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City-regions in Europe

The potentials and the realities

Focusing on the recently fashionable 'city-region' (metropolitan area) issue, this article explores the potential contribution of city-regions to the sustainability and competitiveness of urban areas. Two very different sources of information are taken into account: the URBACT-1 project METROGOV, which focuses on exploring administrative set-ups and territorial policies within eight European metropolitan areas (Birmingham, Budapest, Cologne, Frankfurt, Glasgow, Lille, Malmö, Milan), and the ESPON 1.4.3 analysis of urban functions for metropolitan areas, which differentiates between morphological and functional urban areas. The combination of these sources allows comparison of administratively/politically dominated 'actions' and geographic-economic 'realities' for the eight case study urban areas. On this basis the article explores the large differences among EU countries (and regions) regarding city-region level cooperation. The paper first discusses the general challenges for city-regions. It then summarises the results of the METROGOV project and confronts these with ESPON's morphological approach. This is followed by analysis of different functions and cooperation at the different city-region levels.

Urban areas and city-regions

The expansion of European urban areas accelerated in the twentieth century, becoming, over the last 30–40 years, a Europe-wide issue. Urban sprawl has led to larger and larger catchments of cities within their surrounding areas. This has created major problems for cities, as they lose an important part of their economic assets (retail and leisure in particular) and even resident population to neighbouring municipalities. The surrounding smaller municipalities gain substantial revenues but also have to face the problems caused by rapid growth. In addition, the massive increase in car traffic hits the whole urban area with all its negative consequences.

Urban Europe today is characterised by large, functionally unified urban areas, which lack democratic accountability because political structures have not adapted to this evolution. Even in those countries where the administrative and political systems do not yet recognise it, city-regions are an economic and social reality.

The double challenge for urban areas

European cities face external challenges and internal changes in their recent development, which the cities cannot address in isolation. The external challenges are those of globalisation, the growing role of international trade, and large multi-national

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economic players, which all require greater economic performance of cities. Collaboration with surrounding areas is one of the important factors which provide enough strengths and economies of scale for cities to perform well. The internal challenges take the form of suburbanisation and urban sprawl, causing growing environmental and social discrepancies within the urban areas around some large cities and, in other cities, parallel growth of the inner and outer areas. The handling of the internal territorial restructuring also requires collaboration with the surrounding areas.

There is a long history of national attempts to modify administrative structures in order to respond better to these challenges. In the 1960s and 1970s there were many attempts by central governments to create metropolitan-wide administrative systems, either through mergers of municipalities or through the establishment of a new government level (OECD, 2000, 6). The 1980s and 1990s, however, brought a retreat from these efforts. With the exception of the French *communautés urbaines*, most of the earlier established structures were dissolved (see for example the abolition of metropolitan councils in the UK). New initiatives usually proved to be unsuccessful, as, for example, with the defeat of the proposal to create city-provinces in the Netherlands (see Kreukels, 2000, 474). 'Attacks' on the metropolitan level came both from above (political considerations) and from below (distrust from the population).

Since the late 1990s the idea of metropolitan governance has enjoyed a revival. The OECD – one of the international think-tanks supporting the idea – lists Bologna, Toronto, Mexico City and London as positive examples of area-wide experiments for strategic planning and the establishment of structures with some legal capacity and authority (OECD, 2000, 6). The new attempts differ from the earlier models in putting more emphasis on governance, network-like structures and flexibility.

Inter-communal cooperation around large cities requires special attention in the European context, as countries are very different in their political, institutional, historical and cultural circumstances and set-ups. For example, in 1966 the French law (parliamentary act) created the level of *communauté urbaine*, prescribing the compulsory cooperation of communities around some large cities (Lille, Bordeaux, Strasbourg, Lyon, Nantes). This looks like an attempt to create city-regions – however, as municipalities in France are much smaller than in most other countries of Europe, the *communauté urbaines* merely replicated the size of 'normal' cities. Elsewhere in Europe, where municipalities are larger, for example in Scandinavia, similar compulsory cooperation around large cities would mean a genuine step towards city-regions.

It is important to distinguish the city-region issue from regionalisation. The establishment of regions is very important, especially in centralised countries such as the UK or Ireland. One of the main supporters of regionalisation is the European Union, supporting their increased importance relative to that of nation-states. Some decades ago the EU changed its cohesion policy from the national to the regional level, creating the system of NUTS (Nomenclature of Territorial Units for Statistics) 1 and 2 regions

as the level of financial allocation within the Structural Funds. Consequently, in the last decade or so, the role of regions has grown. However, these regions are in most cases larger than the functional urban areas around large cities, so the establishment of NUTS 1 and 2 regions does not usually solve the problem of the absence of city-region level governance. Moreover, the politically strong NUTS 1 and 2 regions may seek to block the emergence of functional metropolitan regions, perceiving them as potential competitors for scarce resources.

