European Networks and Ideas: Changing National Policies?

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Keywords

Abstract

Wider involvement and better knowledge are keywords in the recent White Paper on European Governance. The political discourse has, quite obviously, taken up the academic debate about the importance of ideas and networks. The Commission is seen as an ideational entrepreneur which by arguing and networking is able to induce autonomous actors with quite diverse interests to follow a European course of action. Regional policy has been a most promising field of research to confirm this hypothesis. Recent investigations can be read, however, in quite a different way. The paper questions established conventional wisdom concerning the importance of European ideas and networks for policy change and raises the question how ideational and network competition could be explored in a better way.

Kurzfassung

"Europäisierung" ist seit kurzem der neue Modetrend der EU Forschung. Ein erstes Zwischenergebnis ist, dass rechtliche Vorgaben und finanzielle Anreize das Ausmaß der nationalen Anpassungsbereitschaft nicht alleine erklären können. So wendet sich das Forschungsinteresse zunehmend jenen weichen Formen des Regierens zu, mit denen autonome Akteure zu einem zielkonformen Handeln gebracht werden. Vernetzung und Einbindung, die Konstruktion und Verbreitung von Leitideen durch "ideelle Unternehmer" spielen augenscheinlich eine wichtige Rolle für die zunehmende Durchdringung der Mitgliedstaaten durch europäische Politik. Bei näherem Hinsehen erweist sich allerdings, dass der Augenschein trügt. Jüngere Forschungsergebnisse beweisen die Beharrungskraft sub-systemischer Faktoren gerade in der Regionalpolitik, dem Paradebeispiel für erfolgreiche Mehrebenenpolitik. Im Text werden nicht nur die Widersprüche aufgezeigt, sondern die Frage gestellt, wie die Kontextgebundenheit von Ideen und Vernetzung in der empirischen Forschung besser erfasst werden kann.

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1 Introduction

The role of regions and the Europeanisation of regional policy have been a favoured object of research and a prominent field for testing new concepts of European governance and institutional transformation. (Conzelmann and Knodt 2001) What is special about regional policy in Europe?(1) At first sight it is "integration as usual". The European impact moved from negative integration, limiting member states' capacity to cope with regional imbalances, to positive integration by expanding Community regulatory authority and providing extensive resources. In terms of expenditure it has become one of the EU's core activities. Its declared objective is "the strengthening of its economic and social cohesion"(2). One of the undeclared and contested objectives is to reach down to lower levels of governance, changing policies and procedures at sub-national level and empowering public and private stake holders. By doing this it intrudes upon the institutional authority of member states, spurring the development of "multi-level governance" and eventually encouraging further regionalism.

When West-European integration started, the reduction of "the differences existing between the various regions and the backwardness of the less favoured regions" and a commitment to the "harmonious development of economic activities" was already written into the Treaty(3). But it offered no specific provisions to achieve this aim. Coping with regional disparities was the responsibility of national authorities. State aid to spur the development of backward regions was accepted as potential exemptions from the application of common competition law. The overriding concern was to accomplish the functioning of the Common Market and overall economic growth. With the first initiative on Economic and Monetary Union in the late 1960s the economic debate turned to the problem of regional disparities because these might impede deepening integration. Interest in a Community remedy to structural and regional imbalances grew in the early 1970s when social aspirations and economic developments coincided with political events. From then on, a European regional policy became a salient political issue just as it was a relevant economic concern.(4) Active regional policies at nation state level had stimulated rising expectations in re-distributive policies. Growing interdependence made it plausible that the Community should shoulder more responsibilities for the correction of unwanted consequences of market allocation. Successive enlargements increased the demand for fiscal redistribution across national boundaries, partly to compensate for a lack of short-term tangible benefits (the British case), partly to balance a likely negative impact of market forces on disadvantaged regions (a sensitive matter in the Southern and the Eastern enlargement). Last, not least, the ambition of the Commission to implement more strictly Community competition law and to exert a tighter control on state aid going to the regions prompted efforts towards finding a coherent approach to regional policy objectives.

What had started "as the hesitant creation of a modest fund with slender resources, barely large enough even to scratch at the surface of the problem of severe regional imbalances" (Wallace 1977:137) expanded in the years to come. The Single Market package deal included a deep cutting modification of the Community's approach to regional policy. The reform

of 1988 entailed both a considerable increase in financial commitments(5) and a substantial change in the objectives and implementation of the structural funds. In the following decade European regional policy went through a process of significant supranational upgrading. Apart from the expansion in budgetary terms, a full fledged regime was developed. This entailed the formulation of a common main objective, namely the strengthening of economic and social cohesion, an agreement on operating principles, rules and procedures. Whereas the principle of *concentration*, which is asking for focussing resources on priority objectives, and the principle of *additionality*, which is meant to confine EU funds to complement, rather than replace, national funding, only restrict the use of money, the other two principles interfere with policies and politics at member state levels. *Programming* entails the obligation to develop a coherent strategy setting policy priorities for a longer period covering more than one region and incorporating a multi-task approach. Programming has been used as an instrument of "mainstreaming". Faced with a stricter application of competition law and improved procedures for monitoring state aid, member states felt increasingly constrained to bring national regional policies in line with Community objectives. *Partnership* is asking for close cooperation between the Commission and "appropriate authorities" at national, regional, and local level and has been extended to include "various economic and social partners". First the Commission guidelines only suggested to include the "usual suspects" like chambers of commerce, representatives of industry, agriculture, trade unions, employers, etc.; now partnership should include environmental and gender groups, too.

