

## Conference

# *Converging and Conflicting Trends in the Public Administration of the US, Europe, and Germany*

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On 19 and 20 July 2012, the German Research Institute for Public Administration (GRIP) Speyer (Germany) and the School for Public and Environmental Affairs (SPEA) of Indiana University (USA) jointly hosted an international conference on *Converging and Conflicting Trends in the Public Administration of the US, Europe, and Germany*. In addition to being a landmark celebrating the academic partnership between these two institutions, the purpose of the conference was to deepen and expand (also to new partners) this cooperation and to institutionalize the progress made by increasing the number of concrete outputs and increasing the number of scholars involved or interested in cooperative endeavours. The purpose of this report is to 1) highlight some of the organizational efforts behind the conference, which will benefit other institutions interested in such ventures, and 2) more importantly to review the academic agenda and outcomes of the conference. The conference was hosted by the German University of Administrative Sciences Speyer (Uni-Speyer), with which the GRIP is affiliated and which cooperates with the SPEA on teaching, e.g. by hosting a summer school for the SPEA and other invited students. GRIP and SPEA were equally represented in the conference organizing committee with four professors each. As the site of the conference, administrative support was provided by the GRIP. The GRIP also served as a central communication point with external actors, serving to minimize conflicting messages that could arise with such a large and active conference committee operating from different institutions. To facilitate plan-

ning, two workshops were held in the two years preceding the conference, the first at the SPEA in Bloomington, Indiana (USA) and the second at the GRIP in Speyer, Germany. These workshops were also used as an opportunity for the academics from both institutions to share their research. The conference committee put a special emphasis on ensuring a geographical balance regarding the conference participants. In order to do this, the conference recruited participants through a three-pronged strategy. First, the active participation of the GRIP and SPEA scholars was encouraged with the support of both institutions' senior leadership. This was seen as central to institutionalizing the outcomes of the conference. Second, senior scholars from other institutions were directly invited to participate. Half of these were recruited from the USA and the other half from Europe. Finally, a call for paper was issued to the wider academic community. Proposals submitted for the call were evaluated solely based on merit. The response to the call was sufficiently high to make the selection process competitive and the paper acceptance rate was just a fraction above 50 per cent.

The conference theme was centred on the observation that public administrations in the US and Europe are facing extraordinary domestic problems (e.g. unemployment, unaffordable social security and public health systems, outdated infrastructures) and severe global challenges (e.g. international terrorism, financial crises, ecological degradation and climate change). The conference concept drew attention to three trends in the ways that public administrations are trying to cope with these problems: privatization of public tasks and services, increasingly detailed government regulation of markets and social activities, and/or adherence to the status quo. The conference was interested in papers examining these trends from a comparative perspective, though it was also willing to consider in-depth single-country examinations provided there were clear lessons or implications beyond the single case. The conference was also interested in larger theoretical or normative perspectives that could help frame the issue. This strategy of being open to and even actively soliciting theoretical papers as well as papers examining the different trends in the role of the state ensured the papers would also form a well-structured post-conference publication, to be discussed below.

Within this broad concept, the conference was organized to cover eight themes. These were: Administrative Theory and State Paradigms; Multi-Level Governance; The Market and the Regulatory State; Human Resource Management and Ethics Management; Society and the Regulator-

ry State; Non-Profit and Civic Engagement, Participation; Administrative Modernization and Performance Management; New Administrative Tasks. The call for papers explicitly mentioned and elaborated at length on these themes. The broad thematic approach was meant to complement the conference's desire to promote cross-national or international perspectives with an effort to promote the exchange of perspectives between the numerous sub-fields of public administration and related disciplines. Thus, generally, the conference was intended to have 1) a comparative perspective, whether cross-national and/or cross-disciplinary, with 2) a focus on contemporary trends rather than static evaluations.

The conference gathered approximately one hundred scholars from across Europe and the United States as well countries further afield, including Russia, Israel, and South Korea. The attendees ranged from Professor Emeriti to PhD candidates and included several persons from government. Graduate students from the University of Speyer were also encouraged to attend and several did so, including visiting students from Georgia and Ukraine.

