



Research Paper

Impacts of the European Landscape Convention on national planning systems: A comparative investigation of six case studies



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HIGHLIGHTS

- This paper presents a comparative analysis of the landscape planning systems in a selection of European states; this analysis can be extended to other cases.
- Each system is connected to the corresponding institutional framework.
- The method successfully assesses the performance of each system with respect to its conformance to the European Landscape Convention (ELC).
- The pitfalls and strengths of each planning context are reported.
- The ELC may induce a European style of landscape planning.

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents an assessment of the effects of the European Landscape Convention (ELC), a treaty signed more than a decade ago, on national landscape planning systems, with special reference to planning policies and tools. While the ELC has been formally ratified by the majority of the states involved, its actual implementation has varied throughout Europe. The author develops a qualitative, indicator-based, and comparative method to study the on-going institutional and planning situation in six European countries: Catalonia (Spain), France, Italy, Switzerland, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom. The study confirms that ELC implementation depends on local government systems and the traditions that dominate landscape planning. Two conclusions have been reached: (i) land management is a powerful instrument for implementing landscape policies; (ii) the sensitivity to landscape issues is greater in the policies for other sectors, such as the environment, cultural heritage, water management, infrastructure, and tourism.

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1. Introduction

The European Landscape Convention (ELC) was signed in Florence in 2000. The ELC marked the transition towards an environmental and territorial interpretation of the concepts of landscape protection and management (Council of Europe, 2000). Due to the ELC, landscape is defined by considering its cultural importance to the local societies in the area today, rather than being simply observed as a separate entity. The ELC is supranational, as it presents general concepts about landscape planning without referring to specific national landscape management systems. Like other supranational directives, such as the European Directives on environmental assessment and protection and those on European land development, it establishes general principles and objectives, not detailed rules and procedures. As a result, the

panorama of paths towards the implementation of the ELC is complex and varies depending on the specific national institutional framework. The official ratification of the ELC does not necessitate the immediate implementation of its principles. The ELC has sometimes been implemented by states that have not formally ratified it.

This paper investigates the effects of inserting the ELC into the national landscape planning context. It does so by constructing and applying a comparative assessment method based on five indicators. The study is applied to six European states and designed to highlight the strengths and weaknesses of the national systems while defining virtuous courses of action and policies for future landscape planning in Europe.

The contents are presented as follows: in the next section, the ELC implementation process is presented and discussed in terms of the challenges in applying the principles of a supranational convention to a national planning systems. The methodology is explained in the third section. In the fourth and fifth sections, the methodology is applied by comparing landscape planning systems in six

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European states and the results are discussed. The sixth section presents the conclusions drawn from the results.

2. Implementing supranational conventions: the case of the ELC

The ELC is a supranational convention, as it has been agreed upon by a variety of European states. These states are changing the concept of landscape planning and of the landscape itself. Similar conventions have been previously discussed and established by clusters of states and, in particular, by the European Union. These conventions were intended to achieve common goals, possibly by using common implementation strategies. These documents can be clustered under the sometimes overlapping general headings of environment, territory, and landscape. In recent decades, these subjects have been recognised as unifying key concerns in regional planning.

Some directives concern the introduction of environmental assessment procedures, namely the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) and the Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA). The so-called “Habitats” and “Birds” directives established a network of protected natural areas. The “Birds” directive is one of the oldest supranational documents at the EU level and obliges member states to introduce the principles of the directive into their own legislative systems within a given period, usually three years. The history of the introduction of the directive into national systems shows that its effect has varied depending on the ability of the system to adapt or be open to the achievement of the proposed objectives (see, *inter alia*, CEC, 2009; Sadler et al., 2011; CEC, 2009b). The implementation of the directive may result in additional procedures being introduced that complement and become prerequisites for decision making and planning (see the case of EIA procedures). In other cases, implementing directives may involve deeper changes. For example, the integration of the principles enunciated in the supranational SEA Directive is encouraging national agencies to adjust the processes they use to design and approve strategic and land use planning instruments (De Montis, 2013).