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There is broad agreement among scholars that this provision has opened up "novel political opportunities for a wide range of actors" (Christiansen 1999:355).(6) The procedural framing of cohesion policy exemplifies well the operation of "multi-level governance" (Marks et al. 1996), i.e. "the dispersion of authoritative decision making across multiple territorial levels" (Hooghe and Marks 2001:XI). It has acted as a catalyst for the strengthening of regional administrations in a number of countries. Some authors, more interested in the change of territorial politics, even claim that a "new regionalism" has emerged (Keating 1998, Jeffery 1997). The effect on polity and politics has spurred a lively discussion: Did the European cohesion policy set off the devolution of power within member states or did it leave the dominance of national governments unaltered? Is it a pertinent observation that – though to a variable degree and dependent on a number of distinct context conditions and actor properties – "national, supranational, and national actors *share* responsibility for policy-making" (Marks 1996:417)? Or is it correct to say that regions and the Commission are part of an "intergovernmental play" in which they are independent actors but constrained by a script "written essentially by the member states" (Pollack 1995:285, cit. in Allan 2000:245)?

Some authors still stick to the debate whether or not the autonomy of governments has been challenged and they tell the story of European regional policy as a cyclical development: First a "significant advance in the direction of multi-level governance" which then has been followed by "a reassertion of member state control" (Allen 2000:246). The wealth of empirical research accumulated till today, however, gives evidence to both, namely "the elevation of regional and local actors without a serious weakening of national structures" (Christiansen 1999:354). Therefore, it may well be argued that the real question is not who decides and who dominates (Peterson and Bomberg 1999:148,170).

In recent years, theoretical reflections and empirical research has moved from "who decides what" to the question on what grounds decisions are taken. The focus is not on the competence and the capacities of actors and the ways and means in which they pursue their interests. Rather, it is on preference formation trying to explain what makes people want what they want. Ideas and assumptions of appropriateness, generated and disseminated through networks are key concepts to understand the evolution of European regional policies and, in particular, the implementation of the Community's structural funds policy.

The puzzle to be explained is threefold: (1) Unanimity did not keep the EU (and formerly the EC) from formulating an extensive programme of re-distribution and succeeding in subsequent efforts of agreeing to far ranging reforms; (2) despite trenchant effects on member states and regions in terms of interfering with established governance procedures it was met with a high level of compliance; (3) though member state governments have a deeply vested interest in keeping their privileged role as gatekeepers in the European multi-level game, EU policy making contributed to an upgrading of the ›third level of government‹. The answer, now widely shared among regional experts, is that ideas and networks were crucial to bring about change. The theoretical argument follows the neo-institutionalist insight that meaning, in particular the practice of ›standards of appropriateness‹, is equally important in guiding collective action as are rights, rules, regulations and resources (March and Olsen 1995, 245-248). Additionally, empirical research has validated the importance of an ideational entrepreneur (mainly associated with the Commission) and the significance of policy networks for generating and spreading consensual knowledge.

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On closer scrutiny, however, the smooth surface of our explanatory concept shows cracks and fissures and is demonstrating inconsistencies that are difficult to explain. The puzzle is not that we are faced with a ›differential Europe‹ (Héritier et al. 2001). We anticipated that sub-national institutions will be stubborn to change and that the implementation of EU regional policy will be »in national colours«(7). It is rather the opaque role of ideas and networks and the erratic course of adaptation that challenges our analytical approach. Could it have happened that our interest in ideas and networks narrowed our view and we just concentrated research on those parts of reality where they make a difference? Now that we have taken a broader look and gained deviant results, how do we add new insights to established knowledge? It would be tempting to take contesting evidence to challenge established wisdom. This is the way to catch the attention of the scientific community: Let's draw bold generalisations that discard previous understanding. The story would then read as follows:(8) "First, the existence of transnational (EU) policy networks is neither necessary nor sufficient for predicting policy change in a domestic setting. Second, domestic conditions (existing belief systems, power relations, bottom-up policy learning) are more important in shaping policy change or stability than the influence of transnational networks… Third, some of the consequences are that existing EU studies (a) overestimate the role of the Commission as an ideational entrepreneur, (b) overestimate the capacity of EU carrots and sticks… to alter domestic policy behaviour. Instead, this paper highlights the capacity of domestic "contexts" to (a) generate policy change (e.g. new ideas) , and (b) transform and adapt external ideas to domestic preferences, beliefs or interests."

