European small towns: what role do they play in metropolitan governance?

(Article begins on next page)

27 December 2024

European small towns: what role do they play in metropolitan governance?

Giancarlo Cotella, Politecnico di Torino
Christophe Demazière, Université de Lille
Sebastian Dembski, University of Liverpool
Loris Servillo, Politecnico di Torino

Abstract

In recent years, several studies have explored the challenges that accompany the creation of metropolitan governments, with particular reference to the institutional relations and power dynamics that potentially subordinate smaller towns to logics and objectives defined in the core area. This paper argues that the establishment of new governance arrangements exercising autonomous metropolitan political power may overcome the institutional fragmentation of metropolitan regions, but it may also overshadow the role played by the smaller towns, which often lack the opportunity or the necessary institutional capacity to participate in the process. The effectiveness of existing metropolitan settings from the small-town perspective is addressed comparatively in the contexts of England, France and Italy, three European countries that have experienced recent metropolitan reforms. The authors trace the history of the administrative reforms that have characterised the three countries, the spatiality of their metropolitan authorities, and the instruments and mechanisms that allow for the engagement and cooperation of small towns with(in) metropolitan authorities. They argue that the actual potential for the engagement of small towns within metropolitan governance dynamics is path- and context-dependent and often hampered by the institutional preconditions that gave birth to metropolitan governance in a specific context.

Introduction

In various European countries, the last two decades or so have seen the creation of political institutions to govern metropolitan regions in a more efficient and legitimate way (Zimmermann et al., 2020). On the one hand, there was the need to tackle the negative social and environmental effects of the incremental process of metropolisation that has

Corresponding author: Giancarlo Cotella, Politecnico di Torino, giancarlo.cotella@polito.it, ORCID: 0000-0001-8445-412X.
Authors:
Giancarlo Cotella, Politecnico di Torino, giancarlo.cotella@polito.it, ORCID: 0000-0001-8445-412X;
Christophe Demazière, Université de Lille, christophe.demaziere@univ-lille.fr, ORCID: 0000-0002-7294-7565;
Sebastian Dembski, University of Liverpool, sebastian.dembski@liverpool.ac.uk, ORCID: 0000-0002-4292-6712;
Loris Servillo, Politecnico di Torino, loris.servillo@polito.it, ORCID: 0000-0001-5819-4555.

characterised the European continent since the 1990s (Kunzmann, 2004; Krätke, 2007; Pumain and Rozenblat, 2019). On the other hand, there has been a desire to foster the local conditions required to exploit the advantages of an increasingly globalised economy that obeys fluid functional development dynamics.

The management of metropolitan areas has been the topic of intense academic debates for over half a century (see Kantor and Savitch, 2010; Tomàs, 2020). As early as the 1950s, the widening gap between municipal boundaries and metropolitan areas led scholars such as Wood (1958) to argue in favour of one integrated government for the whole city region. In contrast, authors embracing public choice theory consider municipalities to be the right scale, arguing that competition among them ensures greater efficiency and democracy (Ostrom et al., 1961). In practice, many studies have shown the difficulties which can accompany the creation of metropolitan governments (Sharpe, 1995; Lefèvre, 1998; Salet et al., 2015; Zimmermann et al., 2020; ESPON, 2021), not least concerning the institutional relations and power dynamics that consolidate within them, and how they may end up subordinating smaller towns to logics and objectives defined in the core area.

Our paper aims to specifically shed light on the role of small towns within new forms of metropolitan governments, which so far has received very little attention. In this paper and in line with the ESPON TOWN project (Servillo et al., 2014), small towns are defined loosely as urban settlements with a population of approx. 5,000 – 25,000 that often coincides with an administrative unit. We assume that, on the one hand, the establishment of institutions and governance arrangements exercising autonomous metropolitan political power can counter the institutional fragmentation of metropolitan regions, ensuring more effective governance and, in turn, more balanced territorial development. On the other hand, however, institutional and political struggles may hamper efforts toward effective metropolitan governance. The centrality of the core municipality (or municipalities) may overshadow the role played by the smaller towns, which often lack the necessary institutional capacity or opportunity to participate in the process. In other cases, small-town local authorities may feel left out in the process or, especially when they govern "prosperous" micro-territories and/or feature a strong historical identity, may resist putting their resources at the service of the (new) metropolitan government (Demazière, 2021a).

The effectiveness of metropolitan settings, especially from the small-town perspective, is assessed through the comparative analysis of metropolitan institutions and governance dynamics in three European countries, which have been characterised by relevant reforms in recent decades: England, France and Italy. We first give a brief account of the academic debate on the establishment of metropolitan governance and of the opportunities and challenges that characterise the engagement of small towns within or in cooperation with metropolitan governance. Next, we trace the history of administrative reforms in the countries under scrutiny and reflect on how this has influenced the institution of metropolitan governments

therein. Then, the spatiality of metropolitan authorities in England, France and Italy is discussed, with reference to small towns. Finally, we identify and analyse the planning and governance instruments and mechanisms that, in the different contexts, allow for the engagement and cooperation of small towns with(in) metropolitan authorities, distinguishing between the case of small towns included in formal metropolitan institutions and that of small towns outside them. A concluding section rounds off the contribution, summarising its main messages and indicating paths for future research on the role of European small towns in metropolitan governance.

Small towns and metropolitan governance: opportunities and challenges

The definition of a bundle of policy actions tailored to the needs and the opportunities of a specific territory with the aim of pursuing effectiveness is the core of place-based development (Barca, 2009). In this light, a key aspect for policymakers responsible for territorial development strategies is to identify a coherent territory for policy action, one which corresponds with the socio-economic and natural features of places. The goal is to create the operative conditions for addressing local needs and opportunities, or to develop new functionalities, in a consistent manner.

Whereas the adoption of a clear metropolitan focus is recognised as helping to establish more efficient forms of service delivery, public goods management or public administration functions (Wollmann, 2008), the actual institutionalisation of a metropolitan governance arrangement is not an easy task (Lefèvre, 1998; Brenner, 2009; Lefèvre and Weir, 2010). The identification of the most suitable geographical scope for metropolitan cooperation *vis-à-vis* the institutional mechanisms constitutes the primary challenge. Complex functional territories may be characterised by one or more urban cores and a more or less fragmented set of small and medium-sized towns. Additionally, a set of complex political alliances and power relations between existing institutions and the presence of historical and cultural differences may affect the rational choice of an institutional framework. The more metropolitan institutional arrangements follow the functional characteristics of the area, the more they allow for effective policy measures. However, the delimitation of the metropolitan area of cooperation often follows path-dependent logics of powers and competences, reinforcing the legitimacy of the new institutions while at the same time potentially making them ill-equipped to tackle functional challenges and pursue innovation (Salet et al., 2015; ESPON, 2021).

In the context of this discussion, the effective engagement of small towns with(in) metropolitan governance and cooperation is characterised by multiple challenges. Leaving aside the debate about the interpretation of small and medium-sized towns and their functional roles (Servillo et al., 2014), a key aspect of our discussion is the administrative role of small towns. Local political representatives play a decisive part (positive and negative) in the formalisation of metropolitan government (Lefèvre and Weir, 2010). Dlablac et al. (2018)

show that most European mayors are aware of difficulties in solving the challenges on a metropolitan scale, but they express no demand to consolidate metropolitan governments, in so doing raising questions about the challenges that surround the horizontal coordination of municipalities. In their study of eight European countries, Hulst and Van Monfort (2011) argue that metropolitan governments seldom emerge spontaneously, as joint planning and the coordination of local government policies restrict the options of individual municipalities and: "[l]ocal governments generally prefer planning forums, where decision-making takes place on the basis of consensus and local government autonomy is not at risk" (Hulst and Van Monfort, 2011: 131).

