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Pioneers revisited: broadening the pioneers concept in European Union environmental policy

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Scientific literature in the 1990s identified a small number of Member States (Denmark, Sweden, Finland, Germany, Austria and the Netherlands) as ‘pioneers’ in EU environmental policy making. By being ahead of other Member States, by giving an example and by actively pushing the policy process in Brussels, they acted as important forces behind the development of EU environmental policy.

Nowadays most, if not all, of the former pioneer countries have become both more hesitant and more selective for a number of reasons. At the EU level, there has been a ‘dilution’ of the influence of individual Member States due to enlargement and to institutional changes, notably the almost total shift to the co-decision procedure (which allows for qualified majority voting amongst Member States in the Council and grants the European Parliament decision-making powers, which are equal to the Council). At least equally important are domestic developments within the former pioneers such as increasing Euro-scepticism, severe problems with the implementation of EU environmental directives, decreasing priority given to environmental and sustainability issues, and a shift to more right-wing governments. The place of pioneering governments seems to have been taken over, at least partly, by a wide range of other actors operating in shifting coalitions.

This discussion explores how the roles of those new types of pioneers can be better understood. It first sketches out the original pusher/forerunner framework developed in the 1990s. It then explores how the concept of pioneers can be broadened to take into account a wider range of actors and a wider range of mechanisms employed in pursuing pioneer strategies. The final section attempts to outline a new, extended framework for analysing environmental pioneers in Europe.

Four types of environmental pioneers

The strategies of ‘green’ Member States operating in the 1990s could be distinguished along two dimensions (see Liefferink and Andersen, 1998 in further reading). First, a state could be a forerunner, i.e. having more advanced domestic policies than the other Member States, as either the consequence of a purposeful decision to take the lead, or the outcome of a more incremental, historical process. Second, these positions could be played out either by pushing the development of environmental policy in Brussels directly, or by exerting influence more indirectly, notably through the impact of higher domestic standards on the functioning of the internal market.

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The two distinctions combined lead to four ideal-type pioneers outlined in Table 1:

- (a) Pusher by example: developing a domestic policy and presenting it as a ‘good example’ to be followed by the EU. In this strategy, conflicts with existing EU policies may be used to provoke EU action.
- (b) Constructive pusher: trying to stimulate the development of EU environmental policy by supporting the Commission, building alliances with other Member States, etc.
- (c) Defensive forerunner: developing a domestic policy that is known to be out of step with the EU and defending it against EU interference for domestic reasons. By affecting the functioning of the internal market, it may nevertheless have a considerable impact at the EU level.
- (d) Opt-outer: trying to maintain a domestic policy that has been developed without a view to the EU, i.e. a situation in which a Member State more or less unexpectedly finds itself out of step with the rest of the EU. Dependent on the issue at stake, that opting out may eventually have an EU impact via the internal market.

New types of pioneers, new mechanisms?

Both domestic and EU-level changes have made the governments of the former pioneer states less eager to push environmental issues in Brussels than in the 1980s and 1990s. Instead – and reflecting trends towards increasing participation and stakeholder involvement in EU governance generally – other types of actors are increasingly involved in pushing EU environmental policies. These may be both sub-national governments (regions, provinces, cities, city networks etc.) and different types of non-state actors (business, business groups, NGOs, citizen groups etc.)³. For instance, city networks are active in propagating innovative solutions in the area of climate change, firms anticipate on resource scarcity, or companies gathering in the World Business Council for Sustainable Development (WBCSD) urge for stricter and more consistent environmental policies. These developments pose the question: which strategies may such new pioneers be expected to employ?

On the one hand, sub-national public actors and most private actors have less formal and informal access to the EU institutions. Hence, they generally have fewer opportunities than Member State governments to engage in influencing the regulatory process directly by constructive pushing or actively presenting ‘good examples’ in Brussels. Most of them also lack the capacity for such relatively resource-intensive lobbying strategies. On the other hand, they may have a considerable amount of freedom to develop innovative practices in their own specific fields of competence (for example in the case of sub-national authorities, in urban planning, sustainable building and so on), even if limitations set by the national and European regulatory context should not be underestimated. Thus, dependent on the policy area at stake, these actors may have better opportunities for developing policies

Table 1: Four types of environmental pioneers².

Forerunner: Pusher:	Purposeful	Incremental
Direct	(a) Pusher by example	(b) Constructive pusher
Indirect	(c) Defensive forerunner	(d) Opt-outer

² Source: Liefferink, D. and Andersen, M.S. (1998), ‘Strategies of the “green” member states in EU environmental policy making’, *Journal of European Public Policy* 5 (2) pp254–70.

³ See for example the other contributions to this volume by Grant, by Monaghan, Wurzel and Connelly, and by Sullivan and Gouldson for more detailed accounts of the roles of other types of ‘pioneers’.

‘ahead of the others’ than Member State governments. This can be done with a focus on achieving local goals, irrespective of their impact on other actors (i.e. defensive forerunner) or with the explicit aim to set an example to others (i.e. pushing by example). In the latter case, the target would be other similar sub-national actors (which may operate transnationally) rather than the EU.