Deliberately; I did not sum up the research in such a clear cut picture. The reason is not that I refuse generalisations because they usually hide a very complex reality. Rather, I want to avoid the constant depreciation of knowledge which comes from using differing evidence to reject previous conclusions. When research provides evidence that EU networks are far too fragmented to produce the assumed "feedback-loop learning", may we conclude that such policy networks are irrelevant? I would reason that we have to know more about the relative importance of different kinds of policy networks (EU, transnational, national), that we should investigate the effect of overlapping networks from different issue areas, and that we better track other kinds of cross-border ideational dissemination. Correspondingly, I would be cautious to make a plain dichotomy contrasting EU and domestic context conditions. My plea would be first to test how "domestic" the domestic context is. Therefore, the message of the paper is that we should broaden our theoretical approach and our analytical framework in order to incorporate new knowledge.(9) The aim is to better grasp the contribution of ideas and networks in ›mainstreaming‹ European policies and institutions.

The argument will be developed in four steps. I will:

1. summarize the main arguments supporting the view that persuasion and core concepts pave the way to agreement and adaptation,
2. ask how policy concepts and institutional innovations travel in a multilevel system and arrive successfully at the sub-national level,
3. present well researched cases that question the importance of networks and refute the assumption that shared ideas will translate into corresponding behaviour,
4. indicate the directions in which we should move in order to better trace the importance of ideas and networks in European governance.

2 The logic and ingredients of network governance ⬆

The first argument is that the distinct institutional setting of the European Union contributes to advance a particular mode of governance. This, in turn, supports the role of the Commission as an "ideational entrepreneur". The second argument is that network governance is not confined to the EU level but disseminates through involvement and procedural provisions into national and sub-national arenas. There it gets a positive response because of internal systemic changes that have brought national systems closer to cooperative governance.

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The EU is, like any other political system, functionally dependent on a well developed system of communication. But the EU is more dependent than any of its member states on communication both as an instrument for gathering and processing information and as a tool for consensus formation and propagating common views. Because of its polycentric structure and the lack of institutions which function as instruments of interest aggregation, analogous to political parties in the member states, governing can not originate in authoritative decisions but has to be anchored in consensual agreements. The EU is a negotiating system geared towards problem solving strategies (Scharpf 1997); it is a system of ›network governance‹ (Kohler-Koch 1999) which thrives on co-ordinating a multitude of actors and approximating diverse interests. For good theoretical reasons and supported by sound empirical evidence, it is plausible to assume that governing by persuasion is the most promising way to make European politics a success. The ›convincing‹ argument is a powerful tool to forge consensus. But what makes an argument convincing? It has to relate to a shared understanding of what constitutes a sound (efficient) and appropriate (legitimate) course of action within the given context. What matters

are not detailed strategies but ›core concepts‹ around which actors expectations converge. The ›prismatic political system‹ (Laffan, O'Donnell and Smith 2000, 199) of the EU functions because it is »enmeshing the member states in a web of collaboration and cooperation« (ibid.) and because both efficiency and well established norms of behaviour and aspirations compel actors to engage in a constant process of conceptual framing that will finally generate an agreement (Kohler-Koch 2000a, 84-85)(10).

I will not go further into details, because we are close to the emergence of a new conventional wisdom(11): The policy process in the EU is more and more organised around communication: The principle of "transparency" has been used to provide the Commission with a data pool on legislative initiatives at member state level (von Bogdandy 2002) and the "open method of coordination" expands the exchange of information concerning targets ("benchmarking") and actual performance ("monitoring"). The philosophy propagated by EU institutions is that the rules of public life will increasingly be based on knowledge ›constructed‹ and renewed in a process of collective learning. The European Commission, the European Parliament and the Council compete in organizing this learning process drawing support from an activated civil society. Owing to its privileged position the Commission has become an ideational entrepreneur, managing the production and diffusion of strategic concepts. Careful empirical research presents well documented cases that the Commission played a decisive role in generating new core concepts and turning them into a point of reference for common action (Kohler-Koch and Edler 1998; Edler 2000; Lang 2001, 40).

The Commission has all the legal prerequisites and is pressured by functional necessities to take the lead. In order to turn its exclusive competence (EC Treaty) of legislative initiative to its advantage, the Commission has to mobilize external expertise. It has chosen different strategies to signal that the arena for public policy making is open and stake holders should raise their voice: The publication of green books and white papers and, last, but not the least, annual working programmes of the planned legislative activities is the most visible part of that strategy. A green book is supposed to »explore the topic's nature, describe the problem, and present the possible principles for future regulation« (Commission 1993); in other words, a green book is already inspired by a core concept and gives direction how to translate it into a problem solving strategy. All preceding activities are of importance. By organising institutional platforms for exchange, selecting and bringing together experts, the Commission is stimulating the discussion and giving it direction. Sometimes it does not only launch a debate but sets off an epistemic community and converts it into an advocacy coalition in its own favour (Edler 2000).

