



A Grounded Theory approach for deconstructing the role of participation in spatial planning: Insights from Nature Park Medvednica, Croatia

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ABSTRACT

Participation in spatial planning across Europe shows disparity between its legislative requirements and implementation, which is usually confined to practices that are devoid of influence in the decision-making process. This research tries to deconstruct the role of participation in the creation of a spatial plan for Nature Park Medvednica - Croatian nationally protected forest area and a Natura 2000 site. As the spatial planning process lasted for more than thirty years, this historical perspective allows for an assessment of the participation practices with respect to changing socio-political factors.

The research design is rooted in Grounded Theory (GT), where data collection and analysis evolved in parallel until theoretical saturation occurred. Data sources include 51 interviews, meeting minutes and recordings from six public hearings, historical records, project documentation and expert studies focusing on Medvednica. The theory defined in this study links participation practices to its socio-economic framework, the outcomes of the spatial planning and the perceptions on the role of actors who took part in it – all performed through the lenses of the proposed 15 assumptions and 46 formal hypotheses. The test of this theory will be its future replication in different circumstances, fields and cultural settings.

Results show a strong role of general socio-political factors affecting the design of spatial planning, which in turn shapes the role of participation. The most important general contextual factors include level of centralization of the state administration, level of urbanization and the culture of participation in decision-making processes, which was mostly exercised in the first process. In the last fifteen years, the participation in spatial planning for Nature Park Medvednica was mostly exercised as a legislative requirement while having very limited effect on the actual plan, and had a symbolic importance by legitimizing the urbanization process of the once forested area.

1. Introduction

Importance of public participation in political decision-making is almost undisputed in the literature (Rosener, 1978; Cooper et al., 2006), but there is a great debate on the desirable structure and procedures of participation and on the roles of authorities as well as other actors (Renn et al., 1993; Fiorino, 1990; Beierle, 1999; Rowe and Frewer, 2000; Innes and Booher, 2004; Bryson et al., 2012). Participation so strongly permeates the discourse on how public policy should be performed that it can be seen as a ‘new tyranny’ (Cooke and Kothari (Eds), 2001, p.15), by which the democratization practices actually reproduce existing power relations. Spatial planning in the European Union (EU) is no exception when it comes to participation, as the Aarhus Convention (UNECE, 1998), the Bristol Accord (The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, 2005) the Leipzig Charter (Council of the

European Union, 2007), Europe 2020 (EC, 2010) and the European Landscape Convention (Council of Europe, 2000) all call for active participation. Although the Aarhus Convention is more focused on public participation in specific activities (Article 6) such as waste management and chemicals (Annex I) than it is on plans, programmes and policies related to environment (Article 7), it still sets the basic participation rights to be applied for spatial planning. Within the EU context, there are other legislative acts that refer to public participation in environmental decision-making that include spatial planning, such as Directive 2003/05 for providing public participation in respect to the drawing up of certain plans and programmes related to environment and the amended Council Directives 85/337/EEC and 96/61/EC, as well as the Directive 2001/42/EC. In Croatia, even before the ratification of the Aarhus Convention in 2007, the role of participation in decision-making as defined by the Convention did not differ strongly

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from the existing status of the Croatian legislative framework (Ban, 2004). The existing legislative framework transposed the AC provisions into Croatian national legislation in the following specific laws and bylaws: Act on the Right of Access to Information, Act on General Administrative Procedure, Act on the Administrative Disputes, Regulation on Information and Participation of the Public and Public Concerned in Environmental Matters, etc. (Leljak-Gracin, 2010).

Nature Park (NP) Medvednica is a mountainous protected area in central Croatia, located on the north edge of Zagreb, the country's capital. Nature Park is a national level category of protection (IUCN category V) in which sustainable usage of resources is allowed and where the protection is set around a particularly valuable natural phenomenon (IUCN, 2008). In the case of NP Medvednica, the phenomenon is its forest habitats, which cover eight different forest phytocenoses (Spatial Plan, NP Medvednica, 2014). The legal basis for the management of NPs are spatial plans specifically designated for those areas, from which more detailed and non-legally binding management plans are to be established. Spatial plans come to power when they are ratified by the Parliament, and in the case of NP Medvednica, the practical spatial planning was done by the administration of the City of Zagreb. The process of spatial planning for NP Medvednica began in 1981 (within Yugoslavia, i.e. Socialist Republic of Croatia) with the proclamation of the park (Parliament, OG 24/81). There were three attempts to create the plan. The first one ended in 1989, when several municipalities within the Park blocked it, and no proposal of a spatial plan was submitted to the City Council. The second process began in 2003 and ended in 2005 (a post-transition period for the Republic of Croatia); in this case too, no plan for NP Medvednica was submitted to Parliament (Lovrić et al., 2012). The only decision, which was made by the Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Environmental Protection, Spatial Planning, and Construction, was that the area of the Park be reduced by one quarter (Parliament, PZ. no.140, 2008). This decision was initially rejected by the decision committee; however, after strong outside pressure coming from both - the development groups and the public, the proposal was finally accepted by the parliament in 2009 (Parliament, OG 25/09). Although no spatial plan for Medvednica existed at that time, a management plan was developed in 2010. This plan is a non-legally binding document and a guideline for the Public Institution NP Medvednica, a state administration organization responsible for the management of the Park. A situation in which there is no legally binding document on the management of the Park has led to a state of continuous construction activities, where residential, tourist and sport facilities are entrenching on the area that was once covered by forests. The third process of spatial planning began in 2012 (when Croatia was approaching EU membership); and the decision on approving the Spatial Plan for NP Medvednica was finally adopted by the Croatian Parliament on the 15th of July 2014 ("Official Gazette", No. 89/14.)

