

BOOK REVIEW

Călin Emilian HINȚEA, Marius Constantin PROFIROIU, Tudor Cristian ȚICLĂU (eds.), Strategic planning in local communities. A cross-national study in 7 countries, Palgrave Macmillan, 2019, ISBN 978-3-030-03436-8

Bogdan Andrei MOLDOVAN*

Public sector reform is, and has been for the past three or more decades, one of the defining features of public policies and also public management literature landscape.

Public organizations are expected to perform at high levels while constantly improving, and adapting to the changing dynamics of the social-economic environment. Strategic planning is an essential tool in keeping contact with these external changes, and developing a good fit with organizational mission and objectives.

In this context, the objective set forward by the editors of „Strategic planning in local communities. A cross-national study in 7 countries” of creating a detailed blueprint of how local governments (across 7 countries) understand, define and apply strategic planning tools in their governance process, is definitely ambitious.

The book is structured on 9 chapters – an introductory chapter where the main concepts used are explained along with the plan of the book, 7 country chapters focused on the specifics of the planning process in France, Spain, USA, Turkey, Hungary, Romania and Russia, and a final chapter (chapter 9) dedicated to a transnational analysis of the findings and general conclusions of the research.

The research methodology used in each country, although not identical, is very similar and offers the possibility of comparative analysis. Furthermore, the authors link (where possible) the methods and instruments used in each country with specific models of public management reform (New Public Management, Neo Weberian State and New Public Governance). Although there is not too much evidence to link the two (strategic planning - reform models), some data points toward interesting elements - for example a preference for a legal approach to planning with high levels of formality in the eastern states (Romania, Russia, Turkey).

Probably, the biggest contribution of the book is in highlighting how „flexible” the concept of strategic planning is, with basically a different approach from the understanding of the concept, to the actual implementation in each country (in a way to be expected, as the external environment of each of these local authorities is characterized by the same level of diversity). The editors conclude: „We started our research with an assumption that although there will be some

* Bogdan Andrei MOLDOVAN is lecturer at the Babes-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania; e-mail: moldovan@fspac.ro.

diversity in how local authorities use planning, we will find general trends and patterns that transcend national (and cultural) context, as planning is at its core a managerial instrument. We were surprised to see that this is not really the case, and that even inside a specific country there is *high variety on both the understanding and implementation of strategic planning.*" (p. 16)

If the literature is abundant in „how to do” theoretical approaches, this volume is exactly the opposite - a short but rich compendium of how planning is actually done by local authorities in 7 countries.

Another surprising (but positive) element highlighted by the research done is that planning is a widespread phenomenon at local level: „although there are huge differences between *how* planning is done, it is used universally by local authorities, which is testament to the contribution planning has to the local governance process.” (p. 223)

The aforementioned diversity between each country permeates the entire planning process - (1) the understanding of planning is quite different - varying from a business, pragmatic approach meant to mainly fix economic imbalances (USA), to a very legalistic formalized process which lacks full understanding and cultural adoption by the bureaucracy (Russia); (2) the actual process varies significantly with major differences in quality: „looking at the overall quality of the process, we see a lot of differences, not only between countries but also inside the same country. One pattern that emerges (expected to a certain point) is that *the larger the size of the community, the better the strategic plan* – although one can argue that community size is also in direct relation with the complexity levels of the problems that need to be addressed. Smaller communities seem to struggle more to use planning at its fullest, with low administrative capacity being the main culprit, along with small community specific problems (low financial autonomy, low levels of community resources that can be engaged in the process, lack of knowledge regarding planning)” (p. 224); (3) results vary as well, with a clear difference between „east” and „west”, with the latter much more effective in enabling the benefits of planning at local level, while the eastern cluster (Romania, Russia, Turkey, Hungary partially) having a more formalized approach but with mixed results.

Finally, an important finding refers to the factors which influence the planning process in all of the countries included: these are (1) the specifics of the administrative reform process, (2) level of decentralization and (3) the size of the community.

A key factor at play here is the relation with the central government and levels of autonomy. As expected, countries with highly decentralized systems and a longer history of local autonomy for authorities gave rise to more capable institutions in this regard. This is probably the most obvious difference between *East (Russia, Turkey, partly Romania and Hungary)* and *West (USA, Spain, France)*, although several „good practice” cases are present in *Eastern* countries as well.

The authors were quite ambitious in *trying to identify or highlight certain patterns that could be linked to specific administrative reform models*. Although they were not very optimistic regarding the potential outcome, they felt it would be a very interesting area to explore, especially since public administration reform is always on government's agenda, and also given the fluid and dynamic nature in this field, which saw huge transformations (both in theory and practice) in the last three decades. To their surprise, in almost all cases (Turkey, Russia, Hungary, partly France and USA), strategic planning at local level is directly linked with comprehensive administrative reform programs. As expected, the content and results of these reforms vary significantly between countries, *but they all have a common pattern of addressing (in most cases specifically) the issue of strategic planning, which again proves their initial point concerning its importance for local governance.*

Although the results point to significant problems in the process (the east-west gap is maintained here as well) they seem to be optimistic regarding the positive effects of the good practice cases they found:

„Strategic planning can become an essential tool for good governance at local level. It offers numerous advantages and benefits for local administration (managerial, economic, social, overall well-being) and should be an intrinsic part of any local development initiative. Although planning is directly linked to the bigger (broader?) reform movement, it should grow beyond this (managerial) role, as an organic platform for cooperation between community stakeholder and the local administration, where all parties engage in defining their future together” (p.230).

In a world of governance often dominated by a rush for immediate results, and in need of clear strategic perspectives, the work of the authors is a step forward in the area of local communities strategic planning, and a useful tool in understanding the diversity of the process, and approaches as well.