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METROPOLISATION THROUGH INSTITUTIONAL ACTION: AN ANALYSIS OF SEVEN METROPOLITAN AREAS IN CENTRAL EUROPE¹

This article addresses the institutional dimension of metropolisation processes in Central Europe. It draws on qualitative research conducted as a part of the Strengthening Metropolitan Cooperation and Governance in Central Europe (MECOG-CE) project. Initiated in 2023 and running to 2026, the MECOG-CE project covers seven metropolitan areas. Based on the concept of hard and soft dialogue spaces, the article seeks to identify the main domains of activity undertaken by institutions in metropolitan areas and elucidate the similarities and differences in their approaches to these activities. Empirical data underline the primacy of three spheres of activity undertaken by metropolitan institutions: regional development, spatial planning, and transport. The study also discusses the prevailing model of urbanisation and metropolitan development, which assumes a triad based on forces of globalisation-innovation-competition, concluding instead that metropolisation in contemporary Central Europe is driven more by metropolitan institutions, collaboration, and principles of inclusive participation and sustainable development.

Key words: metropolisation; soft dialogue space; hard dialogue space; metropolitan collaboration, governance

Introduction

Metropolisation has many faces. This article presents one of them – metropolisation through the activities of metropolitan institutional structures. This approach provides rich insights into efforts to adapt to and co-create ongoing metropolisation processes in several geographically close urban areas. In broad terms, the study outlines the activities and development strategies pursued by

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¹ The article based on MECOG-CE “Strengthening metropolitan cooperation and governance in Central Europe” project. The project is co-funded by the European Union from ERDF funds of the Interreg Central Europe 2021–2027 Programme and by the Polish Ministry of Science and Higher Education under the program called International Co-financed Projects.

metropolitan institutions in seven Central European² metropolitan areas: Berlin-Brandenburg MA, Brno MA, Upper Silesian MA, Ostrava MA, Stuttgart Region (Stuttgart MA), Turin MA and Warsaw MA. This perspective enables the identification of similarities and differences in the activities that develop the metropolisation process. The adopted approach takes into account the European context and highlights the role of the institutions responsible for managing metropolises or metropolitan areas. The opportunity for such an analysis was provided by the MECOG-CE project, which is currently being implemented from 2023 to 2026 by a consortium led by Brno City Council (Czechia).³ This project focuses on strengthening metropolitan cooperation and governance in Central Europe. It aims to identify the best tools, procedures, and examples of good practices to support this objective and to inform their application in ways that enhance integrated strategic and territorial development at the metropolitan level.

As is standard in enterprises of this kind, a preliminary diagnosis was undertaken of the current state of the phenomena in question. In the case of the MECOG-CE project, this diagnostic analysis assessed the level of institutionalisation of the participating metropolitan areas, examined the legal frameworks governing the activities of metropolitan institutions, and identified the core domains in which these institutions operate. Special attention was given to the nature of the activities undertaken by institutions in these metropolitan areas, as well as by other entities collaborating with them. Initiatives aimed at strengthening metropolitan potential – especially by fostering cooperation among local-level actors, but also through inter-metropolitan collaboration – were also closely examined. Thus, attention was drawn to the relationships between social actors and the forms of dialogue between them. In addition, the diagnostic analysis sought to identify specific solutions or intervention projects with the potential to be adopted or adapted in other European metropolitan areas.

Due to length restrictions, a complete account of the diagnostic process and its outcomes cannot be provided in this article. Therefore, the remainder of the paper focuses on the key domains of activity pursued by relevant institutions in the seven metropolitan areas, with particular emphasis on the challenges these institutions and metropolitan areas face. The article addresses the following research questions:

² The notion of Central Europe used in this article is based on the territorial classification adopted in Interreg Europe projects. Accordingly, the region includes the following countries: Austria, Czechia, Croatia, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia, as well as parts of Germany (southeast regions) and Italy (the northern part of the country).

³ More information about the project can be found at: <https://www.interreg-central.eu/projects/mecog-ce/> (access 4.09.2024). Descriptions and references to the project in this paper are largely grounded in the official project documentation.

1. What are the main domains of activities of the metropolitan structures?
2. What similarities and differences can be observed in the activities of metropolitan structures across various domains?
3. How is the institutional aspect of metropolisation manifested in the selected Central European metropolitan areas?

The article is divided into four sections: the first presents a literature review focused on the metropolisation process; the second describes the research perspective and methodology; the third presents the main findings of the research; and the final section ends with a discussion about the specific nature and characteristics of processes of metropolisation through institutional action.

Literature Review

Studies on metropolisation processes often point to their multidimensionality (e.g. Scott, 2008; Jałowiecki, 2009; Zuzańska-Żyśko, 2016; Viturka et al., 2017). It is widely accepted that metropolisation refers to “a temporal, demographic, economic, sociocultural, spatial and political process” (Gonçalves et al., 2024, p. 4) and represents a particular stage of urbanisation and globalisation (e.g. Jałowiecki, 2000, p. 15; Pyka, 2014, p. 22; Zuzańska-Żyśko, 2016, pp. 21–22; Gonçalves et al., 2024, p. 4; Huang and Zhao, 2024). Metropolisation, as a product of the forces of globalisation, results in the transformation of cities into hubs within a global network (Jałowiecki, 2000, p. 15). Or, to put it slightly differently and with reference to the connection between humanity and global processes, it is “the vehicle of globalisation by means of which it influences the life of modern man” (Pyka, 2014, p. 22). It is, therefore, apparent that metropolisation leads to the emergence of metropolises with varying degrees of influence, from global cities (Sassen, 1991, 2006) to regional metropolises.

