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Governance in Norway and Poland: Can Unequal Partners Learn Anything from Each Other?

Ole Jacob Sending¹

Poland and Norway are unequal partners when it comes to governance and the management of issues such as security, migration and energy. One still ranks relatively low according to good governance indicators, having had to reinvent its whole system of government following the fall of communism; the other ranks high. One has spent two decades adapting to the EU's rules; the other remains outside that framework but decided to sign an agreement on the European Economic Area that has made it a quasi-member without direct access to decision-making bodies. At the same time, the hierarchy—an element of inequality—hinders the learning process between the countries. Can Poland and Norway learn anything from each other? This paper, which sets out some of the thinking underpinning the GoodGov project, provides some answers. Following a brief review of the literature on policy learning, it identifies “experimentalist governance” as the model best suited to the two countries, before closing with some practical remarks about how such a model might look.

Knowledge as a Source of International Cooperation: An A-to-Z

On the face of it, Norway and Poland seem unlikely to be able to learn much from each other when it comes to governance. It is not just a question of local differences. It is also the fact of a difference of status. Poland ranks comparatively low on governance indices, but it is a member of the EU. Norway ranks higher, but is not. What does the literature on governance and learning tell us about these dilemmas?

The EU and State Learning

Eighty years ago, scholars such as David Mitrany² and Jean Monnet argued that cooperation across borders could be facilitated through technical cooperation. Their basic contention has since proved correct: political

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cooperation has been facilitated by experts and professionals coming together in specific issue-areas. The functionalist idea has thus provided both a theory about the world and a tool to act upon it. Monnet, for example, used functionalist ideas in his efforts to establish the European Coal and Steel Community and the European Economic Community. These functionalist ideas permeate the workings of the EU to this day as exemplified by the extensive use of expert committees and the reliance on technocratic rule within the European Commission. Recent research has, moreover, directed attention to the “revolving door” phenomenon whereby socialisation into different institutional settings cuts across formal organisational boundaries. As the European External Action Service develops, it can thus be expected to blur boundaries, combining established national orientations with the nascent European outlook of its diplomats.

The core assumption of the functionalists is that the *lingua franca* of science renders invalid points of difference based on the existence of territorial borders.³ Proponents of this idea distinguish two kinds of learning: transnational and international. *Transnational* learning involves networks and modes of communication that cut across borders. This learning process occurs despite the fact that different actors work in different territorial locations. *International* learning, by contrast, refers specifically to how actors that represent different states come to adopt similar policies based on shared knowledge or experience. Learning between actors that represent Polish and Norwegian authorities that results in policy convergence between the two countries is therefore distinct from learning between actors in Poland and Norway that do not represent their respective states. Nevertheless, this latter process of transnational learning by and through non-state actors can pave the way for socialisation and for subsequent changes in both states’ policies.

The role of non-state actors such as EU experts on these learning processes has received particular attention since the 1990s. At a time of heavy interdependence between governments, some scholars held that the nation-state was as strong as ever, others that it was fading away, and others still that the state was reinventing itself, its governance shaped by actors such as international organisations or various types of networks. Already in the early 1970s research had pointed to the role of these non-state actors.⁴ In the 1990s, though, the literature on global governance went a step further and suggested that non-state actors may in some cases have become the primary players in governance decisions.⁵ Today, the massive body of literature on global governance has produced a wealth of insight about the role, power, and effects of non-state actors in producing some governance models rather than others.⁶ Analysts have, for example, explored the role in different countries of the staff of international organisations such as the European Commission and the expert groups operating in its orbit, as well as of advocacy networks comprising NGOs representing civil society.⁷

Appreciating Local Differences, or the Need for Contextualisation

What we are dealing with, then, is the spread of ideas between countries. But this phenomenon covers both policy convergence and diffusion. The distinction between the two is important. Convergence does not necessarily occur by design: it can refer to a process whereby two countries for unrelated reasons or due to comparable background pressures decide to adopt similar types of policies. By contrast, diffusion refers to a process by which the same idea becomes dominant in different countries, for example through the entrepreneurship or advocacy of the same set of actors. A standard account of diffusion is that a set of actors mobilises around an idea in an effort to get others to adopt it.⁸ Over time, these actors are able to socialise others into accepting a new frame of reference for their decision-making. Thus, the diffusion of

² D. Mitrany, *The Progress of International Government*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1993.

³ P. Wagner, *A History and Theory of the Social Sciences: Not All That Is Solid Melts into Air*, Sage Publications, London, 2001.

⁴ R.O. Keohane, J.S. Nye, “Transnational Relations and World Politics,” *International Organization*, vol. 25, no 3, 1971.