Forty-five papers, along with two presentations without papers, were presented in 16 panels ranging across the discipline of public administration. Due to variations in the number of papers submitted, the number of panels that eventually emerged out of each of the aforementioned eight themes varied slightly, but most themes had two constituent panels each covering a more specific sub-theme. Among the panels, one panel had only two presentations (due to a last minute cancellation), one had four, while all the others had three presentations. All panels were overseen by a chairperson, many of whom were experts in the panels overall theme and were senior scholars.

No more than three panels were run concurrently in order to maximize attendance and minimize the dilemma familiar to all conference goers: »which panel to attend?«

The panel sequence was organized to take into account several factors. Firstly, each day opened with one of the panels within the »Administrative Theory and State Paradigms« theme, much as the post-conference publication (or any publication) opens with theory or the big picture. Additionally, the seemingly most cross-disciplinary and currently »popular« panels, notably a panel on »Administrative Reforms«, were held at the end of the day. This was a rather blatant attempt to keep the conference participants on-site through the days characterized by pleasant summer weather. Lastly, the conference size was just small enough to make it

possible to reorganize panels to facilitate the attendance of some of the senior academics with busier schedules.

The papers ranged from the highly theoretical to the highly empirical. All the papers were well developed – i.e. they were not research notes – but the stage of development of the papers nonetheless varied considerably, often based on the career stage, or indeed career (academia versus government) of the paper's author(s). This was to be expected based on the diversity of the conference participants. From most anecdotal reports, the feedback was constructive in furthering the development of the papers. This has contributed in at least a couple of cases to substantial revisions of the people's research. The more theoretical works tended to come from established scholars and several of these will be included in the conference publication. At least three of the most developed empirical works have already been accepted to international peer-reviewed journals, while others have been revised and submitted to such journals for consideration.

While summarizing all the papers is beyond the scope this report, several concepts that spanned eight conference themes and sixteen panels are worth mentioning. Such theme-spanning issues indicate where current interests in the overall discipline lie and can also serve as an excellent basis for future collaborations between scholars with different interests and backgrounds. The issue of transparency and information was the most notable theme-spanning concept, one that was often linked to e-government. The concept of risk management had its own panel but even outside the panel there was considerable interest in the issue, also in the larger idea of the role of the state in protecting citizens, whether from irresponsible industries, terrorists, capitalism itself, etc. Lastly, there was a small but still noticeable interest in some of the »softer« aspects of public management, such as leadership, trust, and values.

The conference opened with a keynote speech by Professor Pan Suk Kim of Yonsei University (South Korea), who is also the current President of the International Institute of Administrative Sciences (IIAS). His address presented »An international perspective on public administration as a discipline«. He approached the issue from a truly international and comparative perspective and discussed the sharing of knowledge, organizational innovation, and practices across the globe as well as the need to deepen and expand this sharing. The speech thus captured the essence of the whole purpose of the conference.

The second day of the conference opened with a keynote address on the »Problems and prospects of transatlantic regulatory harmonization«, de-

livered by Dean John Graham of the School of Public and Environmental Affairs (SPEA), Indiana University. Dean Graham has also a high-level background in government, thus his talk was more from a practitioner's perspective, one that complemented well the academic perspective of Professor Kim. He spoke at length of his personal experience in promoting institutional arrangements and regulatory cooperation, raising both questions and hopes about where US-EU cooperation is now and where it is going in the coming years.

In addition to the daily opening keynote speeches, a third keynote speech was given by Professor Dr. Stefan Fisch, Vice-Chancellor of the German University of Administrative Sciences, during a formal dinner at the nearby Hambach Castle. Professor Fisch's lecture was entitled »The Hambach Rally of 1832 and protest movements across Europe today: progressive or reactionary?« This detailed talk was a chance for the hosts to connect the local to the global and the historical to the contemporary while entertaining the visitors in the seat of German democracy.