The White Paper on ›European Governance‹ (Commission 2001) advocates strongly to communicate more actively with the stakeholders and their political representatives in order to initiate »a virtuous circle, based on feedback, networks and involvement from policy creation to implementation at all levels« (ibid, 11). Involvement is the catchphrase which is associated with »enhanced dialogue« and a »reinforced culture of consultation« (ibid, 16) both aiming at assisting the Commission to achieve more effectively the Union's objective.

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As soon as the EU embarks on a new field of competence, transnational policy networks emerge. They provide an arena for discussion and a testing ground for competing ideas. Furthermore, policy networks provide a resonance structure and an efficient transmission belt for an ideational entrepreneur who wants to propagate a particular concept and push its diffusion throughout the Union. The smooth transposition and implementation of EU policies is, according to widespread belief, not owed to legal imposition and rule obeying behaviour, but to active involvement and the use of windows of opportunity (Kohler-Koch 1998b). There appears to be a broad agreement among the Community of scholars who occupy themselves with EU policy analysis: Transnational networks matter greatly both in policy formulation and in policy implementation. This argument has been made most convincingly for EU regional policies and the structural funds (Ast 1999; Heinelt 1996; Hooghe 1996; Staeck 1997; Lang et al. 1998; Tömmel 1994).

In a nutshell the story reads as follows (see Heinelt 1996, 24-25): In order to meet the specific requirements of the EU, policy implementation networks have been established on a permanent basis. Actors involved have over time turned into a ›policy community‹ in which they share similar overriding objectives, a common interpretation of the problems at stake and the instruments best suited for solving them. Implementation networks have close links to decision making networks providing for ›organised feedback loops‹ (Marks 1993, 403) on the most central topics such as redistribution, economic and social objectives, funding, implementation and evaluation. This made the EU regional and structural funds policy a success. It has been established as a ›paradigmatic‹ model, which survived successive conceptual reforms, became codified in EU law and was successfully implemented across the Union despite broad variations in socio-economic conditions and institutional settings. Success was secured by the »important role of communication among densely interconnected actors in the field« (Lang et al. 2000).

This reading of events departs from conceptualising the multi-level system of the EU as a ›layer cake‹. The new image proposed is rather that of a ›marble cake‹: a representation of a ›penetrated system of governance‹ (Kohler-Koch 1998d,

6-9). European policy making has moved from striking bargains between actors endowed with a given territorial responsibility, i.e. EU institutions and governments representing national or regional constituencies to engaging in negotiations within – functionally separate – trans-national arenas. Public and private actors move easily beyond territorial boundaries and get involved in shaping political action at different levels of jurisdiction. While it is plausible to assume that in a multi-level game setting, governments pursue exogenously given preferences, the fluidity and complexity of trans-national governance may induce actors to redefine their stakes and expectations in relation to common action.

The story told so far supports the assumption that networks are crucial both for the emergence and the dissemination of policy ideas and that core concepts, defining principles and norms of action around which actors' expectations converge, are vitally important for the success of formulating and implementing a common policy. The following chapter will present research findings that question the close interconnectedness of ideas and networks and give evidence that it would be premature to assume a linear causal relationship between the formation of a European ideational consensus and local action. Evidently, Europeanisation is by far more of a bottom-up than a top-down process and it is not just a matter of matching ideas and interests whether or not sub-national actors appropriately take advantage of an open window of opportunity.

3 Do networks and shared concepts really matter? ✝

I choose regional policy to challenge established knowledge because (1) it is well researched, (2) the importance of ideas for the success of European involvement has been firmly established (Malek 1999) and because (3) our own research has produced some unexpected results which, since then, has also been supported by other studies.(12)

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3.1 A European space of ideas and regional spaces of action ✝

The aim of the research was to probe the relevance of ideational exchange and interaction in European policy networks for conditioning attitudes and actions of sub-national actors. The investigation focussed on three questions:

1. To what extent and in what reading did actors at the sub-national level identify(13) with core concepts that had already been propagated for some time by EU institutions to support a given (or envisaged) policy(14)?
2. Does direct involvement in the formulation and implementation of EU programmes make a difference to the receptiveness of ideas and the willingness to translate them into action?
3. Do economic interests and political aspirations show a strong correlation with ideational preferences?