⁵ J. Rosenau, “Governance, Order and Change in World Politics,” in: J. Rosenau, E.-O. Czempiel (eds.), *Governance without Government: Order and Change in World Politics*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1992.

⁶ B. Simmons, F. Dobbin, G. Garrett (eds.), *The Global Diffusion of Markets and Democracy*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2008; I.B. Neumann, O.J. Sending, *Governing the Global Polity: Practice, Mentality, Rationality*, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 2010.

⁷ M.E. Keck, K. Sikkink, *Activists beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1998.

⁸ D. Stone, *Learning Lessons, Policy Transfer and the International Diffusion of Policy Ideas*, CSGR Working Paper no. 69/01, April 2001.

human rights norms in a number of countries has been found to depend on elite socialisation.⁹ A similar pattern has been found within the EU, where socialisation into a new institutional framework has produced a gradual transformation in the outlook and interests of elite actors.

Importantly, however, such learning processes do not necessarily entail convergence and homogenisation. What is seen as a best practice in Poland may not be seen as a best practice in Norway, and the question is whether one country's best practice can usefully be transferred to another country. Some researchers reject the idea that practices remain "best" regardless of context, and argue that there will always be—and have to be—significant elements of adaptation to the local context.¹⁰ This means that arenas designed for policy learning must avoid privileging a certain way of doing things *a priori*, and must allow for adaptation and also criticism of "best practices" based on one's own experience. This has been a key shift in the governance literature recently—to encourage learning from a *diversity* of settings by ensuring that all participants in the search for best practices are equal.¹¹ For our purposes, there is every reason to encourage learning and the identification of best practices that run bottom-up rather than top-down given the EU's perceived legitimacy gaps.

The Problem of Hierarchies

Another question about diffusion patterns has to do with the power and hierarchical position of the actors involved in efforts to push for new policies. Some scholars place greater emphasis on the hierarchical status and power of the actors than on the substance and quality of the knowledge. This suggests that it is not always the best policy that is learnt, but the one that has the most powerful backers.¹² Studies have shown, for instance, that economists have exploited their international privileged contacts as a means to globalise and implement their choice of economic models at home.¹³ This raises a question about the very character of learning, because if knowledge-transfer and learning are marked by hierarchy, then we must ask whether what is presented as "learning" may not simply be the workings of power, *presented as learning*.

There are many examples of this: the concept of "soft power"—often used in EU circles—invokes an image of some actor being in a position to "teach" or instruct others; but this reference to experience or knowledge simply disguises the raw exercise of power and hierarchy. In the case of Poland and Norway there may be issue areas in which one country is simply more powerful. This aspect should be of concern to policymakers, and requires efforts to shield those involved in learning and knowledge transfer from the political or economic hierarchies that may exist between particular states. After all, learning connotes *improvement* based on cognitive developments in a setting that is not significantly structured by either coercion or incentives. It therefore carries within it a clear sense of progress through the use of reason. This connotation is nonetheless often not made explicit in the literature on this topic, as illustrated by the fact that there is a conflation between learning, knowledge-transfer, and diffusion.

Features of Experimentalist Governance: No Hierarchy, No Diplomacy

The principal virtue of the experimentalist approach is that learning is presumed to take place between equals: there is no presumption of some actor knowing more or having "better" policies. A useful way of organising the questions pertaining to knowledge transfer and learning is to differentiate among *who* are the actors involved, on what *arenas* do these actors engage one another, what are the *contents of the knowledge* being transferred, and finally, what are the *constraining and facilitating factors* for genuine learning.

A central component of the literature on policy-oriented learning is that it takes place between professionals presumed to be equals—they are all recognised as competent on the issue in question—and

⁹ T. Risse, S.C. Ropp, K. Sikkink, *The Power of Human Rights: International Norms and Domestic Change*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge–New York, 1999.

¹⁰ B. Bowden, L. Seabrooke, *Global Standards of Market Civilization*, Routledge, London, 2006.

¹¹ C.F. Sabel, J. Zeitlin, *Experimentalist Governance in the European Union: Towards a New Architecture*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2011.

¹² D. Bach, A. Newman, "Domestic Drivers of Transgovernmental Regulatory Cooperation," *Regulation & Governance*, no. 1, 2014.

