

INFLUENCERS, GOOD LEARNERS, AND IGNORERS IN THE PROCESS OF EUROPEANIZATION

The Emergence of European Concepts in the Spatial Planning of EU Member States

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Abstract:

The study addresses the differences between EU Member States' (MSs) participation in the Europeanization of spatial planning. Using the authors' expert surveys and an analysis of national spatial planning documents, it examines how EU-level planning concepts emerge and are adopted domestically. Countries' roles in these discourses vary based on planning culture, power dynamics, and political will. Cohesion Policy and Europe's core-periphery divide play a role in shaping these patterns: Western core countries tend to act as influencers, while new Eastern MSs tend to be 'good learners'. In contrast, the UK and countries in Northern and Southern Europe are less active in adopting these concepts. The study reveals barriers to the idealistic discursive integration described by the literature so far.

Keywords:

Spatial planning; territorial governance; European Union; Cohesion Policy; Europeanization; core-periphery

1. INTRODUCTION

Although spatial planning policy has not become a formal competence of the European Union, it remains a competence of Member States (MSs). The EU's influence on domestic spatial planning systems at regional, urban, and other scales is evident, as a large number of studies have shown (Purkarthofer, 2024; Cotella & Janin Rivolin, 2024, 2025; Cotella, 2020; Salamin, 2021; ESPON, 2018; Evers & Tennekes, 2016, etc.). A recent study (Salamin, 2024) that synthesized the orientation of the EU towards Member States' spatial planning systems identified that one of the five main dimensions of domestic planning that is influenced is the content of plans and strategies. The latter may reflect themes and ideas associated with new concepts formulated or emphasized at the EU level, as well as spatial development objectives set at the EU level. This influence may lead to the modification of the thematic scope of plans and the partial or full transference of goals and priorities from higher territorial levels. However, it can also modify terminology by leading to the adoption of concepts that originate in European spatial planning (ESP) discourses.

In the rich literature on European spatial planning, authors have comprehensively described the different types of enforcement mechanisms supporting Europeanization: In terms of the direction of the process, top-down (from the EU towards MSs), bottom-up (the “uploading” of national concepts and approaches), and horizontal (cross-influence among MSs through cooperation platforms supported by the EU) forms of Europeanization are distinguished (Lenschow, 2006; ESPON, 2018; Cotella & Janin Rivolin, 2025). As drivers of domestic change, rules (hard regulation), resources (mainly Cohesion Policy funding), new ideas, and the more horizontal and bottom-up interactive knowledge exchange, learning, and soft coordination are identified (Böhme & Waterhout, 2008; Giannakourou, 2011; Janin Rivolin, 2012; Cotella & Janin Rivolin, 2025).

It is broadly accepted that there are two faces of this Europeanization process: the “hard” side and the “soft” one. According to Radaelli (2004), the two major causes of Europeanization are pressure from the EU in the form of directives or other expectations, and the fact that the EU has become a framework that orients the “logic of action.” Formal EU policies have, indirectly, a rather hard top-down influence on domestic spatial planning systems, while due to the lack of formal EU competence in spatial planning, Europeanization generally remains an issue of soft policy transfer (Böhme & Waterhout, 2008; Williams, 1996; Evers & Tennekes, 2016; Cotella & Janin Rivolin, 2024). Faludi (2014) differentiates between top-down “EUropeanisation,” whereby the EU gains more competences in the field and requests adaptations from the planning systems

of MSs, from Europeanization, which represents mutual learning. However, Cohesion Policy, as the primary investment policy, intensifies the drive to adopt EU policy patterns in more fields (ESPON, 2018; Cotella & Janin Rivolin, 2025, p271.).

From the late 1990s onwards, the process of creating spatial strategic policy documents (perspectives, agendas, charters, etc.) at the European level and the related open coordination methods of Member States (Waterhout, 2008; Böhme & Waterhout, 2008), supported by cooperation programs of the EU, especially the INTERREG programs, including ESPON (Dühr & Nadin, 2007; Dühr et al., 2007), resulted in the creation of framework-like European spatial planning (ESP) (“planning for Europe” according to Böhme & Waterhout [2008]). One may recognize that ESP is the soft policy framework through which common European ideas about spatial development, as cognitive intellectual content, can be created, shared, promoted, and adopted by the different actors associated with it.

This study is about the differences between European countries in terms of their positions in the process of the Europeanization of spatial planning, focusing on the “production” and the adoption of concepts and ideas concerning ESP. Besides dozens of country-specific studies on Europeanization, some comprehensive studies are also available (Nordregio, 2007; ESPON, 2018; Salamin, 2018), providing empirical findings on the Europeanization of spatial planning of EU countries. However, there is a gap in the knowledge about the (patterns of) different roles and forms of engagement – and their reasons – of different groups of MSs, such as the Old and the New MSs, the North-Western and the Central and Eastern ones, and the Southern block of the EU. This paper aims to explore the different roles of relevant groups of countries in ESP discourses through an analysis of the penetration of European concepts into domestic spatial planning. The paper contributes to the current literature in two ways. First, it attempts to involve discourse theory and core-periphery theory to improve the understanding of the differences between Member States’ engagement in the Europeanization of spatial planning. Second, on the basis of an independent survey conducted by the authors in 2018, it provides complementary and corroborative (‘control’) information associated with the related findings of the ESPON (2018) COMPASS project, which was the latest published comprehensive survey – conducted in 2016 – in this field. Almost all recent academic papers in the field of the Europeanization of spatial planning have built on the COMPASS data (e.g., Cotella, 2020; Nadin et al., 2021; Cotella & Janin Rivolin, 2024, 2025; Nadin & Fernández-Maldonado, 2023). On top of this, the authors build on their active network positions and experiences in the ESPON and other INTERREG programs and in the preparation of the Territorial Agenda. The study investigates retrospectively the period from the early 2000s, when the Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries joined the EU, until the

escalatory impact of Brexit, which likely encompasses the most intensive phase of the European integration project. In this period, beyond the EU policies established by law, many domestic policies have also undergone a sort of European-transformation convergence within the MSs, including spatial planning (see more considerations on this later). At the same time, the authors interpret their findings in the context of recent developments.

In the material that follows, Section 2 presents a discourse-based theoretical framework for analyzing Europeanization in planning content and the main steps in the creation of ESP concepts. The role of the different groups of MSs in this process is then summarized based on the literature in Section 3. Following the description of the research methodology (4) in Section 5, the empirical results of the survey and document analysis are presented and discussed in the context of the respective literature. Finally, the conclusions (6) synthesize the findings with policy implications and argue for the need to address the limitations of discursive integration.

2. EUROPEAN SPATIAL PLANNING AS A DISCOURSE AMONG DIVERSE ACTORS – THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In the case of ESP (and more broadly, territorial governance), where there is no explicit EU-level competence, there are no direct implementation tools, funding, or legal implications attached to this quasi-policy domain. Indeed, ESP serves as a source of shared understanding and reference point, which everyone is asked to promote and apply where and when appropriate (ESPON, 2024, p. 28). Therefore, the creation of new European spatial (development) concepts (conceptualization) and their application in domestic planning systems (adoption) are key elements of soft Europeanization in spatial planning. The birth of the neutral “Euro-English” common concept of spatial planning in the 1990s – encompassing the very diverse planning approaches in Europe – (CEC, 1997; Faludi, 2004a, b, 2011; Waterhout, 2008) was actually the condition for emerging ESP.

In planning documents, these new concepts can emerge as themes (topics to be addressed in spatial planning), priorities, or goals that are more strongly associated with normative values. Both creation (Faludi, 2004a) and adoption (Nordregio, 2007) are realized mainly through discourse (Servillo, 2010; Böhme, 2003; Faludi, 2014; Cotella & Janin Rivolin, 2025). The discourses of ESP and territorial governance take place in different, yet interconnected arenas. Policy actors formally take part in so-called ‘open method coordination’ (Waterhout, 2008) through intergovernmental discourse, while professional and academic actors are involved in joint research and know-how transfer cooperation (ESPON, 2018; Faludi, 2012), while for universities the

Association of European Schools of Planning (AESOP) and for practicing planners the umbrella organization of national planners' associations, the European Council of Spatial Planners (ECTP) are also relevant platforms. *Mendes (2022) asserts that new spatial (development) concepts must undergo a sort of institutionalization, typically inclusion in official documents, before they lead to real changes. In the case of ESP, the European agendas, charters, and perspectives on territorial/spatial/ urban development fulfill the first step of this function. These ESP documents are created through voluntary cooperation between MS and EU institutions (Böhme, 2003; Böhme & Gløersen, 2023; Faludi, 2011).*

2.1. Discursive integration

In this context, some theories of discourse can deepen the understanding of how European concepts and ideas are created and domestically adopted in spatial planning. Based on the growing recognition of the importance of discourses in European integration (See Kallestrup, 2002; Wodak, 2018), Barbehön (2015) proposes that Europeanization itself can be defined as a discursive process through which 'the EU' and the 'adaptational pressures' and 'windows of opportunities' it is associated with are collectively constructed.

The term "discursive integration" generally refers to the process by which the EU integrates not just through formal legal and political mechanisms, but also through shared understandings, narratives, and communication. It is rooted in the tradition of discursive institutionalism (Schmidt, 2008) and the grand theories of European integration (Hooghe & Marks, 2019). This term was first applied to ESP by Böhme (2002, 2003). To capture the two directions of the Europeanization process, Cotella and Janin Rivolin (2025 p.268) differentiate between two ways in which discourse influences domestic spatial planning systems and European territorial governance. Top-down discursive influence occurs when EU concepts and ideas penetrate domestic contexts. Bottom-up discursive influence is a joint process leading to a shared definition of these concepts, drawing on different domestic perspectives.

According to the idea of discursive integration, actors are active participants in a process whose primary concern is often to make sense of a particular situation, justify a certain choice, or solve a specific problem (Waterhout & Stead, 2007, p. 398). The respective authors typically present an idealized view of equal and open cooperation, neglecting potential barriers to participation. However, success may depend greatly on the proper participation of all MSs, and it is connected to the capacities of the related actors.

However, one must assume that various actors participate in these European discourses differently, possessing diverse capacities in terms of both top-down and bottom-up discursive influence. To aid in understanding this, it is useful to apply the term *discursive power*, which

expresses the capacity of actors to frame the debate, introduce issues, or narratives, having a strong influence on them (Capati, 2024). As with ESP, discourses produce new concepts and influence their adoption in national practices (top-down); thus, we need to consider the differences in participation in both the *creation* of ESP concepts and their *adoption*.