The comparison between three European countries featuring institutional systems with varying degrees of (de)centralisation helps shed light on the challenges faced by metropolitan arrangements and the role of smaller towns. We focus on formal metropolitan institutions, which are part of the administrative system and have a more permanent character, rather than on voluntary, policy-based forms of cooperation (Swianiewicz and Teles, 2019). Any process aimed at the creation of a metropolitan government is bound to disturb the established distribution of power (Lefèvre, 1998), and the institution of metropolitan tiers characterised by differential political legitimacy and differing capacities to tackle city-region challenges can be considered the outcome of political struggles that engage various levels of government in different institutional contexts. Hence, the institutional logics that innerve the creation of the metropolitan arrangement provide evidence of the actual involvement of small towns in the decision-making process and their effectiveness in pursuing policy objectives.

For the purpose of the paper, we identify three domains to compare the institutional arrangement *vis-à-vis* the role of small towns: first, the institutional evolution of the metropolitan setting; secondly, the formal spatial extension of the administrative area; and finally, the set of instruments that enables forms of cooperation and policy action.

Paths to metropolitan government: Institutional systems in evolution

The processes of (re)defining the framework of public intervention are embedded in the geography and history of the institutional systems of administration, which are specific to each country (Healey and Williams, 1993). In this light, before discussing the institutional reforms that gave birth to metropolitan governments, it is worth providing an overview of the administrative systems (Table 1) and the number and size of municipalities (Table 2) that characterise the countries under investigation.

Table 1 – Local government levels in England, France and Italy (as of 1 January 2022)

Geographic scale	England		France		Italy	
	Name	No.	Name	No.	Name	No.
Regional	Greater London (8 regions were abolished in 2012)		Région	18 (5 are overseas)	Regioni	20 (5 with special status)
Subregional	County Councils	24	Département	100	Province	93 (2 with special status)
	Combined Authorities	10			Città Metropolitane	14
Local			Métropoles	22		
	Unitary authorities (including 36 Metropolitan Districts, 32 London Boroughs and the City of London and the Isles of Scilly)	128	Other Etablissements de Coopération Intercommunale (EPCIs)	1,254	Unioni di comuni	559
	Non-metropolitan districts	181	Commune	34,955	Comune	7,983

Source: Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities; Institut national de la statistique et des études économique; Istituto Nazionale di Statistica.

Table 2 – *Municipalities in England, France and Italy (2022)*

Country	Main local governments	Nr.	Average n. of inhabitants	Smallest n. of inhabitants	Largest n. of inhabitants	Average area(km²)
England	District Councils Unitary authorities	309	182,816	37,439* (Rutland)	1,117,851 (Birmingham)	653
France	Commune	34,955	1,870	1 (Rochefourchat)	2,132,577 (Paris)	16
Italy	Comune	7,904	7,580	32 (Morterone)	2,758,454 (Rome)	37

* The City of London (pop. 8,373) and the Isles of Scilly (pop. 2,028) have special status and are exceptions.
Source: Office for National Statistics, Institut national de la statistique et des études économique, Istituto Nazionale di Statistica.

The United Kingdom remains one of the most centralised countries in Europe (OECD, 2018). While Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have experienced devolution, England does not have its own national assembly and is administered by the parliament of the United Kingdom. Moreover, there is no intermediate level in England between central government and the county council, district or unitary authority, except in Greater London which survived the abolition of the regional tier in England in 2012. Local governments are traditionally the executing agencies of the central power, their room for manoeuvre has been increasingly constrained since the 1980s and the "localism" rhetoric in the 2010s has done little to reverse this trend (Sykes and Nurse, 2017). In France the regions were created as local governments at the beginning of the 1980s, while the *départements* and *communes* go back to the French revolution. The three levels of local government are managed by elected councils and

nowadays account for nearly 60% of all public investment in France, compared with 53% in Italy and 34% in the UK (OECD, 2018). The principle of autonomy extends to relations between the local governments, with none being entitled to exercise control over others. Like France, Italy features three levels of local government, but the decentralisation process dates back to 1948, when regions were awarded legislative power on several issues by the constitution, a decentralisation which was then implemented in the 1970s. In 2001, a constitutional reform shifted the system towards subsidiarity. In 2009, the law establishing fiscal federalism decreed that the expenses of local authorities must be covered by local taxes or by fractions of national taxes, replacing state grants. However, the implementation of this was thwarted by the economic and public finance crisis.

There is great variation in the number of local governments, their populations and areas. England is characterised by very large local government districts that include multiple towns and an average population of over 180,000. Whilst the size of non-urban districts has been increased through mergers, the local government areas of cities have remained stable, and many non-urban local governments have larger populations than some of England's largest cities. Italy and France have not experienced a major reduction in the number of municipalities. Consequently, 44% of Italian municipalities have less than 2,000 inhabitants, while the proportion is 86% for France (OECD, 2018). In Italy, a law was passed in 1990 to introduce unions of municipalities, making it possible for small municipalities to jointly manage activities in selected fields (Fedeli, 2017, Cotella and Berisha, 2021). In France, the national government adopted a more directive role, seeking to make cooperation common practice. All municipalities, whatever their size or geographical position, are currently involved in voluntary groupings called EPCIs (*établissement public de coopération intercommunale*), to which municipalities have transferred resources and competences such as economic development, transport and housing.

In all three countries the institutionalisation of metropolitan governments is part of wider processes of administrative restructuring. As such, it has met resistance from the established tiers of subnational government. This leads us to address two sets of issues in each national context. First, in these countries with such different institutional systems, we highlight how the national governments have dealt with path dependency, and on what points the new institutions are similar and different in the three countries. Second, we examine the motivations for the reforms and consider whether the aim was to align institutions with metropolitan issues or whether cost efficiency was the driving factor.

Combined Authorities in England: a fluctuating interest for metropolitan government

Metropolitan institutions in England have a chequered history (e.g. Shaw and Tewdwr-Jones, 2017; Sykes and Nurse, 2021). The local government reform in the 1970s drastically reduced the number of local governments and went along with the establishment of

Metropolitan County Councils for England's largest cities, following the earlier establishment of the Greater London Council (GLC) in 1965. Despite overseeing important tasks such as strategic planning, transport and economic development, these councils were abolished in the 1980s, mainly for political reasons, with particularly the leftist GLC being a thorn in the eye of the Thatcher government (Sykes and Nurse, 2017).

Following a brief interlude in the late 1990s, during which the (unsuccessful) establishment of regional institutions was the primary focus of the then Labour Government, city regions received renewed attention from central government in the mid-2000s as the primary geographical focus for economic development, in particular in northern England (Harrison, 2012). In 2009, the government introduced legislation permitting the formation of Combined Authorities, which allows the voluntary transfer of powers, in particular regarding economic development, regeneration and transport.

Although the seeds for Combined Authorities as formal metropolitan institutions were sown by the Labour government, it was under subsequent Conservative rule that the plans came to fruition. Through its Localism agenda, the government invited the establishment of Local Enterprise Partnerships as private sector-led, non-statutory bodies to deliver growth in lieu of the abolished Regional Development Agencies. Shortly afterwards, City Deals offered bespoke transfers of powers to individual or groups of local authorities, which were often negotiated by the major city and the LEP (Ward, 2023). In some cases, these arrangements led to the formation of a Combined Authority to further formalise and legitimise cooperation. In 2011, Greater Manchester was the first Combined Authority to be established. With a devolution agenda, the central government furthered strengthened Combined Authorities by introducing directly elected mayors, which has since become the preferred model, and establishing the possibility of further transfers of powers.

The evolution of formal metropolitan institutions in the form of Combined Authorities over the past two decades was primarily an urban agenda driven by the large cities demanding greater powers and the Conservative government's devolution agenda to redress economic imbalances. To some extent the roll-out of metropolitan arrangements was overshadowed by a strong spatial focus on the North and West Midlands, effectively holding back other areas (Sturzaker & Nurse, 2020: 69). While notionally Combined Authorities were formed voluntarily from the bottom up, there was strong control by central government through its assessment of deals, many of which were rejected (Ayres et al., 2018).