Tasks for city-regions

Regarding the content of city-region cooperation, there are different tasks to be dealt with. On the one hand, there are *positive* issues, for example, improving competitiveness and strategic planning, in the case of which all partners might win if the collaboration works. On the other hand, there are *regulatory* tasks in which the interests of settlements might differ and it can become a zero-sum game, at least in the short run (for example waste disposal). The positive issues are mainly economic; the regulatory issues mainly social and environmental. In general the positive economic issues are easier to build cooperation around than the regulatory ones.

This distinction between 'positive' and 'regulatory' tasks is similar to Patsy Healey's distinction between place-making and regulatory planning in her 1997 book on collaborative planning (Healey, 1997). The novelty is in the application of this concept to the case of city-regions, as in other works (see e.g. Heinz, 2000, 540) the strengths of the city-region cooperation are measured by the number of tasks that are controlled by the city-region level, regardless of the type of task.

The positive issues: city-regions and competitiveness. There is a long-lasting debate about 'location competitiveness', as some economists doubt that the notion of economic competitiveness can be applied to territorial units. However, it seems to be increasingly acknowledged that the 'competitiveness of cities' makes sense and that this should refer to the whole functional area, instead of narrowly only to the city itself (Tosics, 2005b, 79).

A growing number of studies indicate the critical success factors of competitiveness, all of which draw upon this more inclusive approach. Two examples are Begg's (2002) 'urban competitiveness maze' and the 'Parkinson principles' (Parkinson, 2004). Both emphasise employment, diversity, quality of life, innovation, skills, strategic capacity, and connectivity as key factors. While these give an important indication of the required direction of travel cities need to embark on, others (e.g. Jones et al., 2006) indicate that more specific ambitions need a greater focus. For example, cities need to focus on distinctiveness as a means of attracting knowledge workers and businesses; they need a vibrant university that is closely integrated with the planning around the knowledge economy as well as the more generic goals such as improving skills and

connectivity. Hickman and Hall (2005) have been even more specific in prioritising the aspects of the urban environment central to boosting competitiveness: 'Integrated transport planning and urban design are […] critical to the successful functioning (and continued competitiveness) of our urban areas' (2005, 91).

It is clear that cities are the drivers of regional change – 'the most competitive regions [in Europe] also had the most competitive cities – we found no examples of successful regions which had unsuccessful cities at their core' (Parkinson, 2004, 53). While regions are seen as important, there is a growing consensus that they are too large in terms of area to tackle economic competitiveness, while the administrative city is too small. Rather the city-region is seen as providing the right critical mass and expertise in order to improve economic performance.

The OECD has noted a paradigm shift in urban policy from a 'remedial' or passive approach towards urban management to a proactive approach where more dynamic policies have been put in place to improve competitiveness (Kim, 2006). Cities are beginning to strengthen cluster connections, mobilise innovative capacity and human capital; and invest in their attractiveness and quality of life with the aim of improving economic performance – although there may still be a long way to go in terms of shaking off negative images and addressing social exclusion and high unemployment (Jones et al., 2006).

City-regions and the regulatory agenda. Besides striving for more competitiveness, successful city-regions also need to address the challenges of sustainable development. According to the recently adopted European Commission document *Thematic Strategy on the Urban Environment* (EC, 2006, 3),

> Most cities are confronted with a common core set of environmental problems such as poor air quality, high levels of traffic and congestion, high levels of ambient noise, poor-quality built environment, derelict land, greenhouse gas emissions, urban sprawl, generation of waste and waste-water. The causes of the problems include changes in lifestyle (growing dependence on the private car, increase in one-person households, increasing resource use per capita) and demographic changes, which have to be taken into account in developing solutions.
>
> […] the most successful local authorities use integrated approaches to manage the urban environment by adopting long-term and strategic action plans, in which links between different policies and obligations, including at different administrative levels, are analysed in detail […] Obligations imposed at local, regional, national or European level (e.g. land-use, noise, air quality) can be more effectively implemented at the local level when integrated into a local strategic management framework.

From the city-region perspective, there are two important statements in the above quotation: as well as policies, obligations are also needed; and not only at the city

level, but also at higher administrative levels. These should include the city-region level, which in many cases provides the most appropriate level at which to develop a strategic response to problems such as waste water, air pollution and carbon emissions caused by transport, etc.

Addressing the two agendas. City-regions basically need to fulfil both agendas for lasting success. Circumstances for this are very different across countries. While the establishment of competitiveness agreements in most countries depends on the municipalities (and other stakeholders) of the city-regions, the conditions for the regulatory agenda are very different, ranging from total independence of local municipalities to compulsory, higher level, coordinated organisation of some public services.

Cities face particular difficulties in establishing regulatory agreements in those countries where decentralisation and devolution of power are extensive and local governments have become very independent. When combined with the lack of a culture of cooperation, almost hopeless situations might develop from the point of view of city-region cooperation – as can be seen in some of the new east-central European member states of the European Union (Tosics, 2005a).