2.2.Roles in the creation and adoption of ESP contents

In terms of the *creation of ESP concepts*, besides the collaborative nature of discursive integration (Böhme, 2003), it is also important to recognize their competitive character. From a planning theory approach, spatial planning itself can be understood as an activity through which places and spatial imaginaries, based on the interpretation of space, are created (Healey, 2004). European spatial development ideas and concepts are also such imaginaries. The institutional technology planning model by Janin Rivolin (2012, p. 71) emphasizes the role of planning not only in producing new (kinds or levels of) realities but also as a creative selection process that occurs through policy transfer and a competitive, iterative discourse. Luukkonen (2011a, b) suggests that ESP can be considered a specific activity through which European space is created. However, spatial planning can also be interpreted as a competitive arena of power associated with various policies in an ideologically and politically constructed Europe (Luukkonen 2011a, p. 33, 2015, p. 187). In ESP, emerging concepts ‘compete’ to be institutionalized within the European territorial governance system (Cotella & Janin Rivolin, 2025, p. 265; Luukkonen, 2015, p. 177), and hegemonic concepts prevail (Servillo, 2010).

In terms of the *adoption of ESP concepts*, we can utilize approaches formulated to identify different levels of Europeanization in domestic planning systems. Giannakourou (2012) differentiates among ‘absorption,’ ‘accommodation,’ and ‘transformation’ as possible outcomes of domestic changes in spatial planning triggered by EU impulses. The first two cases involve ‘thin learning,’ when MSs adopt EU concepts without changing their core meanings. ‘Transformation’ involves deeper changes in policies and institutions through ‘thick learning’. Giannakourou (2012) notes that compliance-related pressure leads to thin learning, while policy transfer and mutual learning foster more significant national adjustments and cultural shifts. Similarly, authors (Faludi, 1989; Waterhout & Stead, 2007; Janin Rivolin, 2008) emphasize the difference between ‘conformance’ and ‘performance’ in relation to the outcomes of Europeanization influence. Conformance means formal alignment with EU plans, while performance involves actively using the latter to drive real change. Moving from conformance to performance requires influencing actors’ understanding and helping them apply concepts to solve problems (Faludi, 1989), leading to deeper engagement.

Concerning effective participation in Europeanization, MS's engagement with European spatial policy discourses (Cotella & Janin Rivolin, 2025, p. 278) and the effective links between European and national policy communities (Böhme, 2003; Salamin, 2019) are mentioned. Based on approaches associated with discourse theories, Wolff asserts that as planning actors establish communication patterns, they may create asymmetric power relations with each other, and the influence on planning outcomes depends on the actors' power resources (Wolff, 2020, p. 2213).

The *core-periphery approach*, based on ideas about dependency (Cardoso et al., 1979) and world-systems theory (Wallerstein, 1974), can help explain countries' roles in discursive integration. A key postulate of core-periphery theories is that relationships between countries are characterized by asymmetry, resulting in dependency (Weissenbacher, 2019; Rubinic & Tajnikar, 2020). In the contemporary perception, new ideas are generated predominantly at the center and imitated in the periphery (Schott, 1989; Ploszaj et al., 2018). Core countries' actors are usually more powerful in the international political arena (Péti et al., 2024, p. 2), while peripheries have fewer opportunities to contribute to this networking (Martin & Sunley, 2006). The asymmetric integration of countries at different development levels in the global economy and politics can reinforce core-periphery relations by increasing connectedness (Weissenbacher, 2019; Rubinic & Tajnikar, 2020). In European spatial planning discourses, the role of academics and experts is also significant (see, for example, the role of ESPON: Faludi, 2012; Waterhout, 2008). As studies show, increasing international research cooperation and networking can reduce, maintain, or even deepen hierarchical and dependent relations between actors (Zelnio, 2012; Ploszaj, 2018).). In the Europeanization of spatial planning Adams (2008) revealed a stronger lacune between rhetoric and reality in peripheries of the EU.

2.3. Main chronological steps of producing ESP concepts

For those who would like to review the story of the creation of EU-level spatial planning until 2011, Faludi's comprehensive work (2011) provides the best starting point. This book identifies three eras in the former's evolution until 2011. After the so-called '*launch era*' (1945-1960) and the '*doldrum era*' (1960-1999), the '*boom era*,' with the creation of the European Spatial Development Perspective (ESDP) (EC, 1999), involved the intensive creation of European spatial development concepts and ideas (Table 1) as substantial components of ESP discourses. The basic priorities of the ESDP become the key concepts of these discourses: promoting balanced urban-rural development, equal access to infrastructure and knowledge, and the sustainable management of natural and cultural heritage. It also spurred the creation of INTERREG and ESPON. The Territorial Agenda adopted in 2007 (TA2007) marked the next major, more action-oriented step (see Table 1).

Table 1: Most important strategic documents associated with European (-level) spatial planning until 2018. Source: Authors' construction

1983	The European Regional/Spatial Planning Charter of 1983 [Council of Europe Conference of Ministers responsible for Spatial Planning (CEMAT)]
1994	<i>Europe2000+: Cooperation for European territorial development</i> (report of the Commission of the European Community)
1999	European Spatial Development Perspective (ESDP) 1999 (Member State Ministers responsible for spatial planning and the European Commission)
2000	Guiding Principles for Sustainable Spatial Development of the European Continent (2000) [Council of Europe Conference of Ministers responsible for Spatial Planning (CEMAT)]
2007	Territorial Agenda of the European Union and <i>The Territorial State and Perspectives of the European Union (TSP)</i> (Member State Ministers responsible for spatial planning and development)
2007	The Leipzig Charter on Sustainable European Cities (Member State Ministers responsible for urban development)
2007	<i>Green Paper on Territorial Cohesion</i> (Communication of the European Commission)
2011	Territorial Agenda of the European Union 2020 (2011) and <i>The Territorial State and Perspectives of the European Union (TSP) – Update</i> (Member State Ministers responsible for spatial planning and territorial development)
LEGEND:	
Policy strategies: (In bold)	<i>reports: (In italics) (adopting institutions – in parentheses)</i>

The EU's objective of *territorial cohesion* (as a new concept) included in the 2009 Lisbon Treaty became a catalytic concept around which several (spatial and non-spatial) discourses and policy practices have been generated in ESP (Servillo, 2010). It provided a legal basis for spatial-planning-like activities for the EU (Faludi, 2011). We may call this fourth era after 2010, the '*territorial cohesion and urban-development-focused period*,' which involved the modest mainstreaming of spatial-territorial and urban issues into formal EU policies (Cohesion Policy in particular). Adopted in 2011, the second Territorial Agenda of the EU (TA2020) translated territorial cohesion into planning and governance priorities. It defined key territorial challenges and priorities, introduced *territorial capital* as a policy concept, emphasized *place-based* (Barca, 2009) and *integrated development* and highlighted spatial planning's role in coordinating EU funds. As another field of ESP (in a broader sense), urban development gained strong significance from the late 2000s. Its baseline policy paper was the Leipzig Charter from 2007, and in 2016, the Urban Agenda began motivating and coordinating all MSs in this field. Urban development has risen in importance in EU policy implementation, addressing challenges such as climate change, demographic issues, and digitalization through integrated urban development solutions. EU

Cohesion Policy has supported this by requiring each MS to allocate 5% of ERDF spending to integrated urban development since 2014.

Since 2018, ESP has focused increasingly on sustainable development, addressing challenges such as climate change, environmental issues, and social justice. The third Territorial Agenda (TA2030) and the new Leipzig Charter, adopted in 2020, emphasize multilevel governance and territorial cooperation, and the notions of the European Green Deal are reflected in them.

Despite the continued use of existing tools (ESPON, TAs, coordination mechanisms), their impact on EU policies remains limited due to weak political ownership and crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Böhme et al., 2015; ESPON, 2024). However, new integrated development tools (CLLD, ITI) were introduced to Cohesion Policy in 2014, and the minimum ERDF allocation for urban development was further increased to 8% in 2021.

In relation to these documents, experiences with preparing and implementing the ESDP have been the most widely studied (Faludi, 2003; 2004a; Waterhout & Stead, 2007; Nordregø, 2007), while only a few studies are available about the influences of Territorial Agendas (TA2007: Salamin [2021]; TA2020: Böhme et al. [2015]; TA2030: ESPON [2024]; Böhme & Gløersen [2023]).

3. COUNTRIES WITH DIFFERENT ROLES CONCERNING ESP

Although all MSs have a unique position in the Europeanization process, for this paper's purposes, we can identify relevant groups. Obviously, the 'Old' MSs (*EU-15*) with a longer history have been able to play a greater role in European discourses than the 'New' MSs (*EU11*) that joined after 2004; however, the difference between them is presumed to have decreased over time. Planning traditions and cultures may also matter in this participation. Knieling and Othengrafen (2016) classified the countries of Europe into three major categories in an analysis that touches upon the cultural aspects of planning: namely, Northwestern Europe ('NWE'), 'CEE,' and Southern Europe ('SE'). This categorization can be linked to the four planning traditions/models of Europe dominant in the MSs (CEC 1997, Farinós, 2006), and in the second category (CEE), the 'New' MSs (EU11) can be captured.

3.1. Forming ESP content

MSs have played very different *roles in the formation of ESP documents* and the ideas and content in them (bottom-up discursive influence). The planning cultures of certain MSs are

reflected to varying degrees in the philosophy and content of these European strategies, with the NWE planning culture being dominant. In the ESDP process in particular, this has involved especially the Dutch, French, German and Austrian perspectives, while, with the exception of Denmark, the Nordic Member States did not have much input, and SE MSs were reluctant participants, viewing spatial planning as a north-west European concern (Stead & Nadin, 2011; ESPON, 2018; Böhme, 2002, 2003; Faludi 2004a, 2013; Atkinson & Zimmermann, 2018). Dutch planning has been very proactive in terms of the creation of ESP since the beginning of the history of European integration (Faludi, 2011). The logic underlying the concept of *territorial cohesion* itself was taken over from the French model, while the notions of *subsidiarity and proportionality* were primarily added by the Germans. Faludi (2004a, b) emphasizes that the term *spatial planning* has a hybrid nature, with many aspects derived from German *Raumplanung*, the French *Aménagement du territoire*, and the Dutch *ruimtelijke ordening*. The place-based policy model by Barca (2009) had some precedents in Italian local development practice (ESPON 2018). The first and third Territorial Agendas, as well as both Leipzig Charters, were elaborated under the German presidencies, but Belgium and Luxembourg were also active in this (ESPON, 2018). The TA2020 was coordinated and adopted under the Hungarian Presidency in 2011 and continued by the Polish Presidency. It involved a few specificities associated with the CEE region but remained in line with the conceptual framework created purely in the ‘NWE’ discursive arena (Salamin 2019, 2024). Based on an analysis of the policy discourse connected to the Green Paper on Territorial Cohesion, a study (Cotella et al., 2012) concluded that the overall level of engagement of CEE actors in ESP is proportionally lower – although it has increased – than that of their northwestern European counterparts. From a more critical stance, regarding the competition between interpretations of space, the strongest actors naturally dominate; thus, the leading role of the EU’s core areas in European spatial planning may not be surprising – i.e., the dominance of the planning culture of ‘NWE’ (Luukkonen, 2011a; Stead & Nadin, 2011).