French *métropoles*: an alliance between national government and core cities' mayors

After phases of decentralisation that strengthened the various levels of local authorities in the 1980s and 1990s, territorial reform in France was justified, as in Italy, by a cost-saving approach (Pasquier, 2016). Between 2010 and 2016, two successive reforms of local government were carried out. In 2010, a law forced all municipalities to engage in inter-

municipal cooperation by joining an EPCI. The law also defined a minimum population threshold of 5,000 inhabitants for an EPCI; this was raised to 15,000 inhabitants in 2015, leading to the number of EPCIs being halved.

The same law allowed the creation of a new type of EPCI – the *métropole* – for any municipal grouping of more than 500,000 inhabitants, but with only one *métropole* created in Nice, it required another law to roll out metropolitan institutions across the whole country. In 2014, the *loi de modernisation de l'action publique territoriale et d'affirmation des métropoles* (literally the "law for the modernisation of territorial public action and affirmation of the metropolises"), often called the MAPTAM law, revived the notion of a more integrated form of inter-communal cooperation. The law designated a further eight *métropoles* where agglomerations featured more than 400,000 inhabitants and were located within a broader functional urban region of more than 650,000 inhabitants (i.e. in the cases of Bordeaux, Grenoble, Lille, Nantes, Rennes, Rouen, Strasbourg and Toulouse). Brest, Montpellier and Nancy did not fit these population criteria but nevertheless were soon acknowledged as *métropoles*. Seven more *métropoles* were added to the list in 2017, leading to a total of 19: Clermont-Ferrand, Dijon, Metz, Orléans, Saint-Etienne, Toulon and Tours.

Moreover, the three largest French cities – Paris, Lyon and Marseille – have their own bespoke arrangements. Regarding Paris, the corresponding municipality has 2.2 million inhabitants, the built-up area 7 million and the functional urban region over 12 million. In 2012, the national government launched the idea of a metro government for Greater Paris, combining two aims: on the one hand, grouping together independent municipalities (Geppert, 2015), on the other hand, reinforcing the weight of the Parisian metropolis on a European and world scale (Béhar, 2019). Despite the opposition of many concerned municipalities from the Île-de-France region, the *métropole du Grand Paris* (Greater Paris metropolis) was legally created in 2016 as an EPCI, grouping Paris and 130 neighbouring municipalities. Similarly, the *métropole* of Aix-Marseille-Provence was established despite strong opposition from many mayors (Béhar, 2019). Its territorial basis approximates the functional urban region, making it a unique case in France, where most *métropoles* have a population which is less than the corresponding built-up area. However, in Paris and in Marseilles, the top-down creation of a metropolitan tier was toned down by the creation of *Conseils de territoire* (CT – territorial councils) which group municipalities together (Demazière et al., 2022). These CTs undermine the development of metropolitan autonomy since the metropolitan council is obliged to consult the CT on all decisions that concern the *métropole*.

By contrast, in Lyon a bottom-up approach to metropolitan government has been adopted. In 2012, the mayor of Lyon and president of the EPCI Grand Lyon agreed with the president of the *département du Rhône* to create a *métropole* by merging the territory of the EPCI and the department. Unique in France, this project also included the direct election of

the representatives of the *métropole*. With its tailor-made status, the *Metropole de Lyon* is the only *métropole* to be a fully-fledged single-tier metropolitan authority. However, it only includes a small part of the functional urban region, since several local political elites opposed integration in the new institution.

Città metropolitane in Italy: an incomplete territorial reorganisation

Città metropolitane are not new in the Italian administrative system, as they were first mentioned in 1990 under Law 142. Nine cities were explicitly designated – Turin, Milan, Venice, Genoa, Bologna, Florence, Rome, Bari, Naples (Rivière, 2010) – and four more were added to the list by regions with special statute: Cagliari (in Sardinia), Palermo, Catania and Messina (all in Sicily). To identify the boundaries of the new administrative system, the law proposed including in metropolitan areas "the municipalities which maintain (with the central municipalities) relations of close integration with regard to economic activities, the essential services of social life, as well as cultural relations and territorial characteristics" (art. 17). However, the implementation of Law 142 required legislation in all concerned regions and, fearing they would lose power, these regions proved hostile to the reform and did not follow suit.

The problem of governing metropolitan city-regions remained unaddressed until the end of the 2000s when, in an effort to reduce local and national public expenditure, the Italian government reignited the debate. After a long legislative process, in April 2014 the parliament adopted Law 56/2014 – labelled the Delrio law after the minister who signed it – eventually instituting 14 *città metropolitane* to correspond with the country's largest and most complex metropolitan areas. To avoid any discussion on the definition of their geographical scope, which could again hamper the reform (as in the 1990s), the central government opted to base the *città metropolitane* boundaries on the perimeters of the former provinces. It is possible for municipalities to request to join or leave a *citta metropolitana*, but all such attempts have so far been rejected by the region in question (Fedeli, 2017).

According to Crivello and Staricco (2017), the Delrio reform had two main aims. First, its goal was to reinforce the capacity to act of the largest Italian cities. It conferred to *città metropolitane* not only the functions originally held by provinces, but also new ones concerning strategic planning, infrastructure, services and national and international relations. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, the national government aimed to cut costs among all tiers of subnational government. The members of the metropolitan council and of the remaining provinces are appointed by and chosen among municipalities' mayors and councillors, and do not receive any salary beyond that paid for their activities in municipalities (Armondi, 2017). Outside metropolitan cities, the law obliges municipalities with less than 5,000 inhabitants to manage their compulsory basic tasks (e.g. administration, police, school, transports, social care) through unions of municipalities (Bolgherini, 2016).

This had a significant impact since 70% of Italian municipalities have less than 5,000 inhabitants, and the number of such unions increased from 271 in 2006 to over 550 in 2022.

Hence, *città metropolitane* eventually took life as part of a more general effort by the national government to diminish the cost of subnational authorities in the context of austerity imposed by the financial crisis and the EU regulations (Cotella et al., 2015; Tulumello et al., 2020), to the detriment of an effective spatial definition. They are still rather young institutions and, also due to the strong regionalisation of the country, their actual level of activities varies greatly (Vinci, 2019).

The spatiality of metropolitan governments

Even though the metropolitan reforms are recent in all three countries, their capacity to act effectively on spatial issues remains a key question and involves two dimensions: the spatial definition of the metropolitan territory and its institutional and governance arrangements (Lefèvre, 1998). If we consider the metropolitan governments identified in England, France and Italy, a strong heterogeneity emerges in terms of both population and territory (Figure 1). Combined Authorities have an average population of around 1.4 million, like the *città metropolitane* outside Rome, compared to 700,000 for French *métropoles* outside Greater Paris.[1] The average area of Combined Authorities in England is three times greater than their equivalent in France (2,300 compared to 750 km²). In Italy, the area of *città metropolitane* is on average 3,650 km², which implies that they are five times larger than their equivalents in France. Also, the actual correspondence between the administrative boundaries of the metropolitan institutions and the functional urban areas that they are supposed to govern varies between and within countries.

In England, there is a real mix of "metropolitan" institutions in terms of alignment with historical boundaries and functional relationships. Most are the same as the former metropolitan county councils; particularly the Greater Manchester local authorities continued to cooperate after abolition of the metropolitan county council and were the first combined authority to be established in 2011. The metropolitan counties mainly followed the idea of a conurbation, i.e. urbanised areas, continuing with a "strict separation of major cities from their rural surroundings" (Coombes, 2014: 2429). Others are new formations of non-metropolitan regions such as the Tees Valley and Cambridgeshire & Peterborough. As the formation of Combined Authorities is effectively a bottom-up process, the withdrawal of individual local authorities has led to failed bids or unsuitable geographies, e.g. the former Northeast region is split into two Combined Authorities cutting the Newcastle city region into two halves, while in the West of England (Bristol), North Somerset opted out. There is also a real mix of Combined Authorities that have virtually no small towns (e.g. Greater Manchester, Liverpool

---

[1] Paris and Rome are excluded from this calculation since London, having a different and older form of government than the Combined Authority, is not considered in this paper.

