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# EU–China and EU–Brazil policy transfer in regional policy

Marcin Dąbrowski<sup>a</sup> , Ida Musiałkowska<sup>b</sup>  and Laura Polverari<sup>c</sup> 

## ABSTRACT

The paper investigates the European Union (EU)–Brazil and EU–China regional policy dialogues, viewed as vectors of cross-national policy transfer. Regional policy is considered as having limited transfer potential due to its inward orientation, context specificity and complexity. Yet, knowledge exchange and voluntary policy transfer have taken place between the EU and Brazil and between the EU and China since the mid-2000s. The study investigates and compares actors, motivations, mechanisms of transfer, conditioning factors and types of outcomes, shedding a light on the under-researched phenomenon of international policy transfer in regional policy.

## KEYWORDS

policy transfer; lesson-drawing; regional policy; European Union Cohesion Policy; Brazil; China

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## INTRODUCTION

Governments confronted with major challenges, requiring new policies or changes to pre-existing ones, often seek ideas abroad (Dolowitz & Marsh, 2000). They engage in a dialogue with other governments to learn from their experiences. Some governments and supranational bodies, such as the European Union (EU), are also keen to export their policies and norms in order to deepen strategic relationships with other countries. The literature on international policy transfer includes many studies focusing on transfer between the EU and third countries in various policy fields. Hardly any studies have focused on regional policy, even though since 2007 the EU has been engaging in ‘policy dialogues’ in this field with a growing number of countries. A notable exception is of the work of Minarčíková (2016), which, however, is a mere descriptive account of the EU–China’s dialogue. This study focuses on the EU–Brazil and the EU–China regional policy dialogues and is a first attempt at analysing these experiences: their motives, mechanisms and outcomes.

Studies on EU external governance have looked into the mechanisms and conditions of transfer of EU rules beyond the EU member states (Börzel & Risse, 2012; Lavenex,

2011), focusing on those countries upon which Europe is considered to exert its strongest influence, through conditionality or proximity: candidates for accession or neighbour countries. These studies reveal that the EU’s ability to export its norms is inversely proportional to the distance from its borders and enhanced by conditionality. Studies on policy transfer, however, have not yet focused on EU regional policy. Our research applies the concept of policy transfer to this policy to shed a light on the cooperation in this sphere between the European Commission and several third countries (China, Russia, Brazil, Ukraine, Argentina, Chile, Peru, Mexico and Japan).

Naturally, there are theoretical challenges. First, existing studies on policy transfer between the EU and third countries have tended to focus on policy areas that have a clear external dimension, implications for relations with third countries or involve a strategy of diffusion through engagement in international organizations (e.g., security, energy, trade and agriculture). One may ask if the traditional approaches to the study of the external dimension of EU policies and the ‘export’ of elements of those policies to third countries are suitable to appreciate similar developments in a more ‘inward-oriented’ and complex policy, such as regional policy.


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Second, as illustrated in the introduction to this special issue, most of the literature on policy transfer focuses on cases ‘driven by the demand for institutional solutions rather than active EU promotion of its models’ (Börzel & Risse, 2012, p. 196). The regional policy dialogues between the EU and third countries, on the contrary, have been largely conceived and pursued by the European Commission and European Parliament. Does this different underlying rationale – a desire to export a model – have an impact on the mechanisms and concrete outcomes of policy transfer?

Lastly, regional development policy is theoretically a difficult area for policy transfer. Dolowitz and Marsh argued that ‘the more complex a policy or programme is the harder it will be to transfer’ (Dolowitz & Marsh, 1996, p. 353). Rose, in turn, suggested that what makes a policy complex are multiple goals, vague focus, multiple factors affecting the desired outcome, a high perception of side effects, unfamiliarity and unpredictability (Rose, 1993, p. 133). Many of those features characterize regional policy. It is place based and relies on context-dependent solutions, thus policies successful in stimulating development in a particular place may not necessarily produce the expected results in another. Regional policy is also based on complex multilevel and multi-actor interactions, and a variety of endogenous and exogenous factors that may also weigh on the trajectory of regional development. Can policy transfer occur also in the framework of such a policy? And, if so, are the mechanisms of transfer the same as for other policy areas?

The aim of this paper is to examine these issues through an analysis of the regional policy dialogues of the EU with Brazil and China, adopting the conceptual lens of policy transfer, as defined by Dolowitz and Marsh (2000, p. 5): ‘the process by which knowledge about policies, administrative arrangements, institutions and ideas in one political system (past or present) is used in the development of policies, administrative arrangements, institutions and ideas in another’. This choice allows for a focus to be made on the process of transfer itself, rather than on its outcomes (analysed when using, *inter alia*, a policy diffusion lens; Knill, 2005). This research addresses the following questions:

- What was the rationale behind the regional policy dialogues?
- What were the activities implemented and who took part in them?
- Did learning take place?
- How did this happen?
- Is there evidence of policy transfer?
- What lessons can be drawn on the applicability of the policy transfer concept to place-based policies, and on the factors that can facilitate (or hinder) it?

The paper is structured as follows. The next section outlines the analytical framework. It is followed by a brief overview of the regional policies in the three contexts considered – the EU, China and Brazil – to set the scene for the discussion of the transfer process and learning. The subsequent empirical section explores and explains the

process of policy transfer between the EU and China and the EU and Brazil. The paper closes with concluding remarks and suggestions for further research.

## ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

The study employs an adapted version of the analytical scheme proposed by Dolowitz and Marsh (2000), identifying: (1) the main motivations, on both sides, for the policy transfer between the EU and China and the EU and Brazil; (2) the types of actors involved; (3) the scope of the transfer, i.e., whether it is related to the policy architecture (goals, content, instruments), to specific programmes, to implementation arrangements and even to negative lessons; (4) the concrete activities delivered to exchange information and practices, so as to enable lesson-drawing and, subsequently, policy transfer; (5) the ‘direction’ of transfer, i.e., whether it has been mainly one way or bidirectional; (6) the degree of transfer, i.e., if the activities implemented have resulted in off-the-shelf adoption of policy solutions (copying) or in their adaptation, or if foreign practices have represented more simply an inspiration leading to policy innovation; (7) the factors at play that have facilitated or hindered the process of learning and the adoption or adaptation of practices; and (7) the outcomes, classified as actual transfer, soft learning and by-products.

While Dolowitz and Marsh focused on the motivation of the ‘recipients’ of policy transfer, the present study explores the motivations on both sides. As the empirical section will illustrate, contrary to Dolowitz and Marsh’s model, this study found that the ‘sender’ of transfer (i.e., DG REGIO in the present case) was also animated by precise motivations and goals, and that these can be powerful factors in determining the success of the process.

The analysis includes the activities implemented to generate learning and transfer, rather than the sources of information on the process of transfer, and differentiates between facilitators and inhibitors of transfer, arguing that similarities may support the process while differences can hinder it. This paper also includes a focus on the outcomes of transfer, understood as: (1) the actual transfer of policy, schemes or concepts; (2) soft learning, showing evidence of the generation of new knowledge but no clear tangible impact in terms of policy or procedural changes; and (3) other outcomes in the form of unplanned ‘by-products’ from the activities carried out. This additional element goes beyond the analytical scope of the policy transfer literature – traditionally focused on the mechanisms and motivation for knowledge exchange – but is important to understand what the actual result of the process has been (Table 1).

This study proceeded in the typical way of comparative case study research designs by appraising these variables in each case study in the first instance, and then comparing the findings across the two case studies with the aim of understanding especially what makes policy transfer successful or, conversely, what makes it fail.

‘Policy transfer’ is used here in its widest meaning as relating not solely to the actual adoption of policy approaches or practices but to the wider set of

**Table 1.** Analytical framework of policy transfer.

Motivation	Reasons for (voluntary) engagement in the transfer of both ‘sender’ and ‘recipient’
Actors	Institutions, elected officials, bureaucrats and civil servants (national, regional, local); businesses; consultants/think tanks; academics etc.
Scope	Policies (goals, content, instruments); programmes; implementation; negative lessons
Activities	Media; reports; conferences; meetings/visits; statements, training etc.
Direction of transfer	One way; two ways
Degree of transfer	Copying; emulation; adaptation; inspiration; mixtures
Factors affecting the transfer process	Facilitators; inhibitors
Types of outcome	Actual transfer; soft learning; by-products

Source: Adapted from Dolowitz and Marsh (2000).

knowledge-exchange activities aiming at lessons-drawing, irrespective of whether or not they result in the actual adoption of practices. The interest here lies principally in policy transfer intended as a process, in the wider sets of possible outcomes that this process may engender and in the factors that appear to make such process a success. This research does not seek to examine the outcomes of the transfer process in terms of which elements of EU regional policy were adopted in Brazil and China, or vice versa, and how they were adopted, reinterpreted and with what results. This remains an area for a different investigation which may use a conceptual lens more suitable to study the adoption and adaptation patterns – for instance, those of policy translation (Stone, 2012), policy mobility (McCann & Ward, 2012) or policy diffusion (Howlett & Rayner, 2008) – and use a different methodological approach (a longer temporal perspective and, ideally, regional in-depth case studies).

To achieve triangulation, the research was realized through a mixed-methods research design: a review of the literature and documental sources (legislation, policy documents, speeches etc.) was supplemented by interviews with key actors involved in the sectoral dialogues realized between 2012 and 2014.<sup>1</sup> Interviews were conducted to understand and probe the motivations for engaging in the activities of knowledge exchange, the actual scope and operationalization of the activities realized, the practical hurdles faced and the outcomes obtained. Standardized interview checklists, followed by manual coding (on the dimensions of the analytical framework illustrated in Table 1) were used to draw out key messages. In addition, direct participant observation in a number of policy dialogues events in Europe, Brazil and China between 2011 and 2014 provided direct insights into the activities realized, actors’ attitudes as well as some of the outcomes achieved.

## REGIONAL POLICY IN THE EUROPEAN UNION, CHINA AND BRAZIL

### European Union Cohesion Policy

Cohesion Policy can be considered one of the flagship and emblematic policies of the EU. It corresponds to roughly

one-third of the EU’s budget and serves as the main implementation vehicle for the EU’s strategic goals. Crucially, it is also an expression of European solidarity through the transfer of resources from richer towards poorer territories in an attempt to reduce regional disparities which hamper the operation of the EU’s common market (see also Bachtler, Mendez, & Wislade, 2013; Piattoni & Polverari, 2016). The policy supports investment targeted towards particular territories in an attempt to bridge the gap in economic, social and territorial development. The investment is supported through the so-called Structural and Investment Funds, delivered through operational programmes managed by national or regional-level authorities. The policy has gradually been reoriented to stimulate the competitiveness of European territories and promoting *inter alia* innovation, sustainability and job creation, corresponding to the EU’s strategic aims, currently defined as smart, sustainable and inclusive growth. It is governed by a set of principles requiring close collaboration between actors at different levels of government, and inclusion of non-state actors in decision-making, the cornerstones of the EU’s multilevel governance (e.g., Marks, 1993). Cohesion Policy also served as a breeding ground for the experimentation of new regional policy concepts and tools such as territorial cooperation, macro-regional strategies, smart specialization, financial engineering and evaluation.