Metropolises function as nodes in the global space of flows (Castells, 2009). Within this formulation are evident the connections embedded in the well-known triad: globalisation-innovation-competition (Gorzelak, 2009, p. 17). Metropolises are the primary carriers and expressors of this triad; these are the spaces where globalisation is most intense, where the number of innovations is the highest, and where competitive advantages are the strongest (Gorzelak, 2009, p. 17). This triad also clearly relates to metropolitan functions. The crucial ones are decision-making and control, innovation and competition, gateway and symbolic (Zuzańska-Żyśko, 2016, pp. 212–238; Grove and Volkman, 2022, p. 506–507).

Studies on metropolisation often focus on the relations between the metropolis and its surroundings (Soja, 2000, 2013; Cardoso and Meijers, 2020; Huang and Zhao, 2024). These relations can take various forms. Dadashpoor and Malekzadeh (2022) distinguish eight dominant and eight specific patterns

of metropolitan area development based on a review of the literature. Therefore, when conducting research on metropolitan areas, the context in which they function should be taken into account. The megaregion formation phenomena, especially in Asia (Yan et al., 2024) and the functioning of European metropolitan areas must be analysed at least in their spatial and historical contexts (Huang and Zhao, 2024). However, the model of a core city surrounded by suburbs is no longer valid. It has been replaced by the concept of postmetropolis (Soja, 2000) or, in other words, polycentric regional cities (Mlejnek et al., 2020).

In European metropolisation studies, particular attention is given to research exploring the relationship between metropolisation and suburbanisation. In the context of post-communist European countries, analyses highlight the characteristics of suburbanisation in metropolises. This process accelerated significantly in the last decade of the 20th century and the first decade of the 21st century, as evidenced by expansion of urban sprawl (Stanilov and Sýkora, 2014). It was also accompanied by the neglect of social infrastructure, such as educational facilities (Smagacz-Poziemska and Bierwiazzonek, 2022), as well as lower land-use efficiency, attributed to the communist past of metropolitan areas in the former socialist bloc (Masini et al., 2019). In the third decade of the 21st century, the importance of reurbanisation has been strongly emphasised, although suburbanisation remains the dominant trend. This trend is driven by land prices and sociocultural factors, including the aspiration to own a house outside the city (Kajdanek, 2009, 2022; Wagner and Growe, 2020).

The sociological perspective on metropolisation is associated with emphasising the character of the metropolitan style of life. The forerunner of this approach was Georg Simmel (1975). His remarks on the diversity of urban life, variability, and high pace of life – leading, on the one hand, to individual indifference to stimuli, and on the other, to the social and economic development of metropolitan spaces – remain inspiring even today (Mele 2023; Holzhauser and Moebius, 2023). In this context, in addition to the metropolitan lifestyle, the importance of the interaction density in metropolises is also highlighted. This density positively influences the development of the cognitive economy (Scott, 2008) and innovation, including social innovation (Innes and Booher, 2010; Bierwiazzonek and Pyka, 2023).

An effect of metropolisation is the emergence of the metropolitan class, contrasted with lower social urban structures (Jałowiecki, 2000; Szczepański and Śliz, 2017). Their presence in metropolitan areas brings to the fore another issue addressed in metropolitan studies – social inequality. As research over the last few decades has shown, social inequality has been rising significantly faster in metropolitan areas in the United States than in those in Europe (Bach, 2020, da Cruz et al., 2020).

Metropolises face significant challenges related to adaptation to climate change, which raises concerns both about environmental resources and about

effective, resilient and sustainable approaches to metropolitan area management (Nagy, 2021; Nocentini, 2024). The selected model of metropolitan governance is a key factor in this context. Gerőházi and Tosics (2018) identify two main governance models: institutional and procedural. Tomàs (2015, 2016), in turn, distinguishes four types of metropolitan governance: (1) institutionalised, (2) related to the autonomy of metropolitan institutions, (3) sectoral, relying on vertical coordination, and (4) based on voluntary activities of social actors. Regardless of the adopted model, the relationships between social actors involved in the activities of metropolitan institutions are crucial for the effective functioning of metropolises.

Research Perspective and Methodology

Regardless of any particular definitions, three dimensions of metropolisation are commonly acknowledged: a spatial dimension, a functional dimension, and a networking dimension (Zuzańska-Żyśko, 2016, pp. 27–32). An institutional or structural dimension can be added to this, the significance of which is demonstrated in this article. By extending the concept of metropolisation in this way, the definition proposed by Lang and Török (2017) can appropriately be adopted for this study:

We understand metropolisation as a multiple process combining empirical dimensions such as the concentration of population and (economic) activities, normative-political dimensions such as policy frameworks supporting the formation of metropolitan regions and discursive dimensions adding particular values (e.g. about a good life) and relations (e.g. urban-rural dichotomies) to the general debate, which is based on the notion of (metropolitan) regions being social constructs. (Lang and Török, 2017, p. 2)

This conceptualisation incorporates an understanding of metropolisation processes as shaped by the power structures and institutions operating within metropolitan areas. Metropolitan structures can guide different modes of decision-making and action. Recognising this difference, the MECOG-CE project and the article adopt the concept of two types of metropolitan dialogue spaces: soft and hard (Mikuła et al., 2024). The concept, originally used in spatial planning studies (Allmendinger and Haughton, 2009; Kaczmarek, 2018), is applied more broadly here, extending to other domains related to the activities of metropolitan structures. “In this sense, a metropolitan dialogue and cooperation space comprises all forms of exchange of information, everyday discussions, commitments, and transactions between actors from the public, private, or civic sectors, functioning at different territorial levels, which are triggered by

the interdependence of their interests and concerns at the metropolitan level.” (Mikuła et al., 2024, p. 1668).

