

Roaring Lions on the Road: Exploring Agonistic Agency in the Bavarian Cycling Conflict

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Abstract

This paper examines the Bavarian cycling conflict (2017–2023) as a planning-related spatial conflict, using an agonistic lens and focusing on the concept of agonistic agency. While agonistic theory has gained prominence in planning debates, empirical applications remain limited. Addressing this gap, the study develops five indicators to operationalise agonistic agency and applies them to a qualitative case study based on interviews, documents and media sources. The analysis traces how the conflict unfolded across multiple interrelated arenas, including planning, protest, electoral, direct-democratic, legal and media arenas. The findings show that agonistic agency emerges unevenly and relationally through cross-arena dynamics. Civil society mobilisation played a central role in politicising planning inaction and shifting the conflict into alternative arenas. The case highlights the importance of meta-conflicts about conflict recognition and processing, demonstrating that democratic contestation is shaped not only by substantive issues but also by struggles over how and where conflict is negotiated. The paper contributes to planning theory by empirically grounding agonistic concepts and by proposing an arena-sensitive perspective on conflict dynamics in socio-ecological transformations.

Keywords: Conflict ■ agonism ■ civil society ■ direct democracy ■ mobility ■ Bavaria

Brüllende Löwen auf der Straße: Auf den Spuren agonistischer Agency im Konflikt um Radmobilität in Bayern

Zusammenfassung

Dieser Beitrag untersucht den bayerischen Radverkehrskonflikt (2017–2023) aus einer agonistischen Perspektive als planungsbezogenen Raumkonflikt und stellt dabei das Konzept agonistischer Agency in den Mittelpunkt. Obwohl agonistische Theorie in planungswissenschaftlichen Debatten an Bedeutung gewonnen hat, fehlen bislang weitgehend empirische Anwendungen. Zur Schließung dieser Lücke entwickelt die Studie fünf Indikatoren zur Operationalisierung agonistischer Agency und wendet diese in einer qualitativen Fallstudie auf Basis von Interviews, Dokumenten und Medienquellen an. Die Analyse zeichnet nach, wie sich der Konflikt über mehrere miteinander verknüpfte Arenen hinweg entfaltet, darunter Planungs-, Protest-, politische, direktdemokratische, rechtliche und mediale Arenen. Die Ergebnisse zeigen, dass agonistische Agency ungleich und relational durch arenaübergreifende Dynamiken entsteht. Zivilgesellschaftliche Mobilisierung spielte eine zentrale Rolle dabei, planerische Untätigkeit zu politisieren und den Konflikt in alternative Arenen zu verlagern. Der Fall unterstreicht die Bedeutung von Metakonflikten um Konfliktauerkennung und -bearbeitung. Der Beitrag leistet einen Beitrag zur Planungstheorie, indem er agonistische Konzepte empirisch fundiert und eine arenasensible Perspektive auf Konfliktodynamiken in sozial-ökologischen Transformationen vorschlägt.

Schlüsselwörter: Konflikt ■ Agonismus ■ Zivilgesellschaft ■ direkte Demokratie ■ Mobilität ■ Bayern

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1 Introduction

Spatial planning is an inherently conflictual process, particularly in cases of socio-ecological transformations that affect current and future uses of space, such as the mobility transition. Davy, Förster and Shepherd (2025: 597) note that tensions between competing spatial demands have always existed in planning but are currently intensifying as challenges and expectations continue to grow. Hesse and Kühn (2023: 425) highlight that mobility is one of the most conflictive fields of spatial planning. Heindl (2020: 14) argues that the climate crisis, to which transport contributes heavily, is also a crisis of democracy because it raises questions about who exacerbates the problem and who is most affected. Therefore, conflicts surrounding mobility can be understood as political conflicts over societal goals and priorities. Although such conflicts can extend beyond the field of spatial planning, they are frequently articulated and negotiated within planning processes alongside other arenas of political contestation. Planning discourses increasingly engage with long-standing debates about how conflict should be handled¹, a discussion to which this paper contributes. By adopting an agonistic perspective, this paper emphasises the constructive role of democratic dissensus. Although such perspectives are gaining traction in planning theory, they often remain abstract, albeit with notable exceptions such as Bäcklund and Mäntysalo (2010). The present paper addresses this gap by linking theory with a qualitative case study of conflicts about cycling conditions in Bavaria (Germany). The case study uncovers the extent to which agonistic agency became manifest in the enactment of the conflict across different conflict arenas.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. The next section outlines the theoretical-conceptual framework by introducing an agonistic perspective on planning and conflict, and by conceptualising agonistic agency. Section 3 presents the research design and methodology, including the case study approach and data sources. Section 4 analyses the dynamic enactment of agonistic agency in the Bavarian cycling conflict across multiple interrelated conflict arenas. In the final section, the paper concludes by reflecting on the findings and their relevance for planning theory and practice.