### Chinese regional policy

The opening up of the Chinese economy in the late 1970s resulted in extremely rapid growth and fast urbanization. While this led to a huge reduction in poverty and turned China into the second biggest economy in the world, it also exacerbated the disparities between the coastal areas and the depopulating and stagnant central and western parts of the country. The level of gross domestic product (GDP) per capita in the poorest regions has been fluctuating but it has historically been lower than 60% of the national average (against 120–200% in the richest regions). Disparities are even more striking when looking at the provinces: GDP per capita in the poorest province in 2007 accounted for about 25% of the national average against 490% in the richest (Dunford & Bonschab, 2013).

In the mid-1990s, Chinese regional policy was reformed to boost economic development and investment in the so-far neglected central and western provinces. This is where the Chinese regional policy's orientation started approximating that of the EU. Thus, the 9th Five-Year Plan (FYP) (1996–2000) emphasized the need to reduce economic disparities across the Chinese territory, which was then followed by the enactment of the Western Development Strategy (1999). The latter led to a massive shift of resources towards western provinces, giving their economies a much-needed developmental impulse (Lu & Deng, 2013). This trend was consolidated by the provisions of the 10th (2001–05) and 11th FYPs (2006–10) laying the foundations for a coordinated development policy, a classification of regions on the basis of economic factors, resources endowment, environmental features and settlement patterns, and region-specific development programmes. This was followed by the designation of the so-called bloc areas in 2011, where special support measures to combat poverty were deployed. This set of regional policies is funded through a variety of instruments including direct investment by the state, loans, fiscal incentives, subsidies to provincial and municipal authorities to stimulate infrastructure development, and various tools to boost education, reduce poverty and support ethnic minorities (DG REGIO & NDRC, 2011).

### Brazilian regional policy

Brazil is one of the countries in the world with the most significant and historically resilient interpersonal and territorial income disparities (Díaz Dapena, Rubiera Morollón, de Moura Pires, & da Silva Gomes, 2017; Silveira Neto & Azzoni, 2011). Both disparities have reduced in the past 15 years. However, territorial convergence has been deemed to have occurred largely thanks to the combined effect of: (1) curbed inflation; (2) minimum wage rises; and (3) anti-poverty policies, particularly the Bolsa Família (family allowance), whose funding has gone primarily to the poorest Brazilian states (the northern states whose GDP per capita has accounted for many years for 33–65% of the national average; Azzoni, 2014). The theme of income inequalities, especially interpersonal inequalities, took centre stage with the Lula presidency.<sup>2</sup> As well as strengthening social programmes, the Lula administration focused on the spatial dimension of income inequality with the development in 2003 of a National Policy for Regional Development (PNDR), officialized by presidential decree in 2007. The plan targeted the inequalities in living standards among Brazilian regions and the promotion of equity in the access to employment. It comprised public investments and a multi-scalar set of strategies supporting regional development, at macro-, meso- and micro-regional levels. Leveraging on a multiplicity of financial resources (constitutional funds, development funds and national programmes), the policy was coordinated by the Federal Ministry for National Integration. However, it involved other federal ministries, state authorities, the development superintendencies of the three macro-regions and various other bodies (Paternó & Polverari, 2012).

The introduction of this new policy provided the context for the EU–Brazil regional policy dialogues, which were also launched in 2007, with the signature of a memorandum of understanding between DG REGIO and the Brazilian government.

### Context and potential for transfer from the European Union to China and Brazil

As noted, EU Cohesion Policy is a comprehensive, cross-sectoral policy that is viewed as providing limited transfer potential due to its high level of complexity. It is also largely inward oriented, as it aims to address disparities between EU regions and member states, which makes it very much context dependent. Despite these characteristics, Cohesion Policy became to be viewed as a 'model' outside the EU,<sup>3</sup> and since the mid-2000s the European Commission itself has become actively engaged in disseminating it.

In both Brazil and China, the improvement of economic conditions, in the context of exacerbating or persisting disparities, opened up a space for learning from the EU. The EU–Brazil and EU–China regional policy dialogues emerged in the context of longer-standing relations of these two countries with the EU (and, formerly, with the European Community). These were facilitated, in the case of Brazil, by the long history of migratory flows to and from Europe, and the resulting common cultural and linguistic base. Even before the regional policy dialogues, European Community–Brazil relations had already centred on regional planning, the development of rural areas and cities, and other fields which were part of agreements of cooperation with the EU co-financed under different budget headings of the European Community's policy for external aid (Historical Archives of the European Union (HAEU), 1992).<sup>4</sup> However, the projects were few and dispersed across both time and space. In the early 2000s, together with the EU's change of approach towards external aid, some regional strategies and country strategy papers (CSPs) started to emerge, providing the basis for a more systematic, strategic engagement, with the financial support from the EU budget.

In the case of China, relationships with the EU were mainly based on trade agreements (first signed in 1985). However, cultural differences were always strong limitations in bilateral relations. Similarly to Brazil, CSPs were adopted from 2000. In the first CSP (2002–06), an emphasis was placed on the development of the lagging western Chinese regions.<sup>5</sup> China expressed an interest in the European model of development and policy-making, including EU Cohesion Policy.<sup>6</sup> Support was focused on the reform of state-owned enterprises in urban areas and income-generating activities in rural areas. In the 2007–13 CSP, support was provided to sectoral dialogues and policies, including regional policy, and to the establishment of an institutional cross-sectoral platform of the Policy Support Development Facility (PSDF). The focus was on a better balance in development between urban and rural areas and between different regions (European Commission, 2007a, pp. 15, 39).