Hard dialogue spaces refer to metropolitan dialogue and decision-making processes within formally established structures governed by clear legal frameworks. They, therefore, involve highly institutionalised social actors within metropolitan areas. Soft dialogue spaces, on the other hand, refer to informal (or semi-formal) relationships characterised by voluntary cooperation among social actors in metropolitan areas. These spaces often facilitate bottom-up collaboration among local authorities and various stakeholders. Both forms of dialogue and their outcomes influence metropolitan policy, development, mobility systems, planning frameworks, and quality of life, thereby shaping the metropolitanisation process.

This research employs the concept of metropolitan area alongside the concepts of metropolis and metropolitanisation. This approach is based on the assumption that the impact of metropolitan structures extends beyond the confines of the metropolis. A metropolitan area is a social, functional, and symbolic construct defined by the influence of the metropolis. Thus, a metropolitan area encompasses a broader region than the metropolis itself. In simple terms, a metropolitan area consists of the urban core and its surrounding areas (Zuzańska-Żyśko, 2016, p. 103), characterised by complex interdependencies and partnerships crucial for sustainable and resilient urban development (New Leipzig Charter, 2020). Alternatively, it can be described as “a metropolitan settlement system (mono- or polycentric) composed of multiple settlement units and areas with a high degree of urbanisation” (Markowski and Marszał, 2006, p. 15). Moreover, for a region to be classified as a metropolitan area, it must fulfil metropolitan functions (Markowski and Marszał, 2006; Zuzańska-Żyśko, 2016, p. 101).

Defining metropolitan areas’ boundaries is critical for analysing the phenomena occurring within them. As is often the case in the social sciences, however, there is no universally accepted method for delineating metropolitan areas (Zuzańska-Żyśko, 2016, p. 103). For the current purposes, and in line with the approach adopted by the MECOG-CE project – which provides the empirical basis for this study – it is assumed that a metropolitan area consists of municipalities formally associated in an institutionalised metropolitan structure. In addition, metropolitan areas may also encompass informal spheres of influence and spaces for interaction and dialogue among contiguously located territorial units, such as municipalities, especially in cases where formal governance institutions are absent (Mikuła et al., 2024). As indicated earlier, the sphere of influence may extend beyond geographically defined municipal boundaries. This conceptual framework for defining metropolitan areas is applied throughout this article.

Seven metropolitan areas and their associated institutions participated in the MECOG-CE project.⁴ These were:

- Berlin-Brandenburg MA – Joint Spatial Planning Department Berlin Brandenburg,
- Brno Metropolitan Area – City of Brno,
- Upper Silesian MA – GZM Metropolis,⁵
- Ostrava MA – City of Ostrava,
- Stuttgart Region – Stuttgart Region Association (VRS – Verband Region Stuttgart),
- Turin MA – Metropolitan City of Turin,
- Warsaw MA – Warsaw Metropolis Association.

As has already been noted, the main objective of the MECOG-CE project is to strengthen metropolitan management and governance processes. The realisation of this objective necessarily had to be preceded by an understanding of the main areas of activity of the individual metropolitan institutions and their operating principles, such as legal and institutional conditions. In order to identify these areas of activity, participating metropolitan institutions were asked to complete the “Matrix for Identification and Analysis of Tools and Best Practices Enhancing Metropolitan Cooperation.” This tool was prepared by a team of sociologists from the University of Silesia in Katowice. It took the form of an extended questionnaire composed of three main parts. Part A of the matrix referred to the national context determining the strategies of metropolitan empowerment and the structure of metropolitan cooperation and governance in a given metropolitan area in Europe. Part B was designed to present metropolitan cooperation forms, structures and dialogue spaces as components of a metropolitan governance system. This part also included questions aimed at identifying the subject(s) of metropolitan dialogue and cooperation processes and their features. Firstly, sixteen categories of potential cooperation were listed. These were (1) spatial planning, (2) regional development, (3) housing, (4) waste management, (5) water management, (6) energy, (7) education, (8) tourism and leisure, (9) social policy (including social inclusion issues), (10) culture, heritage and metropolitan identity, (11) promotion and marketing, (12) sewage

⁴ In addition to the metropolitan areas and the various institutions that manage them (with different responsibilities and statuses), the project also involves the University of Silesia in Katowice, Charles University in Prague, and the Metropolitan Research Institute in Budapest, as well as six associated partners: the Union of Polish Metropolises, Górnośląsko-Zagłębiowska Metropolia (GZM Metropolis), METREX, Eurocities, the Ministry of Regional Development of the Czech Republic, and the Metropolitan City of Milan.

⁵ The GZM Metropolis is formally an associate partner in the MECOG-CE project, although it fully participated in the collection of data used in this article and is included as a subject of the analysis.

management, (13) transport, (14) healthcare, (15) international cooperation and (16) other domains and subjects of cooperation and dialogue that could be added if needed. Identifying the subject of cooperation was the first step in its further, more detailed description. The matrix contained characteristics concerning the range of actions and competencies within the domain (subject) of cooperation, tools, and good practices used in the mentioned activities, and a question about whether a general strategy connected with the domain or sectoral strategic document existed in the metropolitan area. The information obtained from this part of the matrix provides the basis for the analysis presented in the article. Part C constructed an overview of interrelations and interactions between different cooperation and dialogue spaces in a given partner metropolitan area that were identified by respondents (Pyka et al., 2024).