Defining city-regions in economic, social and cultural terms

Though city-regions are an economic and social reality, it may be difficult to define them precisely in physical or political terms. Addressing the question of how city-regions might be defined, a recent report for the UK's Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (Marvin et al., 2006) quoted the following potential definitions:

- 'We have defined "city-region" to refer to a strategic and political level of administration and policy-making, extending beyond the administrative boundaries of single urban local government authorities to include urban and/or semi-urban hinterlands' (Tewdwr-Jones and McNeill, 2000, 131).
- 'The City-Region transcends the local level (as the basic administrative unit) and also goes beyond the city level. In a spatial sense, the City-Region is very much like a conurbation or metropolitan area. Most importantly, the City-Region is far more of a complex system than a monolithic entity. The evolving City-Region constitutes a political and economic power field, with a variety of cultures and societies' (Ache, 2000, 704–705).
- 'The concept of [the] City-Region covers not only the commuting hinterland of the city but also the whole area that is economically, socially and culturally dominated by the city' (Davoudi, 2003, 986).
- 'The concept of the City-Region can be understood as a functionally inter-related geographical area comprising a central, or Core City, as part of a network of centres and rural hinterlands' (ODPM, 2005).

- 'From a geographic point of view, global City-Regions constitute dense polarised masses of capital, labour and social life that are bound up in intricate ways in intensifying and far-flung extra-national relationships. As such, they represent an outgrowth of large metropolitan areas – or contiguous sets of metropolitan areas – together with surrounding hinterlands of variable extent which may themselves be sites of scattered urban settlements' (Scott, 2001, 814).

While the literature shows a wide variety of views of what a city-region is, some common strands emerge. City-regions exist where the city's economic, social and cultural footprint exceeds that of its administrative boundary. They are fluid and are likely to keep growing, having 'fuzzy edges' at their extremities. The size of the city-region will be issue dependent: for example, the economic footprint might be bigger than the social footprint. Finally, they are complex systems with a plethora of internal and external relationships.

There is also a debate surrounding nomenclature: different terms have different implications, and carry different political sensitivities, in the various EU member states. Examples of terminology (other than 'city-region') include 'functional urban zone/area', 'metropolitan area' and 'larger urban zone'. A new study on the topic (van den Berg et al., 2007) uses the term 'metropolitan region'. There are also those terms that are specific to particular member states: for example, the *communauté urbaine* (and, more recently, the *aire métropolitaine* – metropolitan area) in France. As such, it is important to note that while the term 'city-region' is used in this article, it is not necessarily appropriate in every context.

Cities working with their surrounding authorities as a city-region need to support their partnerships with a robust evidence base. However, understanding the extent of the city-region is a complex issue and requires a multidisciplinary overview of economic, social, cultural and historical geographies; further, the size of the city-region boundary is likely to fluctuate depending on which issue is being considered (Parr, 2005). The process might also be fraught with political tensions and sensitivities whether it is top-down (e.g. a designation from central government) or bottom-up and decided on the basis of empirical evidence (Balducci et al., 2004).

Although recent literature shows that the labour market catchment (measured through travel-to-work) is the most widely used method of definition, a range of data might be used in defining city-regions. According to Marvin et al. (2006), parameters for definition may be grouped as follows:

- Labour-market definitions. Predominantly focused on TTW.
- Economic activity-based definitions. Access to labour markets is key for the private sector, but other factors might also be important (e.g. the supply chain).
- Housing-market definitions. 'City-regions can [...] be defined as those areas in which households search for residential locations' (Marvin et al., 2006, 4).

- Service-district definitions. For example retail catchments, access to hospitals, theatres, international airports etc.
- Administrative definitions.

However, data are not always readily available, or of the right quality, so developing an evidence base at the city-region level may have significant resource implications.

According to ESPON 1.1.1, in the wider Europe, there are some 120 metropolitan areas with 500,000 or more population in contiguous urban areas. They contain 280 million (60 per cent) of the 470 million population of the European Union. ESPON has identified 1595 Functional Urban Areas (FUAs) with over 50,000 population, of which 64 Metropolitan Growth Areas (MEGAs) seem to be the most important. The latter consist of the following: 2 global nodes (Paris and London), 13 European engines (such as Munich and Stuttgart), 10 strong MEGAs (such as Stockholm and Gothenburg), 23 potential MEGAs (such as Lyon and Bratislava), 16 weak MEGAs (such as Naples and Valetta).

The most recent ESPON 1.4.3 study brought an important methodological innovation over the 'classic' ESPON 1.1.1 study, which established for the first time the map of European FUAs. The new study takes no account of administrative boundaries at either settlement, regional or national level. From a city-region perspective especially the definitions of the Morphological Urban Areas (MUA, containing the densely populated city core and the contiguous urban landscape) and Functional Urban Areas (FUA, the 'labour basin' of the Morphological Urban Area) are important.