It is difficult to pin down the precise budget allocated to these activities, due to their fragmentation (in CSPs, pilot projects and preparatory actions). According to rough estimates by DG REGIO, the whole dialogue on regional and urban policy, from the launch of the programme until 2014, accounted for an annual average of about €2 million.<sup>7</sup>

Summing up, before and in parallel with the development of the regional policy dialogues, the EU had already created similar instruments for both countries: strategies and institutional settings (joint committees, studies, working groups etc.), which then acted as a basis for the regional policy dialogues.

## EUROPEAN UNION–CHINA DIALOGUE ON REGIONAL (AND URBAN) POLICY

### Motivation for transfer

From the Chinese perspective, the rationale for engaging in the dialogue on regional policy with the EU was to seek inspiration for new solutions for the reduction of the country's deep regional development disparities in the context of the regional policy reform and preparation of the 12th FYP (2011–15). This reflected a shift towards a more 'harmonious' development and recognition of the need to invest in reducing the East–West disparities. The interest of China's National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC), the key protagonist of the dialogue on the Chinese side, in particular has been on the EU Cohesion Policy concepts and instruments for the classification of regions and, increasingly, urban development (DG REGIO & NDRC, 2011).

The EU's approach to regional policy is viewed as a source of 'good practice' among Chinese government officials,<sup>8</sup> and China is keen to learn from the EU's relatively long experience in this policy area.<sup>9</sup> As stressed by an interviewee, EU Cohesion Policy offers the NDRC an attractive model of a highly visible redistributive policy that still operates with a relatively modest budget for its wide breadth and scope.<sup>10</sup> In fact, more generally, European policy practices tend to be considered as more comprehensive and affordable to implement than other international solutions.<sup>11</sup> Thus, the official reasons for the dialogues, as formulated in the memoranda, statements and reports on this activity, are to exchange knowledge on the common challenge of tackling uneven regional development; however, in practice, as the EU interviewees highlighted, this cooperation was also seen as an opportunity to promote trade links, investment opportunities and people-to-people interactions, involving universities, sub-national authorities and businesses. The whole initiative is recognized as being part of wider diplomatic relations between the two actors, as framed in the 2015 joint statement on continuing the dialogues (DG REGIO & NDRC, 2015), one of the many collaboration documents signed during the 17th EU–China Summit (Brussels, Belgium, 29 June 2015). As one interviewee put it, 'there can be important trade effects in regional cooperation, which is one of the top priorities of EU external policy'.<sup>12</sup>

In sum, the reasons for the dialogues EU–China are mainly diplomatic (to have closer cooperation by adding yet another area for dialogue) and economic (to promote trade and mutual investment).<sup>13</sup> To this one may add normative considerations stemming from the EU's ambition to project its 'values' abroad and 'inspire' third countries.

### Actors

The main actors of policy transfer are DG REGIO, on the EU side, and the NDRC, on the Chinese side. These institutions are the drivers behind the dialogue, signatories of the memoranda and other official documents, and key organizers and sponsors of the related events and collaborations. The constellation of actors involved then varies depending on the actual activity: academic and other experts, representatives of municipalities and regional authorities, regional economic organizations, provincial branches of the NDRC, and even businesses and think tanks (e.g., DG REGIO & NDRC, 2017).

### Scope and activities

One main focus of the exchanges was the approach taken to the classification of regions and to reducing regional disparities as well as the coordination of regional development policy through multilevel governance. The training activities also included a focus on statistical and geographical information systems and innovation and cluster policies. However, in 2012,<sup>14</sup> the focus shifted more towards sustainable urban development, urban regeneration and urban–rural linkages. The content of the dialogues remains vague, with the exception of joint research outputs (e.g., EU–China Policy Dialogues Support Facility, 2010), and a focus on examples of 'good practice', without discussing any lessons from failures or implementation challenges.

The scene for the activities was set by a memorandum of understanding and a series of joint EU–China declarations.<sup>15</sup> The dialogue is structured around four pillars. First, a series of high-level seminars on regional (later increasingly also urban) policy was launched with annual meetings held in both China or Europe where discussions on the policy-learning, common goals and various aspects of policy were held in a formal setting. Second, cooperation entailed a training programme, the Chinese–European Training on Regional Policy (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ), 2015). Third, joint research activities were sponsored by both the European Commission and the NDRC as part of the EU–China Cooperative Research Activity between 2008 and 2010, preparing scientific background for the dialogue. Finally, in the recent years, decentralized cooperation between regional and local authorities as well as other actors, such as businesses, was also initiated and led to numerous mutual visits and establishment of EU–China regional policy cooperation pilot areas, reflecting the Chinese approach to policy innovation through experimentation in special 'zones' (Schoon, 2014). In 2015, a commitment towards the dialogue was reiterated and plans for strengthening region-to-region, city-to-city and inter-firm cooperation and expanding the scope of the

pilot areas up to 2020 were made (DG REGIO & NDRC, 2015).

### Direction of transfer

Despite the official discourse on mutual learning, the activities were geared towards offering the Chinese partners opportunities to learn from the EU experience, i.e., a one-way transfer. Moreover, the dialogue was essentially EU driven, with the Chinese authorities manifesting a more passive and reactive engagement. It is difficult to pin down concrete outcomes of the eight years of cooperation, except for the establishment of ‘block areas’ in China, similar to the EU Cohesion Policy’s less developed regions. Beyond this, the impact has been mostly intangible, one of inspiration. There is also no evidence of transfer of practices from China to the EU, despite the interest of EU officials in the rapidly changing patterns of regional and urban development in China. This notwithstanding, the exchanges intensified from 2015, particularly in the field of urban development, with China committing own financial resources to what has thus far been essentially an EU-funded initiative and the EU providing new forms of support to process, not least by a set of research projects supported by a Horizon 2020 scheme supposed to engage both Chinese and European academics, and governmental and private organizations in building a scientific basis for the next generation of EU and Chinese regional and urban development policies (DG REGIO & NDRC, 2015).

