

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.

Extended deadline for submission: Sunday, August 17th 2025

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

Why participate?

This workshop offers a unique opportunity to showcase your research, gain insights into ongoing projects, and engage with pressing research questions at the intersection of research, policy, and practice. Through diverse formats – including keynote presentations that challenge us to rethink eco-social transformations, lightning rounds, and interactive discussions – the workshop will foster collaborative learning and help shape future agendas for eco-social policy and practice in urban and regional transformations. Participants will leave with a deeper understanding of current research challenges, expanded networks that span countries and disciplines, and inspiration and momentum for collaborative initiatives. A written report documenting the workshop will further capture the insights and research directions discussed, supporting continued engagement beyond the event.

Costs

Over the two days, catered workshop lunches, a group dinner on September 18, snacks during scheduled breaks will be provided by the organisers. Participants are responsible for arranging their own accommodation, travel, and additional meals. Travel bursaries are available for Early-Career Researchers who are members of the RSA – please contact us for more information. Childcare services can also be arranged upon request with advance notice.

References

- 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).