By the exclusion of the administrative criteria and the novelty of using a homogeneous research method for all countries, the ESPON 1.4.3 study showed the number and importance of cross-border MEGAs, and called attention to the importance of the core within the city-region: 'with identical populations, it clearly appears that FUAs which have better opportunities are those having a strong MUA in their centre, especially if the latter has some good quality historical and cultural heritage. This is an important element in the new forms of cross-city competitiveness' (ESPON 1.4.3, 7).

City-region cooperation in European Metropolitan Areas

The following analysis is based on both METROGOV[1] – an URBACT-1 project surveying the administrative set-ups and territorial policies within eight European metropolitan areas – and the ESPON 1.4.3 analysis of urban functions for all EU metropolitan areas, exploring the morphological and functional urban areas around cities.

[1] METROGOV was an URBACT project led by Birmingham City Council, with expert input from Iván Tosics, Metropolitan Research Institute. The final report of the METROGOV project (Homan et al., 2007) inspired this article.

City-region relationships in the METROGOV cities

The eight METROGOV cities are situated in seven countries which represent all the different types of national regional systems of Europe:

- Federal countries (German cities: Cologne, Frankfurt; partly Belgian city-region around Lille);
- Regionalised countries (Italian city: Milan; UK city: Glasgow);
- Decentralised countries (Swedish city: Malmö);
- Unitary countries (UK city: Birmingham; French city: Lille; Hungarian city: Budapest).[2]

The different national systems in Europe provide different regional contexts within which city-regions might be discussed. The political and administrative strength of regions is greatest in the federal states and reduces in the other types, with the weakest examples being in the unitary countries.

The METROGOV project concentrated on city-regions around larger cities, where the core city's economic, social and cultural footprints substantially exceed those of its administrative boundary. From European competitiveness and sustainable development perspectives the most important opportunities and the most severe problems arise around large cities, in which the majority of Europe's population lives. While the cases of monocentric city-regions dominate, some of the METROGOV cities (Lille and to some extent Cologne, Frankfurt and Malmö) are parts of polycentric regions, and their special problems and opportunities are also discussed. Most urban areas remain within the borders of the country, except for Lille (and to a lesser extent Malmö and Frankfurt), which allows us to analyse special problems within cross-border regions.

Comparative data on the METROGOV cities (Homan et al., 2007, 32) show that there is a clear difference between the cities regarding their economic strengths, ranging from rich German cities through 'average' Swedish, French and Italian cities and slightly below-average British cities to the relatively poor Hungarian capital.

Defining city-regions

There are numerous ways in which city-regions may be defined and their functional reach assessed. This functional reach may also vary according to the issue – for example, the size of the 'commuting city-region' might be different from that of the 'cultural city-region'. In some cases, two neighbouring city-regions can even overlap with each

2   It is difficult to classify the UK as belonging to one category. As a whole, the UK can be considered as a regionalised country, while Scotland and England (as parts of the UK) can be considered in themselves as unitary countries.

other. A political decision has to be made as to which criteria will be used to designate a city-region partnership and how to accommodate the administrations at the 'fuzzy edges' of this area. This process can lead to tensions – both with surrounding authorities, who may feel they have been left out of a partnership, and with authorities who are included but perhaps do not see the city-region as their priority partnership.

The issue of definition is not as straightforward as it might first appear. It can be seen as easy for observers outside the political process to draw boundaries and demarcate the spatial extent of city-regions, but political realities within the city-regions themselves are often the main drivers. Whatever the socio-economic evidence shows, historical alliances often end up driving the reality of partnerships on the ground. This may result in confusion and hostility from those outside the partnership who cannot understand why a particular combination of partners has become involved.

Establishing tight definitions of the city-region, and subsequently building a formal partnership around this, might also cause problems when growth in the functional urban area occurs. This has been demonstrated in France, where the *communauté urbaine* no longer represents the physical (economic) reality, and a new layer of governance arrangements have now been put in place – the *aires métropolitaines*, which are informal and based on voluntary political arrangements. However, this might subsequently result in a further level of administration and governance structure. The need for flexibility is one reason why no formal metropolitan institution has been set up in Malmö.

A further problem with definition is that the economic reality may indicate the need for only a partial inclusion of an administration surrounding the core city, particularly if that authority covers a large area or is predominantly rural with one or two key towns with strong commuting flows. This can be a particular problem in Scandinavian countries and the UK where the local authority areas are larger than in countries such as France or Italy. There are advantages and disadvantages in both situations. While in France the definition may be made easier, the number of partners can make decision-making harder.

In the course of the METROGOV project the need to deal with two different city-region definitions for the same urban area became evident: the *narrow* definition of the city's commuting hinterland might be very different from the city's *wider* economic, social and cultural footprint. This differentiation between the narrower and broader definitions of city-regions will lead later to the conclusion that these may require different public interventions.