Scholars of dependency theory claim that permanent *core-periphery patterns* do exist in the European space (Weissenbacher, 2019). Besides the Northwestern core (‘Core’), there are two distinct peripheries, CEE and Southern Europe. The core can be defined through indicators of RDI, GNI, position in global value chains, good governance, etc., while the characteristics of the two peripheries differ significantly (time of EU accession, diverse convergence trends) (Péti et al., 2024). Their primary ties to the EU lead to the CEE region's dependence on foreign technology, foreign capital (Grodzicki, 2016, p. 399), and EU Cohesion Policy sources (Salamin, 2015). Even the EU’s TA2020 highlighted the increasing interdependency between places, which is ‘visible in the concentration of economies and in the persistent core-periphery division in Europe and nationally’ (TA2020, p.10).

EU's INTERREG programs play a key role in shaping territorial development discourses and influencing spatial planning policies (Faludi, 2011; Waterhout, 2008; Dühr et al., 2010). A recent study (Péti et al., 2024) has identified core-periphery patterns in CEE participation in terms of leading positions and funding, even regarding territorially balanced INTERREG programs. Therefore, the CEE-specific position is underrepresented, and these countries play an adaptive role in ESP.

3.2. Adopting ESP contents

Regarding the varying extents of ESP content adoption in Member States' planning systems (top-down discursive integration), more detailed information is available from the ESDP assessment (Nordregio, 2007) and the results of the ESPON COMPASS project. (In contrast, the evaluation of TA2007 [Salamin, 2021] did not reveal major differences.) The first impact of the ESDP was most evident in changes in planning discourse (in 13 MSs), while in seven MS (FI, DE, HU, IT, LV, NL, PT) it resulted in institutional changes, and in two MSs (UK, BG) it also led to a transformation of planning policy. In six countries (CY, EE, NO, PL, SK, CH), including non-EU members Norway and Switzerland, no changes were reported by 2007. Where deeper institutional and policy changes had taken place, these were often driven by other motivations – which may have coincided with ESDP objectives – and in most cases, the changes began earlier (Nordregio, 2007). Waterhout and Stead (2007) reviewed the application of the ESDP through INTERREG programs. They found high levels (but slowly decreasing) of conformance at all stages of the INTERREG program, without a real geographical divide. However, every single step of program implementation led to a decrease in the extent to which the ESDP was able to form a framework for decision-making. Although in the first phase of INTERREG, there was a direct requirement to apply the priorities of ESDP in INTERREG projects, a wide gap existed between the ESDP concepts and the regional and local interests of the project beneficiaries and partners. In 2016, Territorial Agendas were less well known than ESDP and had decreasing influence (ESPON, 2018).

3.3. Influences between 2000 and 2016

The ESPON COMPASS (2018) project, based on its 2016 survey, found that *EU influence on domestic spatial planning* (2000–2016) was significant, mainly via sectoral legislation and Cohesion Policy funding. The TA had less impact than the ESDP or Europe 2020. The authors attempted to identify some general patterns regarding the country groups (ESPON 2018; Cotella & Janin Rivolin, 2025): Newer MSs were more receptive to EU ideas, while bottom-up influence on EU debates was rare. Older EU-15 states had greater influence, though some Eastern countries

are gaining prominence. Strong top-down discursive influence was noted in Hungary and Bulgaria, while it was moderate in most other ESPON countries, except in some Western and Nordic states, where it was weaker or variable. Strong bottom-up influence was mainly seen in Western MSs (incl. the UK), plus Spain, Greece, Sweden, and from the EU11, only Latvia and Slovakia. Most other CEE countries showed minimal or no bottom-up influence. Overall, top-down influence appears to be balanced, with a low level of impact mainly in northern countries (except Finland), Austria, and the Netherlands. Influence declined or fluctuated in Czechia, Norway, Greece, Denmark, and the UK. A rise in bottom-up influence was noted in only five CEE Member States (Cotella & Janin Rivolin, 2025; ESPON, 2018). In all CEE countries, the study found an increase in perceived engagement in EU territorial governance, except for CZ (variable) and LI (stable). Engagement decreased only in the case of the UK.

3.4. Central and Eastern European specifics

Given their late EU accession and post-communist background, it is important to consider some spatial planning *specifics of CEE countries (EU11)*. After the collapse of communist regimes in the 1990s, CEE countries had to develop new planning systems influenced by EU integration (Salamin, 2025; Belof & Kryczka, 2025; Altroch, 2017; Benedek, 2023). In relation to their accession the new MSs had been more or less forced to accept approaches originating in the EU-15 (Pallagst, 2006). As the CEE countries did not significantly influence the respective European discourses or European strategic documents (Faludi, 2004; Salamin, 2024), they appear as potential adopters of EU patterns. This is also linked to the limited participation of scholars from Eastern countries in European debates associated with planning-related disciplines (Maier, 2012). CEE is generally struggling with the relatively slow pace of catching up, a polarized urban structure, and a fragile equilibrium (Rácz & Egyed, 2013), which makes it highly dependent on EU policies. As net beneficiaries of the EU's Cohesion Policy, countries of the region are required to adapt to several EU requirements. Dabrowski and Piskorek (2018) argue that despite differing Europeanization paths, communist and transition-era legacies have led to superficial compliance with EU funding rules in Poland, the Czech Republic, and Hungary. Strategic planning has often been treated as mere 'window dressing,' and the EU has been viewed mainly as a funding source. Adams (2008) found significant lacuna between rhetoric and reality in the Europeanization of spatial planning in the Baltic states.

As early as in 2006 Pallagst (2006) questioned the wisdom of imposing western values and systems with at best an extremely superficial understanding of the local context. She assumed that, over time, the New MSs would be less inclined to unquestioningly accept the values and systems of the former EU-15 as they seek to address their own priorities in their own way. At the time,

Pallagst predicted that either the dominance of NEW northwestern Europe would continue and the spatial policies and approaches of CEE would develop separately, or the two would combine and integrate, thus forming a new approach to spatial planning and therefore a new epistemic community.

4. MATERIALS AND METHODS OF THE RESEARCH

In order to explore the main patterns of differences between the participation of MSs in the dynamics of ESP, the domestic planning contents of the states were analyzed in a comparative way using multiple sources. This empirical analysis covered the period from 2002 to 2018, although the results are also confronted with more recent processes. This was the most progressive period in terms of Europeanization, a particularly suitable time for studying this process, perhaps even better than the more recent eras that followed. First, this was the period of EU enlargement. Later, at the beginning of the 2010s, both sectoral and territorial policies were defined at the same time (TA2020 and Europe 2020), and the programming of EU funds was fully aligned with the new considerations of a reformed place-based cohesion policy. The current programming period has been disrupted by fierce disputes between Member States and the COVID-19 epidemic, and while there is a new TA, no overall EU development strategy has evolved (instead, there are several new single-sectoral ones). The current EU programming methodology largely follows the foundation outlined in the previous period. The empirical results from this period have been compared with those from former and more recent studies to understand the relevant dynamics.

In terms of geographical scope, besides MSs, we tried to include members from two other relevant groups of countries: (1) EFTA countries that take part in shaping EU spatial development policies as members of the meetings of the EU's national territorial cohesion contact points and the ESPON Program (we accessed data sources in Switzerland and Norway); and (2) accession countries (our comprehensive research project partly covers several Western Balkan countries, but the surveys presented in this study could only provide data for Serbia. It should be noted, however, that Serbia was an overall frontrunner for accession at the time).

Table 2: Main methodological tools employed in the empirical research. Source: Authors' construction

METHODOLOGICAL STEPS		MISSION/ACTION	DATA SOURCES	DATA COLLECTED
1	Identifying objectives and topics (issues) in European planning	Identifying the European (EU) characteristics of planning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • relevant EU-level policy documents: Europe 2020, TA2020, Leipzig Charter, ESDP • literature on the Europeanization of spatial planning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • concepts: economic growth, international competitiveness, territorial cohesion, territorial capital, territorial harmony • planning functions: economic growth, international competitiveness, territorial cohesion, territorial capital, territorial harmony, the implementation of Cohesion Policy, programming of public investments, green spaces and infrastructure • EU objectives: priorities of TA2020; thematic objectives of Europe 2020
2	Key expert survey	A survey on the occurrence of European characteristics in the planning practice of the MSs (current and future practice)	121 respondents from 27 countries <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • scientific researchers (59 experts) • practicing planners (30 experts) • experts from spatial/urban/regional planning governmental bodies (29 experts) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • knowledge of EU policy documents among planners, • references in domestic spatial plans to European planning (to European concepts and planning functions, to Europe 2020 objectives, to TA2020 priorities)
3	Personnel interviews and consultations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • surveying national and EU planning practices • assessing the weight of parameters from key expert survey • interpreting answers provided by key experts 	20 interviewees with work experience or who have engaged in academic activity related to more than one country	
4	Document analysis	Detecting the occurrence of European characteristics in the planning practice of the MSs	33 planning documents of EU MSs (see Appendix 3)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • references to EU policy documents: objectives of Europe 2020, objectives of TA2020 • occurrence of territorial concepts: cohesion, capital, harmony
5	Coding and aggregating the results of the key expert survey and the document analysis	quantifying the outputs of the key expert survey and the document analysis		

Our investigation aimed to cover all territorial levels of planning and development (national, regional, local/urban). Key expert surveys in 2018 and interviews (see later) collected information on all these territorial levels, while document analysis focused on the national level, due to resource constraints. Both declared planning intentions and actual development actions were examined. The main methodological tools are summarized in Table 2.

4.1. Identifying European ‘objectives and topics’

A variety of approaches can be used to identify content of EU origin in planning, but in this study, we limit them to the themes and priorities in the EU's policy documents that were most relevant for national spatial planning during the period under review. We identified two types of potential European concepts: topics (issues to be addressed in planning) and objectives (with normative character), both associated with the practice of spatial planning. This was implemented through two exercises: (1) mapping the relevant EU-level policy documents; and (2) reviewing the literature on the Europeanization of spatial planning. Indicators of the Europeanization of spatial planning included a demonstrable awareness of the features mentioned below:

- main/basic concepts: economic growth; international competitiveness; territorial cohesion; territorial capital; territorial harmony (introduced by Territorial Agenda 2020);
- main European policy documents that were relevant in a spatial planning and development context at the time: Europe 2020; Territorial Agenda 2020 (TA2020); Leipzig Charter; ESDP;
- main European objectives: priorities of Territorial Agenda 2020 (TA2020); relevant thematic objectives (TO) of Europe 2020.