¹³ M. Fourcade, "The Construction of a Global Profession: The Transnationalization of Economics," *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 112, no. 1, 2006, pp. 145–194.

yet there is at the same time a distinct, if implicit, inequality inasmuch as some actors are presumed to know better than others, thus being in a position to teach, or instruct others. This brings us to the question, therefore, of the centrality of the positions and authority of those actors that we study when we talk about policy-oriented learning. As alluded to above, this is an issue that has typically been analyzed in terms of “domestic context,” in which new policy prescriptions are to be established. There is room here for more fine-grained analyses of the *formal and informal* positions of the actors that either advocate (export) or receive (import) policy prescriptions and how these actors’ positions structure both the contents of the knowledge being transferred, the mechanisms or channels through which it is sought diffused, and the resulting effect on policy practice.

The arenas where learning and policy transfer take place are usually official or semi-official channels through which a set of actors representing different states (or other actors) are mandated to use their recognised skills to discuss and identify “best practices” that apply to all actors. This is the case in the different peer-review mechanisms that have been put in place at the EU level, as in the case of the open method of coordination and other mechanisms that can be called “experimentalist.” By way of contrast, these features are not in place in cases where the EU draws on only a select few experts to identify “good” policy and “best practices.” Here, some actors teach others how to do things based on their presumed superior skills, experience, etc. This model—in which a best practice is defined in advance by some actor, and expertise is organised into committee work and is expected to produce some policy advice—also runs counter to the idea of diplomatic relations between states.

Diplomacy is based on a particular set of ideas about how some actors (diplomats) should represent the state. Bureaucrats and officials whose task is to use their recognised skills to discuss and understand the issue at hand, do so while representing a polity that has certain interests. An actor representing the Norwegian, or Polish, government or public is therefore engaged in a distinct type of learning in which scientifically produced evidence is assessed in the context of the official position of a larger collective, the interests of which may run counter to what appears to be the “best” or most “effective” policy from the viewpoint of scientific analyses of the matter. These *representational constraints* are also the enemy of experimentalism: whatever the individual views and judgments of participants in such processes, the obligation to represent—to act not in a personal capacity but as an agent of a collective—is constraining inasmuch as it is not a process of deliberation in a sphere without systematic biases and hierarchies.

Successful experimentalist processes focus instead on certain organisational and political factors that are conducive to open-ended explorations of how to improve extant policy on the basis of experience and feedback from others. This literature is particularly pertinent to the study of knowledge transfer because it is focused first and foremost on the iterative process of evolution—learning—in which the question of who is able to influence (export, teach) whom is of less importance. Rather, the question is about the mechanisms through which, and the conditions under which, actors are willing and able to engage in trial-and-error, a state in which learning is, precisely, experimental and open in its orientation and where there is no final answer or solution. Extant studies have here found that the conditions conducive to such processes are those in which there is sufficient autonomy for each actor to set their own goals within a broadly defined and generic set of objectives (such as improve energy efficiency, increase educational quality), and where new ideas and solutions are presented and seen as suggestions, not prescriptions.

Conclusion and Recommendations: Application to Poland and Norway

So, can Poland and Norway exchange practices in a non-hierarchical manner? The World Governance Indicators (WGI) reveal different perceptions of the state of governance in Poland and in Norway in the period between 1996 and 2012 and indicate that Norway scores better than Poland over the whole period, which is not very surprising bearing in mind that Poland regained its independence only 25 years ago and has had to completely remodel its governance system. What is perhaps more surprising is the limited effect of Poland’s entry into the EU on the perception of governance in the country. In 2012, the governance gaps between Poland and Norway were deepest in the field of Rule of Law and Control of Corruption and Government Effectiveness and much less dramatic in the field of Political Stability and Regulatory Quality.

Certain mechanisms might, however, be introduced to overcome this lack of equity between the two countries.

One of the more robust findings from the literature is that whenever professional networks of groups meet *as* professionals, rather than as representatives of sectoral interests or of their respective government, there is higher likelihood of learning and exchange of experience. Further, the fact that entry into the EU has not significantly changed the perception of governance in Poland would suggest that some of the more promising avenues for effective learning and exchange of experience is to have professionals who do similar work meet informally rather than formally.

There is strong support in the research for investing in learning from diverse experiences rather than one actor “teaching” another. Absent local buy-in and context-sensitivity, new insights do not translate into changed or improved practices.

Commitment from political leadership is key, and can serve to put knowledge-exchange between countries on the agenda, which ensures that civil servants and relevant regulatory agencies prioritise and allocate time and resources to do it. Nonetheless, the more informal and “technical” such engagement is, the more likely it is to generate new insights and change the practice of governance.

Many countries in the global south are increasingly experimenting with so-called buddy systems, in which a civil servant from one country sits with counterparts in other countries for a period of time in order for *both* to gain experience and to help build capacity in a particular area. This may be considered also within the EU/EEA.

Less is generally more when it comes to learning and experience-based exploration of policy options. This is an argument against overly formal arrangements, and for informal meeting points and exchange programmes.