The design of the research tool made it possible to obtain comprehensive answers to questions related to the activities of metropolitan institutions. The information received, therefore, presents the perspective of metropolitan structures participating in the MECOG-CE project, which acted as respondents in the project's first – diagnostic – phase. However, it should be emphasised that the studied actors provided examples and descriptions that extended beyond the direct experiences of their institutions. Although the research perspective focused on spaces of dialogue, the information gathered through the matrix enabled the identification of specific actions taken in metropolitan areas.

Data collection occurred between June and September 2023. The researchers were consulted by project partners representing the individual metropolitan areas whenever questions or uncertainties about the requested information arose. The issues raised primarily concerned clarifying specific questions in the tool and the level of detail required in responses. The matrix, therefore, facilitated dialogue between the researchers and representatives of the metropolitan institutions and allowed revision, clarification, and honing of the information collected. This iterative process enhanced the value and quality of the data, all of which – like the resultant analysis – was qualitative in nature. The data consisted of detailed descriptions relating to the domains of activities of metropolitan institutions and the projects implemented within them. Its primary objective was to reveal the main activity domains pursued by institutions located in the seven metropolitan areas under study. A complementary objective was to identify the similarities and differences in institutions' approaches to these activities and to draw connections between analogous domains of activity.

The “Big 3” and Other Activity Domains: Empirical Research Findings

At the outset, it is important to note that the various metropolitan areas participating in the MECOG-CE project operate under different legal regulations. Since 1 January 2015, according to Law n. 56/2014 (Delrio Law), ten Italian provinces, including Turin, have been legally defined as metropolitan cities. In Germany, the legal situation of metropolises varies according to state law. The Stuttgart Region has an exceptionally strong position due to direct representation in the metropolitan Assembly and legally guaranteed competencies. The situation is entirely different in the case of the Capital Region Berlin-Brandenburg, which does not have a metropolitan institution but is managed through cooperation between two states (Länder), namely Berlin and Brandenburg. Czech metropolitan areas structures exist on an informal voluntary basis without any formal political metropolitan leadership. The consolidation of cooperation in metropolitan areas began with the implementation of the Integrated Territorial Investments (ITI) instrument as part of the EU cohesion policy. Most metropolitan areas in Poland, including Warsaw, operate on a bottom-up basis. As a result, cooperation between municipalities in these metropolitan areas takes the form of intra-metropolitan conferences, agreements, and associations. Consequently, Czech and Polish metropolitan areas function primarily through soft dialogue spaces. An exception is the GZM Metropolis, which includes 41 municipalities in the conurbation with its largest city, Katowice. This metropolis was established based on a 2017 law passed by the Polish parliament, which granted it appropriate competencies and its own budget.

The legal basis for the functioning of metropolitan structures influences the type and scale of activities undertaken. Statutory requirements impose obligatory tasks to be performed by metropolitan institutions, clearly indicating the scope of their activities while limiting (but usually not preventing) their involvement in other activities. The absence of statutory obligations permits greater freedom of action on the part of metropolitan institutions but often requires independent acquisition of financial, human, organisational, and other resources. Metropolitan structures that operate on the basis of established institutions and statutorily formulated prerogatives usually have access to these resources, while others may not. The spheres of activity declared by the institutions participating in the MECOG-CE project are presented in Table 1.

Having demonstrated the diversity of their operational concerns and activities, it is worth elucidating, in comparative terms, the most common and least common spheres of operation of these metropolitan institutions. The most common but also most complex sphere of activity is that directed towards regional development. This is also the sphere that, in the three formalised

metropolitan areas – the GZM Metropolis, the Torino MA, and the Stuttgart Region – constitutes the statutory prerogative of metropolitan institutions. Regardless of the statutory provisions in the metropolitan areas analysed, however, two common features can be observed relating to regional development activities. The first is the emphasis placed on technological, organisational, and social innovation in regional development. Innovation, of course, is one of the three apexes of the development triad linked with metropolisation. The second common element is the emphasis on sustainable development, which is evidenced in the close attention given to ensuring the environmental, economic, and social sustainability of projects and interventions.

Table 1. Domains of activity and interventions of metropolitan structures

	Berlin- Brandenburg MA	Brno MA	Upper Silesian MA	Ostrava MA	Stuttgart MA	Turin MA	Warsaw MA
Spatial Planning	x	•	x		x	x	x/•
Regional Development (growth, innovation, R&D, etc.)	•	•	x	•	x	x	x/•
Housing	x/•				•		
Waste Management	•	•	•	•	x/•	x/•	
Water Management	•		•			x	
Energy	•	•	•	•	•	•	
Education	•	•	•	•			x/•
Tourism & Leisure		•		•	x	•	
Social Policy / Inclusion		•	•	•		x/•	•
Culture & Heritage, Metropolitan Identity	•	•	•	•	•	•	
Promotion & Territorial marketing	•		x	•	x	•	
Sewage Management			•				
Transport	x	•	x/•	•	x/•	x	x/•
Healthcare	•						
International Cooperation	x/•	•	•		•	x	x/•
Other domains and subjects of cooperation and dialogue	•	x/•	•	x/•	x/•	x/•	•

x – statutory domain of activities; • – non-statutory domain of activities; x/• – some aspects of the activities in the domain are statutory

Source: own elaboration based on Matrices and information from the MECOG-CE partners (Pyka et al., 2024, p. 57)