The European Spatial Development Perspective, ESDP (European Commission, 1999), intended to improve the coordination and harmonisation of European spatial planning. This aim is connected to the implementation of certain transnational actions funded by EU programmes, such as structural fund based transformations, including the transport infrastructure known as the Trans-European Networks (TEN). The ESDP was the expression of political positions that envisioned a unitary, coherent, convergent, and sustainable Europe (Faludi, 2007) and opened the discourse on European spatial planning (Faludi, 2002). The ESDP has been mainly supported by the United Kingdom, France, and the Netherlands and criticised by other, mostly Mediterranean, countries (Janin Rivolin & Faludi, 2005). The ESDP has not influenced national strategies over the entire continent. The main criticism of the ESDP is that the EU does not have authority over spatial planning, and member states are not inclined to renounce their sovereignty in this field. This shortcoming reflects widespread doubts about Europeanisation, i.e., the creation of a single continental body with binding political power. These doubts are evidenced by the votes against the European Constitution in 2005 and the recent opposition to the serious financial measures that the EU has undertaken to nationally balance and counteract the current crisis. Thus territorial (or spatial) planning in the EU cannot be easily reduced to a common system, as it consists of a patchwork of experiences based on a variety of planning systems (European Commission, 1997; Nadin & Stead, 2008). The ESDP has been partially implemented inside this complex scenario, and its effects are monitored via a specific programme of the European observation network on territorial

development and cohesion (ESPON). ESPON is an information dissemination system and encourages member states to adopt good practices throughout the EU. A relevant example is ESPON project 2.3.2, which centres on the state of territorial and urban policies.

The ELC can be applied to all landscapes (urban, peri-urban, and rural) and aims to promote landscape protection policies, planning, and management. Each member state is expected to implement the ELC as a supranational treaty according to its own legal system and division of powers in compliance with the principle of subsidiary institutional intervention. The ELC also promotes European cooperation in various sectors. Forty member states have signed and, with the exception of Iceland and Malta, ratified the ELC. The majority of European countries adhere to the treaty. However, several important countries, such as Russia, Germany, and Austria, have neither signed nor ratified the ELC. Implementing the ELC has significantly contributed to innovations in planning theory and practice. Peano (2009) reports that many countries, such as France, the Netherlands, Germany, Great Britain, Denmark, and Slovenia, have also constructed landscape atlases to identify large-scale local landscapes and insert them in certain landscape units. The atlases attempt to integrate the objective and subjective descriptions associated with the collective imagination and feelings for the places (Jacobs, 2002). The ELC is designed to be applied at two levels: adhesion of the states and the construction of common regional policies, strategies, and practices that share the values of local societies. A variety of processes are used to implement the ELC due to the different types of European landscapes, which cannot be planned in the same way at the various administrative levels. Countries that form part of the historical cultural matrix of the Central Mediterranean, such as France, Spain, and Italy, have independently devised landscape protection policies for land management using a conservative approach to determine landscape values. In contrast, Northern European countries, such as Austria, Germany, the Netherlands, and Great Britain, were already developing territorial policies to protect the landscape in the last century (Voghera, 2010). Since signing the ELC, the European states involved have introduced institutional, normative, and planning changes to implement the concepts and objectives of this new international treaty.

3. Methodology

Because of the variety of different national processes involved in ELC implementation and planning practice, we propose a qualitative method for comparing and assessing the system of landscape planning in some European countries in this section. This section is divided into two subsections. In the first subsection, we present a state-of-the-art summary of the qualitative/quantitative comparative methods, while in the second we describe the comparative evaluation framework.

3.1. State of the art summary

Assessing planning practice is complicated, as the performance of a planning system is open to question and may not be measurable. This problem has been recognised and tackled by very precisely specifying the goals, criteria, scoring, and benchmark. Many authors often approach the evaluation and implementation of planning systems by adopting mainly qualitative indicator-based and cross-nation comparative frameworks. The contributions illustrated in this section are clustered according to the general context and the planning systems covered as follows.

The first group includes works that generally concern non- (i.e., extra-)urban contexts and processes implicitly and explicitly related to landscape analysis, management, and planning. Alemagi (2010) investigated community forest models in Cameroon and

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