Editorial

Diffusion and Convergence of Environmental Policies in Europe

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In a globalizing world, national environmental policies become increasingly interdependent. This means that the policy choices of one country are more and more affected by those of other countries. As a consequence, striking similarities in the development of domestic capacities for environmental protection can be observed across a wide range of countries. New environmental policy initiatives often spread rapidly throughout large numbers of countries, leading, at least partially, to a global convergence of governance patterns in environmental policy. The five contributions to this special issue ask about the extent to which domestic environmental policies in Europe are becoming similar over time and explore the specific causal mechanisms and driving forces that underlie this process of environmental policy convergence.

The articles find that while convergence of national environmental policies is clearly observable there remain significant differences as to the regulatory details of individual environmental programmes and the administrative arrangements created to implement these programmes. While the most important sources of convergence of environmental policies can be found at the international level, domestic factors account for many of the remaining differences between actual national environmental policies and institutions.

The political mechanisms that lead to global and European environmental policy change and convergence include the harmonization of national policies through EC legislation or binding international accords, the coercive imposition of the policies and programmes favoured by one state or one international organization on other states and the communication-based diffusion of ideas and practices from one political setting to another. While international harmonization and imposition have been at the core of theories of international governance for a long time, diffusion has so far received relatively little attention as a source of domestic policy change and mechanism of international policy convergence.

In line with the contributions to this special issue, diffusion may be defined as the process by which policy innovations are communicated throughout the international system and voluntarily adopted by an increasing number of countries over time. It refers to the international spread of policy innovations

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driven by information flows rather than hierarchy or collective decision-making within international institutions. Thus, its essential feature is that it occurs in the absence of formal or contractual obligation. At the micro-level diffusion is made up of individual processes of social learning, copying or mimetic emulation. While the article by Kerstin Tews develops a general framework for the analysis of policy diffusion, Per-Olof Busch and Helge Jörgens explore the extent to which diffusion processes matter in the international spread of policy innovations. The contributions by Duncan Liefferink and Andrew Jordan and by Christoph Knill and Andrea Lenschow, in turn, analyse the actual impacts of diffusion processes and compare them to those of other mechanisms like legal harmonization, economic competition or coercive imposition. Basically, they find a mixed pattern of domestic policy change with convergence in some areas and path-dependent persistence in others. Moreover, as Knill and Lenschow point out, the type of mechanism at work seems to be an important determinant of the extent of policy change and convergence that can be reached.

Through the identification of the most relevant political mechanisms and the analysis of their interaction, the contributions to this special issue shed light on the question of how political programmes, institutions and ideas spread internationally and how national environmental policies converge over time. A focus on political mechanisms alone, however, cannot explain why environmental policy change occurs at all. Here, more general pressures for domestic policy change provide an important explanatory category. As the articles in this special issue show, environmental policy change may be triggered by economic pressures such as the growing regulatory competition between nations which may force governments to modify regulatory policies in order to sustain or improve national competitiveness in a global economy, by ideational pressures such as the ongoing normative redefinition of the ‘nation state’ as an environmentally responsible entity and by environmental pressures such as transboundary or global threats, which place similar demands on a wide range of countries. These pressures create necessary stimulus for subsequent environmental policy change.

Finally, the actual direction of environmental policy change and convergence is significantly influenced by political pioneer countries and by so-called ‘lead markets’ for green technologies, i.e. pioneering countries in the development and marketing of technological innovations. By developing and presenting tangible technical and political means of dealing with economic, ideational or environmental pressures, which later may be transferred to other countries or serve as examples for international legal accords, they play a crucial role in determining where environmental policies converge. The article by Martin Jänicke explores the role of pioneers and the domestic capacities necessary for a country to become a trendsetter in environmental policy.

By taking into account these different factors, this special issue aims to provide a comprehensive and coherent analysis of processes of diffusion and convergence in European environmental policy.