The research project started from the assumption that institutional change is a social process. First, institutional development entails the formation both of formal and informal principles, of rules and procedures for allocating competence and arriving at decisions. Second, a multitude of actors is involved in the operation of institutions. Their actions and interactions contribute to institutional reproduction, to their stabilisation or eventually alteration. Generally, daily routines will reflect established practice that only relate loosely to legal provisions. Likewise, when new legal requirement are introduced, for the most part they will be adjusted to customary standard operation. Like this, without legal intervention institutions may change because actors have reoriented their behaviour and follow different guiding principles. Therefore, the EU may have a far greater impact on the institutional developments within member states than usually expected. Constitutional reforms in response to EU treaty revisions are few and far between. But many actors that operate in national and sub-national institutions are exposed to European governing concepts and quite a few of them are engaged in Community procedures. They may constitute a far more effective transmission belt for institutional development than parliaments and governments enacting institutional revisions.

In order to grasp how and why in a long term perspective regions may play a different role in European politics and what new patterns of regional governance may evolve, institutional change was conceptualised as a social process that will be stimulated by the transfer of ideas and practices through transnational networks. The focus of research was to trace the precise conditions that induce relevant actors to support a new logic of appropriateness, reorient their behaviour, accept formerly excluded actors as legitimate partners in the policy making arena and engage in different patterns of interaction. It seemed plausible to assume that such a shift would not come about just by being exposed to the framing exercise of Brussels, but would need a deeper involvement. Funds come with strings attached: Procedures have to be implemented in practice and individual interests have to be communicated in the language of the new ›discourse‹.

Apart from expecting that ›enforced learning‹ will have an effect, it was equally plausible to assume that those who will benefit will be more open:

1. High economic benefit will enhance susceptibility to European policy recommendations; i.e. there will be less variation across elite attitudes in a poor region irrespective of what sector of public or private life is being represented.
2. When political aspirations match European concepts, actors will have a strong inclination to give them support; i.e. regionalist parties are most likely to support a stronger role for regions in European policies, because it is instrumental to their own cause.
3. Influence to be gained or lost will decide how European concepts are rated; i.e. weak social actors will be strongly in favour of the principle of ›partnership‹ because it provides an opportunity to raise their voice.

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The sample of regions(15) and actors(16) was carefully chosen to take account of these different variables. But the data did not support our hypothesis. EU policy ideas are widely shared but support cannot be traced back to European origin. In particular, beliefs in regional governance do not co-vary with the involvement of sub-national actors in transnational networks.

Each of the core concepts the EU institutions had propagated for improving European regional development met with an overwhelmingly positive response, namely: (1) a greater influence for regions in the EU; (2) an emphasis on competitiveness; and (3) on co-operative governance. The level of acceptance was so high that it proved difficult to find and explain variations.

Poor regions are on record as having appreciated the profiting from EU funds, yet our research showed that they had no greater enthusiasm for strengthening the role of regions than their richer counter-parts.(17) Additionally, they were equally confident(18) in public-private partnership as the most efficient approach to successful problem-solving and even supported, with only minor reservations, the call for more competitiveness (Kohler-Koch 1998b, 233-235).

Political aspirations showed a greater impact on political attitudes, irrespective of actor categories.(19) In all places with strong regional parties the call for a stronger political influence was more pronounced.(20) But when it comes to more down to earth questions touching upon the allocation of competence with respect to EU structural funds or Research and Technology, the picture becomes blurred (Kohler-Koch 1998c, 148-149). According to the data there is no indication that calculating gains or losses in influence makes any difference in terms of appreciating institutionalising ›co-operative governance‹.(21)

Though refined factor analysis and regressions revealed a more differentiated picture,(22) the message did not change: Core concepts developed in the context of EU regional policy are very present all over Europe and find wide support. Considering that they have been propagated quite persistently by Community institutions and relate directly to norms and procedures written into EU programmes, a high level of acceptance was to be expected. More surprising is the low degree of variation and the patterns of variation: The wide gap in economic development is not at all reflected in the response of actors and different functional backgrounds quite obviously do not influence positions in a systematic way. There is hardly any variation between different kinds of actors, be they public (in government, the administration, agencies, parliament) or private (representatives of business, trade unions, professional interest groups, academia). Variations rather reproduced a ›North-South‹ divide both in economic and political thinking. Closer investigation revealed that advocates of economic liberalism are still more numerous in Germany and the UK than in the Roman countries and that the preference for strong regions in the North is built on a firm belief that regionalism will contribute to economic efficiency whereas in the South it is associated with the advancement of cultural values.