2 Theoretical-conceptual framework: Agonistic agency in spatial planning-related conflicts

Taking an agonistic perspective on conflicts as its starting point, this section develops the theoretical-conceptual framework of the paper. Conflicts can be defined as purposeful, overt interactions between two or more interdependent, competitive parties that are aware of their opposing goals and positions (Oberschall 1978: 291). For instance, such conflicts become visible when social movements² use protests to challenge the neoliberal organisation of society, which spatial planning reproduces through its role as a catalyst for the capitalist transformation of urban space (Heindl 2020: 111). Bertram (2025: 2) characterises such protests as self-organised public participation and as indicators of the state of local democracy. Thus, conflicts can be understood as common occurrences in planning, rather than exceptions (Bertram/Altrock 2023: 499). However, the fact that different conflicts are usually intricately intertwined makes planning politically demanding (Hesse/Kühn 2023: 424). Space and planning are thus inherently linked to conflicts in complex ways. Space can be the location in which conflicts play out, impact how they are expressed and be the object of contestation itself (Knoblauch/Sommer/Pfetsch 2025). The relationship between conflicts and planning can be interpreted as dual: planning can both generate conflict and provide a framework for addressing it (Healey 2015: 300). Notably, agonistic conflict theory has recently gained prominence in planning (Kühn 2021: 144). Mouffe (2013: 131) argues that no democratic order can ever be final because it remains contingent and shaped by struggle. Therefore, conflicts are constitutive of political relations. Post-structuralist perspectives conceptualise transformation through the tension between “politics” – the institutional order providing stability – and “the political”, which disrupts and contests this order (Mouffe 2013: XII). Mouffe (2013: XII) further distinguishes antagonism, which is the destructive struggle between enemies, from agonism, where opponents recognise each other’s legitimacy within shared democratic values. Such a “conflictual consensus” implies agreement on basic democratic principles, while accepting ongoing disagreements over their meaning and implementation (Mouffe 2005: 31).

¹ See, for example the special issue on “Planungskonflikte in der pluralen Demokratie” in this journal (volume 81, issue 5, 2023).

² Social movements are understood as advocacy networks formed by diverse civil actors who do not necessarily share a coherent identity but are unified by their opposition to a dominant “outside” (Landau 2019: 218). Conflicts are a constitutive feature of social movements since their existence depends on the continuous articulation of alternative demands and social imaginaries (Landau 2019: 213).

Table 1 Qualitative indicators of agonistic agency

Indicator	Operational definition
(1) Understanding of contingency and the irreducibility of conflict	Collective actors recognise that social orders, institutions, political decisions and planning outcomes are contingent, provisional and open to contestation and change, and that conflicts cannot always be resolved consensually through participation or deliberation
(2) Visibility of diverse articulations of dissent	Collective actors publicly express dissent and articulate distinct narratives, claims or practices that challenge prevailing problem framings, policy directions or power relations
(3) Recognition of adversaries and democratic principles	Opponents recognise one another as legitimate participants in conflict rather than enemies to be eliminated, and maintain a shared commitment to democratic principles
(4) Mobilisation of passions	Collective actors mobilise and channel political passions into forms of democratic contestation, collective identification and sustained political engagement
(5) Focus on the democratisation of democracy	Collective actors pursue forms of conflict and political intervention aimed at deepening democratic participation, pluralising decision-making, and challenging exclusionary or depoliticising institutional arrangements

Despite originating from political theory and remaining rather abstract in its ideas about institutions, agonistic thought can provide valuable insights for planning processes. It invites planners to strengthen democratic structures by supporting popular agency and fostering pluralistic dialogue between officials, experts and citizens engaging with lived experiences and desires (Pløger 2023: 458). This can include alliances between planning and social movements that expand democratic action spaces (Heindl 2020: 15). Recognising contingency means accepting that planning decisions will always leave someone dissatisfied (Pløger 2023: 457). Yet “conditionality and contentiousness [...] are no reason to give up on planning” (Heindl 2020: 152; translated from German). Instead, planning can co-produce counter-narratives, resist growth imperatives and legally safeguard open, incomplete public spaces, keeping them available for diverse and changing uses (Heindl 2020: 146). Pløger (2023: 457) calls for open-ended planning processes that produce provisional outcomes rather than fixed end states. This contrasts with conventional systems that rely on binding, final decisions (Mäntysalo/Mattila/Hirvola 2023: 442). From an agonistic planning perspective, both projects and their political contexts must remain open to radical questioning, allowing even “zero-solutions” where projects are not merely modified and may ultimately not be implemented at all (Müller/Buchecker 2025: 657).

Despite its promise, agonistic theory faces criticism for offering few operational approaches to planning practice and to the role of planning in contributing to productive conflict resolution. Agonistic theory does not identify “the conditions under which antagonistic conflict can be transformed into agonistic conflict” thus becoming a productive force (Kühn 2021: 147). Gualini (2015: 15–17) further criticises Mouffe’s rigid dichotomy of politics and the political, which leaves little room for the everyday micropolitics of mediation between them. These critiques highlight the need

for empirical studies that trace how agonistic dynamics unfold in practice.

From an agonistic perspective, conflicts are dynamic processes rather than static events. Notably, this paper focuses on how conflicts are enacted, bringing agency – which is central to transition processes (Bögel/Augenstein/Levin-Keitel et al. 2022: 172) – into focus. The paper conceptualises agonistic agency as the collective capacity of actors to articulate, enact and sustain political dissent within a shared democratic framework, as well as their ability to achieve change. To operationalise agonistic agency, this paper proposes five qualitative indicators that facilitate an empirical examination of whether conflicts are enacted in ways that enable or constrain agonistic agency (see Table 1). These indicators were developed as a synthetic operationalisation of recurring themes in the agonistic literature, including contingency, the public articulation of dissent, the recognition of adversaries, the mobilisation of passions and a focus on the democratisation of democracy (e.g. Cuppen 2018: 29; Heindl 2020: 138, 158; Mouffe 2013: 2, 6, 138; Mouffe 2018: 49; Pløger 2023: 458). Rather than functioning as rigid evaluative criteria, they serve as heuristic tools that sensitise the analysis of empirical material to the specific democratic qualities of conflict dynamics. Since the indicators originated from agonistic conflict theory, they inevitably carry a normative dimension. As Bäcklund and Mäntysalo (2010: 335) note, any planning “practice, reflected upon or not, is pregnant with planning and democracy ideals, with corresponding potential consequences”. Therefore, the normative grounding of the indicators reflects the broader aim of this paper: to explore how planning-related conflicts may contribute to democratic renewal in the context of socio-ecological transformation.