Individual metropolitan areas pursue distinct ideas and agendas, which they constellate in different ways under the general rubric of ‘regional development’. For instance, the idea of innovative axes linking its two constituent states, Berlin and Brandenburg, along train infrastructure, and of exploiting these links for knowledge transfer and economic development, is a core feature of the development strategy of the Berlin-Brandenburg metropolitan area. In this case, pursuit of the regional and metropolitan development agenda is integrated with transport and spatial development issues. Similarly, the priority given to innovation by the Brno Metropolitan Area, especially in IT, is fused with the objective of promoting regional development through entrepreneurship. The regional and metropolitan development strategy of the GZM Metropolis and Ostrava MA is explicitly driven by the overarching goal of improving quality of life in the post-industrial era, with initiatives aimed at stimulating progress infused across several activity domains. In the Stuttgart Region, sustainable development is strongly promoted by emphasising the inviolability of the natural environment as the basis for enduring quality of life, the importance of eco-related innovations in the drive for future prosperity, introduction of the principles of the circular economy, social acceptance of proposed solutions, and collaboration between universities, research institutes, commercial enterprises, economic entities, and state institutions to introduce and achieve optimal solutions. The Turin MA emphasises the importance of cooperation between the main metropolitan actors and establishes the following priorities for strategic action: *territorial redevelopment; enhancement of industrial areas; construction of buildings of public interest; strengthening of road, aqueduct and connectivity networks for the development of broadband; infrastructure for higher technical education*.⁶ Lastly, the Warsaw MA links development activities to the provisions of the *Development Strategy for the Mazowieckie Voivodeship 2030+*, highlighting the importance of implementing ITI projects and focusing attention *on building competitiveness based on innovation, digitalisation, the future industry, highly skilled human resources, and the benefits of concentrating administrative functions*.

While the ideas and activities underpinning regional development may require specialist expertise or targeting towards the activities of specific actors or groups of actors, issues like transport and mobility relate to the broader everyday functioning of metropolitan areas and their inhabitants. Public mobility and efficient movement of goods and services is part of *the core business of metropolitan structures*, as stated by representatives of the GZM Metropolis. In fact, all participating metropolitan areas emphasised the importance of efficient

⁶ Verbatim quotations from project materials and information provided by respondents in the matrices appear in italics.

public transport, linking this theme with principles of sustainable development by promoting environmentally friendly solutions for improving mobility. The need for integrated thinking about public transport was also foregrounded by all participating metropolitan structures, including the idea of efficiently and effectively combining different forms of transport (from rail transport to urban bicycles). It is worth noting that the organisation of public transport in Stuttgart MA inspired a search for new solutions in Warsaw MA.⁷ This exchange of knowledge between participating metropolitan institutions, which was a core motivator of the MECOG-CE project, is a prime example of the collaborative ethos and absence of competition that characterises inter-metropolitan relations in Central Europe.

An important sphere of activity that intersects with mobility is infrastructural planning and development. Czech metropolitan areas have taken advantage of the opportunities offered by the ITI mechanism to integrate these critical spheres. As a result, Brno has expanded its tram network and created a transfer centre, while Ostrava has modernised its tram and trolleybus networks and purchased electric and hydrogen-powered buses. Such efforts are a manifestation of the drive, which is evident across the participating metropolitan areas, to reduce damaging emissions, improve air quality, and ensure environmentally sustainable transport and other systems. In the metropolitan areas studied, it is also common for institutions to view mobility as a service in line with the ideas of MaaS (Mobility as a Service), while individual metropolitan institutions are preparing and implementing their own SUMP (Sustainable Urban Mobility Plans) according to EU guidelines (Rupprecht, 2019).

The last sphere of “Big 3” activities is spatial planning, which is a prerogative under the relevant laws for four of the participating metropolises. The role of metropolitan institutions in spatial planning is primarily related to the creation of strategic plans. In the case of Turin MA (as for the other 10 Italian metropolitan cities), the Metropolitan General Spatial Plan (PTGM) is consistent with European and national spatial planning assumptions, considering sustainable development goals. The PTGM defines the structure of the metropolitan city and sets criteria for potential spatial changes within it. In Stuttgart MA, metropolitan spatial planning involves the creation of 15-year plans, the most recent of which was produced in 2009 and centres on six issues: settlement development, development axes, central places, infrastructures, green belts, and green corridors. The GZM Metropolis focuses its activities on four issues:

⁷ In the second year of the MECOG-CE project, representatives of the Warsaw Metropolitan Association and the City of Warsaw, who were designing transport solutions for Warsaw MA, benefited and drew directly on the experience of Stuttgart MA and especially Verkehrs und Tarifverbund Stuttgart (VVS), which is responsible for the uniform ticketing system and the organisation of transport within the Stuttgart Region.

climate change adaptation to resilience, mobility and accessibility, spatial and social cohesion, metropolitanism and innovation.

Several commonalities can be observed in the provisions of the strategic documents of the participating metropolitan areas and in actual actions taken in the individual areas under study (including those where spatial planning is not a statutory prerogative). First, effective outcomes of spatial planning require the cooperation of actors from different levels of government, including state, regional, and local metropolitan institutions through to individual municipalities located in metropolitan areas. These actors frequently have divergent interests or points of view on particular planning or investment proposals, hence the need for inclusive dialogue, usually through participatory mechanisms, with non-governmental organisations and informal residents' groups. Second, the need to adapt to climate change is strongly prioritised by all the examined metropolitan areas, particularly in the context of spatial planning. Third, the issue of spatial planning, especially as it relates to the development of residential areas, is often closely linked with thinking about efficient public transport systems. This is well illustrated by the German metropolitan areas studied. In Berlin-Brandenburg MA and Stuttgart MA, areas demarcated for new residential and commercial development are located close to regional transport corridors. Metropolitan institutions in Berlin have devised a concept of eight development axes located along transport corridors, while a similar program is underway in Stuttgart, where the expansion of residential and service areas is also taking place along designated transport and mobility corridors so as to promote spatial cohesion and optimise transport connections. These are well-planned and coordinated measures involving multiple local municipalities. The absence of coordinating spatial planning yields chaotic spatial development marked by competition between municipalities, developers, and other locally-based investors. Such a situation takes place in the Warsaw MA. But even in that case, intensive residential development is underway near existing transport routes (cf. Porczek, 2023). However, it results more from market circumstances than planned ones.