Existing multi-level governance structures and the city-region

The establishment of a 'city-region' tier of governance is highly complex because of the number and range of organisations involved. As with definition, it is often the case that historical working arrangements influence the present shape of any new partner-

Table 1 Size of city-regions and administrative regions compared to size of core city in the eight METROGOV cities

City	City population (thousands)	Ratio relative to city population		
		Narrow city-region area	Broad city-region area	Next administrative level
Cologne	986	3.0	8.1	18.3
Frankfurt	647	3.4–5.9	8.2	9.4
Birmingham	977	2.8	3.6	5.4
Glasgow	580	3.0	5.2	8.6
Milan	1,260	2.9	4.8	7.2
Malmö	270	2.2	3.6–13.3	4.3
Lille	227	6.2	15.9	17.6
Lille*	1,090	1.7	3.3	3.6
Budapest	1,700	1.4	2.4	1.7

*Taking the Communauté Urbaine as the city

The definitions for the narrow city-region (functional urban area) and the broad city-region (area of economic influence) were developed for each city in the course of the METROGOV work and can be found in the final report of METROGOV (Homan et al., 2007).

ships. Where historical alliances exist, sub-regional partnerships that involve one or two city-region partners may also extend beyond the city-region, making geographically bounded decision-making difficult.

It is also important that any new level in multi-level governance structures adds value to existing arrangements. Careful dialogue and planning is necessary in order to find a 'niche' for the city-region, particularly where there is a call for devolution of policy-making downwards – that is, where partners are calling for new areas of responsibility that are currently the remit of regional or national organisations.

Furthermore, appropriate partnership and governance arrangements need to be put in place to ensure that effective communication takes place with the spheres above and below that of the city-region, as well as to ensure as inclusive an approach as possible.

However challenging the development of a city-region approach might be, it is clear from the METROGOV case studies that a city-region partnership is a highly valued and necessary mechanism for addressing particular issues where the region is seen as too big, and the local authority area as too small, for effective delivery.

In the course of the METROGOV project representatives of all the eight cities worked out the potential territorial delimitation(s) of the narrow and of the broad version of their city region areas (see Homan et al., 2007, 36–37). Table 1 shows the population size ratios of the different city-region levels and their core cities.

Five of the METROGOV cities (Cologne, Frankfurt, Birmingham, Glasgow, Milan) show a similar picture: the narrow city-region (functional urban area) has 3–3.5 times the population of the core city, while the wide city-region (area of economic influence) has 4–8 times the population. The population of the wide definition of the city-region usually remains below the size of the next (regional) administrative level.

The exceptional values of Lille and Malmö can be explained by cross-border linkages and by the polycentric character of their areas, and those of Budapest by the fact that the city is itself very large compared to the country as a whole – 17 per cent of Hungarians live in the capital city.

In all METROGOV cities, city-regions are the newest level of governance that needs to 'slot into' often already overcrowded structures. In all cases, there are at least four existing levels: the city, the region, the nation state and Europe, all of which have different policies and strategies that need aligning with a city-region approach. Further, as discussed above, it can be difficult to replace existing structures, which may require changes to legislation. Careful thought needs to be given as to how the city-region is incorporated without duplicating strategies elsewhere and upsetting a delicate political balance.

It is also important to consider other partnerships that may exist across some or all of the city-region. Some of these partnerships may just include one of the city-region authorities and a number of other administrations, private and community sector organisations outside the 'boundary'. Depending on the strategic priorities of the city-region, serious consideration may need to be given as to how some of these partnerships become integrated into realising city-region aims and objectives.

City-region definitions and administrative arrangements compared with geographic and economic realities

Table 2 compares the geographic-economic approach of the ESPON 1.4.3 study with the recent METROGOV project, which focuses on administrative arrangements and territorial policies. As can be seen, there are large differences between the cities regarding the size of the morphological urban area (MUA) compared to the administratively defined core city. This relationship shows two basic patterns. In the 'normal' case the MUA is only slightly larger than the administrative city and the FUA is close to the narrow definition of city-region (e.g. Cologne, Malmö, Lille and Budapest). In the 'shifted' case, the MUA is much larger than the administrative city, being close to the narrow definition of city-region, and the FUA is close to the larger economic area (e.g. Birmingham, Milan and Frankfurt).

