

*The Regional Studies Association Research Network on Eco-Social Policy and PRactice for Innovation and Transformation (ESPPRIT) is hosting a workshop in **Vienna, 18th-19th September 2025**, and invites contributions for:*

## Spaces of contestation: transgressing policies and practices of eco-social transformation

This workshop aims to critically explore the multifaceted contestations in and around social-ecological transformation processes. It is grounded in the premise that sustainability transitions are deeply contested, conflictual and highly ambiguous. We conceptualise contestation as the active challenging of prevailing transition trajectories, manifesting across various tensions, from local opposition to renewable energy projects, to organised public and political backlash against environmental policy. These contestations are often fuelled by rightward political turns, rising polarisation, democratic backsliding and authoritarian shifts (Patterson 2023; Pel 2021; Patterson et al. 2025).

Contestation poses a significant challenge to transformative change, arising from diverse and deeply rooted sources. Rather than being mere anomalies, such tensions are persistent and unlikely to dissipate without intervention. At one end of the spectrum, contestations often express legitimate and constructive concerns, including historic path dependencies, entrenched regional inequalities, and unmet social needs, highlighting the imperative for more socially just and inclusive transition strategies and mechanisms. At the other, they may be driven by populist mobilisations that instrumentalise and exploit public discontent (e.g. Matilla et al. 2025), often disconnected from the actual social and ecological issues at stake.

For transformation processes, contestation thus presents both opportunities and risks: on the one hand, it can foster democratic engagement and draw attention to overlooked injustices; on the other, it can fuel persistent and self-perpetuating dissatisfaction that obstructs progressive change. To navigate these tensions, we argue that contestation must be understood through its spatial and temporal dimensions, often rooted in various forms of lock-in (e.g., behavioural, technological, institutional) that keep systems in place and constrain change (Seto et al. 2016). This includes examining how conflicts emerge, evolve, and are negotiated and potentially transgressed through the entanglement of distributional, procedural, and recognitional (in)justices, as well as the role of place-based narratives, imaginaries, and governance and planning arrangements in shaping these dynamics.

The workshop aims to:

- Explore the local **socio-spatial drivers and dynamics of contestation**;
- Reflect on how democratically legitimised transition pathways can be **protected and stabilised** amidst contestation;
- Discuss governance and planning approaches capable of **constructively engaging with contestation**.

We particularly invite contributions that offer conceptual insights or empirical case studies on contestation in eco-social transformations, and seek to develop perspectives that transgress sectoral boundaries in both policy and practice.

## Format and Submission Guidelines

**Format of the workshop:** The workshop will be held in an interactive and collaborative discussion setting, allowing in depth exploration of different ideas rather than conference style presentations. Participants will be encouraged to familiarise themselves with the abstracts of the other participants to enable more meaningful interactions and discussion.

**Call for contributions:** 300-400 words abstract, title, author name(s), affiliation, presenting author(s), contact details; highlighting your current research focus, e.g. empirical results, methodologies, conceptual approaches and or open questions that address contestation in eco-social transformation.

**Deadline for submission:** August 1st 2025

**Submission process:** Please email your submission to [lucas.barning@univie.ac.at](mailto:lucas.barning@univie.ac.at) with the subject line: ESPPRIT Workshop Vienna 2025 – Contribution Submission

## Literature

Mattila, Hanna, Hirvola, Aino & Borrup, Tom (2025): Communicative and Agonistic Planning Theories in the Face of Populist Rhetoric: Reflections on Minneapolis 2040 Process. In: *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, DOI: [10.1111/1468-2427.13351](https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2427.13351).

Patterson, James J. (2023): Backlash to Climate Policy. In: *Global Environmental Politics*, 23 (1), 68–90. DOI: [10.1162/glep\\_a\\_00684](https://doi.org/10.1162/glep_a_00684).

Patterson, James, Anisimova, Ksenia, Logg-Scarvell, Jasmin & Kaiser, Cille (2025): Reactions to policy action: socio-political conditions of backlash to climate change policy. In: *Policy Sciences*, Springer Science and Business Media LLC, 58 (2), 287–320. DOI: [10.1007/s11077-025-09578-5](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11077-025-09578-5).

Pel, Bonno (2021): Transition ‘backlash’: Towards explanation, governance and critical understanding. In: *Environmental Innovation and Societal Transitions*, Elsevier BV, 41, 32–34. DOI: [10.1016/j.eist.2021.10.016](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.eist.2021.10.016).

Seto, K. C., Davis, S. J., Mitchell, R. B., Stokes, E. C., Unruh, G. & Ürge-Vorsatz, D. (2016): Carbon Lock-In: Types, Causes, and Policy Implications. In: *Annual Review of Environment and Resources*, Annual Reviews, 41 (1), 425–452. DOI: [10.1146/annurev-environ-110615-085934](https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-environ-110615-085934).