Notes on the SISP panel sponsored by RECODE MLG[1]

The RECODE MLG panel entitled "Pursuing the Green and Digital Transition through Co-creation in Multilevel Governance Projects" was jointly sponsored by the Sections 11 – European Politics and 6 – Public Policy of the *Italian political science association* (SISP) annual meeting that took place in Trento in September 2026. The panel itself took place at 2:00-3:45 of September 4th in the Department of Sociology and Social Research of the University of Trento.

Five papers were presented:

1. Implementing the Digital and Green Twin Transition Transnationally: The Case of the European Union Strategy for the Adriatic-Ionian Region
Marco Pietro D'Attoma (Norway - University of Agder)

2. Governing with cities: A Comparison of top-down and bottom-up transnational city networks in twin transition policies
Katherine Arena (Netherlands - University of Groningen)

3. Communicating Cohesion Beyond Borders. Practices, Actors and Narratives in European Territorial Cooperation
Marinella Belluati and Sara Pane (Italy - University of Torino)

4. The structure of mobilizing opportunities: multilevel coalition building against large railway infrastructure in EU
Emanuela Bozzini and Carla Asero (Italy - University of Trento)

5. Smart specialization strategies for the co-creation of twin transition projects: The case of the TEN-T corridors. (New title: Twin Transition Meets Smart Specialization. Co-creative smart specialization strategies for the good governance of twin transition projects.)
Simona Piattoni (Italy - University of Trento)

The discussant was Prof. Renata Lizzi, a public policy and EU expert from the University of Bologna (Italy).

The **D'Attoma** paper compared two macroregional strategies – the Adriatic-Ionian Region (EUSAIR) and the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR) – asking how two macro-regional strategies with similar governance structures but markedly different contextual conditions receive the EU's twin transition – the integrated pursuit of green and digital objectives. Drawing on the concept of Europeanisation, it treats the twin transition as a paradigm whose reception depends on the degree of misfit between the paradigm and each MRS's founding architecture, and on the contextual factors – path dependency and institutional capacity – that mediate the response to the resulting adaptational pressure. The main question and suggestion of the discussant was to take the opportunity of this study to refine the concept of "Europeanization" and "fit/misfit" which, although they powerfully influenced the reflection on the national uptake of EU policies, is perhaps a bit dated and in need of refinement. *The issue of twin transition remained somewhat in the background, though.*

The **Arena** paper addressed the issue of how the contribution of cities, whose networks and associations are very present in EU policy making and even more in policy implementation, can be theorized. It detailed both the bottom-up (spontaneous activation) and the top-down (EU-led activation) configurations of this presence asking how the institutional design of a city-to-city configuration shapes their capacity to contribute to EU policy-making. The literature on institutional design argues that such network

[1] I report the gist of the papers and the main points of the discussant. In italics are my personal comments.

arrangements shape local governments' policy strategies with regards to the networks' structure, functions, and governance architecture influencing in particular their stability, the ideas that are circulated, the political pressure that they are able to exert, and their perceived legitimacy and effectiveness. The discussant underscored how innovation often emerges at the bottom and then gets diffused and mainstreamed, and questioned whether in MLG settings is still makes sense to insist so much on the distinction between bottom-up and top-down activations, as both are normally present. *In this case, too the twin transition remained somewhat in the background as the main focus was on theory development*.

The presentation by **Belluati and Pane** drew from a report that the Department of Cultures, Politics and Society of the University of Turin produced in the context of a research project *IMREG-2024-INFOME - Information Measures for the EU Cohesion Policy* financed by the European Commission. The Report addressed the issue of institutional communication of INTERREG projects, in particular the *INTERACT IF – Interregional Action for Italy and France*. The Report and presentation focused on the quantity and quality of communication that occur between institutional levels but also, and more importantly, between EU institutions and stakeholders and society more generally. It highlighted how communication is often replete with technical jargon that may result obscure particularly to non-policy insiders and that it thus fails to convey the importance, effectiveness and legitimacy of European policies. Moreover, communication is often top-down, aiming more at explaining what is being done and why than at listening and receiving the input form civil society and citizens. While civil society organizations are more or less kept in the communicative loop, citizens are de facto sidelined. *More than other presentations, this addressed directly the issue of co-creation and underlined how the communicative style does not help the real involvement of European citizens nor does it contribute to EU legitimacy. The Report is very interesting*.

The paper by **Bozzini and Asero** addressed the issue of citizen mobilization in EU policymaking. It referred to the literature on the "Europeanization of protest" developed in particular by political sociologists (Imig, Marks, Mc Adam, Tarrow, etc.) who argued that citizens' (protest) groups are located within different "political opportunity structures" and have different organizational capacities that determine their ability to influence policymaking and, more generally, be heard. They correct and complement this approach by showing that political opportunity structures alone cannot explain the different effectiveness of citizens' groups in mobilizing and being heard. Actors may possess both the incentives and the capacities to address EU institutions and nevertheless remain confined primarily to local or national arenas. Attention must be paid to relational mechanisms that have received insufficient consideration, namely the construction of multilevel coalitions connecting actors operating at different territorial levels. They shift attention from the mere existence of potential European allies to the relational process through which effective multilevel alliances are constructed and on the ability of citizens' groups to establish multilevel coalitions capable of connecting territorially dispersed organisations, coordinating claims, and transmitting them across levels of EU governance. The discussant picked on the notion of "Europeanization" (though different from the one discussed above) and questioned whether, almost by definition, oppositional mobilization can ever be really accepted and heard in Brussels. *Empirical reference was made to the twin-transition project of the Scan-Med TEN-T corridor and the mobilization observed in Italy in Trentino and Alto-Adige/Südtirol*.

The paper by **Piattoni** investigates the actual meaning and import of "co-creation" which, though a nifty concept that has gained extensive currency in EU documents, appears to be exceedingly difficult to implement. It looks at the application of this general concept in the context of Cohesion Policy that has been powerfully influenced since 2010 by "smart specialization" that has the co-creation of growth strategies at its core. Although smart specialization strategies are pursued particularly at the regional level – and hence have a distinct bottom-up character which stands in contrast with the top-down character of TEN-T railway corridors – still the attempt is to draw some insights from the implementation of this long-running strategy and apply it to other projects such as the TEN-T corridors. It emerges that, also in this case, institutional capacities are not the only explanatory variable for the rather limited success of co-creation,

but that inherent technological limitations and cost-opportunity calculations limit the capacity of firms, institutes of research, citizens and public authorities to devise successful smart specialization strategies. Explicit reference is made in both instances to twin-transition projects which are technology-heavy and require the activation of different types of actors at different levels. The discussant suggested to elaborate more on the notion of co-creation by revisiting the vast literature on co-governance, interactive governance and so forth so as to ferret out what is so appealing and compelling about this concept and whether that literature had produced any insights on where and when it is actually possible.

Together, these papers addressed several common themes linked to co-creation and the twin-transition:

1) Bottom-up and top-down activation strategies differentially affect the possibility of co-creation even though they are normally jointly observed in MLG projects
2) Institutional and organizational capacities are not the only or main explanatory variable of when and how citizens can effectively mobilize and be heard but other relational and communicative aspects must also be attentively examined
3) Despite its theorical and normative appeal, co-creation is objectively very difficult and the European Union has not yet found the right way to involve citizens in policy-making.

The public – particularly young researchers – showed real interest in the themes that were discussed and asked questions that I frankly do not remember (did not take notes on them).