City Region and West Midlands) and those that include vast rural hinterlands (e.g. in the Northeast) or do not include a metropolitan city at all (Cambridgeshire and Peterborough).

In France, the *métropoles* essentially reflect the perimeters of the pre-existing EPCIs. The only case of significant expansion – Aix-Marseille-Provence – is where the national government encountered the strongest resistance from municipalities and regional governments. Of the 15 *métropoles* resulting from the MAPTAM law, seven have the same perimeter as the pre-existing EPCIs. However, most of the corresponding city regions have experienced suburbanisation over the past decades, which would justify an expansion of their territories (Demazière, 2021).
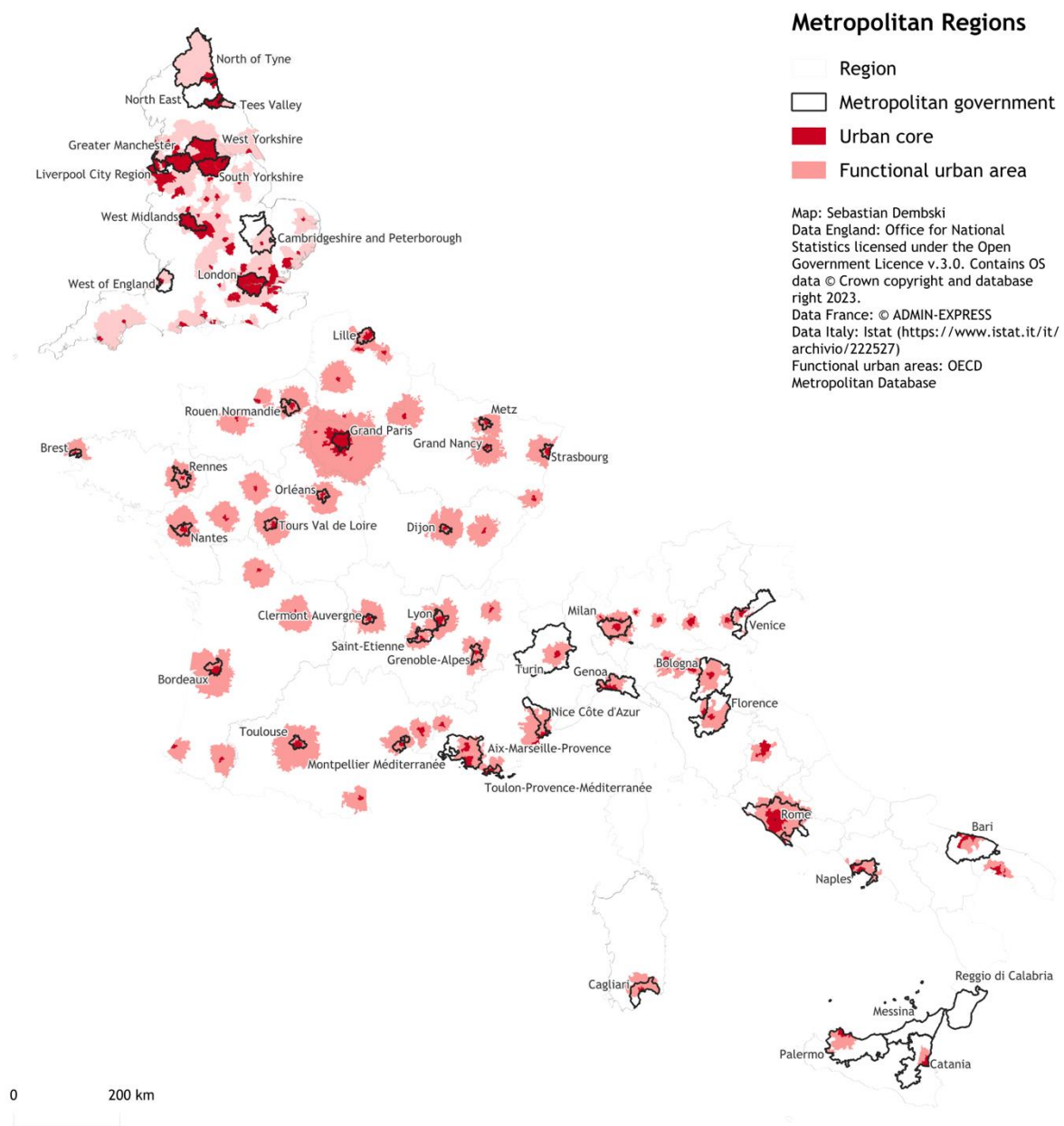

Figure 1 – Metropolitan governments and functional urban areas with a population of 250,000 and over in England, France and Italy. Source: the authors.

Additionally, seven out of 15 MAPTAM *métropoles* have lower populations than the corresponding built-up areas (Demazière, 2021a), and their territories are much smaller than the corresponding functional urban area. Finally, the case of Lille shows why the elected representatives of a *métropole* may be reluctant to merge with one or more groupings of the functional urban region. When the young *métropole* was joined in 2017 by a grouping of five municipalities whose population was below the threshold defined by the NOTRe law, it required the re-election of the president and the 20 vice-presidents of the metropolitan government. Thus, France illustrates a considerable gap between the *de jure* and the *de facto* metropolis. Making the law creating metro governments involved dealing with the power of mayors, who, in the French institutional system, can also be parliamentarians or ministers.

Regarding the Italian *città metropolitane*, Calafati (2016: 19) notes that "these cities are so profoundly different in their size and territorial organisation […] as to raise doubts about the logic of having selected them against the background of the 'metropolitan paradigm' and the features of the Italian urban system". The boundaries of the *città metropolitane* have been questioned by many scholars (Fedeli, 2017; Vinci, 2019; Casavola et al., 2024). Due to the fact that their territories completely coincide with the former provinces they replace, the match between functional interrelations and spatial extension is barely achieved (except for the cases of Rome, Naples and, to a certain extent, Bologna). In some cases, the administrative extension is much larger than the functional area (e.g. Turin, Bari and Reggio Calabria), in others much smaller (e.g. Milan), or there is a misfit between the two (Florence, Venice). The case of Turin is emblematic in this regard, as 55% of its municipalities are classified as "mountainous" with very low population densities. The same applies to Cagliari and Catania, while in Milan the perimeter of the new entity is far too narrow (Calafati, 2016). The Italian reform also appears to be unsuited to the case of polycentric metropolitan areas like Florence, whose development axis extends from the city centre west, encompassing territories that are part of the provinces of Prato and Pistoia (De Luca, 2016). Importantly, the number of municipalities and their average size also varies widely between metropolitan areas, reflecting historical regional and north-south differences and generating a differential picture when it comes to their administrative fragmentation and, in turn, to the actual potential for small municipalities to interact with and participate in metropolitan governance.

The engagement of small towns with(in) metropolitan governance

In this section, we identify the instruments which can promote cooperation between small towns and metropolitan authorities, distinguishing between the case of small towns included in metropolitan institutions and that of small towns which are outside them (Table 3). We especially analyse which planning instruments (in the broadest sense) may favour their inclusion in metropolitan governance.

Table 3 – Metropolitan governance and the reactions of small towns. Source: the authors.