Metropolitan institutions undertake activities in many areas other than the "Big 3". Several such spheres of activity and projects of relevance to the metropolisation process are worth mentioning. First, although energy policy is determined at the state level under EU direction, energy-related projects are, of course, also initiated and implemented by metropolitan authorities at the local level. Energy provision is a significant challenge for countries, regions, metropolises, and smaller cities against the backdrop of increasing energy needs, climate change mitigation, and the war in Ukraine. The Stuttgart MA, for instance, has a goal of climate neutrality by 2050 in line with the United Nations (UN) Paris Accord. To achieve this, investments in renewable solar and wind energy are being planned and locations are being identified for wind or solar farms. These

initiatives are, of course, closely linked with spatial planning and, according to the representatives of the metropolitan area, are explored using participatory mechanisms to facilitate consensus and mitigate potential conflicts between stakeholder groups. The energy strategy adopted by the GZM Metropolis, where the cities forming this metropolis jointly purchase energy supplies, is particularly worthy of note. Apart from the obvious financial benefits arising from economies of scale, this collective initiative clearly strengthens intra-metropolitan dialogue and collaboration among municipalities forming the GZM Metropolis.

While energy policy is mostly a centralised state responsibility, the opposite is the case for waste management activities, which are generally planned and implemented at local municipal levels. Interesting initiatives in this sphere are evident in several of the participating metropolitan areas. For instance, the Turin MA has established a Metropolitan Waste Observatory which cooperates with institutions and bodies operating in the waste sector, such as the municipalities of the metropolitan territory, the Basin Consortia, local waste management companies, the Chamber of Commerce, and various research and regulatory agencies. The Observatory performs monitoring and support functions with respect to the implementation of territorial waste planning. An interesting situation exists in the Stuttgart MA, where the VRS is responsible for problematic waste such as mineral by-products and contaminated excavated soil. In the Brno MA, by contrast, a state-of-the-art Brno Centre for Waste Recovery was built using the ITI mechanism. Both soft measures relating to waste management research and planning, as exemplified in the case of the Turin MA, and infrastructure investments, like those in the Brno MA, are thus pursued by metropolitan institutions in the sphere of waste management.

Water management is usually not the responsibility of metropolitan areas. For example, the Ostrava, Stuttgart, and Warsaw MAs are not heavily involved in water policy or planning, while isolated individual water-related projects are undertaken only in a few locations, such as in parts of the Berlin-Brandenburg and Upper Silesian MAs. The exception among the participating metropolitan areas is the Metropolitan City of Turin, where water management is a statutory competence. *It envisages the protection of surface and underground waters in the Metropolitan City of Turin territory by managing withdrawal concession and discharge authorisation practices. These practices are directly connected to planning activities for adequately using the resource and protecting river and lake territories.* The Turin MA's River and Lake Contracts project is carried out within this competence. Based on Law 125/2006, these agreements were introduced in Italy as voluntary territorial and place-based governance tools. They promote vertical and horizontal subsidiarity, interactive local development, the safety of the riverside and sustainability. The Turin example demonstrates well how metropolitan areas can successfully manage water

resources within their territory, albeit subject to the constraints of relevant parliamentary legislation.

Some metropolitan institutions under study actively engage with housing policy issues beyond just urban planning, although nowhere is this solely a metropolitan prerogative. One metropolitan-based vehicle for dialogue in this sphere of activity that stands out is the Municipal Neighborhood Forum (Kommunales Nachbarschaftsforum KNF e.V.) in the Berlin-Brandenburg MA. This forum, which includes 32 municipalities in Brandenburg, the city of Berlin itself, and 11 districts of the Berlin region, monitors and conducts research on the metropolitan housing market. These activities serve not only to gather intelligence and build knowledge about real estate trends and opportunities but also as a platform for dialogue between municipalities and other actors in the Berlin-Brandenburg MA.

In the sphere of education, the participating metropolitan institutions mainly implement soft measures, such as provision of technological equipment to educational institutions and capacity-building programs targeting groups and individuals in the education sector. Concrete examples include increasing the accessibility of educational institutions for residents (mainly suburban areas), including kindergartens (Brno MA); ensuring equal access to good quality education (Upper Silesian MA); expanding teachers' competencies (Warsaw MA); developing students' competencies, including their use of digital tools and awareness of potential threats posed in the digital world (Warsaw MA, Brno MA); building students' capacity to engage successfully with the labour market (Ostrava MA, Upper Silesian MA); improving the standard of school equipment or renovation of school buildings (Ostrava MA, Warsaw MA, and Upper Silesian MA); and lifelong education (Upper Silesian MA). In Polish and Czech metropolises, the ITI mechanism has been used for these activities. It should be noted that some metropolitan areas with statutory powers (Turin MA and Stuttgart MA) do not declare activities in the educational sphere. This is the prerogative of higher-level authorities.

