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AESOP Section

Transboundary Spaces, Policy Diffusion and Planning Cultures – A New Thematic Group for AESOP

Giancarlo Cotella and Stefanie Dühr

Introduction

The Association of European Schools of Planning (AESOP) (<http://www.aesop-planning.eu/>) has regularly hosted tracks focusing on European territorial cohesion, and transnational and cross-border planning within the context of its annual congresses, coordinated for many years by Andreas Faludi, and more recently by Stefanie Dühr, Jochem de Vries and Wil Zonneveld. Since the AESOP congress in Grenoble in 2003, discussions have been held by academics working on these topics about the possibility of establishing a thematic group.

In general, AESOP thematic groups are working groups focusing on specific themes, established in order to create more effective platforms for debate and discussion amongst AESOP members and beyond. Due to their very nature, the activity of each thematic group (as many as fourteen of them exist at the time of writing) depends greatly on the commitment of its members to interact and cooperate in joint initiatives within the scope of the group. Following on from earlier discussions, including a dormant group on *Transnational and Cross-border Planning*, and reflecting new developments in the field, a new AESOP thematic group on *Transboundary Spaces, Policy Diffusion and Planning Cultures* (http://www.aesop-planning.eu/blogs/en_GB/transnational-and-cross-border-planning) was launched during the 2015 AESOP annual congress in Prague. This thematic group is coordinated by the authors of the present contribution, with the active support of a growing number of scholars from universities around Europe with an interest in the themes. The group is gathering considerable momentum, providing opportunities for exchange during AESOP annual congresses through paper sessions on relevant topics, and has recently organized its first autonomous event.

This short contribution aims at presenting the new thematic group on *Transboundary Spaces, Policy Diffusion and Planning Cultures* to the wider readership of *disP – The Planning Review*. Firstly, it introduces and details the scope of the group, its background and aims, to then briefly sketch out the process that led to its recent revival. It then reports on information concerning the first thematic group's symposium, which took place at the University of Kaiserslautern in September 2016, and introduces the main activities that will characterize the group's life in the near future.

Scope, background and aims

The AESOP thematic group on *Transboundary Spaces, Policy Diffusion and Planning Cultures* aims at creating and growing a network of researchers interested in, broadly speaking, the Europeanization and internationalization of spatial planning, and the various forms this takes: from the creation of new, softer planning spaces and corresponding governance arrangements, to the change of policies and practices through 'travelling ideas', the institutionalization of EU territorial governance, the relevance of planning traditions and cultures in territorial cooperation, etc. As will be further detailed in the subsections below, the scope of the group is deliberately broad in order to acknowledge the diversity of spatial planning arrangements across Europe and the range of questions that arise from processes of European integration (or dis-integration) for the field of spatial planning and territorial cooperation.

Planning systems and cultures

At a certain time in history all countries have deemed it necessary to establish effective procedures to resolve conflicts between competing land uses. Normative frameworks were introduced in order to establish the principles empowering public authorities to monitor and control territorial development and prepare plans, regulations and concepts, identifying what types of development should be permitted and where they would be allocated. Spatial planning is therefore an institutionally embedded practice (Sanyal 2005; Knieling, Othengrafen 2009; Cotella, Janin Rivolin 2011; Janin Rivolin 2012). It is also a practice that is inevitably interwoven with politics, with ongoing conflicts over the allocation and use of public and private resources, with these politics being institutionally embedded as well. It follows that the activity of spatial planning is understood and practiced differently in different institutional settings that vary significantly across countries and even cities (Friedmann 2005).

Moreover, within any given setting, planning must continuously adapt as circumstances change. Politics, institutions, economies, technologies, and social values are indeed all subject to continuous change (Cotella, Janin Rivolin 2015). The diversity of planning systems and cultures in Europe is therefore the result of the specific histories and geographies of places, and the way these interact with institutional structures, cultures, and economic opportunities (Healey, Williams 1993; Knieling, Othengrafen 2009). For this reason, any universal planning discourse must proceed by way of an ac-

knowledge of differences in planning institutions and practices at the various territorial levels. Acknowledging the plurality of planning cultures is not only a question of discourse; it is a very practical matter that holds implications for finding effective solutions to concrete problems, as well as for shaping planning education curricula (Friedmann 2005; Dühr et al. 2016).

