

## BOOK REVIEW SECTION

Nowak, M.J. et al.: **Spatial Planning Systems in Central and Eastern European Countries. Review and Comparison of Selected Issues.** Cham, Springer, 2023. 112 p.

Central and Eastern Europe is a region where, over the last few decades, the understanding of planning, its approaches and principles, and the main planning concepts and institutional regulation have changed as much as the socio-political and spatial context of the region itself. Therefore, it has gone through a difficult path from the unwanted and contradictory legacy of socialism and planning as an ideological construct that is aimed at solving ideological issues and implementing economic plans, to planning as a policy and practice that is designed to interact with emerging challenges – restructurings and inequalities, new regulation, and new spatial development policy. Hence, the study of spatial planning systems enables to address the planning systems and planning cultures across the countries of Central and

Eastern Europe and to unpack their evolution under transition and socio-political landscape changes, to illustrate approaches to planning and organization of planning process, and to exemplify certain planning instruments and practices.

The recently published book is the result of a collaboration of 14 authors from different countries of the region, which offers insight into the context and practice of planning in Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, and Slovakia by examining how planning systems are functioning at the local level and thereby establishing a framework for comparing spatial planning systems within the region through a detailed and careful analysis of the planning process in different countries.

The authors of the monograph explore the relations between planning concepts, approaches to spatial planning, and regulations in different national contexts, and they are trying, in particular, to reflect how planning concepts are translated into regulations. For this reason, the analysis of the institutional environment and its historical background is supplemented by case studies of the detailed spatial planning arrangements. Describing specific spatial planning instruments and illustrating their use in relation to the spatial objectives, the authors of the monograph contribute in this way to the discussion on planning instruments, their effectiveness, and the implementation of sectoral policies. By providing a clearly structured analysis of the characteristics of the planning process at the local level and examining specific instruments and solutions in detail, this study ensures a comparative perspective and shows how planning systems are organized in the countries across the region and which concepts and instruments they rely on. Therefore, it offers new insights into discourses on declared concepts and the practices of implementing them.

The book starts with a brief discussion on the meaning and approaches of spatial planning. Such a discussion, which is a kind of reflection on the content and role of planning, is of crucial importance in the region, where such significant changes in the notion of planning and its agenda have taken place in recent decades relations between society, politics, and space. First, a shift from a highly centralized and hierarchized planning in the socialist period to weak planning took place during the transition of the 1990s and early 2000s, which was accompanied by the so-called “legitimacy crisis” of planning (NEDOVIĆ-BUĐIĆ, Z.



2001). Such a situation, along with spatial development challenges, created the need for “re-establishing” planning as a societal function across the region (HIRT, S. and STANILOV, K. 2009), which was followed by the search for new concepts in planning and development policy, the adaptation and implementation of these concepts, the “reinventing” (TSENKOVA, S. 2007) and strengthening certain types of planning, particularly to manage spatial restructurings and foster collaborative decision-making.

By highlighting the approaches to spatial planning and concepts of planning in legal acts across Central and Eastern European countries, the authors show that various countries translate the objectives of spatial planning into the normative framework in different ways, and even the objectives themselves are often defined differently (p. 9). The same applies to the multidimensionality of planning and the approaches to it: as the authors argue, these vary significantly in different countries of the region (p. 4). Even more diverse are the instruments of planning, such as spatial plans and their composition and content (Chapter 1.3). In this volume, the authors focus on describing the prevailing types of instruments at the local level, which are mostly spatial plans, and their relation to other available instruments, their position in the planning system, and their relationship with development policies, which are in some cases integrated into spatial plans and serve as part of them.

The role and significance of such an analysis is well understood as a starting point for further discussions on the organization of the planning process at the local level, its regulation, and the ability to ensure the compliance of the declared goals, particularly during the land use. However, after considering how different countries are approaching the spatial plans, the authors suppose that an in-depth comparison of the planning systems should rather begin with investigating specific issues instead of specific documents (p. 13), which they treat as a response to current issues and challenges.