This paper draws on the concept of conflict arenas as “sites of political mobilisation” in which various actors engage in visible political activities, such as participating in protests or elections (Hutter/Weisskircher 2023: 406).

The notion of using arenas as a lens through which to analyse politically contentious public discourse originally comes from Ferree/Gamson/Gerhards et al. (2002). Additionally, Jasper (2015: 14–15) emphasises that arenas are structured by formal and informal rules that enable and constrain interaction. They also vary in terms of their stability, institutionalisation, legal recognition, relevant resources and accessibility (Jasper 2015: 14–16). Furthermore, arenas are relationally connected, sometimes hierarchically, and actors often move across multiple arenas simultaneously, adopting different roles and influencing other participants, or reshaping the arenas themselves (Jasper 2015: 16). For example, Hutter and Weisskircher (2023: 410) highlights trends towards hybridisation and cross-arena interaction between social movements and political parties, and towards “blurring boundaries between civic engagement and political activism”, which can also be observed in the case analysed below.

In this paper, the selection of arenas is empirically determined based on their relevance to the case under investigation (electoral, protest, media, planning, direct-democratic and legal arenas). The electoral arena refers to institutionalised spaces of political competition and representation in which actors seek to shape outcomes through elections, party politics and legislation (Hutter 2014: 27). The protest arena encompasses forms of contentious collective action with a low degree of institutionalisation, in which actors such as social movement organisations publicly articulate claims through demonstrations, rallies, occupations of public sites or other extra-parliamentary mobilisation practices (Hutter 2014: 27). The media arena is a space for public communication where issues are interpreted and framed through journalistic reporting and commentary, and where discourses from other arenas are incorporated (Ferree/Gamson/Gerhards et al. 2002: 10). The planning arena involves the coordination of “different interests for a specific place or region in an integrated manner” through “specifying physical space, specifying uses, prohibitions, and commands that are linked to this area and spatial units” (Levin-Keitel/Behrend 2023: 14–15). The direct-democratic arena comprises formal mechanisms of direct citizen participation in binding or consultative decision-making, such as petitions and referendums. Finally, in the legal arena, conflicts are translated into legal claims and addressed through litigation, constitutional review and other means.

3 Methodological approach: Case study research on a cycling conflict

Using a qualitative case study, this paper addresses the empirical gap in research on agonistic perspectives on conflict.

It examines the conflict over cycling conditions in Bavaria, Germany (2017–2023), focusing on the development of a cycling law (see Section 4.1 for a conflict overview). The analysis includes the developments at the federal state level and in two selected counties. Analysing one complex, multi-layered conflict facilitates in-depth insights into how different actors perceive, navigate and shape the conflict. This case was selected for three reasons. First, it is particularly suited to the study’s theoretical perspective because it spans multiple, interrelated conflict arenas, reveals both manifestations and limitations of agonistic agency and centres on the procedural dimension of conflict. Second, data collection coincided with the active phase of the dispute, providing real-time insights, while later stages allowed for retrospective analysis. Third, easy field access enabled engagement with a broad range of actors and materials.

Empirical data were collected using complementary methods. In 2023/2024, 29 semi-structured expert interviews were conducted with 31 interviewees from civil society, politics and public administration, including activists, non-profit organisation representatives, municipal and ministerial staff, mayors and members of the Bavarian parliament, among others (see Table 2). The interviews were documented through transcripts, fieldnotes and interview protocols to capture contextual information.³

Furthermore, a comprehensive document corpus was analysed including parliamentary documents, legislative texts, party manifestos and position papers from civil society organisations, providing insights into institutional and discursive frameworks. Additionally, because the media shapes public perceptions, press reporting (2017–2023) was also analysed, including articles from the supra-regional, Bavaria-based newspaper *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (restricted to articles concerning Bavaria) and two local newspapers.⁴ The keywords ‘bicycle traffic’, ‘cycling law’ and ‘cycling referendum’ were used for the selection of media articles.

All data underwent category-based qualitative content analysis following Mayring (2022). A structuring approach extracted key aspects, identified thematic cross-sections and enabled systematic interpretation. Coding was supported by QCAmap, with interviews, documents and media sources analysed separately before being synthesised in the final interpretation.

³ Direct quotations from the interviews will be cited as follows: Interview number: Institution of interviewee, year of interview. The direct interview quotations and cited text from media articles and documents included in this article were translated from German by the author.

⁴ To ensure the anonymity of the interviewees in this politically sensitive and contentious field, the selected counties and local newspapers related to them remain unnamed.