### Types of outcomes and degree of transfer

The EU–China dialogue corresponds to the weakest degree of transfer, inspiration, ‘where policy in another jurisdiction may inspire a policy change, but where the final outcome does not actually draw upon the original’ (Dolowitz & Marsh, 2000, p. 10). Despite the substantial time over which the dialogue spans and the relatively high degree of its institutionalization, there is so far no evidence of other types of transfer (copying, emulation, mixture). In the most concrete example of transfer identified, the classification of regions, the transferred practice has been loosely inspired by the EU approach, adapted to suit the Chinese context and specific policy needs.

### Factors affecting the transfer process

The main factor facilitating the dialogues is the shared perception of a common challenge of regional disparities and sustainable urbanization. The second facilitator is the embeddedness of the transfer process in a wider diplomatic cooperation framework and linkages to other cooperation goals (boosting trade and investment), which helps to ensure a strong and stable political commitment. The third facilitating factor is policy entrepreneurship on both sides, with DG REGIO and the NDRC actively pushing to open up new areas and forms of cooperation, as well as personal leadership, as illustrated by the instrumental role played by then Commissioner Danuta Hübner in launching and raising the profile of the cooperation.<sup>16</sup>

However, this case also highlighted a number of transfer-inhibiting factors, which help explain the lack of tangible outcomes of the EU–China dialogue and its one-way orientation. First is language, which creates a major barrier for deeper discussion and learning beyond the shallow presentations of good practice and simultaneously translated formal exchanges. Second are cultural differences, hindering mutual understanding. Finally, the transfer was naturally limited by the substantial differences not only between the EU being a supranational organization and China being a unitary state, but also in terms of political culture and values. Thus, transferring practices related with concepts such as the partnership principle, multilevel development or evaluation, if possible at all, would require substantial adaptation to the local institutional setting.

## EUROPEAN UNION–BRAZIL DIALOGUE ON REGIONAL POLICY

### Motivation

The cooperation between the EU and the Brazilian federal government in regional policy also began with the signature of a memorandum of understanding in 2007 (Brazilian Ministry of National Integration and European Commission, 2007). This was part of a wider EU–Brazil strategic partnership launched a few months earlier in the same year (European Commission, 2007b), to be implemented via a joint action plan, comprising activities such as annual high-level EU–Brazil summits, ministerial and sectoral dialogues (one of which was to be on regional policy), annual business summits, and civil society round tables (Brazil and European Union, 2008).

Like with other memoranda signed by DG REGIO at the time, the EU–Brazil regional policy dialogue was born from an increasing concern about balanced territorial development in the context of rapid growth in Brazil. Further factors were, first, an awareness of the significance of territorial disparities in both the EU and Brazil, and that, in both, achieving balanced territorial development was a constitutional commitment (Art. 3 of the Brazilian 1988 Constitution and Art. 174 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union – TFEU); second, an awareness of the similarities in the wider challenges faced (e.g., globalization, migration, climate change); and, lastly, a resemblance in territorial governance. Like the EU member states, the 27 Brazilian states enjoy strong autonomy and political weight in what is one of the most decentralized systems in the world. All this paved the way for a shared interest in the development of a structured cooperation on regional policy.

Motivations were different, though. For the European Commission, the engagement was primarily driven by geopolitical and economic considerations, part of a wider agenda of extending the sphere of influence of the EU in Latin America and developing commercial opportunities for EU businesses.<sup>17</sup> The Brazilian memorandum was the first signed with a Latin American country: Brazil had emerged as a key ‘economic actor and regional leader’ within Latin America, and had played a key role in the

promotion of South American integration (Commission of the European Communities (CEC), 2007, p. 2).

The Brazilian counterpart, by contrast, had a clear vision that EU Cohesion Policy could represent a model for the strengthening of the incipient Brazilian regional policy. There was a desire to learn from the architecture, governance, financing model and practical delivery of EU Cohesion Policy so as to tackle territorial disparities effectively. This learning concerned every aspect of the EU Cohesion Policy approach, from the selection of target areas based on levels of development, to the availability of a dedicated fund, to the implementation via programmes, to the consultative and multilevel policy design and delivery. There was also an interest in the practical management tools and delivery practices (e.g., in the fields of monitoring, evaluation, auditing and financial management),<sup>18</sup> and on specific themes, such as innovation, local productive systems, metropolitan issues, urban network and cross-border cooperation.<sup>19</sup> The goal was not to take off-the-shelf solutions, but rather to gain insights, examples and ideas that could be *adapted* to the Brazilian context.<sup>20</sup> Cooperation with the EU was also seen as instrumental to raising the profile of the policy, enhancing the ‘status and government commitment to the young policy’.<sup>21</sup> Brazilian regional policy officials had already been looking at EU Cohesion Policy before the signature of the memorandum: when the opportunity for structured (and funded) collaboration presented itself, it was immediately seized.

### Actors

The top-level political members of the respective executives – the EU Commissioner for Regional and Urban Policy and the Brazilian federal Minister for National Integration – were involved in the launch of the initiative, as signatories of the memorandum and participants in high-level bilateral events (EU–Brazil summits). However, most of the activities entailed exchanges, visits and training events that involved civil servants from the European Commission, Brazilian federal ministries, the state and sub-national administrations, academics and representatives of the productive sectors (European Union and Federal Government of Brazil, 2011).<sup>22</sup> While one may be tempted to dismiss these as ‘policy tourism’, the importance of such visits for facilitating policy learning, as suggested by the policy mobility literature (McCann & Ward, 2012) and our own interviews, should not be underestimated.