Although the Europe 2020 strategy was not part of the ESP framework during that period, it was the EU's overarching strategy, closely linked to cohesion policy, and could therefore serve as a crucial reference point for the national and regional planning of many countries at various spatial scales. During the investigated period, the thematic concentration of ESIF investments was introduced through the Cohesion Policy. This meant that only projects designed to achieve the 11 thematic objectives outlined in the Europe 2020 strategy could be financed from the Cohesion Policy funds.

Besides the above content-based approach, the Europeanization of ‘objectives and topics’ can also be interpreted from a functional perspective. Therefore, the declared functions of the planning activities in the practice of the MSs were also surveyed. The main/basic concepts mentioned among the indicators listed above can be understood as planning functions, too. Additional functional concerns could also be identified in the literature: the implementation of Cohesion Policy, the programming of public investments (utilization of funds), and green spaces and green infrastructure. We surveyed the application of these planning functions with an EU origin (See ‘Eur’ on figures showing the most frequently observable ones). (Other non-Europe-related planning functions were also predefined and surveyed, but are not dealt with in this article.)

4.2.Key expert survey and interviews

The data on the use of the above categories in the MSs' planning practice were generated primarily through an independent, expert-focused survey conducted by the authors. Questions were formed for content-related indicators and functional categories (see above). The survey included questions about the past (the situation in 2002 and changes since then) and expectations regarding future changes. The survey questionnaire was conducted in 2017 and 2018, and a total of 121 respondents were reached. The questionnaire was tested and validated by four European experts and implemented using web-based services. The target population of the survey consisted of recognized experts and professionals in spatial planning with a certain international outlook. All of them were asked about the planning in their country where they were active. Information was collected from these experts through questionnaires, often followed by more interactive online communication. Three subgroups were identified: scientific researchers (59 experts), practicing planners (30 experts), and experts from the relevant ministry or other governmental body in charge of spatial planning or one of its subfields (urban or regional planning) (29 experts). The aim of sampling was to reach at least three respondents in each country with different areas of related expertise. (In the case of 13 countries, we had five or more respondents). Those countries were excluded from the country comparison for which responses from a minimum of three respondents could not be achieved. (Due to the lack of information, Cyprus and Latvia were not part of the analysis at all, and in the cases of Estonia, Luxembourg, and Lithuania, we had less than three responses from different types of respondents; thus, for these countries, country-specific statements were not formulated. All the excluded countries are relatively small countries geographically; thus, their spatial planning systems are idiosyncratic).

The target population was first contacted through representatives of European professional networks and/or personal relationships. Researchers were recruited through ESPON national contact points and institutional contact points of the AESOP, as well as the ministry group of experts via members of national territorial cohesion contact points (NTCCP) and the ESPON monitoring committee. Practicing planners were primarily contacted through the leaders and delegated members of the ECTP, with additional support from several other experts with experience in European planning and research projects. This approach is considered capable of delivering reliable and valid sources of information about how the perception of planning procedures and practices has evolved in each country.

The method that was applied obviously has its limitations. It attempts to ensure the representation of comparable information about several countries; however, the baseline data primarily reflect expert perceptions and experiences that were influenced by personal tastes and

the experts' own understanding of the issues. (It should also be noted that the survey and additional information sources provided data about less subjective factual issues, too.) This subjectivity was reduced by (1) the selection of well-qualified and experienced experts who were familiar with the European understanding of spatial planning; (2) the comprehensive introduction to the questionnaire that explained the context and helped understand the questions; and (3) supplementary personal interviews (see below). The comparability of information from different countries was also ensured by using terminology associated with European-level documents that is well-known to all the actors involved.

Twenty personal interviews also helped with the research work (see details about the interviewees in Appendix 2). In these interviews, we comprehensively examined national and European planning practices. In the context of the current study, these interviews helped clarify how to interpret some of the key experts' answers, identify objectives, topics, and functions that could be extracted from the survey, and assess the weight of these features during coding, quantification, and calculation. These interviews also facilitated the comparability of the survey, as the interviewees have work experience or have engaged in academic activity related to more than one country.

This current comparative analysis of planning systems has precedents in Europe, which provided this study with methodological support. The first comprehensive comparative analysis of spatial planning in Europe, the EU Compendium of Spatial Planning Systems and Policies, was published by the European Commission in 1997, covering the former EU-15, and has since become a standard reference. The ESPON 2.3.2. project then extended it to the new MSs of the EU (Farinós, 2006), and then the ESPON COMPASS (an ESPON project 'Comparative Analysis of Territorial Governance and Spatial Planning') was recently implemented (ESPON, 2018). The current study complements the latter by providing direct, in-depth information on the Europeanization process, while it can also serve as a control for some of the results of COMPASS.¹

¹ Both our research project and the COMPASS project employed a fundamentally qualitative methodology to address research questions on Europeanization, and in both projects, the expert survey played a significant role. Given the subjective factors inherent in this methodology, we believe it is a unique addition to the latter study, as it builds on another independent survey, unlike most recent studies on this topic. An important characteristic of our methodology is that it places great emphasis on ensuring that practitioners are as well represented as possible among the data providers.

4.3.Document analysis

A structured analysis of domestic spatial planning documents also supported the research on Europeanization. All available national spatial plans were analyzed, or at least one regional-level spatial plan in countries where national documents were not available.

During the document analysis, the dimension of ‘European objectives and topics’ was described by the following criteria: references to the objectives of Europe 2020, Territorial Agenda 2020, and three territorial concepts (cohesion, capital, and harmony). A total of 33 planning documents were analyzed (see details in Appendix 3). The context of the occurrence of a relevant words was also examined in order to exclude non-content-related references. This study presents the results of a document analysis that utilized an aggregated indicator (see below).

4.4.Coding and aggregating

The answers to the questionnaire (and compliance with the criteria in the document analysis) were coded (linked to specific values) and compiled into a database. The values were aggregated by country, country category, and macroregion (see calculations in Appendices 1 and 3). An aggregated indicator for the appearance of ‘European objectives and topics’ was also calculated for each country (see the calculation formula in Appendix 1).

Considerations about common European spatial policies may have emerged later in Eastern Europe due to the Eastern MSs joining the EU only in 2004/07. However, the EU Cohesion Policy has more significance in these new MSs than in the old ones. Therefore, these countries may have special features that are worth analyzing directly by constructing country categories or macroregions. The following categories were used: *EU 15* (MSs that joined before 2004); *NWE*: UK, AT, NL, LU, BE, FR, DE, IE, CH; *Southern Europe* (SE): IT, ES, GR, PT; *EU 11* (also referred to as ‘East EU’ and ‘CEE’): EE, LV, LT, PL, CZ, SK, HU, BG, HR, SL, RO), and *Northern Europe* (DK, FI, SE, NO).

5. RESULTS

5.1. Awareness and mentioning

The first condition for adapting the content of topics and objectives is that the professional actors are familiar with the related EU documents. In the examined area, the selected EU documents were widely known to the planning community. According to the questionnaire survey, spatial planning experts know the ESDP best, while the least-known documents were the Europe 2020 strategy, the European baseline strategy, and the seven-year period of Cohesion Policy, although even this was known by 50% of the respondents in detail (Figure 1). The ESDP is most well-known in the northwestern countries and least in the eastern countries. The results are the same, albeit with minor differences, in the case of the TA2020 (Territorial Agenda, 2020), which is surprising, since this is the first European spatial development document coordinated from CEE. (It was adopted during the Hungarian presidency, while the following Polish Presidency also made progress with it.) This suggests that while European spatial strategies are more important among the professionals of older MSs that had a determining role in shaping the ESDP, Europe 2020, which defines the thematic of EU sources, is most well-known in CEE MSs. This indicates that spatial planning and Cohesion Policy are considered more relevant in their cases. The ESDP and TA2020 are better known to researchers, while the Europe 2020 strategy is more familiar to practicing planners. Their level of recognition by experts from the Ministry sector is identified as somewhere between the two former groups.

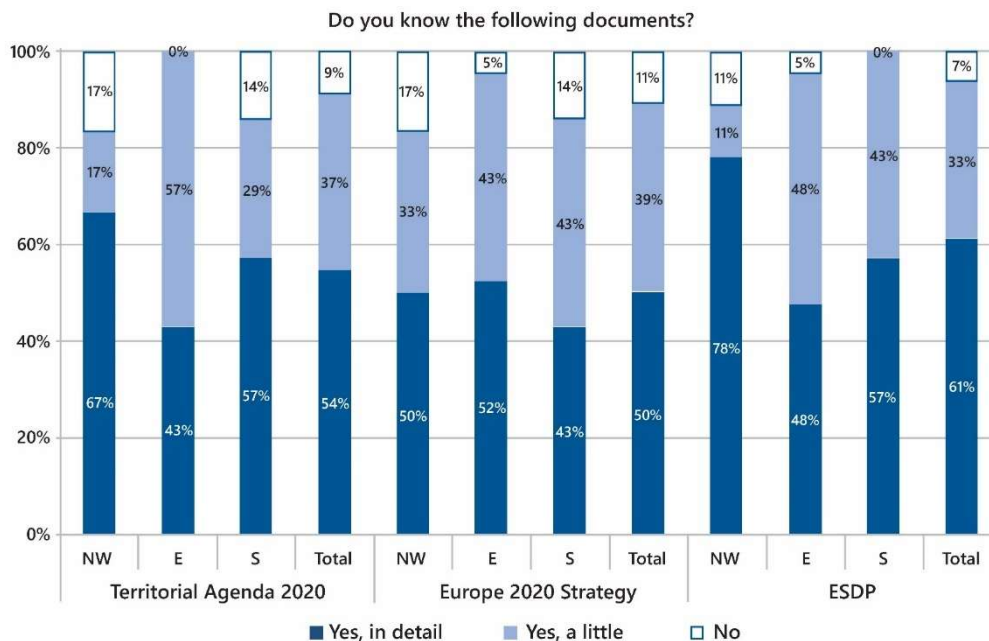


Figure 1: Knowledge of the main European policy documents among spatial planning experts (100%=sum of the values of all answers associated with a macroregion; see also Appendix 1)
Source: Authors' construction (key expert survey 2018)

References to European documents in national, regional, and urban planning documents are clearly more prevalent in the Eastern region (EU11). Such references are generally significantly less frequent in the Northwestern and Southern countries, where the frequency of references to the Leipzig Charter (which focuses on urban development, aligning with the tradition of typical urbanism) is higher, but does not exceed that of the Eastern region (EU11). The best embedded strategy document is the ESDP, which is also widely known in the three non-EU countries that were analyzed. Respondents indicated regular references to the Europe 2020 Strategy and TA2020 in national and regional documents in almost the same proportions (around 70%), while references to the Leipzig Charter were significantly less extensive, evidently appearing mostly in urban-themed documents.

