention to the need for a reconciling of the roles and powers present on different levels. There is no doubt that it is domestic regulations which must offer the core bases here, but these must first have an eye on the historical and cultural specifics of each state, as well as working to set out key (resultant) values in a skilful way. The dilemma linked with the first issue is exemplified in the specific features of the CEECs that [Maier and Rezac \(2024\)](#) are able to present. And in an article from authors from other states of that same region (i.e. [Nowak et al., 2024d](#)) we see presented the key values encompassed in domestic regulations, including those linked with both similarities and differences. Analyses relate to the emerging 'right to the city' concept ([Nowak & Rocco, 2024](#)), as well as selected responses to the challenges posed by climate change ([Geissler et al., 2024](#)). These both encourage a conclusion that identified values must be set more widely within and among defined concepts and theories associated with spatial planning. [Petrtýlová and Jaško \(2024\)](#) take up another aspect of comparisons of disparate systems, concerning disparate urban waterfronts. This comparison is particularly relevant from a climate challenge perspective.

In turn, the articles prepared by [Rosik et al. \(2024\)](#), and [Kezai \(2024\)](#) point to a broader dimension of comparisons between systems of spatial planning. Transport policy also links up significantly with planning objectives, even as it emerges how this can be very much determined by domestic conditioning. The specific features of conditioning domestically in this context, as well as the limitations on possible comparison remind us of the specific features and limitations present as we try to compare institutional aspects of the systems referred to.

The review of two monographs ([Cotella, 2024](#); [Petrişor, 2024](#)) deserves separate mention. These monographs attempt to make broader comparisons of national spatial planning systems. In this way, both books refer in depth to other ongoing research on the subject.

The reader of the work referred to gains access to a broad and diversified context when it comes to the conditioning of European states' systems of spatial planning. At the same time, the material brought together here allows for the formulation of the following more-general conclusions and recommendations where further research is concerned:

- one of the key elements of the system of spatial planning is the regional level, given that the scope determined there, the true driving force that can be achieved, and the legal conditioning, are all among factors deciding the effectiveness of the planning system as a whole. It is thanks to the regional tier that it is possible to achieve goals and challenges noted beyond the local sphere in a more effective manner. The regional level should supply the local level with the expert knowledge it needs. Where that conditioning is not acted upon, there can only be more-limited changes to achieve the goals of spatial planning set out nationally or even supra-nationally (at the EU level, for example). The integration of development policy remains a key component element here;
- from the point of view of each analysed system of spatial planning it is possible to define key problems and limitations. An important direction in need of consideration would be more-universal discussion of what the barriers to – and problems of – spatial planning might be, where the Europe-wide scale is concerned. A certain universalisation of these problems (even to the extent of their departing from the set of instruments available) may help us to set particular case studies within wider comparative frameworks;
- a challenge that is as important at least is to ensure that discussions on national systems of spatial planning take account of sectoral themes and prospects. Over time, spatial planning has come to embrace an ever-larger number of objectives and challenges. A great part of these are set

within the context of other public policies. It would thus seem necessary for the perspectives in question to be integrated; but for that to be possible there needs to be discussion (also on a comparative scale) of link-ups with the spatial planning of sectoral policies. In this context also, it is necessary for particular importance to be attached to the instruments of spatial planning existing at regional level, as well as to the introduction of values into planning's regulatory sphere.

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