Table 2 Interviewees

Interview number	Position and institution of interviewee
1	Executive management of the Working Group of Bicycle-Friendly Municipalities in Bavaria (AGFK)
2	Cycling Referendum Bavaria representative (also: German Transport Club (VCD); General German Cycling Association (ADFC); Alliance 90/The Greens)
3	Local community organiser at a citizens' initiative for the mobility transition (also: VCD; Alliance 90/The Greens)
4	Local ADFC community organiser (also: Alliance 90/The Greens, municipal council member)
5	Staff member for road construction at the State Building Office
6	Executive committee at More Democracy
6	Executive management at More Democracy
7	Local community organiser at League for Nature Conservation (also: Alliance 90/The Greens, municipal council member)
8	Local community organiser at League for Nature Conservation
9	Free Voters mayor
10	Cycling officer at municipal administration (also: local citizen initiative for the mobility transition)
11	Free Voters member of the State Parliament
12	Head of department at the Office for Rural Development
13	CSU county administrator, member of the district council
13	Mobility management staff at the county administration office
14	SPD mayor
15	Executive management at Bavarian Farmers' Association (also: CSU)
16	CSU member of the State Parliament
17	State Ministry for Housing, Construction and Transport
18	CSU mayor
19	Executive committee at Organisation for Regional Development
20	Bavarian Academy for Rural Areas (also: CSU mayor)
21	Local community organiser at a citizen initiative for the mobility transition (also: ADFC)
22	Cycling officer at municipal administration
23	Staff member for county and regional development at county administration office
24	Scientific advisory board of Bavarian Academy for Rural Areas
25	Bavarian Farmers' Association (also: CSU, member of the county council)
26	Political advisory board of Cycling Referendum Bavaria (also: Ecological Democratic Party)
27	Alliance 90/The Greens municipal council member (also: local citizen initiative for a mobility transition)
28	Local community organiser with Mobility Transition Camp Munich
29	Project manager for cycling with tourism association

4 Results and discussion

This section reconstructs the Bavarian cycling conflict across the seven-year period between 2017 and 2023. The conflict repeatedly moved across the planning, protest, media, electoral, direct-democratic and legal arenas. Tracing these inter-arena dynamics helps to explain how conflict was enacted and strategically reconfigured over time, while clarifying the specific role of planning within a broader constellation of political struggle. This perspective also makes it possible to identify where agonistic agency became empirically observable across arenas, based on the indicators developed in the theoretical framework.

4.1 Conflict overview

This case centres on the contested transformation of mobility in Bavaria, focusing on civil society mobilisation around cycling policy at the local and state levels (for more on the multi-level governance dimension, see Loffing/Levin-Keitel 2025). The focal point is the Cycling Referendum Bavaria Alliance (CRBA), a state-wide initiative led by a broad alliance of local cycling campaigns, civil society organisations and opposition parties. CRBA core demands included a Bavarian cycling law, safer cycling infrastructure and a stronger political commitment to cycling as part of the mobility transition. The main instrument was a state-level direct-democratic procedure with the potential to cul-

4.2 Planning as the initial site of contestation

The cycling conflict originated in the planning arena because its substantive core concerns the construction of cycling infrastructure, street-space redistribution and modal prioritisation. However, unlike many classic planning conflicts, it did not begin as resistance to a proposed intervention. Rather, civil society mobilised around the perceived absence, delay or insufficiency of planning action. The case is hence best understood as an inverse planning conflict: actors politicised planning inaction and translated demands for mobility transformation into both concrete local proposals and state-wide legislative claims. This dynamic was reinforced by the public's everyday antagonistic experiences in traffic, which were often framed in the public discourse as "war" or "close combat" between cyclists and car drivers (Bayerischer Landtag 2021a: 12), making visible the underlying spatial tensions over scarce street space.

Planning actors increasingly responded through participatory and consultative formats, such as digital reporting tools, citizens' assemblies or dialogue formats (Interview 20: Bavarian Academy for Rural Areas, 2024). Administrative actors recognised civil society input as valuable but also emphasised the need to translate broad demands into incremental, manageable interventions: "Of course, I have to temper those [high expectations]; that's my job, at the end of the day" (Interview 23: County administration office, 2024). Some actors drew explicit technocratic boundaries around mobility decisions, arguing that even elected local politicians were "laypersons" and therefore should refrain from "interfering" and leave transport policy to the "experts" (Interview 9: Free Voters, 2023). Thus, the planning arena constitutes the initial site of conflict, as well as a site in which conflict was only partially processed, prompting subsequent shifts into other arenas (see Figure 1).

4.3 Local protests and civil society initiatives

From the planning arena, the conflict increasingly moved into the protest arena through local cycling initiatives across Bavaria. These initiatives actively politicised local mobility conditions, rendered deficiencies visible and pushed cycling concerns into broader public and political debates. Bicycle demonstrations served as highly visible forms of claims-making and collective identity formation as a "cycling family" (Freymark 2022). These practices make indicator 2 (visibility of diverse articulations of dissent) and indicator 4 (mobilisation of passions) particularly observable.