	Metropolitan government competences	Metropolitan instruments engaging small towns inside metro area	Metropolitan instruments engaging small towns outside metro area	Small town reactions to metropolitan governance
England	*Variable.* They are pooled by the districts or decentralised by the government. Competences are limited and often involve urban transport, strategic planning, economic development, urban planning, housing and police.	• Spatial Development Strategies • Local Plan • Neighbourhood planning	• Local Plan • Neighbourhood planning	Towns are not directly involved in metropolitan governance
France	*Homogeneous* (with the exceptions of Greater Paris and Lyon). Competences are very important: spatial planning; economic, social and cultural development; local housing policy; urban policy; protection and enhancement of the environment and local amenity/liveability; public services management.	• Inter-municipal Local Plan for Urbanism (PLUI) • Local Programme for Housing (PLH) • Territorial Climate Air and Energy Plan (PCAET)	• Territorial Coherence Plan (SCoT – spatial and strategic relevance) • Collective transport associations • *Pôle métropolitain* • *Contrat de réciprocité*	Suburban small towns may opt out of the *métropole* as long as they are part of an EPCI which has more than 15,000 inhabitants
Italy	*Homogeneous.* Competences are important: general territorial planning; adoption and annual update of a three-year strategic plan; economic and social development; mobility; computerisation and digitisation systems; public service management coordination.	• Metropolitan Strategic Plan (PSM) • Metropolitan General Territorial Plan (PTGM) • Sustainable Urban Mobility Plan (PUMS) • Urban Integrated Plan (PUI – Recovery and Resilience Facility)	N/A	Coordinated action through: • Unions of municipalities Local Action groups • Territorial Pacts and similar instruments

England: small towns fending for their interests despite a lack of political representation

One of the main issues in England is that towns lack strong political representation, which in turn also means that they rarely feature in research – a fact which is exacerbated by the limited availability of official statistics for this geographical entity. The substantial size of English local authority districts means that small towns are by definition not self-governed, as virtually all districts have a population that is greater than that of a small town and, more importantly, usually greater than that of multiple settlements. Most small towns have a parish council which, however, has very limited powers, such as the right to be consulted on planning applications and the provision of additional public services. At the metropolitan level, small towns are only indirectly represented via their council leader or mayor.

Towns in general have not received much attention in England over the past decades, that is until the EU referendum. The results stirred a fundamental debate about the divide between metropolitan cores, who predominantly voted remain, and the leave-voting towns and rural areas (Jennings and Stoker, 2018; Sykes, 2018). "Left-behind Britain" became a catch phrase referring to the emerging crisis of towns, which experienced a different trajectory in the new millennium in which agglomeration economies, the importance of higher education, immigration and deindustrialisation have all benefitted cities and increased the gap to towns

(Jennings and Stoker, 2018). The Centre for Towns, set up by the Labour MP Lisa Nandy amongst others, lobbied for more attention to the fortunes of towns. It has to be said that the real focus was nonetheless never on small towns, but rather on medium to large towns, also sometimes referred to as third-tier cities. In 2019, the new government made "levelling up" one of its main electoral promises, planning investment in towns and high streets with a £3.6 bn Towns Fund. Particularly in metropolitan areas, Town Deals were mainly signed for larger towns and were administered by the local council, though a Town Board with wider representation was included.

Metropolitan planning is still in its infancy and beset with problems. No metropolitan plan has been approved as of 2023 and quite a few Combined Authorities do not even engage in strategic planning. Greater Manchester has been working on its strategic plan since 2014 but was beset by problems concerning the greenbelt (Haughton, 2020) and had to go back to the drawing board after the withdrawal of Stockport Council. The West of England Joint Spatial Plan predates the formation of the Combined Authority but was deemed unsound by the Planning Inspector. Both plans were primarily concerned with the allocation of new housing and greenbelts rather than the interests of small towns per se.

Small towns in general, though, tend to do rather well in and near metropolitan areas, as most of them are located in the greenbelts, which makes them generally attractive places to live in with corresponding property values. Greenbelts, which became formally required in the 1950s and expanded in the 1970s to contain urban growth in England's major urban areas, were a major factor in the inflation of land values in small towns (Hall, 1974; Cheshire, 2018). They have also encouraged widespread anti-growth attitudes in rural areas (Sturzaker, 2010). Neighbourhood planning was introduced as part of the Localism agenda in 2011 to enable communities to have a greater say on spatial development, enabling small towns to fend for their interests regardless of direct involvement. However, it was also an instrument taken up more keenly by wealthier communities (Parker and Salter, 2016; Sturzaker et al., 2022).

France: small towns struggling not to be subordinated to the core area

Because of the indirect election of the metropolitan council, the executive of the *métropole* has little legitimacy, while the mayors have strong relationships with the populations of their communes. In some cases (Bordeaux, Grenoble, Lille, Strasbourg and Tours), the president of the *métropole* is the mayor of a small peri-urban commune and not an elected official of the core municipality[2]. In such a context, metropolitan governance may be marked by tense relations between the representatives of the core municipality(ies) and the mayors of communes of lesser demographic, economic and political weight. For example, representatives from suburban municipalities typically want metropolitan plans to allow low-

---

[2] For instance, the current president of the *Métropole Européenne de Lille*, who has held this position for ten years, is mayor of a village of 900 inhabitants.

density urbanisation on the outskirts, while those from the central municipality want to encourage the reuse of brownfield sites for residential projects.

The Lyon case shows the same tension between metropolis and municipalities, in a different institutional situation. With the election – for the first time in 2020 – of metropolitan councillors by universal suffrage, the 59 municipalities of the Lyon metropolis no longer have an automatic seat in the metropolitan assembly: only 22 mayors (corresponding to the most populated municipalities, roughly those with over 10,000 inhabitants) are members of the deliberative assembly. At the same time, the environmentalist party won the city of Lyon, thereby shifting the attitude of metropolitan government from a pro-business orientation towards the implementation of policies aimed at an energy and ecological transition. In this context, 45 mayors expressed their distrust of the president of the metropolis in 2021. They regret that investments favour metropolitan projects (sewage treatment plants, express bike network paths, etc.) over municipal projects. Some mayors have even asked parliament to amend the MAPTAM to guarantee a place for each mayor in the metropolitan council or to make it possible for any municipality that wishes to leave the *métropole* to do so. Ultimately, the Lyon case shows the difficulty of initiating truly metropolitan policies that are not just the sum of municipal policies.

The role played by small municipalities in metropolitan governance in France can be further analysed by examining whether development and planning instruments foster cooperation between municipalities within a *métropole*, or between a *métropole* and other suburban groupings of municipalities. In the 1980s, decentralisation laws have transferred the bulk of urban planning powers to around 35,000 communes. In 2000, this competence was extended to EPCIs, firstly to relaunch strategic spatial planning at a larger scale than individual municipalities, and more recently to make plans more effective in managing environmental issues. Two planning tools are key: the local plan (*plan local d'urbanisme* – PLU) and the territorial coherence scheme (*schéma de cohérence territoriale* – SCOT). The PLU is supposed to define an urban development strategy and not just stipulate zoning. It is legally binding and can thus be opposed by any public or private person for the execution of any work or construction. The PLU used to be carried out at the municipal level even though in large cities (with the notable exception of Paris), it has always been developed by the corresponding grouping of municipalities. Since 2014, the PLU is to be gradually replaced for all territories by the PLUI, 'I' standing for inter-municipal. The PLUI is also more integrative than the PLU since it includes housing and transport planning guidelines. This implies that small towns included in a metropolitan government need to be able to negotiate their right to develop with the larger municipalities. The result (development rights, public transport access, location of facilities financed by the *métropole*) will depend on the balance of power of municipalities within the *métropole*. When a *métropole* is presided over by the mayor of a small peri-urban municipality, planning may incline towards recognising the almost equal

right of each municipality to develop. On the other hand, small towns that are located outside a *métropole* need to develop a real capacity in planning, so as to have a PLU (and now a PLUI) that helps to maximise the advantages of being located nearby while managing the corresponding shortcomings.

The interaction between the PLUI made by a *métropole* and the one developed by a suburban grouping of municipalities takes place through the SCOT, which is the pivotal document of urban planning in France. The SCOT is focused on strategy and foresight. It aims to define a shared vision at the scale of several EPCIs by establishing a legal framework that other local urban plans must comply with. The development of the SCOT involves a concerted process between the EPCIs concerned, who are responsible for it, and also the central government and the region. In practice, the realisation of SCOTs is uneasy. Their perimeters can take very diverse forms, with generally several tens of communes in several groupings, but there is often difficulty in taking into account the whole of a functional urban region (Demazière, 2018). For instance, in the case of Lyon, the SCOT brings together only the *Métropole de Lyon* and two suburban EPCIs (Demazière, 2021b). There are 13 different SCOTs in the functional urban region, which means that a number of territories, including small or medium-sized towns, have been able to develop a strategic plan autonomously.