Based on the brief analysis of the conceptual and regulatory frameworks of spatial planning, planning tools at the local level, and the relationship between planning and development policy, the authors engage in dialogue on the classification of spatial planning systems, which is a reference point for their further comparative analysis. While emphasizing the difficulties of making comparisons, the authors at the same time underline the importance of such comparisons for various goals, particularly the Europeanization of spatial planning. As limits to such comparisons, the authors name diverse legal provisions and their interpretation, and different planning practices embedded into specific planning cultures. These two dimensions characterizing the planning system can be correlated with what Karel MAIER called the “hardware” of formal institutions, instruments, and procedures, and the “software” of planning cultures (MAIER, K. 2012).

Finally, the authors propose a set of issues which should be considered when classifying spatial planning systems. The first criterion they propose is the degree of centralization or decentralization of the planning system. Here, it is worthwhile to mention one of the comparative analyses conducted for the countries of the region in 2009 on the first twenty years of post-communist transition, which was dedicated to revisiting urban planning in transitional countries (HIRT, S. and STANILOV, K. 2009). When analyzing the institutional and regulatory framework in so-called transitional countries, particularly its implications for planning, in a long-term perspective, Sonia HIRT and Kiril STANILOV pointed out decentralized planning as a means of consensus-building in communities as well as more dynamic power balance between the central and the local governments.

Since the development of the new balances in the once centralized and hierarchical planning systems is an essential trait for their studying across the region, the levels of planning in spatial planning systems and linkages between them are considered by the authors of the study among the key criteria for classification and comparing of planning systems. This also applies to the relevant acts, instruments, and documents. Thereby, they reflect the concept of governance, the character of the political discourse around it, and planning practices, including formal and informal practices and their balance, which result from “specific configurations of formal and informal institutions in a specific context” (VAN ASSCHE, K. *et al.* 2012) and reflect the functioning of planning systems. From this perspective, the criteria proposed by the authors – e.g., the consolidation of legislation, the development of documents, public participation, and spatial conflicts – not only characterize the planning system and process but also display how the discourse around them and planning systems themselves are transforming.

Despite a substantial number of shared features and tendencies in the restructuring of planning systems, the context of CEE countries demonstrates considerable variety in approaches to the organization of the planning process and specific instruments, in Chapter 2, the authors perform an overview of the planning systems in different CEE countries to provide a comparative understanding of different institutions, primarily focusing on the local level.

This chapter begins with a brief historical overview of planning and spatial development in the region, where among the common features of CEE countries, the authors suggest the difficulty of responding to the market pressure on the one hand and spatial challenges (like urban sprawl) on the other, which in one way or another manifest themselves in spatial conflicts. Undoubtedly, the narrative of modernization, which for long acted as an umbrella for any projects in a post-communist context, manifested it-

self in dramatic changes in the spatial structures and urban morphologies and even became a challenge for citizen empowerment, marginalizing it in favour of more technocratic governing as Anna DURNOVÁ (2021) showed. From this perspective, the analysis of planning systems and the relationship between spatial planning and spatial development policy, as well as specific instruments and their performance, may contribute to the discussion around planning system configurations and their ability to achieve the goal of more sustainable and inclusive spatial development.

The authors of the book organize an overview of the planning systems in the countries across the region as a detailed table, in which they provide diverse characteristics of the planning systems, illustrate the legal acts on spatial planning, give an overview of the relationships between acts at the local and regional levels, characterize related acts at the national level and identify specific solutions by giving examples and highlighting their results. However, the particular focus of this detailed description of the planning systems is made on the local level to explain the production of decisions and documents on spatial planning and their effect. To that end, the authors for the case of each country in the region review how public authorities at the local level participate in spatial planning and explain which acts define zones and land use parameters, indicate which acts at the local level shape the spatial development policy, and how planning acts include environmental conservation. Based on this analysis, different issues associated with spatial plans at the local level are further explained, including particular attention to the role of courts in planning acts.

