

Summary

17th Spatial Planning Report 2021–2023

The Austrian Spatial Planning Report (“Österreichischer Raumordnungsbericht”) is published by the ÖROK in regular three-year intervals and includes comprehensive analyses of developments in the field of spatial planning in Austria. The current 17th Spatial Planning Report for the period 2021 to 2023 provides an overview of the framework conditions and trends in spatial development, analyses regional policy and development in Austria and provides an insight into current developments in Austrian spatial planning law.

The report focuses on the presentation of spatial trends and developments in the overall Austrian context. It utilises the current instruments of the Austrian Regional Monitoring System – the “ÖROK-Atlas” and the “ÖROK-Rechtssammlung”. Current examples from the Austrian regions – presented with photos, graphics and web links – visualise the diversity of planning instruments and planning activities in Austria.

Spatial planning & regional development in Austria

This introductory chapter provides information on the distribution of spatial planning competences in Austria as well as the structure, tasks and working methods of the Austrian Conference on Spatial Planning (ÖROK), which was established in 1971 to coordinate spatial planning issues.

ÖREK 2030 and implementation pacts

In Chapter 1, the authors of the ÖROK Office illustrate a wide range of topics, from the basic principles and priorities of the ÖREK 2030 to the ÖREK implementation pacts as key instruments for increasing the focus on implementation and impact.

The Austrian Spatial Development Concept (ÖREK) 2030 is guided by three basic principles:

Austria’s spatial development should be climate-friendly and sustainable, orientated towards the common good and fair. Spatial resources have to be used sparingly and carefully, social and spatial cohesion must be strengthened, economic areas should be developed in a climate-friendly and sustainable manner and vertical and horizontal governance need to be further developed.

So-called “implementation pacts” were derived from the priority topics of the ÖREK and provided with political mandates and agreements of the ÖROK. With the decision of the ÖROK Political Conference on 20 October 2021, work began on the following “pacts” within the ÖROK committees:

- ÖREK 2030 implementation pact «Space for building culture – strengthening town and city centres and opening up space for building culture»
- ÖREK 2030 Implementation Pact «Soil Strategy for Austria – Strategy to reduce further land use and soil sealing by 2030»

The intensive work and coordination on both implementation pacts were a key focus of ÖROK activities in the reporting period of the 17th Spatial Planning Report. Recommendations were drawn up by the ÖREK partnership “Space for building culture” and adopted as “ÖROK Recommendation No. 58 by resolution of the ÖROK Political Conference on 31 January 2023. The implementation of the recommendations is a significant contribution to the implementation of the “ÖREK 2030” and the building culture guidelines of the federal government and some federal provinces. In addition, the recommendations follow a series of ÖROK documents, international programmes and strategies to which Austria has committed itself.

The ÖREK partnership “Soil Strategy for Austria” prepared a draft soil strategy at administrative

level and submitted it for political approval. On 29 February 2024, the “Soil Strategy” in the ÖROK version of June 2023 was adopted by the provinces at a meeting of the provincial spatial planning officers. The draft soil strategy comprises four general objectives: Protection of open space and grassland, prevention of urban sprawl, efficient inner urban development, intensification of awareness-raising and public relations work.

One focus of the “Soil Strategy for Austria” pact was the development of a standardised monitoring system throughout Austria. The core elements were the development of a harmonised database and a uniform monitoring system. Work on monitoring land use and sealing started in October 2021 in the ÖROK Spatial Monitoring Working Group. The aim was to develop a basis for evidence-based decisions. The new recording of land use and sealing was subject to intensive technical coordination between the federal government, federal states, cities and municipalities and validated by geodata experts from all federal states and the Federal Environment Agency. The result is significantly improved, robust data on land use for settlement and transport purposes, leisure and recreation, supply and disposal purposes as well as sealing for the reference year 2022. This work will be transferred to ongoing national monitoring, which will be coordinated within the framework of the ÖROK.

Framework conditions and trends in spatial development

On the basis of facts and maps, the chapter 2 „Framework conditions and trends in spatial development“ highlights and analyses specific topics related to spatial development. The authors Erich Dallhammer and Wolfgang Neugebauer used current data of the Austrian Regional Monitoring System. Indicators from the “ÖROK Atlas”, the “ÖROK regional forecasts” or from ÖROK accessibility analyses are presented in a comprehensive picture and in relation to each other. Based on the region-specific Austrian developments, the authors derive challenges for the future spatial development policy in Austria.

While spatial development in the period of the 16th Spatial Planning Report 2018 to 2020

was significantly influenced by the immediate effects of the coronavirus pandemic and the global economic decline, the current period 2021 to 2023 is primarily characterised by the coronavirus pandemic, the war in Ukraine and inflation in all areas of life due the sharp increase of energy prices.

The coronavirus pandemic has changed behaviours and had some lasting effects on spatial development – working from home for one or two days a week has become the norm in many sectors. It can be assumed that this will also reduce the need for office space in the future. At the same time, the coronavirus pandemic has changed mobility behaviour – more cycling, more walking, less public transport.