European spatial development priorities extensively penetrate the planning processes of countries. It is mainly the contents of national plans that have been Europeanized, since reference to the nine priorities designated in the TA2020 in national documents was indicated by 85-92% of all respondents, while this proportion was smaller in terms of regional documents, being 69% and 38% in the case of the most and least referred to objectives (Figure 2 shows the data aggregated by country).

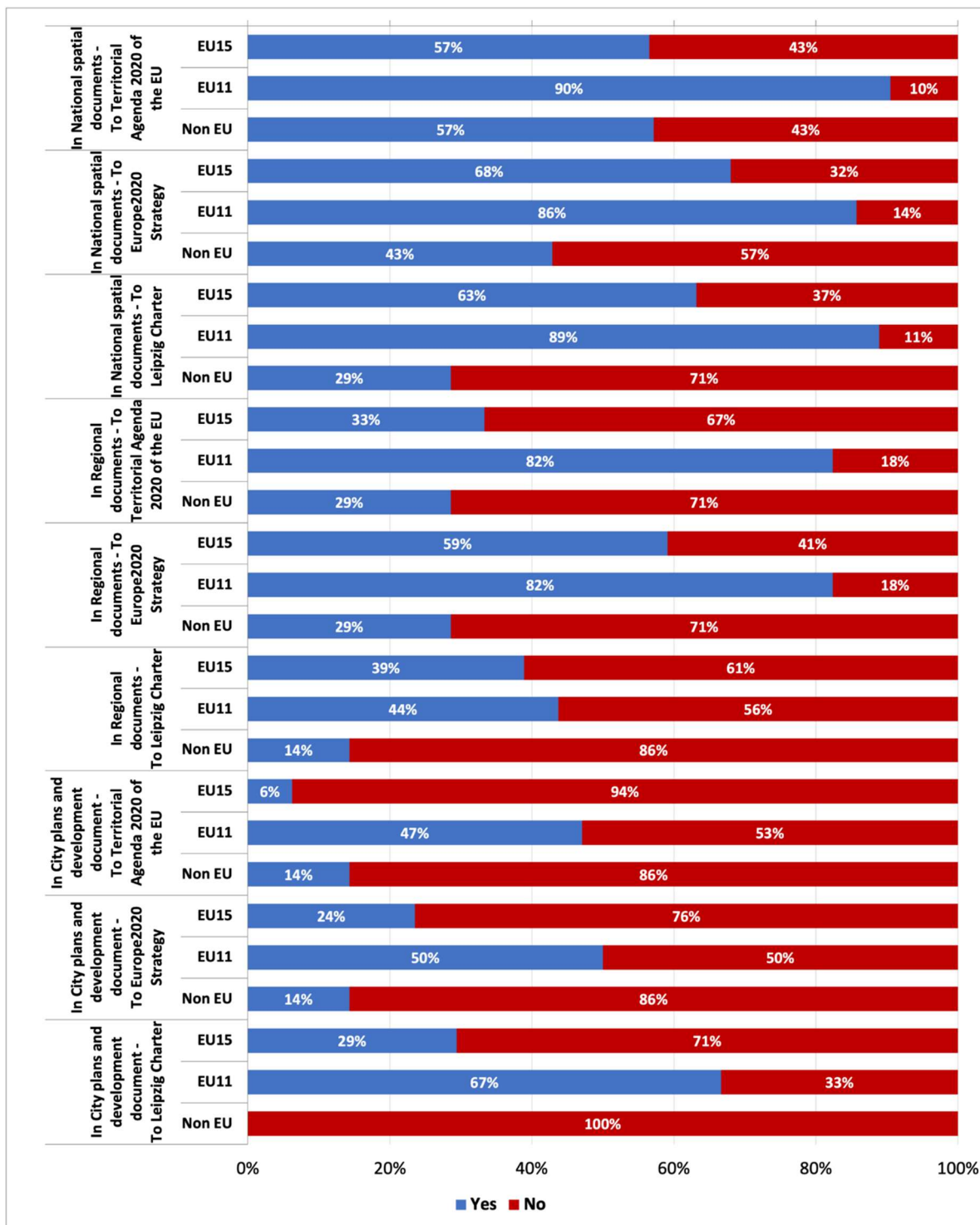


Figure 2: References to European policy documents in domestic spatial plans (100%=sum of values of all answers associated with a country category; see also Appendix1)
Source: Authors' construction (key expert survey, 2018)

Regional documents feature the integrated development of cities (as driving forces of growth), and the linking of ecological, landscape, and cultural values and their management as the most important European objectives. This is followed by territorially balanced development and then polycentric development, but the integration of cross-border and functional spaces comes last. In national plans, European territorial objectives appear in an almost similar order of frequency, the difference being that the first-referenced item is territorially balanced development, while the

ecological-landscape objective is much less prominent, and cross-border and functional spaces are most frequently referenced (62%). When examining the differences between the country groups, it was surprising to see that the ESP priorities put forward in the TA2020 are similarly strongly represented in non-EU countries, such as Norway, Switzerland, and Serbia.

5.2. Themes in plans

The presence of topics associated with the 11 thematic objectives (TOs) that supported the Cohesion process at that time in territorial and urban plans was also examined. We can identify that many of the TOs, which are traditionally less well characterized by spatial planning, are now significantly present in territorial plans, and the appearance of such topics increased significantly more than average over the 15 years under examination. Such TOs are five topics from among the ten most frequently referenced ones, and eight topics from among the ten most appreciated. The favorite topic of spatial planning is now the handling of climate change, together with the transition to a state of low CO₂ emissions and, evidently, the development of the ICT sector. At the same time, it is notable that two TO topics that are traditionally not within the scope of spatial planning – research and development innovation (R&D&I), a highlighted EU priority, and the competitiveness of small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) – have become the object of territorial plans, too. (It may also be noted that the sets of planning functions, both related and not related to Europeanization, are not evaluated consistently, their elements being both intensively and non-intensively referred to – as other parts of our research database that are not presented here show.) It is worth noting that territorial capital is a topic typically discussed in the scientific and policy ESP discourse of the EU, which has significantly expanded.

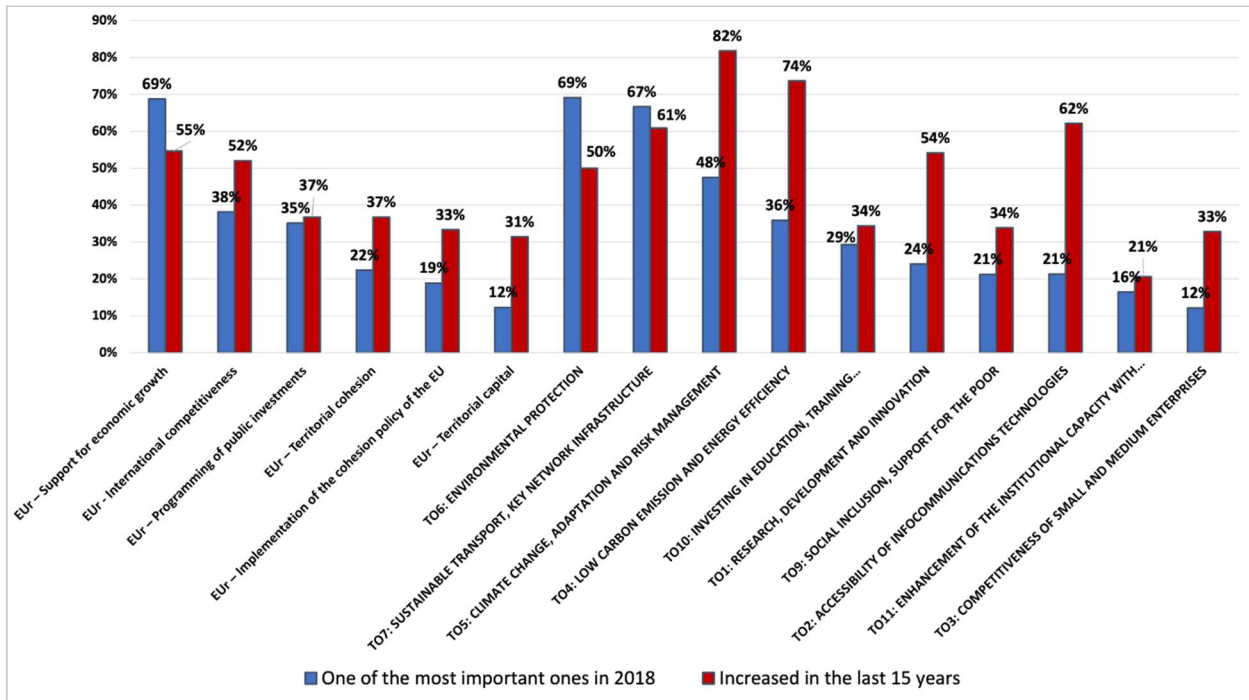


Figure 3: Main ESP concepts and Europe 2020 objectives in domestic spatial plans (100%=sum of values of all answers; see also Appendix1) Source: Authors' construction (key expert survey, 2018)

Based on the data presented in Figure 4, significant differences can be recognized between Old and New MSs. Economic growth and competitiveness were previously significantly present in spatial planning for the Old MSs, but their coverage has expanded strongly in the NMS (Figures 3 and 4), indicating a ‘catching-up’ motivation. The increase in the importance of many topics shows that the new MSs (EU11) are very eager to adopt new ESP concepts in planning (territorial cohesion and capital) and to intensify the role of spatial planning in coordinating/directing public investments (programming public investments, Cohesion Policy). They are also open to including Cohesion Policy topics (TO3, TO10), even those with less spatial relevance. Spatial planning in MSs was more active in addressing ‘green’ issues, such as climate change, sustainable transport, environmental protection, and low-carbon emissions, demonstrating a greater commitment to sustainable development. EU-15 countries’ plans show significantly more interest in innovation-related themes (TO2, TO1). Social inclusion and support for the poor are less well represented, with modest dynamics. Surprisingly, this is particularly the case in the EU11, which are less developed states and have more challenges with poverty.

5.3. Emergence of the priorities associated with the Territorial Agenda 2020

The priorities defined in the Territorial Agenda 2020 are broadly reflected in domestic plans, although there are significant differences among countries (Figure 5).