Hence, the authors create a framework for comparison by critically reviewing how planning systems function in CEE countries. That enables considering specific practices to investment pressures and ensuring the expected role of spatial planning in achieving spatial development goals. During the analysis, it becomes clear that in most countries of the region, the problem of confusion and fragmentation of legal norms in spatial planning appears when various legal acts and even various sectoral regulations include specific provisions. In addition, changes to legislation in this field “occur too frequently” in most countries, further complicating the situation and making it even more confusing for interpretation when applied and complicated for the practice of planning and urban development, thereby causing regular court proceedings. Moreover, as emphasized by the authors, in the case of Romania or the Czech Republic, courts exert influence on the direction of local spatial policies (p. 59) and often shape spatial policy in practice (p. 34); therefore, the book considers the role of courts about planning as one of the criteria for comparing the planning systems.

Although the main planning instrument at the local level is the spatial plan, it is paradoxical that in

some countries, such as Bulgaria or Poland, certain municipalities did not adopt the spatial plans, which opens the door to implementing investment projects but significantly challenges sustainable land use. Similarly, the interaction between different planning levels and the implementation of spatial planning regulations is quite challenging, since provisions are sometimes “too vague” (p. 59) for planning practice. The same applies to the relations with development policy and its translation into local spatial planning, which often faces numerous barriers when implemented, i.e., the overabundance of objectives and tasks (the Czech Republic) and the scarcity of a holistic view (Estonia).

It is noteworthy that for several countries at once, particularly the Czech Republic, Poland, and Latvia, the authors highlight the underrepresentation of the public interest in spatial planning and the “need for an in-depth dialogue” (p. 44). We should underline that the authors focus here mostly not on participation as such, which implies the various forms of involvement during the development of spatial planning documents but on the need and growing demand for proper representation and consideration of public interest. The constant coordination of efforts, which goes beyond the scope of statutory requirements on public participation in spatial planning, can significantly change approaches and decisions on spatial development, which the authors illustrate by giving the example of one of the towns in Bulgaria.

By providing a detailed overview of the planning systems in each of the countries, the authors have provided a framework for both comparing and discussing planning practices, planning instruments, and configurations of the planning systems across the region, as well as their relations with spatial development goals and their ability to put them in practice. Hence, in Chapter 3, the book’s authors perform, on the one hand, the comparative analysis of planning systems (Chapter 3.2) and, on the other hand, employ individual case studies to illustrate the context of specific planning systems more deeply (Chapter 3.3). In this way, the authors open the possibilities for “the transfer of best planning and policy practices across systems, places, or countries” (VAN ASSCHE, K. *et al.* 2020).

Before analyzing individual cases, the authors note that some planning systems lack an overall development concept or a proper translation of the concept into individual instruments (p. 78). Given this, the characteristics of planning instruments and their interaction with each other provide an essential insight into the planning process, its results, and its effectiveness.

In 2015, Sonia HIRT noted that regional planning could become “more instrumental in solving some of the serious challenges” (HIRT, S. 2015). That’s why particular interest is the unpacking of the specific instruments – for instance, the analysis of general spatial plans for cases in Bulgaria, regulatory plans in the

Czech Republic, and the strategy of the Riga planning region, as well as individual decisions and planning practices, including outsourcing plan preparations in Estonia, specific environmental natural provisions within spatial plans in Hungary, and court rulings in Poland. The authors comprehensively examine in these cases the challenges, problems, and solutions in each of the planning systems in the CEE region, show their mosaic and diversity across the region, and the ability of different instruments and practices to deal with these challenges. Hence, the authors guide the discussion on the planning instruments and practices in CEE countries under the umbrella of what TUNA TASAN-KOK calls critical constructive thinking in contemporary planning studies (TASAN-KOK, T. 2019) to promote more effective approaches, decisions, and practices across the region.

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