Local initiatives also moved beyond protest through the drafting of desired cycling networks, identification of dangerous areas, and organising site visits with politicians and administrators to translate everyday experiences into action-

able planning knowledge (e.g. Interview 3: Local citizens' initiative, 2023). Civil society actors may act as strategic allies for cycling-friendly local authorities because they can provide a progressive, positive voice in support of politically challenging measures (BALM 2023). In some cases, these activities led to more institutionalised cross-arena cooperation, such as local cycling working groups involving politicians, administrators and civil society (e.g. Interview 10: Municipal administration, 2023). Such arrangements are especially relevant for indicator 5 (focus on the democratisation of democracy) because they broaden participation beyond formal representative institutions and create spaces in which disagreements can become processable without being fully depoliticised. Simultaneously, these opportunities coexisted with strong power asymmetries. In some municipalities, protests were delegitimised as "maximally populist" and "a few lunatics out and about again" (Interview 9: Free Voters, 2023). Such devaluation undermines the recognition of opponents as legitimate adversaries and weakens indicator 3. Notably, the media arena played an ambivalent role. It had the potential to intensify polarisation or to limit access to local decision-makers and stage structured disagreements, for example, through contentious debates in newspapers that publicly foregrounded unresolved conflict (e.g. Lang/Vettori 2022).

4.4 Local cycling referendums and the expansion of democratic conflict

From 2016 onwards, cycling conflicts in 11 Bavarian municipalities entered the direct-democratic arena through local cycling referendums, paralleling developments in more than 50 German municipalities. Interviewees described these instruments as "getting people excited about democracy" through issue-based participation beyond elections (Interview 26: Cycling Referendum Bavaria, 2024) and making representative democracy "more representative" (e.g. Interview 6: More Democracy Bavaria, 2023). This scenario makes indicator 5 particularly visible. In many Bavarian cities, municipal councils adopted central demands before a binding referendum took place. Compared to other citizens' petitions, cycling-related initiatives were accepted with above-average frequency, functioning primarily as agenda-setting instruments (Rehmet/Socher/Müller 2025: 27). In some cases, this translated into increased resources, specific infrastructure measures or follow-up participation in implementation processes (Interview 26: Cycling Referendum Bavaria, 2024). However, implementation frequently remained incomplete and delayed.

4.5 Advocacy for a Bavarian cycling law in the electoral arena

Parallel to local mobilisation, the Bavarian chapter of the General German Cycling Association (ADFC) had advocated a state-wide cycling law since 2018. This demand emerged partly in response to the Cycling Programme Bavaria 2025, which committed the state to doubling the modal share of cycling to 20% by 2025 (Bayerisches Staatsministerium des Innern, für Bau und Verkehr 2018: 8). While the ADFC acknowledged that the programme incorporated long-standing demands, it criticised it as an “empty promise” without binding implementation or legal force (ADFC Bayern 2018a). The demand for a cycling law was taken up by several parties in the electoral arena. Alliance 90/The Greens and the Social Democratic Party (SPD) incorporated it into their programmes, the Free Voters signalled support and the CSU party conference adopted a resolution in favour of a cycling law in 2019 (ADFC Bayern 2018b; Bayern SPD 2018: 49; Bündnis 90/Die Grünen Landesverband Bayern 2018: 23; CSU-Landesleitung 2019: 263–264). However, this internal endorsement was not followed by implementation.

In a 2021 hearing in the Bavarian parliament, experts – including representatives from civil society – were invited to assess the conditions for cycling, discuss its potential and outline possible courses of action for the state (Bayerischer Landtag 2021a). The hearing was significant for the subsequent trajectory of the conflict because several measures later adopted by the state government can be traced back to demands articulated there (Interview 1: AGFK Bavaria, 2023), for example, the Cycling Offensive Climate State Bavaria⁶, which included measures to improve cycling infrastructure. In late 2021, the SPD and the Greens introduced draft cycling laws, which were both rejected because they were seen by the government as unnecessary and were criticised as excessively bureaucratic and overly prioritising cycling (Bayerischer Landtag 2021b; Bayerischer Landtag 2021c; Bayerischer Landtag 2021d; Bayerischer Landtag 2021e; Bayerischer Landtag 2022).

4.6 Cycling Referendum Bavaria

As it became clear that local referendums and lobbying would not secure a state-wide cycling law, the conflict was deliberately shifted into the direct-democratic arena through the Cycling Referendum Bavaria (*Radentscheid Bayern*). In itself, this arena shift can be interpreted as an expression of

agonistic agency: actors reflexively moved into another institutional setting when planning and parliamentary channels proved ineffective in achieving certain goals.

The campaign began in 2022 and quickly formed a broad alliance, linking local initiatives, non-governmental organisations and parties. For the draft cycling law, organisers deliberately chose what they considered to be the safest variant, even “sacrificing” more ambitious elements to minimise grounds for potential legal rejection.⁷ Through systematic press work, large bicycle demonstrations on highways and symbolic actions, cycling became a visible political issue across Bavaria and stimulated broader public engagement with the topic.⁸ Protests not only expressed support but also staged alternative spatial orders in a highly visible form, momentarily rendering cycling futures tangible in the present. Protests also produced strong emotional effects, particularly through vigils for cyclists killed by motorists and the installation of ‘ghost bikes’, where grief was transformed into explicit political claims about preventable deaths and unsafe planning. These dynamics made indicator 2, and especially indicator 4, highly visible. Media coverage often intensified the rhetoric of disruption through terms such as “revolution”, “uprising” and “struggle” (e.g. Hummel 2019).