The larger this difference, the more pressing is the need for the city to gain some type of influence over the continuous urban area around it. According to the data this is the case with the cities of Milan, Birmingham, Frankfurt and Glasgow, where

Table 2 Existing governance arrangements and potential city-region areas in the eight METROGOV cities (ratios)

City (municipality)	City population (thousands)	Morphologic urban area MUA (ESPON)	Potential narrow city-region	Functional urban area FUA (ESPON)	Broader economic area	NUTS 3 proxy	Next existing administrative level
		Ratio relative to city population					
Cologne	986	1.4	3.0	3.1	8.1	2.7	18.3
Frankfurt	647	2.3	3.4	6.3	8.2	6.5	9.4
Birmingham	977	2.4	2.8	3.8	3.6	3.2	5.4
Glasgow	580	2.1	3.0	2.4	5.2	2.6	8.6
Milan	1260	2.9	2.9	4.7	4.8	5.9	7.2
Malmö	270	1.0	2.2	2.5	3.6	3.1	4.3
Lille*	1090	0.9	1.7	2.9	3.3	3.2	3.6
Budapest	1700	1.3	1.4	1.5	2.4	1.7	1.7

*Taking the Communauté Urbaine as the city

the continuous urban area has more than twice the population of the administrative territory of the city.

The ratio between the population size of the functional urban area and the administratively defined core city can be considered as a second type of 'push-factor' for city-region initiatives. This ratio is especially large in the case of Frankfurt and Milan. It is large for Birmingham and Cologne, a little less so for Lille, Malmö and Glasgow, and relatively small for Budapest.

Finally, the third type of 'push-factor' for city-region initiatives is the ratio between the population size of the larger economic area and that of the administratively defined core. This ratio is especially large for Cologne, Frankfurt, Glasgow, and Milan. It is large for Birmingham, Malmö and Lille, while relatively moderate for Budapest.

These ratios describe different aspects of the territorial structure around the city. Provided that the ESPON definition of the morphological urban area (densely populated city core and contiguous urban landscape around, determined by settlement level density figures and satellite images) is correct, the large ratio of this area compared to the administrative city sheds light on the potential problem of administrative city borders. In the case of Milan, Birmingham and Frankfurt the possibilities of amalgamation of the surrounding area should be explored, as the continuous urban area seems to be too large compared to the size of the administratively defined city. If the extension of the city border through the very direct and strong method of amalgamation is not feasible (which is likely be the case in most European cities nowadays), the creation of strong city-region relationships, also with potential use for

joint public services and regulatory tools, should be considered as a more politically acceptable solution.

Another aspect of the problem is the existence of the next administrative level above the city (usually the region). The larger the ratio between this level and the city, the less the region is able to take over the functions of an eventual city-region. In this regard Cologne, Frankfurt, Glasgow, Milan and Birmingham are cities whose surrounding regions are far too large to be able to exercise a city-region role. The other extreme is Budapest, where the regional level is very close in size to the city-region. (There is also the entirely separate, albeit very important, question of how 'strong' the administrative region is, whether it would be able to exert the control functions considered to be necessary at the city-region level.)

The analysis of the geographic-economic 'realities' of the urban areas has shed light on the fact that from this point of view the city-region issue, as potential provider of the needed administrative-political framework, is most pressing for the German, British and Italian (METROGOV) cities and is least important for Budapest. Lille and Malmö have to be considered as special cases, since both are part of cross-border, multi-nodal, polycentric regions.

Positive and regulatory functions and enhanced cooperation in city-regions

As already discussed, in the city-regions in general the 'positive' issues are easier to build cooperation around than the 'regulatory' ones. The latter can be illustrated through the example of sustainable urban development in large urban areas, which is only possible on the basis of overarching public policies, related to different aspects of urban development, either directly through sectoral policies (waste, water, etc.) or indirectly through financial equalisation and taxation (Tosics, 2004, 71). Achieving area-wide agreements on a joint waste-treatment policy or on tax equalisation are among the most difficult and highly politicised issues, much more difficult than signing agreements on joint future policies towards economic competitiveness. While positive functions, such as competitiveness, are most often a 'win-win' agenda (advantageous or satisfactory to all parties involved),[3] regulatory policies are usually not. To achieve such regulatory agreements top-down power is needed, or very wise, forward-looking behaviour on the part of municipalities, some of which have to bear short-term burdens in order to gain long-term advantages.

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3   This is, of course, an over-simplified statement in order to show the difference between the two types of function. In reality, economic development and transport are not purely win-win – there are winners and losers depending on who gets the investment in new infrastructure, jobs, etc.

Analysis of city-region functions

In order to obtain a more systematic overview of capacities at the city-region level, three different functions (strategic planning, public transport and waste disposal) were selected and METROGOV cities were compared regarding the extent to which these functions are performed in their city-region areas.

Strategic planning is considered to be one of the most important win-win functions, as without a basic agreement on the present position and future direction of development no area can systematically cooperate and become competitive. On the other hand, strategic plans usually mean only loose agreements on future actions without too much constraint on present decision-making at the municipal level.

Public transport has win-win elements, as a well-developed public transport system is an important 'location factor', ensuring the necessary links for local residents throughout the whole area to places of work, commerce, culture, etc. On the other hand, public transport also has regulatory elements – an effective transport system requires formalised structure because of financing (and the huge coordination tasks between different providers) and close cooperation of the municipalities, with the taking over of many binding elements.