Europeanization, territorial cooperation, and policy diffusion

In the European context, the above issues gain a further level of complexity due to the integration process that progressively led to the consolidation of the European Union (EU), a hybrid institutional context that combines 'intergovernmental' and 'supranational' features (Nugent 2010) and is characterized by the dispersion of decision-making powers among various administrative levels, as it is described through the concept of 'multi-level governance' (Hooghe, Marks 2001). The widening and deepening of the European Union, notably during the 1980s and 1990s, has presented numerous challenges as well as opportunities for spatial planners (Dühr et al. 2010; Faludi 2010). Successive enlargements have changed the context within which planning occurs and how regions position themselves in infrastructure debates and in relation to urban networks (Pallagst 2006). Open internal borders, and EU-funding for territorial cooperation, have presented planners with opportunities to address shared concerns and learn from experiences. Successive EU Treaties have broadened the scope of the EU's involvement in many spheres and raised attention for the need to better coordinate sectorally-conceived EU policies with spatial impacts. These processes, frequently described as Europeanization, have been the focus of academic research and debate over the past years (see e.g. Dühr et al. 2007; Böhme, Waterhout 2008; Stead, Cotella 2011; Cotella, Janin Riolin 2015), and recent concerns over the future of the EU project will present a number of new research questions.

The growing consolidation of the EU's involvement in territorial governance contributed to a multiplication of European territorial cooperation initiatives. They are identified by multi-actor constellations, focusing on flexible, transboundary spaces that stretch across political and administrative boundaries, and are often challenged by the 'boundedness' of how spatial planning is conceived and organized. Territorial cooperation initiatives function as laboratories where planning cultures meet, as platforms of interactions through the various actors involved continuously exchange knowledge and ideas in order to jointly develop planning solutions for the development of their territory (Dühr et al. 2007, 2010; Adams et al. 2011). In this light, the idea that the diffusion of good practices can lead to policy improvement has become an accepted wisdom within national as well as international arenas and networks (Cotella et al. 2016).

The revival of the AESOP TG

The coordination of the TG was assumed by the authors in July 2014, during the AESOP annual congress in Utrecht. Together with Jochem De Vries (University of Amsterdam), the coordinators of the current thematic group started to develop a strategy to revive the group and fill it with life. This strategy included various issues, among which the central issue was to shift the main title and focus of the group towards a set of themes that were more 'central' to contemporary planning debate and acknowledged the issues presented in more detail in the section above.

Following this initial discussion, the thematic group's website was renewed (Figure 1) and aligned to the new focus. Similarly, a preliminary list of potentially interested academics active in several European universities and research institutions was composed. They were contacted and asked to spread the information concerning the revived thematic group to other potentially interested colleagues. Through this process, the group regained prominence within the scientific community, with many scholars explicitly expressing their interest in its focus and activities. The interested parties were included in a database which is used as a basis for the group's communication and, at the time of writing, accounts for over 150 members from as many as 26 different European countries.



Fig. 1: New layout of the AESOP Thematic Group *Transboundary Spaces, Policy Diffusion and Planning Cultures* website. (Source: www.aesop-planning.eu/blogs/en_GB/transnational-and-cross-border-planning)

At the AESOP annual congress, held in Prague in July 2015, the group was officially launched. The launch session was widely advertised through the mailing list as well as through the main AESOP communication channels and it was well attended, with approximately 50 participants of many different nationalities. The coordinators presented the objectives of the group and the proposed means of communication, and invited the participants to discuss ideas for future activities. A lively discussion ensued with many suggestions made by new group members on how to bring the network to life, notably in relation to future workshops and sessions, but also as regards potential 'target groups' and the

professional and institutional ‘users’ of the research and knowledge created by the group.

Moreover, a dedicated track (Track 11 on “Planning across borders”) of the Prague annual congress, coordinated by Stefanie Dühr, Jochem de Vries and Wil Zonneveld, was organized in close connection with the thematic group’s focus. This built on a track held at the 2014 congress in Utrecht, coordinated by Jochem de Vries and Stefanie Dühr. Most of the participants in these paper sessions were (or became) members of the group, thus ensuring a first platform of knowledge exchange where they could share and discuss their research findings.

Among the main outcomes of the Prague thematic group meeting, one of the suggestions for future events was put forward by Karina Pallagst (University of Kaiserslautern), who offered to investigate whether a first autonomous scientific meeting of the group could be organized by her university in 2016, when the AESOP meetings were subsumed into the World Planning School Congress in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. This possibility of a European meeting was confirmed after the annual congress and organized in the form of the 1st Symposium of the AESOP thematic group *Transboundary Spaces, Policy Diffusion and Planning Cultures*, which will be discussed further in the following section.

The 1st Symposium of the AESOP thematic group Transboundary Spaces, Policy Diffusion and Planning Cultures

The 1st Symposium of the AESOP thematic group on *Transboundary Spaces, Policy Diffusion and Planning Cultures* was jointly organized by the thematic group coordinators and the International Planning Systems Department of the University of Kaiserslautern (<https://www.ru.uni-kl.de/en/ips/intplanungssysteme>) (Figure 2).