The campaign adopted a lion symbol, invoking Bavaria’s heraldic animal while signalling determination, strength and assertiveness. For instance, at protests, activists were encouraged: “You must roar [...] You are lions” (Gerl 2022). Yet, overall, the campaign maintained a deliberately moderate public profile. The organisers sought a “non-partisan vibe” (Interview 26: Cycling Referendum Bavaria, 2024) and explicitly avoided forming formal alliances with more controversial climate protest groups (Interview 2: Cycling Referendum Bavaria, 2023), who advocated further-reaching anti-capitalist goals and used more confrontational forms of action, such as abseiling from bridges over motorways (e.g. Achternbosch/Kastner 2023). Yet even the direct-democratic arena faced repression when several supporters of the referendum accidentally signed multiple times and were then interrogated for suspected electoral fraud, which was interpreted as a “highly disproportionate response” that “does not bode well for direct democracy” (Interview 6: More Democracy Bavaria, 2023).

⁶ <https://www.bayern.de/radoffensive-klimaland-bayern> (21.04.2026).

⁷ <https://radentscheid-bayern.de/haeufige-fragen/der-vollstaendige-text-fuer-das-radgesetz-bayern> (21.04.2026); see also https://radentscheid-bayern.de/newsletter-archiv?email_id=9 (21.04.2026) and https://radentscheid-bayern.de/newsletter-archiv?email_id=19 (21.04.2026).

⁸ https://radentscheid-bayern.de/newsletter-archiv?email_id=4 (21.04.2026).

In July 2022, amid the referendum campaign, the state government presented its own measures to promote cycling, including the construction of 1,500 km of new cycle paths by 2030 (Bayerische Staatsregierung 2022). Although the Cycling Referendum Bavaria Alliance (CRBA) described these measures as a “modest first success” resulting from their pressure, they criticised the measures as “minimal additions to a ‘business as usual’ policy”, noting that standards, resources and responsibilities remained unclear without a cycling law.⁹

4.7 Government counter-legislation and the containment of direct-democratic pressure

Just one day after the CRBA and the Ministry of the Interior agreed on a date for submitting the admissibility application in January 2023, the Bavarian Minister-President Markus Söder publicly announced that the state government would pursue its own cycling law.¹⁰ Interviewees and media reporting interpreted this development as an attempt to pre-empt the referendum’s momentum by reclaiming authorship over cycling policy before the direct-democratic process could advance further (e.g. Osel 2023): “I think the pressure has simply grown to such an extent that the state government had no choice but to take action” (Interview 1: AGFK Bavaria, 2023).

This situation intensified when the Ministry of the Interior referred the application for admissibility to the Bavarian Constitutional Court in March 2023 due to doubts regarding admissibility.¹¹ Formally, this referral is part of Bavaria’s direct-democratic architecture (Art. 64 LWG). Politically, however, civil society actors interpreted it as a delaying move that shifted the conflict into the legal arena while creating time for a state-controlled counter-project in the electoral arena (Bayerischer Landtag 2023a: 20750). In May 2023, while the Constitutional Court was still deliberating on the referendum’s admissibility, the CSU and Free Voters introduced their own draft Bavarian Cycling Law shortly before the end of the legislative term (Bayerischer Landtag 2023c). While the CSU representative initially rejected opposition proposals, suggesting that “what we certainly do not need is a law” (Bayerischer Landtag 2021d: 13061),

they later stated the following: “To claim here that we did not want or rejected the introduction of a cycling law [...] is outrageous. [...] We never rejected the introduction of a cycling law” (Bayerischer Landtag 2023a: 20752).

The law was introduced through the governing parliamentary groups rather than through the state government, which reduced the amount of consultation that was formally required (Interview 11: Free Voters, 2023). Notably, civil society actors central to the conflict were not formally involved in drafting the law. The priority was to reach a quick, pragmatic outcome because it was seen as “always [...] a bit of a problem when many people are having their say” (Interview 11: Free Voters, 2023). This strategy was sharply criticised by opposition and civil society actors, who portrayed the law as having been “rammed through” in a top-down manner (Interview 1: AGFK Bavaria, 2023) and “simply cobbled together in a back room” (Bayerischer Landtag 2023b: 21682). Thus, the conflict was processed in a way that acknowledged pressure while limiting the political agency of those who had generated it (Interview 6: More Democracy Bavaria, 2023).

When the Constitutional Court declared the referendum inadmissible in June 2023, arguing that parts of the draft encroached upon federal competences, the direct-democratic path was formally closed.¹² This fits a broader pattern visible over the past decade: when applications for the approval of a referendum were referred to the Bavarian Constitutional Court, the Court consistently rejected the proposed initiatives.¹³ While the cycling activists expressly respected the court’s decision, they shared their criticisms: “Even wording that appears exactly as it does in the cycling laws of North Rhine-Westphalia and Berlin was not recognised in Bavaria”.¹⁴ Activists and observers stressed that, even after extensive legal preparation, the threshold for admissibility appeared so high that the case might deter future civil society actors with fewer resources from attempting referendum-based interventions (Interview 6: More Democracy

⁹ https://radentscheid-bayern.de/newsletter-archiv?email_id=5 (21.04.2026).

¹⁰ x.com/Markus_Soeder/status/1615997493992472577 (07.04.2026); https://radentscheid-bayern.de/newsletter-archiv?email_id=13 (21.04.2026).

¹¹ <https://www.bayern.de/herrmann-volksbegehren-radentscheid-bayern> (07.04.2026).

¹² <https://www.bayern.verfassungsgerichtshof.de/media/images/bayverfgh/8-ix-23-pressemitt-entscheidung.pdf> (21.04.2026).