The real ‘dynamo of the process’,<sup>23</sup> however, i.e., the key actors who drove the cooperation, were a handful of senior level officials within the Brazilian Ministry of National Integration and DG REGIO. In Brazil, these were senior officials educated in Europe, and having a cultural affinity with their European counterparts and insights into the EU.

### Scope and activities

Activities have been wide ranging, comprising study visits by Brazilian delegations to the EU, and vice versa,

conferences, training events (e.g., on monitoring, auditing), dedicated sessions at the annual open days/European Week of Regions and Cities in Brussels, the organization in Brazil of ‘National Exhibitions’ modelled around the European open days, as well as comparative policy research (e.g., on monitoring and evaluation) and studies in strategic areas (e.g., innovation). Emphasis was primarily on institution and capacity-building, and on the transfer of selected ‘good practices’, such as multi-annual programming, non-repayable forms of finance, and procedures to strengthen financial regularity and accountability (payments to certified expenditure, monitoring systems and a single-audit approach) (European Union and Federal Government of Brazil, 2011).<sup>24</sup> These activities were financed primarily by a dedicated ‘support project’ signed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Brazil and the European Commission, entrusted to the Brazilian Federal Ministry of Planning. Brazilian actors were involved in shaping the content of the exchanges and activities. This ensured that the activities implemented were met by strong and genuine interest.

### Direction of transfer

As with China, the transfer has been mostly one way, from the EU to Brazil, but more tangible than in the Chinese case. The European experience was used as a source of inspiration to support the reshaping of Brazilian regional policy in a single federal strategy able to deliver the strategic, financial and operational synergy that was lacking under pre-existing instruments (Conferência Nacional de Desenvolvimento Regional, 2012, p. 19). As noted, the first such strategy was drafted in 2003, before the signature of the memorandum. Already at this stage, several aspects of the strategy had been derived from the EU experience, e.g., the definition of a typology of eligible areas based on development levels and the requirement for the Ministry of National Integration to publish an annual evaluation report on the implementation of the plans, programmes and actions implemented under the PNDR (Paternó & Polverari, 2012).

When the memorandum was signed, the PNDR had just been adopted by presidential decree following a vote in congress. The launch of the regional policy dialogues that followed the signature of the memorandum was fundamental to introduce further changes to the plan, which became labelled ‘PNDR II’. For this second iteration, EU Cohesion Policy was ‘one of the strongest sources of inspiration’,<sup>25</sup> with key elements derived from it. These included the establishment of a new ‘National fund for regional development’, similar to the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), and the institution of multi-level governance arrangements that would enable the coordination and integration of federal interventions across Brazilian territory (Pitanga do Amparo, 2014).<sup>26</sup> The plan was also elaborated through an extensive multilevel consultative process, along the lines of the EU Cohesion Policy model (e.g., the Cohesion Forum). This process involved more than 10,000 individuals from the public sector, businesses, higher education, research institutions and



**Table 2.** EU–China and EU–Brazil regional policy dialogue.

	EU–China	EU–Brazil
Motivation	Mutual: voluntary lesson-drawing on tackling regional disparities, but mainly promoting wider strategic partnership between the EU and China as well as trade and investment EU specific: desire to project ‘EU values’ abroad (normative)	Mutual: voluntary lesson-drawing on tackling regional disparities which are a common problem across both Brazil and the EU EU specific: desire to project the EU Cohesion Policy approach abroad, develop trust and links Brazil specific: to reform regional policy, enhance buy-in and legitimization
Actors	Supranational institution (European Commission); bureaucrats and civil servants (national, regional, local); businesses; think tanks; academics	Supranational institution (European Commission); apical politicians; bureaucrats and civil servants (national, regional, local); consultants; academics; business sector, civil society
Scope	Policies (goal of reducing territorial disparities; instruments)	Policy content; procedures; knowledge exchange; networking
Activities	Reports; conferences; meetings/visits; statements and memoranda	Conferences; consultations; meetings; visits; training; reports; statements and memoranda
Direction of transfer	One way (EU → China)	One way (EU → Brazil)
Degrees of transfer	Inspiration	Inspiration; emulation
Factors affecting the transfer process	Facilitators: shared policy challenge; transfer is part of a wider strategic partnership and is linked to other goals (improving trade and investment links), which ensures strong and stable political commitment; policy entrepreneurship by DG REGIO and the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) Inhibitors: language and cultural differences; institutional incompatibilities	Facilitators: shared, constitutionally enshrined objective/policy challenge; policy entrepreneurship by DG REGIO and Ministry of National Integration senior officials; language and cultural affinity among key actors; timing (up to 2012) Inhibitors: political change/uncertainty in Brazil; apical change and uncertainty over future policy in the EU
Types of outcome	Aspects of soft learning, but mainly by-products in the form of (decentralized) economic links	Transfer of practices (payments on certified expenditure, auditing); soft learning and by-products (mutual understanding/trust, transnational networks)

Source: Authors.

civil society.<sup>27</sup> The new PNDR II used dedicated programmes and enhanced the coordination of sectoral policies to support less developed areas designated by standard indicators. One area was even denominated ‘Convergence’, exactly like in Cohesion Policy during 2007–13 (although defined via different indicators) (Castro, 2012).<sup>28</sup>

The PNDR II, however, was to be subjected to parliamentary approval, which failed to materialize. Regional policy was not a key priority for the new president, Dilma Rousseff, taking office in 2011. Political changes within the governing coalition led the minister and key top-level administrative positions within the ministry to leave in late 2013 (Pitanga do Amparo, 2014). Subsequently, the uncertain political climate that followed the 2014 parliamentary elections, and Rousseff’s impeachment in 2016, meant that the new strategy no longer had a political owner and that it would be indefinitely ‘parked’: it was a disappointing epilogue for those who had been

involved in the EU–Brazil regional policy dialogues and promoted the PNDR II.