To overcome the difficulty of cooperation in spatial planning, several initiatives have been proposed to create flexible forms of governance where the challenges faced by metropolitan areas would be discussed. In general, they have not proved successful (Demazière et al., 2022). In 2010, a law introduced "metropolitan poles" (*pôles metropolitains*) to promote cooperation between nearby towns or cities located within large, complex urban regions or development corridors. In contrast to the *métropoles* that were created later, the metropolitan poles do not follow the principle of territorial contiguity. They can create a network of cities in the form of a group of geographically distant EPCIs which agree to cooperate to tackle a series of issues. This institutional form is valued by local actors as a "breath of fresh air" as it is not subject to the general logic of territorial reforms but offers more flexibility and opportunities for experimentation (Vanier, 2017). About 20 metropolitan poles have been established, only half of them located in metropolitan areas (Demazière et al., 2022). Some metropolitan poles explicitly aim to develop cooperation between a metropolis and territories with many small towns. For example, we can cite the *Caen Normandie Métropole*. With 1.1 million inhabitants, it is the third largest metropolitan pole in France. It brings together, around the agglomeration of Caen (300,000 inhabitants), 23 public inter-municipal cooperation establishments (EPCI) located in three departments. Half of the member EPCIs have less than 30,000 inhabitants. In Brittany, the Pays de Brest brings together the *Métropole Brest Océane* and six inter-municipalities which each have less than 50,000 inhabitants. It carries out the study, animation, coordination and management activities necessary for the implementation of actions of metropolitan interest. Metropolitan poles also provide representation, negotiation

and contractual functions with regional, national and European public authorities. However, a metropolitan pole is often nothing more than a forum for discussion. Therefore, it is questionable whether such a metropolitan governance structure can effectively address issues at the wider scale (Demazière, 2021b).

Italy: small towns looking for their place within fluid metropolitan institutions

The Italian metropolitan cities are in charge of various spatial planning instruments, through which they steer and coordinate the activities of the municipalities that they encompass. The most relevant is the Metropolitan Strategic Plan (*Piano Strategico Metropolitano* – PSM), which was introduced by the Delrio law and makes the Italian metropolitan cities the only administrative level provided with statutory strategic planning competence in the country. The PSM is valid for three years and follows a rather complex participatory process that engages all municipalities either individually or in aggregation in so-called territorial homogeneous zones (ZTOs), i.e. municipality groupings that are not administratively or politically recognised but are supposed to organise the activities of neighbouring municipalities (Crivello and Staricco, 2017). In addition to the PSM, two other instruments play a relevant role in coordinating the actions of municipalities: the General Metropolitan Territorial Plan (PTGM) and the Sustainable Urban Mobility Plan (PUMS). The PTGM is an updated version of the area-wide coordination plan developed by the Italian provinces, it translates into practice the PSM strategic vision for the main territorial structuring elements (roads, infrastructure, etc.) and is binding for the development of the municipal general regulatory plans. The PUMS guides metropolitan mobility policies and planning in the short, medium and long term with a ten-year horizon, in order to meet people's mobility needs and improve their quality of life (Vinci, 2019).

Despite the above, the engagement of small towns in metropolitan governance is still rather limited. This is partly due to the novelty of metropolitan cities, and to the fact that they still struggle to gain recognition within the overall administrative setting of the country. As a result, most metropolitan cities have only recently started drafting their first strategic plan, and only four of them have activated the aforementioned ZTOs for their territories (Turin, Milan, Genoa and Bologna). Whereas this may also depend on the actual culture of inter-municipal cooperation that characterises each area, the absence of ZTOs certainly hampers the effective participation of small municipalities in metropolitan governance. A similar situation concerns the development of the PTGMs and the PUMS, with many metropolitan cities lagging behind schedule here. A recent improvement in this regard concerns the introduction of the so-called Urban Integrated Plans (PUI), through which the central government provided metropolitan cities with an important implementation role. Small towns are involved through a process of consultation, and they are entitled to present their own projects for funding to the metropolitan authority either autonomously or jointly. However,

some challenges have also emerged here, with some metropolitan cities clearly separating activities that interest the core municipality from those that will impact the area outside, thus wasting a potential chance for the coordination of development.

Beside the activities initiated by the metropolitan cities, small municipalities can cooperate and coordinate their actions through other means, forming sub-territorial areas through specific planning instruments, such as the EU instrument of Community-Led Local Development (CLLD), or the National Strategy for Inner Area (Cotella and Vitale Brovarone, 2020). Similar initiatives of inter-municipal cooperation have been supported with varying levels of success since the 2000s by the national and regional governments, for instance with the launch of complex programmes such as PRUSSTs and the more recent Patti Territoriali (Caruso et al., 2015).

As an additional consequence of the Delrio reform, Italian small municipalities are increasingly coordinating their actions by creating unions of municipalities. This phenomenon varies very much from region to region and its actual magnitude and effectiveness depends on the actual level of territorial fragmentation, the specific transposition of the national law on unions of municipalities to regional legislation and the path-dependent culture of inter-municipal cooperation. Small municipalities located outside the perimeter of metropolitan cities do not engage with metropolitan governance to any relevant extent. In most cases metropolitan cities are larger than the functional phenomena, and cooperation with other territories is not a priority. Also, in the case of metropolitan cities that are smaller than the functional urban area or have territories that are misfitted in relation to it (as is, for instance, the case with Milan, Florence and Venice), the lack of cooperation with municipalities outside the metropolitan city perimeter represents a challenge that is not presently addressed.

In conclusion, the engagement of small towns with metropolitan governance in Italy is rather limited, if one excludes a few exceptional cases (e.g. Bologna, where the unions of municipalities play a strong role, or Bari, where the administrative configuration is characterised by a very low degree of fragmentation). This is due to a range of reasons including the youth of metropolitan authorities and the overall domination of the central municipality inherent to the nature of the reform.

Concluding remarks

The paper has explored how various institutional struggles exist that may hamper efforts toward effective metropolitan governance and limit the role that small municipalities play within it, thus relegating them to a dependent position in relation to the main centres. From the analysis it emerges that, in all three countries, the institution of metropolitan governments emerged as part of wider national processes of administrative restructuring. Austerity was a common motivation of national governments (whatever their ideological orientation) to try to counter the effects of the global economic crisis and decline. The outcome presents a certain

variety in terms of the resulting institutional landscapes and of the institutional processes that led to their design and consolidation.

When it comes to their spatial dimensions, the new metropolitan governments are heterogeneous in size, both in terms of population and area, between and within the three nations. In the two contrasted cases of France and Italy, the geography of the new institutions does not seem to fit the phenomena that they are intended to govern, whether the territories are too narrow or too wide. The reasons for this contrast with one another: the Italian reform has been characterised by a strong top-down flavour, and all relevant decisions were taken by central government with a focus on urgency of action and cost-saving logics; on the other hand, in France the MAPTAM law was partly negotiated by the mayors of large cities. While in the Italian case the national government copied the new institutions onto the perimeters of the provinces that they replaced, in the French case the concerned mayors were careful not to modify the governance of the future *métropoles* by including suburban municipalities. The English case appears to be more coherent, with Combined Authorities grouping very large districts (as compared to France and Italy) in city regions. However, the more bottom-up nature of the formation of Combined Authorities resulted in some unusual geographies due to local political preferences. Also, there is often a lack of alignment of Combined Authorities with other institutions (Pike et al., 2016: 16). The much smaller size of local administrative units in France and Italy means that the issue of small towns is much more prominent at the metropolitan level, whereas in England they operate more within local authorities (also because metropolitan planning is still weak)

With regard to planning instruments that concern metropolitan areas, the two previous dimensions – institutional and geographical – have a strong influence on the place of small towns in design and implementation. In England, not all Combined Authorities have planning powers and even if they do, the large size of the districts prevents the representation of small towns. In Italy, the metropolitan cities have an official competence in strategic spatial planning, but this is rarely used due to the lack of political weight of these new organisations, not to mention the fact that the lack of coherence of the perimeters with the functional urban regions is an obstacle to the implementation of such plans. In France, spatial planning is very much a matter for the municipalities. Even though it is increasingly carried out by groupings of municipalities, the priority is to coordinate the action of municipalities, not to harmonise the strategy with other groupings in a metropolitan area. In all three cases, the consequence is that metropolitan planning or development instruments that make room for small towns do not exist at all or do so only on paper. Therefore, it is difficult for small municipalities to interact with metropolitan development governance, whether from within or outside metropolitan areas.