A large number of expert studies were conducted for each of the three processes, and each of them had used surveys, public hearings and consultative meetings with experts and stakeholders in order to jointly draft the spatial plan. Such approach demonstrates that participation was an important part of spatial planning of NP Medvednica; however, it took more than thirty years and three processes to develop a plan. Hence, the research question of this study is:

How does participation affect spatial planning of Nature Park Medvednica? Providing an answer to this question is even more complicated by the fact that Croatia has undergone strong system-level changes since the beginning of the spatial planning process, which is added to a series of explanatory factors such as multitude of stakeholder groups and their potentially changing interests, urbanization and EU relations. Acknowledging this complexity embedded in the analysis of participation in spatial planning, a research design based on Grounded Theory (GT; Glaser and Strauss, 1967) is selected. In this inductive approach, explanation of the research question is not limited to a subset of potential variables as it would be the case of a deductive approach

set with a given theoretical framework. Rather, the GT approach allows the explanations to emerge from the data – which is reflected in the broadness of the research question. In the following chapters, we explain the GT approach and how it was used. Subsequently, a description will follow on how its application has resulted with a contextually-embedded explanation of the role of participation in spatial planning of NP Medvednica. We then proceed to discuss from a theoretical perspective the differences and similarities of our explanation to alternative explanations based on complementary theoretical frameworks, and on practical level we discuss how this case of participation in spatial planning relates to other similar cases in different contexts. Finally, we conclude by discussing the limitations of the study and by providing conclusions on its generalizability.

2. Materials and methods

Grounded Theory can be defined as “the discovery of theory from data systematically obtained from social research” (Glaser and Strauss, 1967, p.2). In this research design the collection of data, the analysis and the eventual theory are in close relation (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). The theory has been much discussed regarding its use of standard scientific terminology and its relation to the scientific canon of good science (Corbin and Strauss, 1990; Strauss and Corbin, 1998, 1994), and can be utilized from different epistemological approaches (Charmaz, 2000, 2006). The authors of the theory disagree on how it should be further developed (Glaser, 1978; Strauss and Corbin, 1998; Kelle, 2005) and this situation has led the researchers to adopt and adapt the methodology for their studies. This is the reason why the number of approaches to GT is almost the same as the number of its applications (Auerbach and Silverstein, 2003; Punch, 2009).

We followed Glaser's (1992) approach to GT, where the aim of the analysis is a theory building based on constant comparative method. The literature review on the topic of the study and on complementary theoretical frameworks is performed after the analysis is done in order to avoid preconceptions, to keep a focus on the emerging data and to prevent forcing it into categories coming from the literature, as well as to keep a post-positivist ontology of classic GT (Dunne, 2009). The goal of the GT application is to deconstruct the utilized data to a series of variables and concepts, where their interplay, as set by current contextual setting, allows the research question to be answered. These variables and concepts have to be general enough so that their interplay in alternative contexts can provide adequate answers to similar research questions posed in other studies, which allows for generalizability of the GT to other settings. This is accomplished by formatting the newly-designed variables and concepts into a structure that resembles the structure of other, already established theories. In this case we have provided a structure (Appendix A) with 15 general assumptions that provide the overall social context, 10 auxiliary hypotheses (Earman, 1992) that bridge distance from the social context to the individual actors, and 46 formal hypotheses that are ready to be tested in other studies. A parallel system on a case of well-established theory - Advocacy Coalition Framework (Sabatier, 1987), would be its core assumptions of tripartite system of shared normative and causal beliefs that are drivers of political behavior, inflexibility of policy core beliefs and susceptibility of secondary beliefs to change. Bridge assumptions would be long-term stability of events external to the policy sub-system, long-term stability of advocacy coalitions, and short-term resource constraints of actors (See Fig. 1 in Sabatier, 1998), while its formal hypotheses (Sabatier, 1987; Sabatier and Weible, 2007) have been frequently tested in different contexts (see Weible et al., 2009 for overview).

Technical and expert literature on spatial planning for NP Medvednica has been used as a starting point for defining initial topics and interviewees (Strauss and Corbin, 1998 p.51). With the combined data gathering and analysis, the final primary data sources entailed 51 interviews with representatives from 28 organizations, meeting minutes

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