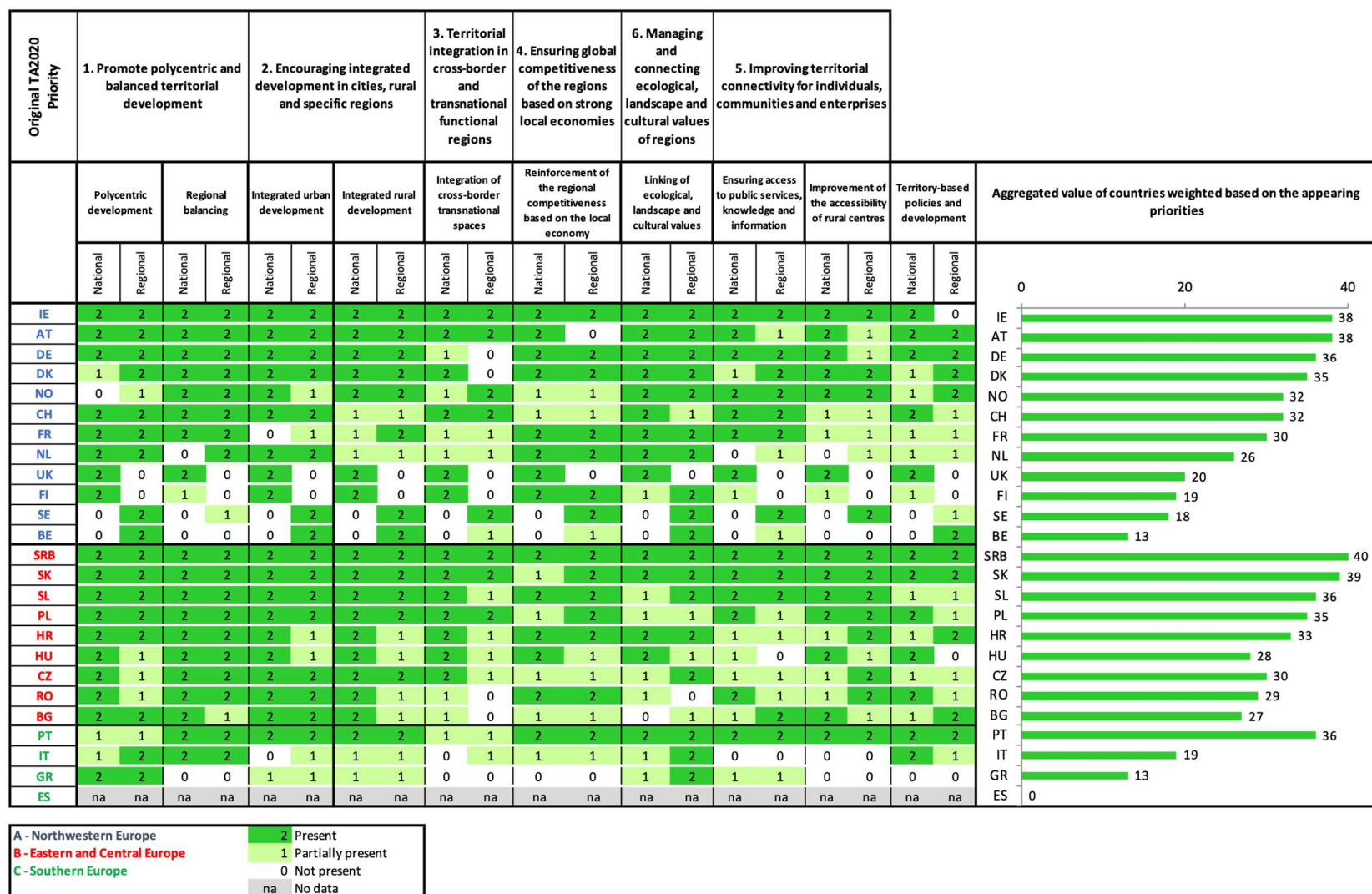


Figure 5: Priorities and overall aims (territory-based policy) of TA2020 in spatial planning documents in 25 European countries (by values of answers aggregated by country and by territorial level –national/regional; see also in Appendix1) Source: Authors’ construction (key expert survey, 2018)

Polycentric development and territorial balancing are the European territorial priorities that are best integrated into domestic spatial plans. Polycentric development appears in the national spatial planning of 21 countries and in regional national documents, while in the case of territorial balancing, the numbers are 20 and 20, respectively. Integrated urban development and integrated rural development are included at nearly the same frequency, while the integration of cross-border spaces and the accessibility of rural areas are less well incorporated, according to the respondents. The extent to which countries have adopted European priorities varies significantly across specific countries, in a surprising manner. The penetration of these European priorities in plans has been limited in the UK, Finland, and Sweden, but particularly in Belgium, as well as in most of the SE countries. The EU11 countries were active in adapting TA2020 priorities; however, surprisingly, Serbia, which is not an EU member, demonstrated the greatest inclusion of European priorities. It is worth noting that the Territorial Agenda and its expert background document were published in Serbian shortly after their original publication. At that time, the country's motivation for joining the EU was very strong, as confirmed by the planning professionals. In our interviews, the coordinating members of the drafting team for TA2020 emphasized that they had to focus on synthesizing existing concepts and ongoing discourses in the EU arena and had very limited room for creating new ideas or aspects.

Considering the appearance of ESP priorities in the examined countries, we see that European countries have a spatial development vision, a major part of which is shared. It is evident that many of the topics and intentions set forth in the context of the EU are well known among the planners in EU countries. Due to intergovernmental cooperation and partnerships among professional communities, such content is also present in planning documents. However, as is indicated in the literature, the rhetoric of planning documents often differs from real development intentions. The extent of this difference corresponds to the fact that some plans are not able (or not intended) to shape reality.

Here, the adaptation of European objectives is motivated by other objectives, including the receipt of funding, communication, alignment, or simply a kind of 'fashion'. This anomaly is also caused by the fact that plans are often, and to a significant extent, expert products that do not reflect real political commitment. The experts who prepare the plans are often significantly embedded in the European professional community. A striking example is Serbia, which is not yet a Member State, but whose plans during the examined period strongly reflected European territorial priorities, despite the fact that TA2020 itself is evidently less well known among experts. It appears that this anomaly is particularly pronounced in CEE planning, as exemplified by the Romanian case, where

the territorial development strategy document strongly reflected the objectives of TA2020, albeit this is not fully valid regarding other dimensions of EPS content.

As regards the adoption of the content of European territorial priorities and topics (ESP concepts), we obtain a relatively balanced picture of European planning systems on the whole. In older MSs in which the establishment of such topics was actively shaped, many of the latter are traditionally present or formed organically, while many new MSs were active in the adaptation of the content of the topics. It is mainly SE countries and Belgium (which is unique in many regards) that have been less inclined to adopt European objectives. The UK is also similar in this respect, as national discourses and planning topics are significant in the country, which has a well-developed planning culture. However, in the case of Belgium, methodological limitations may have contributed to this result. In Belgium (a federal state), the national level lacks real competence in spatial planning; therefore, the emergence of European concepts cannot be reported at this level (See Figure 5).

An aggregated indicator (a multivariate index) is used to summarize the indicators and provide a more global assessment (see Fig. 6). Among the countries in which the examined level of Europeanization was the highest are those which played a leading role in forming European spatial planning discourses, such as France, the Netherlands, and Germany, although countries from CEE are also represented, including Slovenia and Slovakia.

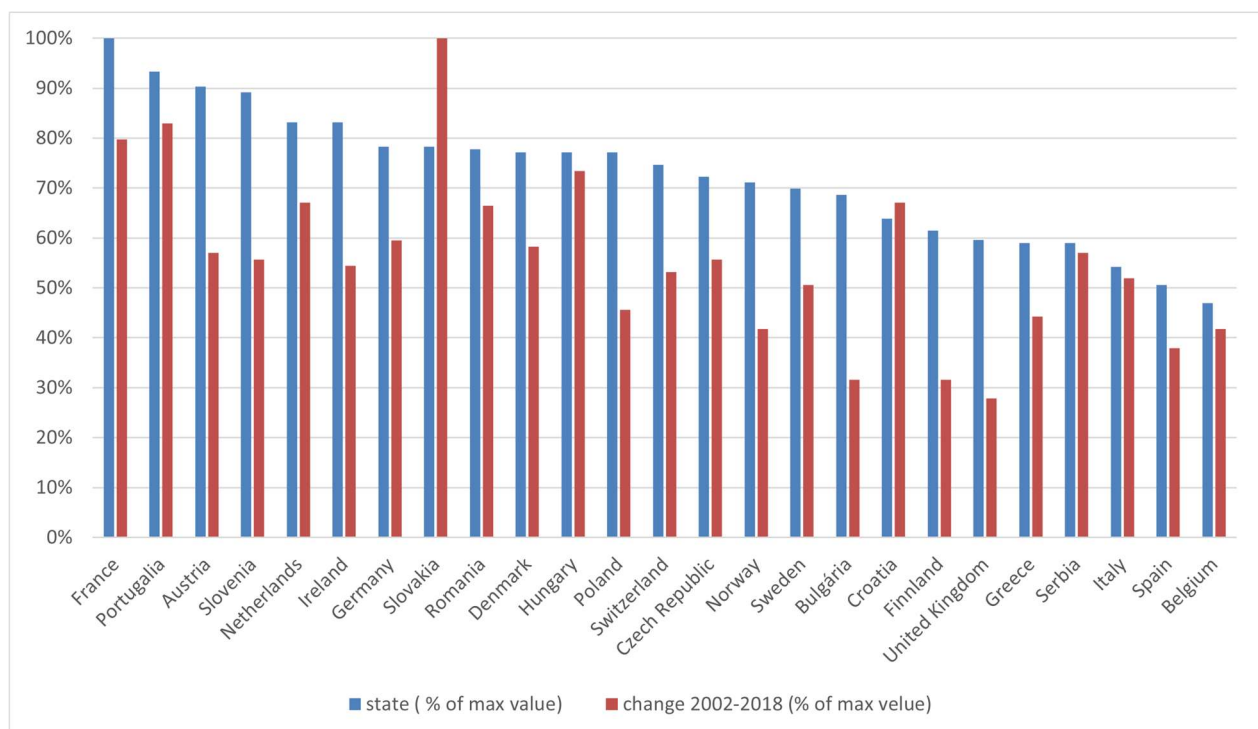


Figure 6: Aggregated indicator of the appearance of European objectives and topics in the spatial plans of some European countries (see calculation in Appendix1) Source: Authors' construction (key expert survey and document analysis, 2018)

From the SE region, three countries are hardly influenced by the Europeanization of themes. The exception is Portugal, which had the second-highest score in terms of both the Europeanization of planning and its changes. Two national-level differences may justify this. The dominant planning tradition there – unlike in other Southern European countries – is regional economics (see Farinós, 2006), and the sources of Cohesion Funds are allocated via regional or territorial-oriented programs in greater proportions. The change in the emergence of European themes was greatest – except in France and the Netherlands – mainly in CEE countries, such as Slovakia, Hungary, Croatia, Romania, Slovenia, the Czech Republic, as well as Portugal, the characteristics of which have already been mentioned. The greatest strengthening of the Europeanization of content is seen in Slovakia, which confirms the related results of the COMPASS project, which showed the strong contribution of the discursive influence of this country. British planning seemed less sensitive to the topic of Europeanization. The values of the three non-EU countries – with strong ties to the EU – suggest that the content defined by EU documents is included in the broader spatial planning discourse (such as that generated by ESPON) beyond the EU.