The situation regarding engagement by municipal institutions in social policy activities is similar to education. Here again, Czech and Polish metropolitan areas use the ITI mechanism. *The Brno Metropolitan Area, via the ITI tool, co-funds strategic projects to improve the availability and quality of health and social services, promote labour market integration with a focus on particularly vulnerable groups, support activities and infrastructure for the elderly or coordinate social housing in the Brno MA.* In turn, Warsaw MA implemented projects related to the care of children up to three years of age. As far as measures related to social policy are concerned, the Turin MA provides a good example of projects undertaken to improve the quality of life of its inhabitants. Social policy is a residual competence for the Turin metropolitan area and

the metropolis appeals to EU programs and draws on these resources for its activities in this dimension. An example is the *SocialLab* project which benefits from Interreg funds. The goal of this project is to improve *the quality, sustainability and proximity of services to the local population [by] defining and experimenting with a community social assistance service focused on the well-being of the community and based on innovative practices*.

Metropolitan activities also focus on culture, heritage and metropolitan identity. The last of these three themes is particularly important as individual residents' bonds with the metropolitan area – which are, of course, cultivated constructs – positively influence their sense of belonging and shape the social and emotional ties that contribute towards building a metropolitan community (cf. Neuve-Église, 2019, p. 77). This in turn translates into various forms of civic participation and strengthens metropolitan governance processes. Metropolitan institutions thus engage various means of creating and reinforcing, or at least contributing to narratives that seek to create and reinforce, metropolitanism and a distinctive metropolitan culture, identity, and sense of belonging (Pagès, 2010).

Activities of the participating metropolitan structures related to promoting or supporting cultural initiatives are, for the most part, common among the participating metropolitan structures. By way of examples, the Berlin-Brandenburg MA co-finances the Prussian Palaces and Gardens Berlin-Brandenburg Foundation (Stiftung Preußische Schlösser und Gärten Berlin-Brandenburg), while the GZM Metropolis supports cultural events like *The Night of Theatres* and *The Industrial Heritage Path*. The Turin MA promotes cultural metropolitan initiatives, local events, and, more generally, the cultural heritage of its territory through patronage and concrete projects. Through its contribution to the *Food Districts* project, the Turin MA also recognises the role of culinary tradition in contributing meaningfully to the development of local cultural heritage. This latter project serves as an interesting example of how traditional values related to cuisine can be blended with a forward-thinking approach to shortening the food supply chain, fostering local producer groups, and boosting the local economy. In Czech metropolises, cultural activities mainly focus on co-financing heritage projects via the ITI mechanism. The Stuttgart MA takes a broader approach to culture. It established Culture Region Stuttgart, a forum that has 47 members, including 43 towns and municipalities, three clubs and associations, and the VRS. This forum plans and organises regional cultural projects and promotes existing cultural offerings in the region, and contributes to strengthening dialogue on cultural policy between local authorities, creative groups and the public.

Activities relating to territorial marketing and tourism are also commonly linked to the cultural sphere. Three of the metropolitan areas studied, GZM Metropolis, Stuttgart, and Turin, undertake a wide range of such activities. These are in line with its statutorily-defined tasks in the case of the GZM Metropolis,

or accord with intra-metropolitan arrangements for promotional activities in the cases of Stuttgart and Turin. Through their contributions to designing and implementing marketing strategies, these promotional activities aim to reinforce the attractiveness of the metropolitan area among residents and other internal stakeholders, as well as in the outside world more generally. It is noteworthy that intra-metropolitan tourism is strongly promoted and tends to target equally inhabitants of peripheral and core parts of metropolitan areas. In the Brno and Turin MAs, inhabitants are encouraged to explore and visit suburban areas, as is manifest in the example of its *Go from Brno* project. In the Stuttgart MA, one project currently being implemented encourages locals to reacquaint themselves with Stuttgart's city center through development of *new city sightseeing tours designed to attract tourists back to the city center on foot and by bike* (thus also embracing principles of environmental sustainability). Generally speaking, promotion of specific sections of particular metropolitan areas is based on diagnostic assessments and existing trends, and is also sometimes shaped by canvassing the needs and aspirations of local businesses and inhabitants.

In concluding this presentation of the research findings, it is worth highlighting the significant role of the networking activities undertaken by the institutions of the participating metropolitan areas. Most of them indicated their involvement in a variety networking initiatives. This is evidenced by their participation in the MECOG-CE project itself, as well as in other projects implemented under the auspices of EU programs and, in the case of the Brno MA, the World Bank. The Network of European Metropolitan Regions and Areas (METREX), to which all the surveyed metropolitan institutions belong, was also mentioned as an important partner in various activities.

Conclusion

Although the metropolitan areas and related institutions that participated in the study are by no means statistically representative, these seven areas are sufficiently diverse to permit some degree of generalisation of the research findings presented in this article. The metropolisation in Europe is especially evident in relation to what has been termed here as the metropolitan "Big 3", namely regional development, spatial planning, and transport. It is telling that precisely these three spheres of strategic activity were also identified as key drivers in a quantitative study of metropolitan areas in OECD countries a decade or so ago (Ahrend et al., 2014).⁸ These three spheres thus emerge as critical fields of

⁸ In this study, activities in the area of regional development were declared by 81% of the 263 metropolitan areas surveyed, transport by 78%, and urban planning by 67%. Further areas

activity for metropolitan institutions regardless of the scale, methodology, and geographic focus of the study.