In the light of the coronavirus pandemic the public discourse on dealing with the climate crisis has not received much attention. In view of ongoing record highs in average and peak temperatures, extreme weather and floods, the climate crisis is gaining importance in the public debate.

The massive rise in energy prices for fossil fuels as a result of the Russian war against Ukraine demonstrated Austria’s strong dependence on imported fossil fuels and the importance of more regional energy supply. In terms of spatial planning, the expansion of renewable energies is focussing on the competition for land between renewable energy production and ensuring food security through the agricultural sector. The use of land for housing, factories, logistics facilities, social and technical infrastructure as well as leisure and tourism facilities is also increasing pressure on the preservation of land for agricultural production. It therefore remains a challenging task for spatial planning to balance the different interests – such as ensuring affordable housing, suitable industrial areas, energy production and the protection of high-quality soils for agricultural production.

Agriculture is one of the sectors most affected by climate change. Climate change increases the risk of lower agricultural output in the future. It is a challenge to implement appropriate adaptation measures without creating new conflicts – e.g. limited water resources.

The energy transition and the necessary expansion of wind power and photovoltaics pose challenges for spatial planning in the federal states. Suitable locations for plants have to be found and secured. The expected positive effects in terms of climate protection and energy production must be weighed up against the possible (small-scale) spatial effects. To avoid land use conflicts, the use of renewable energy resources needs to be harmonised with the needs of residents, agriculture and forestry, tourism and landscape and nature conservation. On the other hand, regional energy production offers new economic opportunities for rural regions.

Beyond the global challenges of the coronavirus pandemic, the war in Ukraine, inflation and climate change, structural change in rural areas continues to be a key topic in the current spatial planning report. The structural change that has been ongoing for decades will continue in the 2021 to 2023 reporting period – population growth in urban centres and decline in rural areas. This confronts cities and rural regions with major challenges concerning building, maintaining and financing infrastructure, public services and mobility services. This applies to both – growing regions and those with constant or declining populations. Balanced spatial development with a reduction in regional disparities remains a strategic challenge for urban and regional planning in the federal states.

The lack of workers – triggered by a decline in the number of people of working age – will become a challenge particularly for rural regions in the future. There is a risk that companies will relocate their sites and jobs to urban centres, which will further increase the trend towards migration from rural areas.

The demographic change will further raise funding pressure on public systems – such as pensions, care and healthcare – and increase the lack of skilled labour. In any case, adaptation strategies are required to cope with demographic change: changes in the age structure of the population also require adjustments to the range of public services and infrastructures.

Due to migration and demographic change the ÖROK regional forecasts expect fewer large

households in rural regions, where currently single-family homes are common. There will be more demand for flats for smaller households in rural regions.

Due to immigration housing demand will continue to rise in cities, also for multi-person households. Affordable housing for families will thus remain an important topic in the future.

Due to the shift of population into metropolitan areas with limited land availability, the degree of sealing in densely built-up urban areas is very high. Green and open spaces are increasingly coming under pressure. In view of rising temperatures, the negative effects of sealing on the urban climate and people's health are to be expected. Strategies for keeping green spaces free are just as necessary as ensuring a climate-adapted design and quality of life in public spaces of city centres.

The demand for leisure property has reached a dynamic level in recent years that poses new challenges for spatial planning. The negative effects – such as price increases on the property market, overuse of municipal infrastructure or the damage of natural and recreational areas – primarily affect communities in tourism and rural areas.

Accessibility plays a key role in the attractiveness of rural regions. There are still immense regional differences between metropolitan areas and peripheral rural areas. In order to offer an attractive public transport service even in rural areas, it is important to pay attention to the strengthening of regional centres and to compact settlements and districts with suitable planning and funding instruments in the future.

Current developments in the Austrian spatial planning law

In Chapter 3, Arthur Kanonier presents the current trends and developments in Austrian spatial planning law. The increasing presence of spatial planning issues, such as high land consumption, in media reporting and political debates has also led to changes in spatial planning regulations. In many federal states the basic principles of spatial planning law have been revised – in

some cases considerably – and legislators and planning authorities have thus responded to current requirements in spatial planning.

The focus of the spatial planning laws of the federal states varies considerably. On the one hand, state legislators have been concerned with the implementation of EU directives – such as the Seveso Directive. On the other hand, perennial issues in spatial planning law, such as measures to reduce land consumption, mobilise building land, restrict shopping centres or holiday flats, have led to revisions of spatial planning laws.

Dealing with wind power and photovoltaic systems is a focus in the revisions of spatial planning laws and other laws in the reporting period. Sectoral spatial plans for the management of photovoltaic systems on open spaces and wind turbines were enacted in several federal provinces. Spatial planning measures for affordable housing and to strengthen city centres were also introduced. Taxes for unoccupied houses and flats are new in the field of spatial planning law and are mainly regulated by special state laws. In some federal states, the regulations for shopping centres have been tightened.