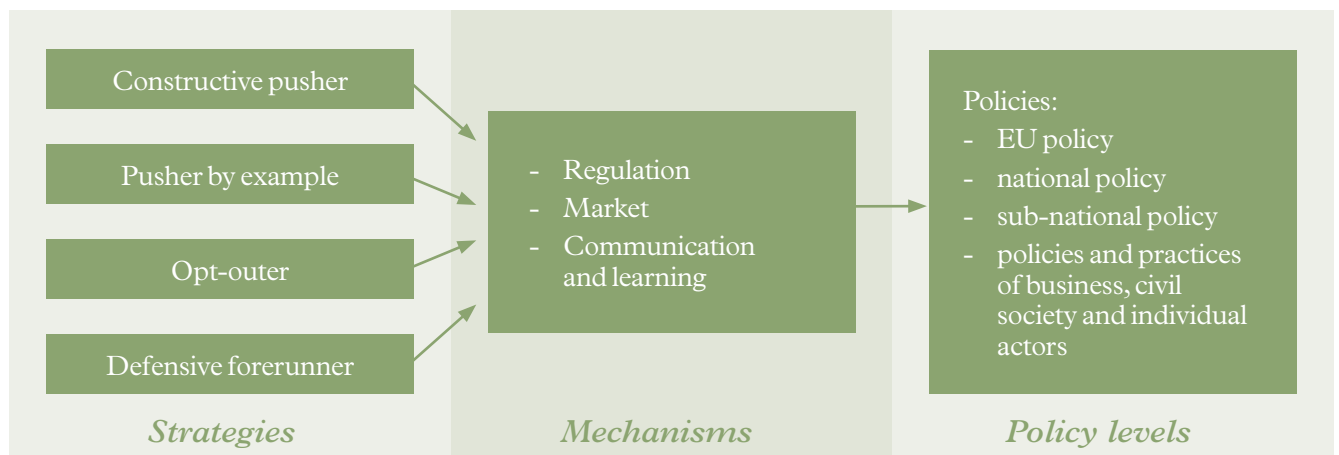
If sub-national public actors or private actors engage in pushing by example or defensive forerunner strategies, several mechanisms may be at play. An indirect impact via the functioning of the internal market may of course not be ruled out, but various types of communication and policy learning are in fact likely to be much more important. Exchange of knowledge and practical experiences can take place in the context of, for instance, business associations, city networks, research programmes, consultancy firms or benchmarking exercises. It may lead to processes ranging from inspiration to copying and thus to diffusion of policy innovations. The cumulative effect of such processes may or may not eventually influence regulatory output at the EU level. Even if it does not, the impact on environmental policies and practices at national, sub-national or company level may already be significant.

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Towards a new conceptualisation of environmental pioneers

The original, purely state-oriented pusher/forerunner matrix is limited to strategies and mechanisms related to either regulation or the market. It does not accommodate the potentially large role of communication and learning. Therefore, as a starting point, we propose the scheme in Figure 1, which may have a wider applicability.

Figure 1: Pusher/forerunner strategies, mechanisms and policy impact at different levels.



The scheme makes a distinction between strategies (constructive pusher, pusher by example, etc.), mechanisms employed in pursuing these strategies (through regulation, market or communication and learning), and their impact on policies at different levels (EU, national and sub-national as well as private, civil society and individual). As hinted at above, different strategies in the hands of different actors may employ different configurations of mechanisms and target different levels. The particular ways in which this occurs has to be elaborated in further research. One hypothesis could be that constructive pushing, involving direct influence on the EU regulatory process, tends to be limited to Member State governments and a relatively small number of powerful companies and associations with good access in Brussels. Pushing by example and defensive forerunner strategies, in contrast, appear to be more relevant for sub-national governments or private and civil society actors acting as pioneers. Although effects via regulation or the market cannot be excluded, the key mechanism here seems to be communication and policy learning although more extensive empirical research is needed to test this hypothesis. Sub-national governments or private and civil society actors may also be expected to bring about policy change with their counterparts in city networks, business associations, etc., possibly before having a wider policy impact at the national or EU level.

Further reading

Andersen, M.S. and Liefferink, D. eds. (1997), *European environmental policy: the pioneers*. Manchester/New York: Manchester University Press.

Liefferink, D. and Wiering, M. (2011), 'Environmental pioneers in retreat? The cases of the Netherlands and Denmark'. Paper presented at the 6th ECPR General Conference, University of Iceland, Reykjavik, 25-27 August 2011, available at: http://moodle.tau.ac.il/pluginfile.php/260496/mod_resource/content/0/Liefferink%20%20Wiering%202011.pdf, (visited 1 July 2013).

Liefferink, D. and Andersen, M.S. (1998), 'Strategies of the "green" member states in EU environmental policy making', *Journal of European Public Policy* 5 (2) pp254-70.