Waste disposal is clearly a regulatory function, as area-wide agreement on waste disposal requires both strong leadership at the area level, and acceptance of the rules and regulations by the municipalities. In order to join such an area the municipality has to accept either the establishment of an unwanted facility (incinerator, landfill) on its territory or the obligation to pay those other municipalities that take on these functions. (It is only in Germany that waste disposal facilities are not so unwanted, because waste burning and consequent energy production is a very profitable business for private and public bodies. Thus, it is more a problem of overcapacity than one of obligations.)

For each of the three functions the following questions were asked of the METROGOV cities. Is the cooperation in the given function in an area smaller, the same size as or larger than the (narrower definition of) the city-region? Can cooperation in this function become a driving force for city-region relationships? What needs to be done (and by whom?) to fulfil this role?

Strategic planning, public transport and waste disposal at the city-region level

This section summarises the experiences of the METROGOV cities with regard to the selected functions.

Strategic planning is understood very differently across the cities, reflecting the fact that

there is no widely accepted definition and methodology for this type of planning. While each of the cities has some type of future-oriented strategic plan, this is rarely the case at city-region level, as this would need some type of formalised collaboration between the municipalities of the city region area (such a plan must be elaborated, discussed and formally approved by some organisation). On the other hand, territorial development plans usually exist on the higher, regional level. In fact, in many cases the national legal regulation of planning excludes the possibility of having overall strategic or structural plans for any territorial unit between the well-defined and formalised regional and local level.

Under such circumstances mainly sectoral plans of strategic importance for some sectors (economy, environment, etc.) might exist at the city-region level. In addition, a broad range of non-binding, loose and voluntary strategic documents can be identified, depending on the character of city-region cooperation, based on bottom-up initiatives by municipalities. Thus, surprisingly, strategic planning, which was considered to be the 'easiest' of the three functions under investigation, is performed in a serious, over-arching manner only in a very few city-region areas of the eight METROGOV cities.

Even so, it is a unanimous view among the cities that strategic planning, either 'allowed' from above or 'achieved' from below, can be an important contribution to strengthening the city-region level. It is the cooperation-oriented procedure of strategic planning which is most needed to establish and further strengthen the city-region level. In fact this characteristic of strategic planning is precisely the reason why in many countries this type of planning is not permitted by higher level authorities who would not be happy to see any strengthening at the city-region level.

Public transport. All cities have some form of metropolitan cooperation in public transport. This ranges from very well organised (Cologne, Frankfurt, Malmö, Lille) through developing (Birmingham, Glasgow, Milan) to initial efforts (Budapest). Public transport associations usually cover the city-region area or even larger territories, with the exceptions of Lille and Milan, where the area is smaller than the city-region (and Budapest, where such an association hardly exists yet).

For strong, lasting public transport partnerships based on an integrated system (with unified ticketing and timetabling) both political power and resources are needed. Among the METROGOV cities there are cases where the political will is there but not the resources (Budapest), where money is there but not the political will (UK cities), and cases where both are present (German cities). Although within an integrated public transport system competition is also an important aim, the order of things has to be chosen carefully: the city-region partnership in public transport should be established before the privatisation of transport providers.

Control over public transport might become one of the strongest roles of city-regions (in addition to the practical advantages of enhancing the identity of the city-

region). All cities consider public transport as crucial for efficient city-region working and even suburban settlements are more amenable to cooperation in this area than in others (e.g. to create joint plans for road development). Paradoxically, in those countries where public transport has been well developed and covers large metropolitan areas (for example Germany and Sweden), this function no longer plays an active role in strengthening the city-region level – since cooperation in public transport is already functioning, the problem is solved.

The situation with regard to *waste disposal* is quite different. Waste disposal in all METROGOV cities is essentially a local, municipal function and, where territorial cooperation exists, this is below the city-region level. In countries where this communal function is well developed, it has lost its potential to act as a driver for wider territorial cooperation. Only those cities in which the question of waste disposal is not yet solved satisfactorily see opportunities for more territorial cooperation, but even they do not consider waste disposal as a driving force for city-region cooperation. Hence, waste disposal seems to be a less suitable function for creating joint working at a city-region level. This is seen everywhere as a very specific, technical rather than political function, and is rarely accorded any strategic importance.

What brings city-regions forward?

The analysis of the METROGOV cities aimed to test the initial hypothesis that it is easiest to achieve city-region-wide agreement in strategic planning (which is visionary, not binding), more difficult in public transport (which is advantageous for everyone but needs binding solutions), and most difficult in waste disposal (where, because of the NIMBY effect, strong regulations are needed as the unwanted facility has to be put somewhere).