5.4. Discussion of findings

The most visible symptom of Europeanization in spatial planning is the widespread presence of EU concepts in the content of domestic systems, either in themes, goals, or direct citations included in plans. To understand its real significance, it is helpful to explore the differences between MSs' performance and to compare the examined fourth ESP period (TA2020 dominated, and marked by 'territorial cohesion and urban development') with the ESDP-centered third period, the 'boom era' (as Faludi [2011] called it). Similar to ESDP (Nordregio, 2007; Waterhout & Stead, 2007), conformance with TA2020 is broadly perceived in most of the analyzed countries. This kind of Europeanization impact, which is rather a type of absorption – as Giannakourou (2012) puts it – in most EU countries, is stronger than that experienced in changes to planning style, culture, or policy changes leading to substantive transformation, as revealed by ESPON COMPASS (2018).

There are significant differences in the creation and application of the leading documents associated with the two aforementioned eras. TA2020 was created under the Hungarian Presidency and its follow-up activities under the subsequent Polish Presidency, which provided an opportunity for a significant contribution to the ESP discourses and to upload some of the characteristics of their region. However, unlike in the case of the ESDP (Faludi, 2004a; Waterhout & Stead, 2007; Nordregio, 2007), according to the interviews with coordinating experts, the TA2020 was less able to incorporate the specifics of the CEE countries, but the discourse persisted in the conceptual

context dominated by the ESPON program and the main planning cultures of NWE. Therefore, this opportunity was not used for bottom-up discursive influence for CEE. The high level of awareness of the ESDP among planners indicates that it has had a stronger impact on the planning practices of the countries participating in its creation and discourse. At the same time, the content of the newer documents, particularly the Europe 2020 objectives (which underpin Cohesion Policy), is more strongly taken into account and, above all, directly referred to in the newer MSs.

The NWE MSs and the CEE (EU11) group showed the highest level of engagement in applying EU concepts. However, behind the similar symptoms, there are different positions. Surprisingly, according to our analysis of the topics applied in domestic spatial planning, ESP concepts with an NWE origin (territorial cohesion, territorial capital) are more prominent in the spatial plans of CEE MSs. In ESP discourses, NWE countries uploaded many of their spatial policy concepts (territorial cohesion, spatial planning, integrated development), while CEE MSs downloaded them by using the European concepts in their spatial planning documents as a result of significant discursive adoption. Taking into account the different contributions of MSs to the creation of ESP (Faludi, 2004) and the results of the COMPASS project (ESPON 2018) and its recent interpretation (Cotella & Janin Rivolin, 2025), our results show that the NWE MSs of the EU-15 are more active in terms of bottom-up discursive influence, playing a key role in producing themes, while CEE countries are typically adopters of these themes, active in top-down discursive integration. Such eager, frequent references to EU concepts in the plans of CEE MSs tend to indicate a motivation or compulsion to conform. This is best illustrated by the fact that Serbia's spatial planning showed the greatest alignment with the TA2020 objectives, even though the country was not yet an EU member at the time, but was highly motivated to join as soon as possible. This stronger engagement with the top-down influences of MSs with shorter EU involvement can even be observed when comparing accession countries and new MSs (Simeonova & Stamenkov, 2021); however, in the Western Balkans, professional traditions are also determinant alongside Europeanization (Berisha & Cotella, 2024).

The topics preferred more by EU-15 MSs show that the latter focus more on innovation, competitiveness, and the sustainability transition – issues specific to core regions (Ploszaj et al., 2018) – while the spatial plans of CEE MSs had a stronger connection to the receipt of public funds (national grants and EU funds) for the development of territories. This describes how locations are dependent on redistributive funding from the superior public level, which is specific to the peripheries of the EU (Weissenbacher, 2019; Rubinic & Tajnikar, 2020). Our results indicate that it is very meaningful that spatial planning in EU-15 MSs focused much more (with increasing intensity) on “green” topics from as early as 2018, which was not particularly motivated by the ESP documents (e.g., TA2020) of that period. These issues appeared in a more emphasized way

only later, in 2020, in the last Territorial Agenda (TA2030) and in the New Leipzig Charter (2020) or in the Green Deal (2020) of the EU. This confirms the proposition that NWE countries incorporate topics into their domestic spatial planning that later also gain importance in ESP documents, while topics preferred by EU11 MSs in 2018 did not receive further focus in the new generation of ESP documents. It also illustrates that NWE countries are active in the bottom-up process of Europeanization, as indicated by Lenschow (2006), whose actors have taken or could take an active role in shaping ESP as *'influencers'*.

Countries in the CEE region demonstrated an adaptive attitude and sources of motivation to adopt European patterns as the EU's *'good learners'*. In CEE countries and Portugal, Cohesion Policy has played a significant role in spatial planning due to the strong reliance on EU funding. This is strongly connected to the fact that the latter's planning systems after the collapse of socialism (1990) were reconstructed with a strong EU integration motivation, in preparation especially for EU grants (Salamin, 2025; Belof & Kryczka, 2025; Benedek, 2024; Altroock, 2017). While the spread of ideas often occurs through voluntary policy transfer and discourse, in these countries, meeting EU objectives may be considered more obligatory. Spatial plans frequently align with Cohesion Policy goals (e.g., that of Europe 2020) and are often developed specifically to access EU funds. This creates a planning hierarchy, from the Europe 2020 Strategy and Partnership Agreements down to national and local plans. Regional and urban plans that rely on EU funding must reflect EU priorities, especially in Cohesion countries, unlike in more developed MSs, where Europeanization stems mainly from voluntary cooperation (as Faludi [2014] and Dühr et al. [2020] have described).

The strong penetration of EU themes into the spatial planning of CEE MSs may be caused partly by the increasing share of professionals who speak the *'language'* of ESP, as they have become involved in the discourses of the ESPON program, joint research, and other elements of European Territorial Cooperation over the last two decades. However, it is an alarming fact that even the place-based and cooperation-oriented transnational and interregional INTERREG programs (especially their ESPON component), which play a crucial role in these ESP discourses, exhibit the core-periphery pattern in their actual implementation, as Péti et al. (2024) revealed. Based on our results and the reviewed literature, there is limited mutual learning between NWE MSs and CEE, as well as between NWE MSs and SE. The core of the EU is dominant in relation to its two peripheries. Based on this, we can say that CEE tends to conform rather than perform (See Waterhout & Cotella, 2007; Janin Rivolin, 2008).

However, our results do not fully support Giannakourou's claim (2012) that only mutual learning and policy transfer lead to real transformation, while mandatory compliance does not. This position was also reflected in the opinions of the CEE key experts we interviewed, who, in

fact, may have overstated the phenomenon of the Europeanization of planning. It appears that there was a rather strong sense of engagement and a strong attitude of learning from the (old) EU during the period under study, as also confirmed by the authors' personal planning experiences. Case studies of countries (e.g., Czernielewska et al, 2004; Benedek, 2023; Salamin, 2019, 2025; Dąbrowski, Piskorek, 2018) have shown that during the fourth Europeanization period, substantive changes and even transformations occurred in the planning systems of CEE countries, without mutual learning. The Hungarian law on the spatial planning system, and the introduction of the integrated urban strategy as a formal (obligatory) planning instrument (although it was terminated in 2021) and the regional planning of Poland can be mentioned as examples of systemic change reflecting a very adaptive attitude (Salamin, 2025) or even the extensive application of the integrated development tools of ITI and CLLD to the greatest extent in Poland and the Czech Republic (Ferry et al, 2018).

However, some countries show neither a high level of adoption of EU concepts (Figure 7) nor any particular dynamism in increasing this adoption. They seem to ignore (*'ignorers'*) this type of ESP approach. Further research is needed to explore the reasons for this. However, it can be assumed that the dominance of an urbanism planning tradition and the related professional culture in SE countries may deter planners from embracing softer EU concepts. At the same time, studies (Giannakourou, 2005; Cotella & Janin Rivolin, 2011) show that conforming dynamics also prevail in Europeanization in SE countries. The low value of conformance for the UK can be explained by the fact that it has one of the most distinctive and dominant planning systems in the world, with a broad scientific base that is less susceptible to influence from 'others,' while its commitment to EU discourse may also have declined during the Brexit process.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The results of the study shed light on significant and permanent functional differences in the participation of European states in Europeanization. In the arena of discursive integration, most of the NWE MSs are strong influencers, while CEE MSs were rather good learners, and SE MSs are influenced mainly by top-down influences, but are less motivated to conform to the hegemonic ESP discourse of the EU. Our results suggest that, instead of mutual learning, there is a one-way flow from NWE to CEE. This suggests long-lasting asymmetric participation in discursive integration. For understanding the real nature of ESP, it is unavoidable that we focus on the specific barriers to discursive integration faced by actors in the future. According to the ideals associated with how European territorial governance and spatial planning can effectively work (described by Cotella and Janin Rivolin [2025] and Waterhout and Stead [2007]), participants are not perceived as passive recipients, but rather as active players in a joint process that leads to the definition of

these concepts, drawing on different domestic perspectives. The weak discursive power of the MSs of both peripheries (SE and CEE in particular) is a barrier to participating in discursive integration through bottom-up discursive influence. Underrepresentation in INTERREG cooperation (Vf. Péti et al, 2024) and in academic discourses in the field (Meier, 2012) illustrate this weak discursive power of CEE MSs.

At the same time, there are constraints (access to Cohesion Policy sources), especially for CEE MSs, on being more receptive and adopting a top-down discursive influence. If dependence on Cohesion Policy remains the main driver of Europeanization for most CEE countries and perhaps Portugal, the chance of genuine cooperative ESP and mutual learning will remain very limited, and only ‘thin learning’ is likely to occur (Cf. Giannakourou, 2012.) The greater constraints of CEE MSs in the top-down Europeanization process may explain their discursive adoption and formal conformance without real systemic change and performance, as described by authors such as Salamin (2025), Dąbrowski & Piskorek (2018), Altrock (2017), and Maier (2012).

If the asymmetric participation in ESP discourses remains, the ideas and specific issues affecting regions outside the core, CEE in particular, will fail to be comprehensively reflected in the European arena. This risks reducing the effectiveness of EU policies, particularly those related to territorial cohesion. Some recommendations can be made for a more balanced (thus effective) ESP discourse. Reforming ESPON and the INTERREG programs, as well as the coordination methods of European territorial governance, may be a reasonable ambition. The purely competition-based selection of ESPON project groups should be reviewed, and the approach of a geographically balanced network of project partners (re)introduced. In research projects and cooperation, CEE and SE-specific topics and their regions should be consciously supported, so that they are given appropriate weight in European discourse. In the identification of spatial visions, policy solutions, and good practices, it would be beneficial to consider the variety of approaches and solutions instead of identifying the only European “good” way. In addition to common European concepts, more space should be awarded to macro-region-specific goals and characteristics. This paper has focused on a period that could be considered a golden age of Europeanization. However, after the investigated period, the generally receptive and ‘good learner’ attitude of CEE MSs might have changed in parallel with the increasing political tensions between the EU institutions and certain CEE national governments. The research – especially that associated with the interviews – revealed some signs of fatigue in CEE MSs during the prolonged process of one-way learning. As a recent study (Salamin, 2025) revealed, in the case of Hungary, despite the robust wave of Europeanization until mid-2018 – with the country showing the fourth largest increase in the adoption of EU content (and the greatest top-down overall influence between

2000 and 2006 (ESPON, 2018) – recent reforms of the planning system have steered the Hungarian system away from Europeanization in the last half decade.