Overall, it is possible to conclude that the metropolitan institutional settings that have developed in the three countries are far from being final and consolidated. Importantly, the

present configurations do not yet manage to grant the smaller urban areas adequate coordination capacities or defined roles in the governance process, indeed they are *de facto* very often subordinated to interests and policy choices defined in the core areas. In this light, additional research and policy actions are required to inform the further consolidation of metropolitan governance in the analysed countries in a way that is effective in engaging small towns and in intercepting their challenges and issues.

Acknowledgements

Conflict of interest

The authors do not perceive any conflict of interest that may arise from the publication of the present contribution.

References

Armondi, S. (2017). State rescaling and new metropolitan space in the age of austerity. Evidence from Italy. Geoforum, 81, 174–179. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2017.03.008

Ayres, S., Flinders, M., & Sandford, M. (2018). Territory, power and statecraft: understanding English devolution. Regional Studies, 52 (6), 853–864, https://doi.org/10.1080/00343404.2017.1360486

Barca, F. (2009), An Agenda for a Reformed Cohesion Policy. CEC.

Béhar, D. (2019). De l'égalité à la cohésion des territoires. Le modèle français à l'épreuve de la métropolisation. Géographie, économie, société, 21 (3), 251–267. https://doi.org/10.3166/ges. 2019.0015

Bolgherini, S. (2016). Crisis-driven reforms and local discretion: an assessment of Italy and Spain. Italian Political Science Review/Rivista Italiana di Scienza Politica, 46 (1), 71–91. https://doi.org/10.1017/ipo.2015.23

Brenner, N. (2009). Open questions on state rescaling. *Cambridge Journal of Regions, Economy and Society*, 2 (1), 123–139. https://doi.org/10.1093/cjres/rsp002

Calafati, A. (2016). The metropolitan question in Italy. Rivista Italiana di Economia Demografia e Statistica, 70 (2), 15–34.

Caruso, N., Cotella, G., & Pede, E. (2015). From crisis to crisis: dynamics of change and emerging models of governance in the Turin Metropolitan Area. In J. Knieling & F. Othengrafen (Eds.), Cities in Crisis: Reflections on the Socio-Spatial Impacts of the Economic Crisis and the Strategies and Approaches Applied by Southern European Cities (pp. 287–307). Routledge.

Casavola, D, Cotella, G, & Vitale Brovarone, E. (2024). Engaging small and medium-sized towns in metropolitan governance: evidence from Italy. European Journal of Spatial Development, 21(3), 74-103.

Cheshire, P. (2018). Broken market or broken policy? The unintended consequences of restrictive planning. National Institute Economic Review, 245, R9–R19. https://doi.org/10.1177/002795011824500111

Coombes, M. (2014). From city-region concept to boundaries for governance: the English case. Urban Studies, 51 (11), 2426–2443. https://doi.org/10.1177/0042098013493482

Cotella, G., & Brovarone, E. V. (2020). The Italian national strategy for inner areas: a place-based approach to regional development. In J. Bański (Eds.), Dilemmas of Regional and Local Development (pp. 50–71). Routledge.

Cotella, G., Othengrafen, F., Papaioannou, A., & Tulumello, S. (2016). Socio-political and socio-spatial implications of the economic crisis and austerity politics in Southern European cities. In J. Knieling & F. Othengrafen (eds.) Cities in Crisis: Reflections on the Socio-Spatial Impacts of the Economic Crisis and the Strategies and Approaches Applied by Southern European Cities (pp. 27–47). Routledge.

Cotella, G., & Vitale Brovarone, E. (2021). Rethinking urbanisation after COVID-19: What role for the EU cohesion policy. Town Planning Review, 92 (3), 411–418. https://doi.org/10.3828/tpr.2020.54

Cotella, G., & Berisha, E. (2021). Inter-municipal spatial planning as a tool to prevent small-town competition: the case of the Emilia-Romagna region. In J. Bański (Ed.), The Routledge Handbook of Small Towns (pp. 313–329). Routledge.

Crivello, S. Staricco, L. (2017). Institutionalizing metropolitan cities in Italy: success and limits of a centralistic, simplifying approach. Urban Research and Practice, 10 (2), 228–238. https://doi.org/10.1080/17535069.2017.1307001

De Luca, G. (2016). The paradigmatic case of the metropolitan city of Florence. Procedia – Social and Behavioral Sciences, 223, 108–112. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2016.05.320

Demazière, C. (2018). Strategic spatial planning in a situation of fragmented local government: the case of France. disP – The Planning Review, 54 (2), 56–74. https://doi.org/10.1080/02513625.2018.1487645

Demazière, C. (2020). The multiple agencies of metropolitan institutions: is there convergence? In K. Zimmermann, D. Galland, & J. Harrison (Eds.), Metropolitan

Regions, Planning and Governance (pp. 41–57). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-25632-6_3

Demazière, C. (2021a). Exploring the creation of the metropolitan city-region government: the cases of England, France and Italy. European Planning Studies, 29 (11), 2038–2055, https://doi.org/10.1080/09654313.2021.1923666

Demazière, C. (2021b). METRO – The role and future perspectives of Cohesion Policy in the planning of Metropolitan Areas and Cities, Case study Lyon. ESPON EGTC.

Demazière, C., Feiertag, P., Paris, D., Zimmermann, K., & Dubois, J. (2022). The development of metropolises in France and Germany. In U. Grabski-Kieron, E. Gustedt, C. Demazière & D. Paris (Eds.), Cities and Metropolises in France and Germany (pp. 58–79). ARL.

Dlablac, O., Medir, L., Tomàs, M., & Lackowska, M. (2018). Metropolitan challenges and reform pressures across Europe – the perspectives of city mayors. Local Government Studies, 44 (2), 229–254. https://doi.org/10.1080/03003930.2017.1411811

Dolez, B. (2015). Le cumul des mandats, la professionnalisation des élus et la réforme territoriale. Revue française d'administration publique, 156, 931–944. https://doi.org/10.3917/rfap.156.0931

ESPON (2021), METRO - The role and future perspectives of Cohesion Policy in the planning of Metropolitan Areas and Cities, Main Report. Luxembourg: ESPON EGTC.

Fedeli, V. (2017). Metropolitan governance and metropolitan cities in Italy: outdated solutions for processes of urban regionalisation? Raumforschung und Raumordnung, 75 (3), 265–274. https://doi.org/10.1007/s13147-016-0430-7

Geppert, A. (2015). Planning without a spatial development perspective? The French case. In G.-J. Knaap, N. Nedović-Budić & A. Carbonell (Eds.) Planning for States and Nation-States in the U.S. and Europe (pp. 381–410). Lincoln Institute of Land Policy.