The implementation of activities in these aspects varies across individual metropolitan areas. This results, on the one hand, from local economic, social, and spatial conditions but, on the other hand, as research has shown, from how metropolitan institutions operate and what forms of dialogue dominate within them. In metropolitan areas, where structures are strongly institutionalised and have statutory legitimacy – particularly in Stuttgart, with its powerful Stuttgart Region Association, but also in Turin and other Italian metropolitan cities operating under the Law n. 56/2014 (cf. e.g. D’Orazio and Prezioso, 2022) – hard dialogue spaces prevail. These are based on formally defined prerogatives of metropolitan institutions. Such a situation does not imply the absence of soft dialogue spaces, but rather that they are most often developed through established participatory mechanisms relating, for example, to public consultations on specific metropolitan activities or projects. Conversely, in metropolitan areas without a statutory framework, as in Czechia and Poland (with the exception of GZM Metropolis), soft dialogue spaces play a key role in implementing activities. Among the metropolitan areas studied, Stuttgart MA represents one end of the spectrum, with a high level of institutional legitimacy, while the Czech metropolitan areas and Warsaw MA lie at the other, with activities based on agreements between various institutional actors operating in metropolitan areas. Different forms of metropolitan structures are typical across Europe, where no single model of organising metropolitan areas exists (cf. Tomàs, 2015; Gerőházi and Tosics, 2018). However, the lack of a standard model of functioning does not diminish the role of these structures in contemporary metropolisation process. On the contrary, metropolitan structures remain important actors in this process.

The findings show that, beyond planning and strategic activities, metropolitan institutions direct their projects and interventions very much towards improving the quality of life of the inhabitants of the metropolitan areas they serve. In addition to initiatives related to “the Big 3,” concerted attention is also paid to improvements in education, healthcare and culture. Engagement in activities covering a wide range of domains is a hallmark of European metropolitan structures.

Among the metropolitan areas that participated in this study, it is apparent that networking by metropolises and their associated institutions has assumed great importance. In the context of Central Europe (or even in the broader scale of the European Union), characterised as it is by close geographic proximity and complex layers of administrative ties, obligations and benefits, institutional

of activity, such as waste collection and water supply, were indicated by 35% of the metropolitan areas (Ahrend et. al., 2014, pp. 12–13).

networking on a continental scale is sometimes a requirement and, if not, is anyway regarded as highly advantageous in terms of cooperation and knowledge exchange. Activities based on networking partnerships are often motivated by EU programs and directives, with projects implemented via Interreg and ITI mechanisms serving as prominent examples. The centrality of institutions in metropolisation processes, combined with the strong emphasis on continental (rather than global) institutional networking and collaboration, has evidenced a clear shift in emphasis in the triad of globalisation-innovation-competitiveness that is often used to model metropolitan development. At least in Central Europe, globalisation is currently not a primary driving force of metropolisation, particularly since the COVID-19 pandemic and the outbreak of full-scale war in Ukraine. Instead, access to endogenous resources and regional alliances are much more influential drivers of metropolisation processes than global trade and cross-continental alliances. The strong shift towards regionalism and localisation is very clearly manifested in the thinking and actions of Central European metropolitan institutions and is perhaps best evident in their approach to economic development. The prevailing trend in these institutions is to emphasise endogeneity by prioritising use of local resources for the development of local forms of production and services. This applies, for example, to food production and the many projects aimed at shortening and localising food supply chains. The second element of the triad – competitiveness – has also been diluted in favor of cooperation and collaboration. These values, at least in Central European metropolises, are at the heart of much metropolitan activity, both within metropolises themselves and in inter-metropolitan relations. This emphasis on collaboration is another striking feature of contemporary metropolisation in the region and weakens the salience of competitiveness as the driving force assumed in the triadic model of metropolisation development.

While globalisation and competitiveness are clearly no longer primary drivers of metropolisation in Central Europe, the last element of the triad – innovation – has not lost its resonance and significance. Indeed, the climate crisis, the COVID pandemic, and the multitude of other challenges facing the modern world are spurring innovation at a pace rarely witnessed in human history. Although the classic categories of innovation identified years ago by Schumpeter (1960) still apply, innovations aimed at sourcing new forms of energy are now of paramount importance for global survival. Globally, the view of innovation is also broadening away from a narrow preoccupation with scientific and technological advancement to encompass efforts to seek solutions to contemporary social challenges and improve the living circumstances of the world's populations. In the European context, this has translated into concerted attempts by metropolitan institutions to identify and generate innovations that improve the quality of

life of metropolitan residents in sustainable ways (cf. Bierwiazzonek and Pyka, 2023; Zemke, 2023).

Whether in the sphere of economic development, social innovation, or another domain of activity, discernible in all of this is the critical role of cross-sectoral cooperation. This trend, and the emphasis on enriching it through inclusive participation by less obvious or powerful stakeholders, is strongly apparent in metropolitan institutions' management of all seven metropolitan areas participating in the study. These institutions are very much concerned with strengthening institutional cooperation based on a quadruple helix model that embraces actors from the public and private sectors (including academia and research institutions), the NGO sector, and metropolitan inhabitants and others who use or are invested in metropolitan spaces (Arnkil et al., 2010; Bień et al., 2020). Activities reflecting this quadruple helix model are present in many of the metropolitan projects documented in this study, while the application of inclusive, participatory approaches in most spheres of activity appears to have become a matter of course. Due to the diverse models of shaping metropolitan structures and types of metropolitan governance (cf. Tomàs, 2016), it is still worthwhile to explore how cooperation forms based on the quadruple helix are developing in practice and what forms of metropolitan dialogue they entail. This represents a promising direction for further research on the process of metropolisation, conducted from multiple perspectives – not only the institutional one, as in the MECOG-CE project.

Aknowledgements

I would like to thank Zuzanna Neuve-Église, Robert Pyka, and Małgorzata Suchacka from the Institute of Sociology at the University of Silesia in Katowice, who are involved in the implementation of the MECOG-CE project, for their valuable comments on the first version of this article's manuscript.

I also extend my thanks to the representatives of the metropolitan institutions participating in the MECOG-CE project for their active involvement in completing the "Matrix for Identification and Analysis of Tools and Best Practices Enhancing Metropolitan Cooperation," as well as for sharing extensive and valuable information.

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