¹³ <https://www.bayern.verfassungsgerichtshof.de/media/images/bayverfgh/66-ix-15-pressemitt.entscheidung.pdf> (21.04.2026); <https://www.bayern.verfassungsgerichtshof.de/media/images/bayverfgh/60-ix-16-pressemitt.entscheidung.pdf> (21.04.2026); <https://www.bayern.verfassungsgerichtshof.de/media/images/bayverfgh/28-ix-18-pressemitt.entscheidung.pdf> (21.04.2026); <https://www.bayern.verfassungsgerichtshof.de/media/images/bayverfgh/41-ix-19-pressemitt.entscheidung.pdf> (21.04.2026); <https://www.bayern.verfassungsgerichtshof.de/media/images/bayverfgh/32-ix-20-pressemitt-entscheidung.pdf> (21.04.2026).

¹⁴ https://radentscheid-bayern.de/newsletter-archiv?email_id=19 (21.04.2026).

Bavaria, 2023).¹⁵ The government's Bavarian Cycling Law was passed in July 2023 and entered into force in August of the same year.¹⁶

This development can be interpreted as a form of sequential neutralisation: first, opposition proposals were rejected by the government; second, the conflict was contained by shifting it from the direct-democratic arena to the legal arena; third, the governing parties occupied the policy field in the electoral arena through more moderate government counter-legislation without including civil society (selective appropriation). Therefore, the conflict was not simply about the substance of a cycling law, but also about timing, issue ownership and institutional control. This can be interpreted as revealing a depoliticising tendency with the conflict being settled before a public vote could force a more visible confrontation between competing mobility futures. Although such dynamics regarding cycling referendums are not unique to Bavaria¹⁷, the Bavarian case appears to intensify this pattern in a particularly distinctive manner. Media commentary explicitly framed the government's handling of the cycling referendum as part of a broader CSU repertoire of "getting rid of explosive issues just in time". This reading was reinforced by comparisons with the biodiversity referendum *Save the Bees*, which was confronted much later in the process, reportedly prompting a much earlier governmental response in the cycling case (e.g. Glas/Osel 2023).

However, this did not end the conflict; it transformed it. The object of struggle shifted from whether a cycling law should exist to what that law means in practice, how it is implemented and whether it will be revised. The later creation of the Cycling Alliance (*Radallianz*) under Article 12 of the Bavarian Cycling Law can be read as an institutionalised follow-up arena that to some extent incorporates movement actors into consultative governance, while leaving open the question of how far this inclusion enables meaningful influence over implementation.¹⁸ Activists stressed that the law would now have to be monitored, specified and, if necessary, revised (e.g. Interview 2: Cycling Referendum Bavaria, 2023). The possibility of a further referendum and

additional protest actions was explicitly raised (Interview 2: Cycling Referendum Bavaria, 2023). Notably, the conflict can be expected to re-enter the planning arena, where political decisions and legal regulations must ultimately be translated into concrete spatial arrangements that materially consolidate conflict outcomes.

4.8 Empirical observability of agonistic agency across arenas

The Bavarian cycling conflict demonstrates that agonistic agency is empirically observable across all analysed arenas, albeit unevenly and under shifting institutional conditions. Democratic contestation around mobility is not reducible to the design of participatory planning procedures. Rather, agonistic agency emerges through movement between the planning, protest, media, electoral, direct-democratic and legal arenas. Therefore, an arena-sensitive perspective is crucial because it reveals that where one arena constrains agonistic agency, another may temporarily expand it.

Indicator 1 (Understanding of contingency and the irreducibility of conflict) was most visible where actors explicitly framed street-space allocation and mobility priorities as politically contingent and contestable, rather than as technical or naturalised. This was particularly pronounced in the protest, direct-democratic and electoral arenas, where civil society and opposition actors challenged prevailing mobility arrangements and acknowledged redistributive trade-offs. By contrast, in the planning arena, technocratic framings often narrowed public recognition of contingency by presenting decisions as being primarily expert driven. Therefore, the meta-conflict over whether mobility transformation constitutes a genuine political conflict is closely tied to this indicator.

Indicator 2 (Visibility of diverse articulations of dissent) was strongly observable, especially in the protest, media and direct-democratic arenas. Demonstrations, referendum campaigns, symbolic protests and public debates rendered disagreement highly visible and transformed dispersed grievances into collective demands. Dissent did not disappear in planning-related settings; it was more often translated into manageable issues, technical deficits or incremental improvements. This suggests that planning may incorporate conflict while simultaneously narrowing the range of legitimate forms in which dissent can appear.

Indicator 3 (Recognition of adversaries and democratic principles) was partially observable; for example, where opposing actors engaged in structured public exchanges or where administrative and civil society actors acknowledged one another's distinct roles despite disagreements. However, activists were at times dismissed as irrational or naïve, while political and administrative actors were perceived as evasive

¹⁵ https://radentscheid-bayern.de/newsletter-archiv?email_id=19 (21.04.2026).

¹⁶ Act to Promote Cycling in Bavaria (Gesetz zur Stärkung des Radverkehrs in Bayern; Bayerisches Radgesetz – BayRadG) of 24 July 2023 (GVBl. p. 371) BayRS 97-1-B.

¹⁷ https://www.mobiltaetsforum.bund.de/DE/Themen/Wissenspool/Berichte/Webinar_Diskurs-am-Dienstag_230912_Druck-von-der-Strasse.html (11.05.2026).

¹⁸ <https://radentscheid-bayern.de/gruendungssitzung-der-radallianz-bayern-als-neuem-runden-tisch-zu-radverkehrsthemen> (21.04.2026).

or obstructive. Thus, the present case highlights that the existence of democratic procedures does not automatically secure mutual recognition as legitimate opponents.