In view of these findings the conclusion can only be that trans-national policy networks have not been the most prominent transmission belt for transporting European concepts. And indeed, when trying to validate the relevance of involvement in European programmes, the data did not produce compelling evidence (Larat 1998). A more plausible explanation is that obviously there is a European space of ideas that stretches beyond the realm of EU policy making. Furthermore, designing a new policy regime is most of the time not inventing new principles and producing new wisdom but putting together what is about to become accepted as ›conventional wisdom‹. Attributing the Commission the role of an ›ideational entrepreneur‹ does not imply that it creates new concepts, rather that it takes up what has been developed elsewhere and gives it a new drive. The power of such an entrepreneur, the relevance of EU framing and the importance of policy networks is an empirical question. This question, however, can only be answered to our satisfaction when widening our horizon of research. What is needed is a more ›symmetrical‹ approach which does not just cover the small world of EU policy making but pays tribute to what is happening simultaneously around it.(23)

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The importance of context conditions are most obvious when screening how principled beliefs like ›co-operative governance‹ are translated – or rather not translated – into political practice. Our research included a quantitative network analysis and this revealed a chasm between concepts held in high esteem and the organisation of political exchange (Grote 1998a, b; Knodt 1998a). Despite the variation of network structures across regions,(24) they just do not correspond to the ideal of co-operative governance. On the contrary, in regions where actors were most outspoken with regard to the virtues of public-private partnerships, network structures are hierarchical and centred on state actors. In depth research(25) confirmed that the discrepancy was not just a matter of time lag in adjustment but is a permanent phenomenon. It may be explained as being yet another illustration of a phenomenon that is as common in government as it is in human practice: »the duality and tension between purpose and institutionalisation« (Pitkin 1967, 235). It is easier to re-interpret guiding principles of action than to engage in institutional reforms.

This explanation would, however, miss a crucial point. EU policies are always highly selective in terms of being functionally very specific and often regulate just a small segment of a more encompassing policy field. Patterns of adaptation will, therefore, depend on the scope and relative importance of EU intervention, on the structure of the interface between related entities and on the mechanisms of administrative and political coordination. In addition, sub-national actors do not just respond to initiatives from the European level. They may welcome the impetus for change just because it corresponds to parallel developments at national or regional level. In this case the obligation to implement an EU regulation is like a foreign investment that contributes to produce a cherished good at lower costs. Here again, exploring context conditions is decisive in order to discriminate between a chain reaction set in motion by an external (European) demand (impulse), interdependent developments and change that has to be attributed to a common source.

3.2 Loose coupling, coherence mechanisms and trans-national dependence ✆

The importance of interface structures and context conditions are highlighted in research just recently concluded.(26) Against conventional wisdom, the success of the EU structural funds can not be explained by highly integrated networks and well organised feedback loops that stimulate trans-national learning processes (Heinelt et al. 2002). On the contrary, the authors present evidence for a high degree of fragmentation and they claim that differentiation and loose coupling are essential for successful adaptation in a multi-level system of governance. It is not elaborate policy regimes, but rather common principles and norms of interaction which are considered to be crucial ›coherence mechanisms‹ with which to secure ›governability‹.

Lang (2002) in turn elaborates on the interdependence between EU structural funds policy and the related domestic policies. He presents convincing evidence that concurrent developments in the respective regional and national context will decide which patterns of adjustment will prevail. What at first sight looks like a highly differentiated picture (he compares three countries, i.e. Germany, Ireland, and Sweden, and four policy processes, i.e. the formulation of programmes, evaluation; and both the involvement of sub-national state actors and of non-state actors in programming, monitoring and implementation) can be reduced to a limited set of options. The short-term response might be absorption or symbolic policy change, whereas the longer-term solution might involve isolated implementation or material policy change. The rationale behind absorption and symbolic policy change is well known. When EU demands meet with established practice and compliance entails no costs, EU regulations will be implemented. When, however, the requirements of EU policies contradict consensual knowledge and vested interests and when they can only be incorporated by changing existing routines, resistance is most likely. In the short-run symbolic action might suffice, but in the longer-run more effective implementation will be asked for. Because the efficiency of organisations rests on the optimal use of a limited set of standard operation procedure, deviant practices and frequent change might endanger administrative performance. A strategy of ›isolation‹ and ›symbolic change‹ will prevail as long as sub-national organisations are not pulled into a more encompassing move for domestic change. According to Lang, effective implementation, i.e. a breakthrough to material policy change is dependent on complementary domestic developments. Six out of twelve cases are on record for effective implementation and each time this was due to a paradigmatic change in domestic policies (Lang 2002, 24). These changes were largely independent of EU policies in the respective issue which has provided inspiration, but a causal relationship is not verifiable.

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These findings contradict the most common interpretation, relating compliance to interest driven strategies: EU policies represent ›negotiated change‹; negotiators interested in the status quo will take care that EU regulations will not violate well tried operating procedures; actors interested in change will grasp the opportunity to launch a policy reform against some stubborn vested interests. Whose interest prevailed will be eager to enforce compliance.