The experience of the METROGOV cities, however, did not fully support this view. For many of the cities, public transport cooperation is more developed at the city-region level than is joint strategic planning. This is especially the case in cities from those countries where public transport cooperation is initiated and organised 'from above' by the regional (or national) level and on a very broad territorial base. In such cities the cooperation in strategic planning, which could be also a bottom-up initiative, is less developed as it needs more effort and orientation towards cooperation by the municipalities themselves. Moreover, in some countries higher level administrations systematically hinder the development of links (through strategic planning or in any other way) between municipalities at the city-region level.

With this caveat in mind, in general it is clear that strategic planning and public transport seem to constitute the minimum content of any feasible city-region relationships. While public transport requires a formalised structure because of financing

and the huge coordination tasks between different providers, strategic planning might range from voluntary, not binding visionary documents to permanently monitored, binding plans.

Waste disposal (similarly to other infrastructure services, such as sewage), being a very technical function, might be performed in single-function partnerships of municipalities, which do not necessarily correspond to the city-region area. However, territorial cooperation agreements in relation to such infrastructure services, although not as visible as those relating to strategic planning or public transport, are also important, mainly from the point of view of sustainable urban development. For this reason cooperation between municipalities in relation to infrastructure services should also be considered as an important contribution to – although not the driving force of – the city-region partnership.

According to the evaluation of the METROGOV cities, in an 'optimal' scenario regulatory functions are to some extent controlled at the city-region level (but not necessarily organised precisely on this territorial basis), while the positive, win-win functions are performed at least on this level, or even in the broader city-region area, covering the whole area of the city's economic influence.

Conclusion

On the empirical basis of the eight participating cities the METROGOV project has shown the large differences in approach between EU countries and regions in relation to city-region cooperation. Dominated, on the one hand, by local conflicts between settlements in the same area and, on the other hand, by the challenge of international competition between metropolitan areas, substantially different cases can be observed regarding how metropolitan-wide policies are built up (top-down or bottom-up) in relation to planning, economic and regulatory functions. From the analysis it becomes clear that in the European context the boundaries of national states and administrative-political regions constitute very strong barriers against policies aiming to optimise the position of metropolitan areas around large cities.

There was a general agreement among the experts from the METROGOV cities that despite all the difficulties, city-region cooperation is of key importance in all efforts towards better development in urban areas. An important outcome of the joint work was the recognition that the city-region level need not be as formalised as the municipality or the regional government. As Salet et al. (2003, 377) put it, in metropolitan areas 'solutions to the problems of coordination and spatial planning are not to be found in the mere establishment of new encompassing territorial government but in new methods of "organising connectivity"'. In some countries there are already too many government levels and it would be difficult to 'squeeze in' another. There are, however, functions to be performed at the city-region level (classic regula-

tory functions and also public transport and strategic planning) that would need some types of formalised structure.

On the basis of the analytical work and the discussions between the city-representatives in the course of the METROGOV meetings, it is possible to offer some recommendations, which, in turn, could also serve as starting points for future research.

In an optimal scenario voluntary, bottom-up cooperation should become the basis for subsequent formal structures. It is a lesson learnt from the past that over-hasty top-down enforcement of formal structures usually leads to the death of incipient voluntary bottom-up cooperation.

Two metropolitan functions require special attention. The concept of strategic planning has been enriched with many new aspects and layers in the last decade and offers not only useful models but also procedures to establish cooperation between municipalities and other entities at the metropolitan area. Public transport is the other key function performed at the city-region level. There are many examples of well-developed city-region cooperation that were initially based on public transport associations (Stuttgart might be the most famous case). Public transport is a very much 'wanted' city-region function, having strong win-win elements: when it is well organised, the participating settlements gain more than they give up. On the other hand, running a city-region level public transport association needs well-developed formal structures with binding agreements. Thus, public transport cooperation, once established, can become the basis for cooperation in other functions as well (except where it was established top-down for very large areas, as the examples of Cologne and Frankfurt show).

As already discussed, in the ideal case city-region cooperation should start from the bottom and should be based on voluntary cooperation between the municipalities in the urban area. Higher levels of government should initiate and support such types of cooperation, not through the enforcement of rigid structures but through policy and economic initiatives (e.g. framework policies and the way in which public funds are allocated). It is also important for already existing higher sub-national government levels to support city-region level cooperation and not to consider it as a rival. A cooperative approach and organisational efforts by the core city towards the smaller municipalities in the urban area is, of course, a prerequisite for all city-regions.

City-regions can easily fit with the recently fashionable multi-level governance approach, especially if the aim is less the creation of a stable new level of administration (government) and more a new scene for, and method of, cooperation. Establishing city-region cooperation needs not only patience and caution, but also a longer-term view of cooperation and co-existence with the regional level, rather than efforts to replace it.

From both competitiveness and sustainability points of view, the city-region or metropolitan agenda is an important step forward for the development of urban areas.

In addition, well-planned cooperation between the urban core and the suburban areas, underpinned by functional urban transport, can help to overcome most of the problems of sprawling suburban development. In this way city-regions are important to pave the way for European urban areas to become the vital cities of Europe.

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