The conference concluded with a roundtable discussion directly related to the conference theme: »Converging versus conflicting trends in the public administration of the US, Europe, and Germany«. It was chaired by Professor Jos Raadschelders, of Ohio State University and the University of Leiden. The discussants were Professor Arthur Benz, Technical University of Darmstadt; Professor Laurence J. O'Toole, University of Georgia; Professor B. Guy Peters, University of Pittsburgh & Zeppelin University (Germany); and Professor Jacques Ziller, University of Pavia.

The wide-ranging roundtable discussion covered converging and conflicting trends in public administration as an academic discipline and a practice, as well as the connection between the two. All the contributors saw both converging and conflicting trends depending on what one looked at, while they also highlighted stability and contradictory trends. The theory, mechanisms, concepts, methods, and levels of analysis used to examine public administration were also scrutinized. An overall observation of increasing variety and complexity in public administration as a discipline and practice was noted. While this complicates things for academics and administrators, the contributors generally saw it as making the field richer.

The two opening key note speeches and the roundtable discussion were recorded and transcripts have been compiled. The presentations given in the panels were also recorded. The specific use of these (e.g. in a further report) is yet to be determined. However, they, as well as the copies of all the papers and power point presentations, have been made available to the conference participants on a secure intranet page.

The recording and transcription of the speeches and presentations, and the archiving of the papers and presentation slides, are part of the effort to institutionalize the knowledge presented at the conference. While it is less quantifiable, there are indications that several research relationships are emerging from the conference as well, which is yet another manifestation of the institutionalization of the conference. That several papers are to be published in international peer-reviewed journals is another related output, though, of course, most credit here goes to the individual scholars involved.

The most public and formal manifestation of the conference's outputs is the post-conference publication. Professors Raadschelders (the roundtable chairperson) and Eberhard Bohne (conference committee chairperson from the GRIP) as well as Dean Graham of the SPEA agreed to co-edit a book containing selected papers from the conference. Sixteen papers were selected based on an evaluation by the editors in consultation with feedback from the panel chairpersons. The selected authors have accepted the offer for publication and are currently revising their manuscripts while the editors are coordinating the details regarding the publisher. Even with a very generous timetable, the book is intended to be submitted by the end of 2013 at the latest, with publication to follow shortly. The book, together with the other aforementioned outputs, will ensure that the conference was not merely a one-off event but rather a cumulative and even autocatalytic process contributing to the discipline of public administration.

After the conference closed, the University of Speyer hosted a meeting of the Transatlantic Policy Consortium, in which the SPEA and the GRIP have long been involved. This meeting saw the selection of new co-chairpersons of the executive committee, including one from the SPEA. The exchange programme of the SPEA and the University of Speyer has also been passed to a new generation, with professors new to both institutions now taking the lead. The conference was thus ideally timed to coincide with these transitions and firmly placed the GRIP-SPEA partnership in the minds of the institutions' (and the TPC's) future leaders. Meanwhile, the lessons learned from hosting and administering a truly international conference of this magnitude at the GRIP and the University of Speyer, a first for these institutions, are being put to use. The University will host the international conference of the Middle East Economic Association (MEEA) in 2013 and a European Group for Public Administration (EGPA) conference in 2014.

The conference committee members and senior leadership of the hosting institutions judged the conference to be a success. Likewise, the feedback from the conference participants was largely positive despite a packed schedule. The conversations carried on well after the conference officially closed. Indicators of a more quantitative nature also reveal the event's success: the conference met its target participation rate, resulted in more than enough quality papers to turn into a book, and ended well under budget despite maintaining many contingencies (many of which, e.g. extra transport and rooms, were needed). The conference stands as a model for international cooperation between academic institutions and a clear demonstration of the benefits of such partnerships.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is a subjective assessment of the author and the opinions expressed herein do not necessarily represent the views of the GRIP, the SPEA, or the conference committee except where directly stated in the text. Those interested in further information on the conference and its outputs are welcome to contact the corresponding author.

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