Several state-wide, regional or sectoral spatial planning programmes were drawn up during the reporting period. Salzburg has a new regional development programme. Several regional development programmes in Burgenland, a regional spatial planning programme in Upper Austria and regional programmes in Tyrol relating to the protection of agricultural areas were enacted.

In the functional spatial planning legislation of the federal government and the federal states, several relevant laws were amended and adapted to current requirements. Building laws and building regulations were extensively revised in some federal states – also in connection with amendments to spatial planning laws. Some federal provinces amended their land transfer laws during the reporting period, in particular to promote affordable housing and prevent holiday homes. The nature conservation laws of the federal states were also amended slightly. The amendment to the EIA Act contains provi-

sions to speed up the approval of energy transition projects. The author also deals with the spatial planning case law of the Constitutional Court.

Regional policy and regional economic development

In Chapter 4, Markus Gruber and Konstantin Melidis outline the framework conditions for regional policy and regional economic development in the interaction between the European Union, the federal and state governments and discuss the most important developments in the 2021 to 2023 reporting period. They look at long-term developments and illustrate the change of this policy field in a contextual way and by focusing on milestones.

Unexpected crises had a drastic impact on the economy and society in the current reporting period and challenged policymakers at national and regional level. In addition to national measures, new short-term EU crisis interventions had to be developed and implemented in the shared management of funds, parallel to the commitment of funds for the ongoing 2014–2020 EU funding period. Furthermore, the new generation of programmes was established. Planning and reorientation under high uncertainty and heavy pressure on resources can be summarised for the reporting period. Changed conditions also have implications for the design of regional innovation, economic and location policies and their governance, processes and instruments in order to support the transition to ecologically sustainable and socially inclusive economic practices and to initiate or accelerate territorial transformations. The challenges are:

- To strengthen the awareness of new transformative change processes;
- support the development of skills and capacities for the management of these processes and provide them with sustainable resources;
- to (further) develop existing structures, programmes and initiatives in the direction of a transformative understanding, to gather experience and to support learning and exchange processes,
- with the aim of promoting prosperity, resilience and new, sustainable competitiveness of regions.

Key activities of ÖROK 2021 to 2023 with spatial reference

In this chapter, the authors from the ÖROK Office cover the work on the ÖREK 2030 implementation pacts, the resulting ÖREK partnerships, the innovations in the ÖROK basic work – such as the ÖROK Atlas and ÖROK regional forecasts, publications and the ÖROK legal collection. Furthermore, the activities within the framework of EU regional policy – such as the development of the Partnership Agreement 2021–2027 – as well as the implementation of the transnational ETC programmes and macro-regional EU strategies in Austria are presented.

The focus in the area of spatial development in the reporting period was on completing work on the Austrian Spatial Development Concept (ÖREK) 2030, which was adopted on 20 October 2021 at a meeting of the ÖROK Political Conference – together with two ÖREK implementation pacts. The two pacts “Space for Baukultur” and “Soil Strategy for Austria” were implemented as ÖREK partnerships of the same name. The results are explained in more detail in the first section of the report.

Further results of ÖREK projects include a publication on the topic of “Spatial dimensions of digitalisation” (publication series no. 213) and on the “Management of leisure residences” (publication series no. 214). In addition, a new ÖROK population forecast was published in April 2022 and an ÖROK household forecast in March 2024.

Key milestones in the area of EU regional policy – in addition to the strategic monitoring of the 2014–2020 period – were in particular work in connection with the preparation of the EU period 2021–2027, including the preparation of the Austrian Partnership Agreement 2021–2027, the “Just Transition Plan 2021–2027” and the

preparation of the National Regional Funding Area Map 2022–2027 in accordance with EU state aid law.

Since 2002, the “National Contact Point” (NCP) for the implementation of the transnational and EU-wide programmes of the “European Territorial Cooperation” (ETC) objective has been set up at the ÖROK office. In September 2023, the NCP’s tasks were expanded to include support for the European Urban Initiative (EUI).

In the reporting period, the focus was on the start of the implementation of the programmes for the new 2021–2027 funding period and the intensive support of those interested in participating. In March 2023, an “Urban Contact Point (UCP)” was added to the NCP’s information offering. This is intended to support EUI activities and communicate the objectives, offers and results of the EUI at national level on the one hand and communicate the needs of the cities to the EC on the other.

Following the 2014–2020 funding period, the Managing Authority (MA) for the IBW/EFRE & JTF programme in Austria is also located at the ÖROK office for the new period 2021–2027. In addition to the administrative tasks of the managing authority, public relations work is an important aspect of the work of the managing authority, with corresponding offers being made available for both programmes in the transition phase between the funding periods. Communication for the expiring IWB/EFRE 2014–2020 programme focused on the implemented funding projects, while preparations were made in parallel for the start of communication activities for the ERDF & JTF 2021–2027 programme approved in 2022. The Campaign2024 – EU funding for regional development website (efre.gv.at) was relaunched in October 2022.