Due to the aforementioned limitations of the empirical method that was applied, country-specific, deeper analyses could provide more knowledge about the policy transfer mechanisms and the real nature and significance of limits to engaging in discourses about European spatial planning and territorial governance.

Finally, it is essential to note that, over the last two decades, ESP and EU territorial governance, centered on territorial cohesion, has had a mixed impact and has been less successful. The report on TA2020 implementation revealed growing spatial centralization and territorial imbalances in the EU, contradicting its objectives. Awareness of territorial cohesion and the TA2020 remains low outside specialist circles, reflected in weak political ownership and a shift in cohesion policy toward sectoral priorities (Böhme et al., 2015). This lack of significant influence is even more pronounced in the case of Territorial Agenda 2030 (TA2030), which is not even referenced in the regional programs of MSs (Romania being a notable exception) and is largely absent from sectors such as transport and environment, despite its relevance (ESPON 2024). Policy discussions on the essential function of ESP should now be reinitiated. The ‘fixed division’ of labor among groups of MSs in ESP and the lack of mutual learning between them, along with the long-lasting core-periphery division in the EU (TA2030), might suggest that opportunities for the creation of common spatial development goals and themes of the EU will be limited in the future, and if ESP focuses only on this, its position might weaken even further.

When assessing the real potential of ESP, it is worth considering its broader current policy context in the EU. The 2021–2027 EU programming period was not associated with a unified plan or comprehensive strategy, but only refers to thematic strategies such as the Green Deal or the European Pillar of Social Rights. These formulate European messages along much narrower topics than the Europe 2020 strategy did previously. This is less conducive to complex and integrated spatial planning that covers multiple sectors. Accordingly, it is likely that not only general strategic planning but also the further development of European spatial planning should not be expected from current practice. With Brexit, one of the oldest and most characteristic national spatial planning cultures has increased its isolation from European planning practice. Moreover, the disintegration signaled by Brexit and the increasing disputes between MSs may affect the Europeanization of Member States' spatial planning practices and set them back. At the same time, there are also processes that could promote ESP: in the 2021-2027 period, an integrated territorial

objective² has already appeared among the programming objectives of Cohesion Policy, which have been reduced from 11 to 5, radically simplifying planning and the use of EU funds based on territorial logic, especially in cohesion countries. A new feature of the current period, the Just Transition Fund, can be used in a territorial manner, creating an interesting new area of flexibility. The intensifying EU accession process in Ukraine and the Western Balkans also introduces a number of territorial considerations into European spatial planning. It is difficult to assess the direction European spatial planning is taking at present, but this will likely be decided in the coming period.

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Disclosure of interest

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

² ...a Europe closer to citizens by fostering the sustainable and integrated development of all types of territories (PO5).

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Appendix 1:
Quantifying the results of the key expert survey

Indicators (questions)		Possible values (of answers) (partially; one of the most important) all 'no' answers are zero	
(A1) Relevant Thematic Objectives of Europe 2020 (TO) source: key expert survey	TO1: research, development and innovation	0,5; 1,0	
	TO2: accessibility of infocommunications technologies	0,5; 1,0	
	TO3: competitiveness of small and medium enterprises	0,5; 1,0	
	TO4: low carbon emission and energy efficiency	0,5; 1,0	
	TO5: climate change, adaptation and risk management	0,5; 1,0	
	TO6: environmental protection	0,5; 1,0	
	TO7: sustainable transport, key network infrastructure	0,5; 1,0	
	TO9: social inclusion, support for the poor	0,5; 1,0	
	TO10: investing in education, training...	0,5; 1,0	
	TO11: enhancement of the institutional capacity with public authorities and ...	0,5; 1,0	
(A2) Main/Basic EU concepts source: key expert survey			
Planning functions (Eur)	Support for economic growth	1,0; 2,0	
	International Competitiveness	1,0; 2,0	
	concept of territorial cohesion	1,0; 2,0	
	concept of territorial capital	1,0; 2,0	
	Programming of public investments	1,0; 2,0	
(A3) EU policy documents source: key expert survey	Europe 2020 – referenced at national level	0,0; 1,0	
	Europe 2020 – referenced at regional level	0,0; 1,0	
	Territorial Agenda 2020 – ref. at national level	0,0; 1,0	
	Territorial Agenda 2020 – ref. at regional level	0,0; 1,0	
	Leipzig Charter – referenced at national level	0,0; 1,0	
	Leipzig Charter – referenced at regional level	0,0; 1,0	
(A4) Priorities of Territorial Agenda 2020 source: key expert survey	Priority 1. Promote polycentric and balanced territorial development	polycentric development	0,0; 1,0
		regional balancing	0,0; 1,0
	Priority 2. Encouraging integrated development in cities, rural and specific regions	integrated rural development	0,0; 1,0
		integrated urban development	0,0; 1,0
	Priority 3. Territorial integration in cross-border and transnational functional regions		0,0; 1,0
	Priority 4. Ensuring global competitiveness of the regions based on strong local economies		0,0; 1,0
	Priority 5. Improving territorial connectivity for individuals, communities and enterprises	ensuring access to public services, knowledge, and information	0,0; 1,0
		improving the accessibility of rural centres	0,0; 1,0
	Priority 6. Managing and connecting ecological, landscape and cultural values of regions		0,0; 1,0

	Overall aim: Territory-based policies and development	0,0; 1,0
(A5) Appearance of European objectives and topics in the national strategy/plan (See in Appendix 3) source: document analysis	objectives of Europa 2020 (see above)	1,0; 2,0; (3,0 if highly significant)
	Priorities of TA2020 (see above)	1,0; 2,0; (3,0 if highly significant)
	concept of territorial cohesion	0,0; 1,0
	concept of territorial capital	0,0; 1,0
	concept of territorial harmony (as in TA2020)	0,0; 1,0
<p><i>The aggregated indicator of the appearance of European objectives and topics is calculated as follows:</i></p> $(A1+A2+A3+(A4/2)+A5) * 0.75 \text{ (Maximum value: } 31.13; \text{ Minimum value: } -14.63)$		

Appendix 2

Interviews and consultations during the research:

- Antonic, Branislav (SRB, University of Belgrade),
- Balogh, Zoltán (EC DG Empl),
- Blynth, Richard (UK, RTPPI),
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Appendix 3

Document analysis

Country	reference to the EU	integrating EU sources	European objectives and topics			Planning documents
			Europe 2020	Priorities of Territorial Agendas	territorial concepts (cohesion, capital, harmony)	
AT	2	0	2	2	2	Austrian Spatial Development Concept (ÖREK), 2011
BE			1	1		Visie 2050. Longterm Strategy of Flanders, 2016 Ruimtelijk Structuurplan Vlaanderen (Spatial Structure Plan for Flanders), 1997
BG	1	1	2	2	2	National Concept for Spatial Development for the period 2013-2025: The national space –our common heritage for the future, 2012
HR			1	1	1	Spatial Development Strategy of the Republic of Croatia 2016
CY						(no document available)
CZ	1		1	1	1	Spatial Development Policy of the Czech Republic, 2015
DK			2	1	1	Regional Development Plan 2012 - Central Denmark region, 2012
ES	2		2	1		Catalonia 2020 Strategy, 2012
EE	2	2	1	2	2	Eesti regionaalarengu strateegia 2014-2020, 2014
FI			2	1	1	National Priorities of Regional development 2016-2019: Competitive regions and smooth everyday life, 2016
FR	2		3	2	1	NATIONAL SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY 2010-2013 - Towards a green and fair economy 2010
DE		2	1	1	1	Leitbilder und Handlungsstrategien für die Raumentwicklung in Deutschland, 2016 Concepts and Action Strategies for the Spatial Development of Germany (Perspectives of Spatial Development in Germany brochure), 2006
GR	1		1	2	2	General Plan for Spatial Planning: And Sustainable Development. - Έγκριση του Γενικού Πλαισίου Χωροταξικού Σχεδιασμού και Αειφόρου Ανάπτυξης.
HU	2	3	3	3	2	Országos Fejlesztési És Területfejlesztési Konceptió (OFTK), 2014
IT			2	1	1	Piano territoriale regionale dell'Emilia-Romagna, La regione-sistema: il capitale territoriale e le reti - Emilia-Romagna regional territorial plan The region-system: the territorial capital and the networks, 2010
IE	1		2	3	1	National Spatial Strategy for Ireland 2002 - 2020. People, places and potential, 2001
LT	3	3	2	2	2	National Development Plan of Latvia for 2014-2020, 2012
LV	2		2	1	1	Lithuania's Progress Strategy "Lithuania 2030", 2012
LU					1	Master Programme for Territorial Planning (PDAT), 2008
MT	1		1	1	2	Strategic Plan for Environment and Development, 2015
NL			1	1	1	National Policy Strategy for Infrastructure and Spatial Planning (SVIR), 2011
NO		1	1	1	2	White Paper on Rural and Regional Policy, 2013
PL	1	1	1	3	2	National Spatial Development Concept 2030, 2011
PT	1	1	2	2	2	Programa Nacional da Política de Ordenamento do Território (National Policy on Territorial Planning), 2007

Country	reference to the EU	integrating EU sources	European objectives and topics			Planning documents
			Europe 2020	Priorities of Territorial Agendas	territorial concepts (cohesion, capital, harmony)	
RO	2	1	1	3	2	Strategic Concept of Territorial Development - Romania 2030. Romania a competitive, balanced and prosperous country, 2009
SK	3	3	2	1	2	National Regional Development Strategy of the Slovak Republic, 2011
SL	1		2	2	2	Spatial Development Strategy of Slovenia, 2004
SE			3	1	1	Regional Development Plan for the Stockholm Region (RUFSS 2010), 2010
CH			1	1	1	Federal Government's Regional Policy, 2008
UK - ENG			1	2	1	National Planning Policy Framework (England) 2012
UK - SCO			2	1	2	Ambition * Opportunity * Place - Scotland's Third National Planning Framework, 2014
UK - WAL		1	2	1	1	People Places Futures. The Wales Spatial Plan. 2008 Update
UK - NIR	1		2	2	2	Regional Development Strategy, 2010

highly significant (3p)	
yes (2p)	
partly (1p)	
No (0p)	