Indicator 4 (Mobilisation of passions) was very clearly observable, particularly in the protest arena and in broader civil society mobilisation around cycling. Frustration, anger, fear, hope and identification were central to the persistence and expansion of the conflict, and sustained demonstrations, signature campaigns, alliance-building and long-term engagement. At the same time, passions were not always democratically stabilised: media discourse and everyday traffic conflicts sometimes intensified polarisation. Therefore, this case underlines that the mobilisation of passions is necessary but not sufficient for agonistic agency.

Indicator 5 (Focus on the democratisation of democracy) was strongly observable. Across several arenas, actors not only sought policy change within existing channels but also pursued interventions that broadened participation, pluralised agenda-setting and challenged the closure of established decision-making structures. This was particularly evident in the use of local cycling referendums and the attempted state-wide referendum, which extended the conflict into direct-democratic arenas. Simultaneously, participatory planning practices often remained bounded by limited mandates and expert-centred gatekeeping, revealing the limits of inclusion within formal planning.

Overall, the case study suggests that agonistic agency is best understood not as a fixed property pertaining to actors or institutions, but as something that is relationally produced through shifting interactions between actors, arenas and institutional logics. Its empirical observability depends not only on whether actors dissent, mobilise or seek participation, but also on whether particular arenas render these practices legible, legitimate and politically consequential. For instance, protests can politicise what planning neutralises; direct democracy can formalise what electoral institutions delay; media visibility can amplify what closed negotiations suppress and legal filtering can contain what mobilisation opens. Notably, no arena is inherently agonistic or permanently closed. The author argues that arenas can be ‘agonised’ – that is, rendered more receptive to democratic dissent, plural contestation and politicised engagement – even if only temporarily or incompletely.

For planning theory and practice, this implies that agonistic agency cannot be secured by planning procedures alone, even though they remain important. A more democratic handling of mobility conflicts may depend on recognising the legitimacy of extra-planning forms of contestation and on building institutional interfaces through which claims from other arenas can enter planning without being fully depoliticised. Hence the Bavarian cycling conflict shows not only whether agonistic agency is present or absent, but also how

it is unevenly distributed, strategically enacted and repeatedly negotiated across a multi-arena conflict trajectory.

5 Conclusions

Employing an agonistic lens, this paper has examined the Bavarian cycling conflict as a planning-related spatial conflict. It has thus proposed a set of qualitative indicators that can make agonistic agency empirically observable across conflict arenas. Substantively, this case suggests that mobility transitions can generate a distinctive type of planning conflict characterised not only by resistance to intervention, but also by conflict around indecision, delay and the political consequences of inaction in planning. The Bavarian cycling conflict case study is thus best understood as an inverse planning conflict in which civil society primarily mobilised not against planning, but rather to pressure planners and politicians to act.

The case study also demonstrates that such conflicts cannot be adequately understood if analysis remains confined to a single arena. Rather than unfolding linearly, the conflict moved recursively across the planning, protest, media, electoral, direct-democratic and legal arenas, where it was displaced, amplified, formalised, selectively appropriated and eventually reintroduced into planning in a transformed form. Two interrelated meta-conflicts proved particularly important in structuring this trajectory: first, whether mobility transformation was recognised as a genuine political conflict; second, which arenas and institutional logics it should be processed through. These meta-conflicts help explain why agonistic agency does not simply emerge or fail, but is variably enabled, blocked, translated or incorporated, depending on the arena.

Methodologically, the main contribution of this paper lies in demonstrating what can be learned from grounding agonistic planning theory in empirical research. Rather than treating agonism only as a normative ideal, the investigation used qualitative indicators to trace where agonistic agency becomes visible and where it does not. This helps shift the debate from considering whether planning is ‘agonistic’ in an abstract sense to examining how specific conflict arenas render dissent visible, sustain disagreement, mobilise political affect or open democratic contestation under concrete institutional conditions. Additionally, this case highlights the uneven distribution of agonistic agency since different arenas foregrounded different indicators, and planning itself was not merely an implementation arena but remained a site in which tensions between politics and the political continued to be negotiated, especially when conflicts returned to it in an altered form.

Beyond the specific Bavarian context, this study speaks to wider debates in planning research regarding ways to analyse conflicts that exceed formal planning procedures while remaining deeply planning-related. Mobility conflicts may have been particularly revealing in this case because they combined everyday spatial practices, scarce urban space, socio-ecological urgency and highly visible distributive trade-offs. However, the broader analytical lesson likely extends beyond mobility since contemporary planning conflicts are often shaped not only by disputes over substantive outcomes, but also by struggles over whether conflict is acknowledged and how it is institutionally processed.

Despite its practical and theoretical value, the investigation has certain limitations. As only a single case study is analysed, it cannot support broad generalisation; thus, its findings are shaped by the specific legal and political contexts of Bavaria. As an interpretive analysis, the study also relied on situated actor perspectives and on the researcher's own analytical positioning. The proposed operationalisation of agonistic agency should thus be understood as exploratory rather than definitive. In light of this context, future research should test and refine these indicators across other conflict types and contexts, more systematically examine the institutional and political conditions under which particular arenas become more amenable to agonistic enactment and more closely investigate how planning operates after contentious political struggles, particularly whether it stabilises conflict technocratically or continues to negotiate it politically.

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