How can these general research-based findings can be “translated” into a set of practices that could help improve Polish governance in the three fields that are the focus of that study? What role can be played in this process of governance improvement by cooperation between Polish and Norwegian policymakers and decision-makers and other formal and informal networks operating in both countries?

It seems that the best possible results could be achieved if Polish–Norwegian cooperation could be less formal. It could be organised as collaboration amongst various groups of professionals working in their respective fields rather than strongly institutionalised state-to-state cooperation. In addition one should be open to discussing various possible approaches to problematic issues and avoid situations that some actors taking part in this cooperation may experience as one-way learning, not taking into account the local context. To start with, one should identify areas of mutual interest and make sure that those directly involved in this form of cooperation get deeper insight and understanding of their counterparts’ approaches to the problem before they start discussions on the best possible ways of addressing the issues in question and possible transfer of best governance practices from Norway to Poland, a transfer that should always take into consideration the local context of policymaking and the political, social and economic realities in the target country.

In addition, to make this informal and technical cooperation work better, one should provide both sufficient backing from the political leadership and resources needed for this cooperation to work smoothly over a longer period. As all three issues in question—security, energy and migration—are strongly politicised in both countries, so one should focus not on political aspects of cooperation in these three fields but on professional cooperation among actors directly involved in policymaking and governance in these three fields. This would make the cooperation focus not on only the practical aspects of governance, but hopefully also secure more continuity in the structure of bodies that are to coordinate these efforts.


The situation today is probably the best in the field of security, as there are already several formal and informal channels of cooperation and a number of professional networks working together in both bilateral-and-multilateral institutional and non-institutional contexts, with NATO as the main arena. On energy and migration, the situation is much less satisfying.

An important challenge to cope with is the fact that Poland and Norway are affiliated differently with the European Union, which is an important arena for discussion of both energy- and migration-related issues. This may mean that cooperation between the two countries should be based on bilateral arrangements in which the two countries can discuss questions of mutual interest and coordinate their policies towards the EU. At the same time, the two countries belong to various categories in both the energy and migration

fields. Norway is a main exporter of energy, Poland depends on energy imports. In the migration context, Norway is a receiving country and Poland is a sending country. This may mean that finding common interest in these two fields may be much more challenging than finding common ground on an issue such as security. This may also have some negative impact on the willingness of national actors to seek closer cooperation in these two fields and may make a possible transfer of governance-related knowledge between the two countries more problematic.

Neither the 2001 agreement on supplies of substantial volumes of Norwegian gas to Poland nor the plans to build the Skanled pipeline that was to connect the Polish gas market with the Norwegian gas fields has materialised. Energy cooperation between Poland and Norway is today limited to the presence of two Polish companies (PGNiG and Lotos) on the Norwegian continental shelf and some projects in the field of CCS (Bełchatów). At the same time, Poland may be about to open a new chapter in the country's energy history with possible exploration of shale gas deposits and the increasing presence of international companies. The Polish system of energy governance has visible problems with coping with this new situation. The governance-related problems in this specific area could have been addressed in a more efficient manner had Polish decision-makers been able to learn how other countries—including Norway—faced similar challenges and coped with them. In this specific context, one could therefore consider organising a Polish–Norwegian forum to discuss Norwegian experience with management of the country's petroleum resources and to decide which of the Norwegian solutions could be introduced in Poland, considering the specific Polish and EU institutional, legal, political and social context.

On migration, one country has already decided to invest into a better understanding of the motivations of Polish migrants and how Poland and Norway have been dealing with their respective migration-related challenges, again, the former as the main sending country and the latter as one of the main receiving countries. However, Poland is probably about to face migratory challenges typical not only of a sending country but also at least some of those of a receiving country. It seems that the Polish system of migration governance could benefit from the Norwegian experience and one should therefore consider creating an informal arena in which Norwegian and Polish policymakers could share their experience and discuss a number of relevant issues. Here again, the focus should be not on state-to-state formalised and institutionalised cooperation, but rather on how to facilitate contacts between actors involved directly in policy-shaping and those who have direct and indirect stakes in the field.



The GoodGov project explores how Poland and Norway can learn from each other in the crucial policy areas of security, energy and migration. This paper is one of three initial analyses: how unequal partners can learn from each other; how this process can be structured within the EU and EEA frameworks; and how this would function specifically between the two countries in the three chosen fields. The project is conducted by PISM in cooperation with the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs and the Institute of Political Studies of the Polish Academy of Sciences. The project is managed by Lidia Puka (PISM). The content editor is Roderick Parkes (PISM).

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