### Types of outcomes and degree of transfer

Despite the failure of the PNDR II, there were examples of practical transfer of policy-making practices. These included the piloting of a ‘single-audit approach’ involving the Brazilian Court of Accounts and comptroller general, and the introduction of procedures, such as payment conditional to expenditure certification, that were novel in the Brazilian context.

The policy dialogue also generated an important spin-off: the setting up of an academic network dedicated to the study of regional policy in Brazil: *Observa DR*. Originating in one of the first Brazil–EU regional policy seminars, with prime funding from the Brazilian federal government of about €3 million for three years, it is still in operation and serves the federal, state and local authorities with research on regional development.<sup>29</sup>

Moreover, the cooperation created links and networks within and outside the public administration that could pave the way for further bilateral exchanges in future. On the whole, however, the impact of the policy dialogue was less than had been anticipated. The failed approval of the PNDR II and the subsequent waning of EU–Brazilian bilateral cooperation in regional policy were a disappointment on both sides. For Brazilian civil servants, this highlighted the enduring fragility of regional policy in the country.<sup>30</sup>

### Factors affecting the transfer process

Cultural affinity and language proximity made for a context conducive to cooperation, while the similarities in the regional problems faced provided the ground for fruitful exchanges. The process benefitted from the driving force represented by ‘policy entrepreneurs’ – Brazilian senior officials within the Ministry of National Integration and DG REGIO senior officials, who saw the opportunities to be gained from the policy dialogues on both sides: a learning and legitimization opportunity, on the Brazilian side, and a trust-building and commercial opportunity, on the EU side.

Timing was a crucial factor for the momentum gained by the cooperation undertaken in the early years. At a time when the Brazilian administration was trying to consolidate a new regional policy, the EU–Brazil policy dialogues represented an important legitimizing opportunity. The PNDR was the first active regional policy launched in Brazil since 1988. Its implementation would require the buy-in of other federal administrations other than the Ministry of National Integration and of the states. It would also require the development of implementation competences at state and sub-state levels. The viability of a policy led by a federal ministry could not be taken for granted in a decentralized and politically fragmented context such as Brazil. Thus, the regional policy dialogue became an opportunity to raise the status of the policy and to empower, with new tools and skills, the actors called in to deliver it. However, ultimately political factors meant that the initiative lost relevance.

## CONCLUSIONS

This research shows that applying policy transfer theory to the study of cross-national dialogues in the context of regional policy allows an appreciation of the true potential as well as the limitations of these types of initiatives. Through a focus on the aspects, parameters and factors affecting the process of transfer (Table 2), the two cases considered show that international policy transfer in regional policy can be tangible, that it can relate to substantive policy issues (e.g., policy priorities or target areas) as well as to operational issues (e.g., auditing practices), and that international dialogues such as those investigated can deliver important intended, mainly ‘soft’, effects (e.g., a legitimization of own-policy choices) and even by-products (both intended and unintended). The variation in the types of outcomes between the two cases also demonstrates the

relevance of mediating factors hindering or favouring the adoption of foreign approaches.

Due to these mediating factors, the EU–China case presented very little evidence of EU Cohesion Policy being adapted and used in the Chinese context, with the exception of the designation of poor and/or peripheral regions as ‘Bloc Areas’, reminiscent of the EU Cohesion Policy’s ‘Less Developed Regions’ designation. Thus, there was an element of soft learning, but not much else. Conversely, the EU–Brazil case shows that transfer within regional policy can occur not just in relation to the operational aspects of policy delivery (more readily transferable), but also in relation to the underlying philosophy, ideas and principles of policy. It also shows that the transfer of policy elements from the EU to third countries can take place even in the absence of stringent conditionalities as long as there is: (1) an underlying need; (2) a strong political commitment; and (3) the leadership to drive the process. However, important factors such as political change and instability can undermine the sustainability of the transfer process and of its outcomes.

The EU–Brazil case also illustrates the important potential legitimization effect (within government and vis-à-vis subnational authorities and wider stakeholders) of international policy learning, demonstrating, however, that legitimization via international transfer cannot be sustained solely through technocratic engagement but requires high-level political support. This conclusion has important implications for the EU. On the EU front, it could be argued that, besides the declared objectives discussed above, another implicit objective might have been legitimizing further the policy *within* the EU. Cohesion Policy has been reoriented, resized and increasingly questioned in recent years (Piattoni & Polverari, 2016). Demonstrating that it has ‘appeal’ elsewhere could provide a strong argument for the policy’s defenders.

Lastly, the important by-products represented by the creation of practitioners and academic networks are likely to leave a legacy. They may allow the revamping of EU–Brazil dialogues in future, if and when the political context once again becomes favourable.

While the focus of this research was on the process of transfer – as opposed to the patterns of adoption (Börzel & Risse, 2012; Shipan & Volden, 2008) or the local translation of foreign practice (Stone, 2012) – the study also adds to the debate on the obstacles for policy transfer (Benson, 2009) by providing new evidence from a case of the transfer of a policy with high programmatic complexity and between culturally and institutionally distant contexts. Our findings confirm earlier claims that the dynamics and outcomes of transfer processes depend on existing levels of institutional and administrative capacities (Borrás, 2011), but also enrich this debate by elaborating on how wider contextual factors matter, especially those related to political commitment, drive and tenure in office of the actors involved on both the ‘sender’ and ‘recipient’ sides.

This research also adds to the literature on policy transfer by showing that the softer by-products of these dialogues, in terms of the creation of links and mutual

understanding, also matter. They can lead to the desired expansion of trade and investments, but also to spillovers onto new areas, e.g., urbanization in China.

