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Karel Maier, Prof. ing. arch., PhD, is Professor of Urban and Regional Planning and Head of the Institute of Spatial Planning in the Faculty of Architecture at the Czech Technical University in Prague, Czech Republic. He is a member of the Czech Chamber of Architects, member of the German Academy for Spatial Research and Planning (ARL) and Czech national representative to the Association of European Schools of Planning (AESOP).

1. Present Status of Planning

The Planning and Building Act (2006) defines spatial territorial planning, which deals with the physical aspects of development. Legally, territorial planning is quite a strong tool of land and development control, with binding instruments on the national, regional, municipal and neighborhood levels. National and regional governments are obliged to procure statutory planning documents. For municipalities or communities it is not required that they procure any local and detailed (regulation) plans, but they need to have the local plans for any expansion of developable land as well as to apply for assistance from state or EU funds to their development projects.

Apart from territorial planning, strategic planning makes plans for cities, towns and regions, parallel to the territorial plans, dealing mostly with economic and social change. Unlike territorial planning, which is framed and regulated in detail by law, no legal definition for strategic planning exists.

For environmental aspects, e.g. nature, soil, forest, minerals, air, noise protection, etc., as well as for the concerns of monument preservation, water management and infrastructures, territorial planning has legal partners in state agencies that are responsible for these particular issues of public interest. No plan can be approved without a prior consent of these partners.

In the last two decades, the issue of planning has shifted from being an entirely expert activity towards being an issue of politics. Planning and development has become an important item on political agendas, especially on the local level of cities and towns. However, the profession of planning has maintained its “value-free” expert position, being in service to governments as clients. This is why many people accuse planners of serving the power and, consequently, the money behind, without respect for the interests of local people. As such, plans and development projects are often a matter of controversy between town halls, which are supposedly favoring developers and strong investors, and civic groups.

2. Dominant Themes and Media Coverage

Environmental pollution was one of the triggers for citizen protests that contributed to the political break-up in 1989. Later environmental issues lost their priority in favor of the economy, which has prevailed in the discourse and in the decision-making related to spatial planning and management. The EU standards pushed environmental concerns back onto the planning agenda during the accession period in terms of legal acts and procedures, but it has only been more recently that environmental issues are returning to the public scene, at this time with a broader scope, spanning from habitat protec-

tion to the quality of the living environment, public spaces and the landscape.

Suburban sprawl in the formerly rural belts around major cities is a current matter of critical debate, both among professionals and in the general public. In addition, the recent market-driven transformation of city centers into office, and sometimes tourist, ghettos is a subject of criticism, with diminishing services for local residents vis-à-vis the mushrooming suburban shopping and amusement facilities. Criticism from the public, voiced by civic groups, targets many development projects that start with purpose-built changes to planning regulations in favor of the project. People complain that these development projects are on the account of environmental and living quality.

Internet is a most effective medium for organizing public initiatives who protest against controversial planning decisions of municipalities and planning offices, while newspapers and TV tend to report on certain selected cases, mostly those connected with alleged corruption.

3. Theory vs. Practice

A theoretical debate on planning as well as theory in planning is weak. Planning is often considered to be rather a technique and a set of practical skills, rather than a conceptual effort based on science and harnessed with its own theories.

Planners recruit professionally from various academic backgrounds. Practicing plan-makers have mostly an architecture background and many of them consider planning as an extension of architecture. Planning administrators are usually graduates from schools of civil engineering, natural sciences or economics and their professional expertise in planning develops in practice as more practice-oriented skills.

An inherent doctrine of planning shared by planners is missing. Formally, the mission of Czech territorial planning is defined by the law, which requires that planning should aim at a sustainable development of territory and, at the same time, should support construction. Planners who elaborate spatial plans are obliged by the Czech Chamber of Architects to follow its professional Code of Ethics. In practice, planners without a shared professional set of values, mix the concepts and ideas imported from the EU and adjust them to the local interests represented by their clients.

The knowledge of English is common among the generation graduating from Czech schools of higher education in the last decade, but most practicing planners prefer Czech professional texts, which are for them easier to access and easier to read. There is an effort to translate some cornerstones of international planning literature to Czech.

There is no sound platform of independent professional planning journals in Czech, which would

be acknowledged internationally and useful for scientific evaluation. This forces Czech spatial planning researchers to publish in international publications in English. However, the prevailing debate in international professional journals usually does not deal with specific problems of East-Central European planning, which makes them of little use for the Czech planning profession.

4. Addressing and Reducing Disparities

Territorial disparities, as the side effects of transformation and privatization, loomed large after the state retired from overall control of the entire economy through sector and regional planning in 1990. The inter-regional gaps emerged in the 1990s between the prosperity of the Prague metropolitan region and the rest of the country, as well as structural problems of the previously heavy industry-based regions of North-West Bohemia and Moravia-Silesia. Since then they have stabilized, but not diminished. The issue of social and economic disparities and their spatial impact is addressed rather by regional policy, which is outside the domain of territorial planning.

Nevertheless, the national Policy of Territorial Development as the top directive for territorial planning sets the priority to “prevent spatial-social segregation when changing or creating an urban environment that could adversely impact the social cohesion of inhabitants. Analyze principal mechanisms that drive segregation, assess existing and potential consequences, and propose, during planning activities, solutions that prevent an undesired level of segregation or decrease its level.” The practical implementation of this priority is not very pronounced; mostly it is understood that plans should make development sites for investments in industry available in deprived regions. Very little has been accomplished in territorial planning to prevent residential segregation in new developments. Practicing planners usually do not believe that socio-spatial issues can be effectively addressed by territorial planning.

5. Future Challenges and Education

There is no independent master’s degree program in planning at Czech universities and, consequently, there are no specialized planning students and graduates. This contributes to the above-mentioned diverse professional background of planners and, together with the fragmented practice of territorial and strategic planning and regional policy management, it weakens the identity of the planning profession.

Graduates from the schools of architecture, who prevail among plan-making experts, have good professional training in urban design, civil engineering and visual presentation, but their professional preparation in social sciences is unsatisfactory. Also schools of geography, economics and environmental sciences offer courses of planning, but these are not central in their curricula, which is more ana-

lytically oriented and, in the case of schools of economics and environmental science, often without a spatial or territorial viewpoint. Thus, the problem of Czech spatial planning education and its capability to address the challenges of future revolves around poor definition of the study of planning and a resulting weak identity of the profession.

6. Role of the European Union

The planning systems in particular EU Member States show a large diversity, which apparently will not allow their unification. Consequently, attempts to regulate spatial planning by the EU will have to respect the existing diversity and focus more on the common core, the shared professional mission of spatial planning expressed in ethical codes of the profession, and European issues of territorial cohesion, than on some formal top-down requirements and criteria for e.g. planning systems, the planning profession and planning education.

The Czech experience from the EU accession period as well as from the EU planning period 2007 to 2013 showed that a top-down conforming pressure from the EU, usually by means of requirements for EU funding, may lead to rather formal adjustments in terms of superficial arrangements that would not affect the actual processes as the essence of planning. Apparently, a certain convergence of European planning towards a joint European planning and urban policy should be considered as a gradual, long-term process based on and initiated with changes in education and governance, leading to a convergence of planning and governance cultures.