3.3 Persistent coexistence ✆

Another thorough comparative research supports the relevance of the domestic environment. The empirical findings

presented by Conzelmann (2002) are twofold: (1) Indeed, member states have implemented EU regulations. They have pledged their allegiance to core concepts of EU regional policy, and (re-) organised national activities accordingly. On closer scrutiny, however, it becomes obvious that adoption and change can not be taken at face value. The British case is quite telling: ›Partnership‹ has been introduced in planning and programming in the UK but the way it is implemented does not support the European idea of ›mobilizing endogenous resources‹ and ›giving stake holders a voice‹. It rather is an instrument to increase efficiency and secure ›return on investment‹, or to put it more bluntly, to get assured access to EU money. (2) Accommodating with EU paradigmatic shifts and policy regulations has not changed fundamental beliefs governing national regional policy. Both the German belief in efficient promotion of regional economic growth in favour of equalizing living conditions and the British preference for increasing economic competitiveness unhampered by any territorial considerations, have survived European interference. The detailed account and contextual explanation give food for thought. Two hypotheses stick out for further testing:

1. *Ideational competition makes a difference*, i.e. adapting to new or changing core concepts is easier for a political system that is ›pragmatic‹ and not dedicated to any kind of economic or political ›orthodoxy‹. This statement is not as trivial as it sounds. Successive British governments have declared ›trial and error‹ a guiding principle because only continued efforts to redefine and restructure programmes will spur creativity and advance innovation and competitiveness. The German administration, on the other hand, is more inclined to link programmatic concepts to basic principles in order to assure ›sound‹ policy making. Unlike their British counterparts, German public actors became engaged in conceptual competition with the EU. It was not just a matter of adjusting a few elements, but defending an elaborate policy regime: It is a set of principles, norms, rules, and procedures around which actors' expectations converge (to borrow Krasner's famous definition of a regime) which itself is embedded in two more encompassing political (federalism) and economic (social market economy) regimes.
2. *Actor access may challenge fundamental beliefs about appropriate ways of governing*. Despite a neo-corporatist tradition, German state-actors are quite reluctant to follow EU demands to open up planning and programming procedures to additional actors. From the perspective of the German executive giving voice to non-experts would introduce non-pertinent deliberations and ultimately endanger policy efficiency. The insistence on established institutional competence was considered to be necessary in order to safeguard the achievement of ›sound‹ policy. A second, not less important objective was to protect the delicate compromise between the German *Länder*. Any reform would open the arena for re-negotiations with unknown outcomes.

Both hypotheses offer a good explanation for the persistence of institutional arrangements and policy outlook. In response to EU policy initiatives, a ›parallel‹ regional policy became institutionalised that did not change established concepts, nor the distribution of organisational competence or the legitimacy of central actors.

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4 How to nail the pudding to the wall? ⬆

The lessons to be learned from these investigations are (1) networks support the travelling of ideas but are not indispensable for their diffusion, and (2) ideas travel easily but do not translate equally easily into changed behaviour. This leaves us with some intriguing questions: How do we explain variations in the success and failure of travelling ideas? And how do we gain a better knowledge about the relevance of shared concepts for orienting policy behaviour?

Comparative policy analysis has provided us with thick descriptions but, unfortunately, narrow views. Therefore, in order to better understand the importance of ideas and networks we should aim at broadening our analytical view in four directions:

1. Context conditions: ›Impact studies‹ let us believe that ideas originate from the EU level and, therefore, the Commission is the most likely ›ideational entrepreneur‹. Looking for parallel developments at other levels, that is at the international and domestic level, may give a more realistic picture.
2. Transmission belts: Networks are vital for the transnational dissemination of ideas. But how speedy they travel and whether or not they arrive in the relevant domestic context does not only depend on the properties of the network but also on the interface structure of related networks. Networks are not the only transmission belts. Transnational public spaces have been established through networks but have also emerged independently. Most of them are limited to functionally specific arenas but have a wider resonance structure (Eder and Trenz 2002; Trenz 2001).
3. Ideational receptiveness: Policy ideas crystallise around core concepts. An ideational entrepreneur may send out well reasoned concepts. But even when the message is heard and understood it might not be incorporated for two reasons: First, incorporation comes with unequal intellectual costs. Ideas that fit nicely in a given frame of reference will be accepted easily, whereas a new way of thinking might be rejected because it is unfamiliar.

Second, policy ideas may be incompatible with fundamental belief systems. In our research in Mannheim we gathered convincing empirical evidence for the distinctiveness of national fundamental belief systems (Herschinger 2000), their framing power (Kohler-Koch 2000b), and their persistence over time (Jachtenfuchs 2001; Diez 1999; Jung 1999).

4. Institutional support: Organisations and ideas are interdependent in terms of mutual support and vulnerability. Organisations give ideas stability and shield them from being eroded by competing ideas(27). Organisations, in turn, may loose their very reason of existence following a substitution of ideas. In contrast to economic entities, their survival is a matter of politics. Political concepts may not find acceptance because organisational restructuring might affect political (party) competition.