Hall, P. (1974). The containment of urban England. The Geographical Journal, 140 (3), 386–408. https://doi.org/10.2307/1796533

Haughton, G. (2020). Constrained governance rescaling and the development of a new spatial framework for Greater Manchester. In V. Lingua & V. Balz (Eds.), Shaping Regional Futures (pp. 73–85). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-23573-4_6

Haughton, G., Deas, I., Hincks, S. & Ward, K. (2016). Mythic Manchester: Devo Manc, the Northern Powerhouse and rebalancing the English economy. Cambridge Journal of Regions, Economy and Society, 9 (2), 355–370. https://doi.org/10.1093/cjres/rsw004

Harrison, J. (2012). Life after regions? The evolution of city-regionalism in England. Regional Studies, 46 (9), 1243–1259. https://doi.org/10.1080/00343404.2010.521148

Healey, P. & Williams, R. (1993). European urban planning systems: diversity and convergence. Urban Studies, 30 (4–5), 701–720. https://doi.org/10.1080/00420989320081881

Hulst, R. & Van Montfort, A. (2011). Institutional features of inter-municipal cooperation: cooperative arrangements and their national contexts. Public Policy and Administration, 27 (2), 121–144. https://doi.org/10.1177/0952076711403026

Jennings, W. & Stoker, G. (2018). The divergent dynamics of cities and towns: geographical polarisation and Brexit. The Political Quarterly, 90 (S2), 155–166. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-923X.12612

Kantor, P. & Savitch, H. (2010). The politics of city regions in comparative perspective. Pôle Sud, 32, 119–136. https://doi.org/10.3917/psud.032.0119

Knox, P. L. & Mayer, H. (2012). Europe's internal periphery: small towns in the context of reflexive polycentricity. In A. Lorentzen & B. van Heur (Eds.), Cultural Political Economy of Small Cities (pp. 156–172). Routledge.

Krätke, S. (2007). Metropolisation of the European Economic Territory as a consequence of increasing specialisation of urban agglomerations in the knowledge economy. European Planning Studies, 15 (1), 1–27. https://doi.org/10.1080/09654310601016424

Kunzmann, K. (2004). An agenda for creative governance in city regions. disP, 58 (3), 2–10.

Lefèvre, C. (1998). Metropolitan government and governance in western countries: a critical review. International Journal of Urban and Regional Research, 22 (1), 9–25. https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2427.00120

Lefèvre, C., & Weir, M. (2010). Building metropolitan institutions. In K. Mossberger, S. Clarke & P. John (Eds.), Urban Politics (pp. 624–641). Oxford University Press.

Marvin, S., Harding, A., & Robson, B. (2006). A Framework for City-Regions, Working Paper 2 - City-Regions: Policy and practice. Lessons from France, Germany and the Netherlands. Office of the Deputy Prime Minister.

OECD (2018). Key Data on Local and Regional Governments in the European Union. OECD.

Ostrom, V., Tiebout, C. M., & Warren, R. (1961). The organization of government in metropolitan areas: a theoretical inquiry. The American Political Science Review, 55 (4), 831–842.

Parker, G., & Salter, K. (2016). Five years of neighbourhood planning – a review of take-up and distribution. Town and Country Planning, 85 (5), 181–188.

Pasquier, R. (2016). Crise économique et différenciation territoriale. Les régions et les métropoles dans la décentralisation française. Revue internationale de politique comparée, 23 (3), 327–353. https://doi.org/10.3917/ripc.233.0327

Pike, A., Kempton, L., Marlow, D., O'Brien, P., & Tomaney, J. (2016). Decentralisation: Issues, Principles and Practice. CURDS.

Pumain, D., & Rozenblat, C. (2019). Introduction: a global view of urbanization. In C. Rozenblat, D. Pumain & E. Velasquez (Eds.), International and Transnational Perspectives on Urban Systems (pp. ix–xviii). Springer.

Rivière, D. (2010). La question métropolitaine: éclairages italiens. L'information géographique, 74 (4), 71–90.

Salet, W., Vermeulen, R., Savini, F., Dembski, S., Thierstein, A., Nears, P. & al. (2015). Planning for the new European metropolis: functions, politics, and symbols. Planning Theory and Practice, 16(2), 251–275. https://doi.org/10.1080/14649357.2015.1021574

Sandford, M. (2020). Devolution to local government in England. Briefing Paper Number 07029. London: House of Commons Library. Retrieved from https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/sn07029/

Servillo, L., Atkinson, R., Smith, I., Russo, A., Sýkora, L., Demazière, C. & Hamdouch, A. (2014) TOWN. Small and Medium Sized Towns in their Functional Territorial Context. ESPON.

Sharpe, L. J. (Ed.) (1995). The Government of World Cities: The Future of the Metro Model. Wiley.

Shaw, K., &·Tewdwr-Jones, M. (2017). "Disorganised devolution": reshaping metropolitan governance in England in a period of austerity. Raumforschung und Raumordnung, 75 (3), 211–224. https://doi.org/10.1007/s13147-016-0435-2

Sturzaker, J. (2010). The exercise of power to limit the development of new housing in the English countryside. Environment and Planning A, 42 (4), 1001–1016. https://doi.org/10.1068/a42297

Sturzaker, J., & Nurse, A. (2020). Rescaling Urban Governance: Planning, Localism and Institutional Change. Policy Press.

Sturzaker, J., Sykes, O., & Dockerill, B. (2022). Disruptive localism – how far does clientelism shape the prospects of neighbourhood planning in deprived urban communities? Planning Theory and Practice, 23 (1), 43–59. https://doi.org/10.1080/14649357.2021.2003425

Swianiewicz, P., & Teles, F. (2019). The institutionalization of inter-municipal arrangements in Europe: findings from the unusual suspects. Transylvanian Review of Administrative Sciences, 57, 119–136. https://doi.org/10.24193/tras.57E.8

Sykes, O. (2018). Post-geography worlds, new dominions, left behind regions, and 'other' places: unpacking some spatial imaginaries of the UK's 'Brexit' debate. Space and Polity, 22 (2), 137–161. https://doi.org/10.1080/13562576.2018.1531699

Sykes, O., & Nurse, A. (2017). Cities and regional development in England: a carnival of scales and regionalisms? Pôle Sud, 1, 79–96. https://doi.org/10.3917/psud.046.0079

Sykes, O., & Nurse, A. (2021) The scale of the century? – The new city regionalism in England and some experiences from Liverpool. European Planning Studies, 29 (11), 2056–2078. https://doi.org/10.1080/09654313.2021.1931044

Tomàs, M. (2020). Metropolitan revolution or metropolitan evolution? The (dis)continuities in metropolitan institutional reforms. In K. Zimmermann, D. Galland & J. Harrison (Eds.), Metropolitan Regions, Planning and Governance (pp. 28–40). Springer.

Tulumello, S., Cotella, G., & Othengrafen, F. (2020). Spatial planning and territorial governance in Southern Europe between economic crisis and austerity policies. International Planning Studies, 25 (1), 72–87. https://doi.org/10.1080/13563475.2019.1701422

Vanier, M. (2017). Le soldat pôle métropolitain: itinéraire d'un rescapé. Le point de vue d'un chercheur. In B. Bariol-Mathais (Ed.), Les pôles métropolitains, accélérateurs de coopérations territoriales (pp. 18–19). FNAU.

Vinci, I. (2019). Governing the metropolitan dimension: a critical perspective on institutional reshaping and planning innovation in Italy. European Journal of Spatial Development, 17 (1), 1–21.

Ward, M. (2023). City Deals. House of Commons Library.

Wollmann, H. (2008). Reformen dezentral-lokaler Organisationsstrukturen zwischen Territorialität und Funktionalität – England, Schweden, Frankreich und Deutschland im Vergleich. In H. Heinelt & A. Vetter (Eds.), Lokale Politikforschung heute (pp. 197–226). VS Verlag.

Wood, R. (1958), Metropolitan government, 1975: an extrapolation of trends. The new metropolis: Greenbelt, grass roots or Gargantua?, American Political Science Review, 52 (1), 108–122.

Zimmermann, K., Galland, D., & Harrison, J. (Eds.) (2020). Metropolitan Regions, Planning and Governance. Springer.