Undertaking further research into the dynamics of international policy transfer in regional policy would provide precious insights that could be used to improve this type of initiative. Future research could draw on the literatures of policy translation or policy mobility to explore the outcomes of the transfer process on the ground, investigating how the concepts, ideas and solutions learned as part of the dialogues may be reinterpreted and applied in the national or regional contexts in Brazil, China and other countries. Attention could be paid to the power dynamics, and the strategic domestic 'uses' of EU-inspired practices to enhance, inform or justify reform.

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## DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

## NOTES

1. DG REGIO (three interviews covering both cases), Brazil (two interviews) and China (four interviews).
2. From the adoption, after the end of the military regime, of the current constitution (in 1988), until the Lula presidency (2003), the priorities of the federal government had been economic development and democratic stabilization. Throughout this time, regional policy essentially coincided with regional funds, the constitutional financing funds for the north-east (FNE), the north (FNO) and the central-west (FCO). These were relatively minor, providing aided repayable loans to 'small-scale farmers and small industrial firms' (Resende, 2014, p. 647).
3. 'The European regional policy is well known worldwide with several breakthroughs and recognised results' (written response from a Senior Brazilian official, March 10, 2014).
4. The document was found at the HAEU during Ida Musiałkowska's Post-graduate Sørensen Fellowship (11–12/2015, Florence, Italy).
5. European Commission working document, 'Country Strategy Paper. China. 2002–2006'. Retrieved July 28, 2016, from [http://eeas.europa.eu/china/csp/02\\_06\\_en.pdf](http://eeas.europa.eu/china/csp/02_06_en.pdf).
6. 'National Indicative Paper 2005–2006. China'. Retrieved July 28, 2016, from [http://eeas.europa.eu/china/csp/05\\_06\\_nip\\_en.pdf](http://eeas.europa.eu/china/csp/05_06_nip_en.pdf).

7. Interview with a senior DG REGIO official, Brussels, March 31, 2014.
8. Interview with a senior official of the Development Research Centre of the State Council, Beijing, June 25, 2012; intervention by Huang Chengwei, Director General, National Training Centre for Officials in Poor Areas, China, at the 6th EU–China high-level seminar on regional policy, Brussels, October 13, 2011; interview with a senior DG REGIO official, Brussels, April 19, 2013.
9. For the summary of the 6th EU–China high-level seminar on regional policy, see [http://ec.europa.eu/regional\\_policy/cooperate/international/doc/6eu\\_china.doc](http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/cooperate/international/doc/6eu_china.doc) (accessed on September 25, 2013).
10. Written response from a senior DG REGIO official, Brussels, March 31, 2014.
11. Speech by Huang Yiyang, Mission of China to the EU, 'EU–China Soft Diplomacy', at the conference by the College of Europe and the Committee of Regions, Brussels, April 19, 2013.
12. Written response from a former Commissioner for Regional Policy, December 8, 2014.
13. Interview with a senior DG REGIO Official, Beijing, June 25, 2012.
14. Joint Declaration of the EU–China Partnership on Urbanisation, signed on May 3, 2012, Brussels. Retrieved October 26, 2016, from [https://ec.europa.eu/energy/sites/ener/files/documents/20120503\\_eu\\_china\\_joint\\_declaration\\_urbanisation\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/energy/sites/ener/files/documents/20120503_eu_china_joint_declaration_urbanisation_en.pdf).
15. For documents and other outputs of the dialogues, see [http://ec.europa.eu/regional\\_policy/pl/policy/cooperation/international/china/](http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/pl/policy/cooperation/international/china/) (accessed October 26, 2016).
16. Interview with a senior DG REGIO official, Brussels, March 31, 2014.
17. Interviews with senior DG REGIO officials, March 24–25, 2014; written response by a former EU Commissioner for Regional Policy, December 8, 2014.
18. Such as those of innovation, local productive systems, metropolitan issues and urban network, and cross-border cooperation. Interview with a DG REGIO official, March 24, 2014; written responses, March 10 and April 15, 2014.
19. Interview with a DG REGIO official, March 24, 2014; written responses with senior Brazilian officials, March 10 and April 15, 2014.
20. These quotations from Senior Brazilian officials are indicative: 'Since our first approach to European counterparts we understood that our cooperation should provide us with ideas and examples on what to do and not simply search for a model to copy.' 'There are fundamental historical and politico-cultural differences between the two contexts, ... which make it difficult to identify lessons or observations of direct and functional transferability' (authors' own translation from Portuguese).
21. Written response from a senior Brazilian official, April 15, 2014.
22. Written responses from senior Brazilian officials, March 10 and April 15, 2014; interviews with DG REGIO officials, Brussels, March 24–25, 2014.

23. Written response from a senior DG REGIO official, March 31, 2014.
24. Written responses from senior Brazilian officials, March 10 and April 15, 2014; interviews with DG REGIO officials, Brussels, March 24–25, 2014.
25. Written responses from senior Brazilian officials, March 10 and April 15, 2014.
26. Written responses from a senior Brazilian official, March 10, 2014.
27. Described in detail by Pitanga do Amparo (2014).
28. Written responses from senior Brazilian officials, March 10 and April 15, 2014; written responses with DG REGIO officials, Brussels March 24–25, 2014.
29. For documents and content of the portal of Observa DR, see <http://observadr.org.br/portal/> (accessed July 17, 2017).
30. Written response from a senior Brazilian official, April 15, 2014: 'The initiatives that for almost a decade brought us so close were discontinued by a new government strategy, which indicates how fragile our regional policy is! Nowadays we have no active regional policy.'

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