Research strategies should put emphasis on

a. Discourse analysis: Policy ideas develop in a ›communicative universe‹ and it is worthwhile exploring how they relate to broader concepts and are inspired by fundamental belief systems.

b. Ties and interfaces: Network actors live in two different kinds of institutions that are built around competing regimes. What is the relative importance of the Europeanised sectors of organisations? And what is the nature and the quality of intra-organisational interfaces and inter-organisational ties?

c. The shadow of party politics: Policy framing does not occur in a politically neutral environment. How do ideological cleavages and party competition affect the success of ideational innovation?

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Endnotes ⬆

(*) The paper is a revised version of a chapter in Conzelmann and Knodt 2001 and a previous paper (Kohler-Koch: *On networks, travelling ideas, and behavioural inertia*) which was presented at the European Union Centre Conference at Harvard University ›Ideas, Discourse and European Integration‹, May 11-12, 2001. I would like to thank Thomas Conzelmann and two anonymous reviewers for stimulating comments which pushed me to sharpen my argument.

(1) Over the years the issue has been discussed under different headings – regional policy, structural funds policy, cohesion policy - following the shifting objectives and ambitions of the Community.

(2) Amsterdam Treaty, Art. 158.

(3) Rome Treaty, Preamble and Art. 2.

(4) For a concise presentation of the early developments see Tsoukalis 1997:198-209 and Wallace 1977:141-163.

(5) From 5% of the Community budget in 1975 to 37% of the budget at the turn of the century.

(6) Though the notion is that societal groups, in particular social and public interest groups play only a marginal role. Their inclusion met little enthusiasm on the part of sub-national public authorities who benefited most from opening the policy-making process (Bauer 2001).

(7) A popular phrase in the former GDR to underscore the particularity of the German approach to socialism.

(8) I take the liberty to quote one of the reviewer.

(9) Insight from research will be presented in a dialectic fashion for two reasons. First, taking each step seriously will better document how research has advanced and how it could add up to accumulated knowledge. Second, empirical findings are contradictory not because some investigations failed the state of the art but because individual conceptual frameworks focussed on different segments of reality.

(10) For a similar argument see Laffan (2001).

(11) I have developed the argument more extensively in Kohler-Koch (1998a); Kohler-Koch and Edler (1998); Kohler-Koch (1999); Eising and Kohler-Koch (1999); Kohler-Koch (2000a).

(12) I draw from our own research at Mannheim, in particular a large comparative survey study on sub-national elites from different fields of economic, social and political life in nine different regions (Kohler-Koch 1996; 1997; Kohler-Koch et al. 1998; Grote 1998a,b; Knodt 1998a) and a comparative case study on the UK and Germany (Conzelmann 2002) and external research which has been part of the national research programme on ›EU Governance‹ which I am coordinating (Malek 1999; Lang 2002; Heinelt et al. 2001).

(13) ›Identification‹ meaning supporting a concept as being relevant and appropriate.

(14) The questionnaire used the phrases of official documents in the respective native language to avoid misinterpretations or an unintentional reframing of a concept.

(15) In each of the five larger EU member states (France, Germany, Italy, Spain, the United Kingdom) a ›rich‹ (above the national GNP average) and a ›poor‹ (below the national GNP average) region was selected. In order to control other factors that might have a considerable influence, no metropolitan and no border region was included in the sample. The five larger member states were selected to control for political power and a variation in constitutional setting. Because collaboration failed we could only include one British region.

(16) The survey covered about 3000 actors from diverse public institutions and private organisations with a response rate close to 42 % .

(17) With the exception of Sicily more than 90% of the respondents were in favour of an equal or greater influence of regions in the future. Among the Sicilian respondents 14% opted for a reduced influence which was explained in interviews as an expression of the lacking trust in regional administrative capacity.

(18) For a more detailed account see Kohler-Koch (1998b, 238-240); 85% of all respondents being in favour.

(19) There was hardly any difference between public and private actors; 75% of all private actors and 79% of all public actors were in favour of strengthening the regions.

(20) Ranging from 82% in Catalonia and 87% in Lombardy to 93% in Wales in favour for greater influence as compared to a support between 64% and 68% in the German and French regions (Kohler-Koch 1998b, 231-232).

(21) Support for ›co-operating in confidence‹ is unequivocal irrespective of regional affiliation of actor category (Kohler-Koch 1998b, 238-240).

(22) For example preference for state intervention explained why the role of regions in economic policy was rated equally high in all countries despite considerable constitutional settings. For a more detailed account see Kohler-Koch et al. (1998) and Knodt (1998a).

(23) Though I make use of the expression from Latour (1987), I do not follow his scientific programme.

(24) Network structures relate to the density of exchange relations, the degree of centrality of particular actors and the location of individual organisations within the network.

(25) For more detail see Knodt (1998a) and Knodt (1998b, 118-121).

(26) For more detail see Heinelt et al. (2002); Lang (2002).

(27) As March and Olsen (1989: 18) have pointed out "programmes adopted as a simple political compromise … become endowed with a separate meaning and force by having an agency established to deal with them".