Being the first autonomous activity organized by the relatively young thematic group, the symposium had a twofold objective. First, it was meant as a platform for substantive and intellectual exchanges on topics of interest to the group; and second, to have a discussion within the group on the future agenda for cooperation and future activities.

The symposium attracted a number of both senior and junior academics from across Europe, with paper presentations and discussions organized in three thematic sessions:

1. A session focusing on *Transboundary spaces and territorial cohesion* invited the participants to discuss the multi-actor and multi-level nature of policies aiming at promoting territorial cohesion, focusing in particular on the role and features of spaces of governance.
2. A session dealing with *Planning systems and planning cultures* welcomed contributions reflecting upon the heterogeneity of planning systems, cultures, and practices in Europe, providing theoretical and empirical considerations on the matter.
3. A session on *Policy diffusion and the Europeanization of spatial planning* collected theoretical and empirical observations concerning the Europeanization of spatial planning as well as policy transfer and diffusion as a means for fostering good territorial governance in Europe.

In addition to the thematic sessions, the symposium’s participants were encouraged to debate the broader issues of interest to the thematic group in more open formats such as the ‘fishbowl method’ as well as during the discussion following the keynote speech made by Professor Andreas Faludi (Figure 3).

Overall, the event was widely considered a success by participants and organizers. It also gained the attention of the German media, which reported on some of its activities in a local television report. Around forty guests from almost twenty EU countries actively participated in the event, allowing for the discussion of a large number of questions that present many current and future challenges for the planning profession. How will the development of the European space be promoted in the coming years? How can the heterogeneity of planning systems and cultures in Europe be turned into a strength in this process? How can practices that work in one context be transferred somewhere else without losing their effectiveness? As the host, Professor Karina Pallagst, highlighted in her conclusive intervention: “We can learn much more from each other in Europe”. To do so, mostly depends on our will to talk to each other!

The way ahead

On the second day of the symposium, the participants had the chance to meet again and discuss future steps in a brainstorming session. The session was very lively, and all the participants expressed their views on what the agenda for the group should look like in the close future.

First and foremost, everyone agreed on the importance of linking the group’s activities with the AESOP annual congress, identifying a congress track that should work as the ‘natural home’ of the group’s members year after year. This point was already brought up in the meeting of AESOP country representatives during the Prague conference and it was agreed with the AESOP Secretary General and the President that it should be possible to guar-

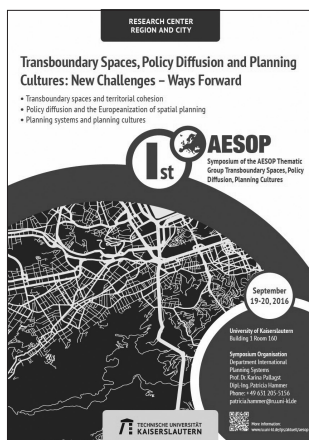


Fig. 2: Symposium poster. (Source: 1st Symposium of the AESOP Thematic Group *Transboundary Spaces, Policy Diffusion and Planning Cultures* materials)

Fig. 3: Symposium participants discussing future activities of the AESOP thematic group. (Photo: Giancarlo Cotella)



antee tracks connected to AESOP thematic groups at future congresses. For the 2017 AESOP annual congress in Lisbon, the connection with the interests of the AESOP thematic group on *Transboundary Spaces, Policy Diffusion and Planning Cultures* is ensured in a track on *Territorial cohesion: a multi-scale approach* (<http://aesop2017.pt/index.php/programme/themes-tracks>). Moreover, the organizers presented the possibility of publishing the symposium papers in an edited book or special issue, and steps are currently being taken to find a suitable publisher. Finally, the participants also discussed options for future thematic meetings – or workshops dedicated to particular topics – as an interesting opportunity and this will be looked into further in the following months.

To sum up, the activities of the AESOP thematic group on *Transboundary Spaces, Policy Diffusion and Planning Cultures* focus on exchanges on research and studies concerning spatial planning in a European or international context, including cooperative approaches to spatial planning and a rescaling of planning functions to ‘unusual regions’ or supranational spaces. Differences in planning cultures and how they influence such collaborative planning approaches are of interest in this context, as are discussions about planning instruments, policies, and practices in such soft planning spaces. International and European research on how planning ideas travel and how policy diffusion takes place (and who the agents of change are in these processes) is another key area of interest for this group, as are discussions on theoretical and methodological aspects of conducting meaningful cross-national comparative research in the field of spatial planning. In this light, we would like to invite anyone interested in the group to contact the authors of the present contribution and join its activities!

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