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# Institutionalising Metropolitan Cities in Italy. Success and limits of a centralistic, simplifying approach

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## Abstract

The article presents an overview of the recent institutionalisation in Italy of the “Metropolitan cities” as introduced by the Law 56/2014. The study analyses the process of institutionalization of this new level of government, the rationales of the reform promoted by the Law and the reasons for its success in making the Metropolitan cities effective. Problematic issues that the reform has not solved and that can weaken its effectiveness are also examined, underpinning specifically the question of the boundaries and the inner spatial organization of Metropolitan cities, and the rescaling of functions from Regions and Municipalities to Metropolitan cities.

**Keywords:** Metropolitan city, Delrio Law, Province, government, governance.

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## 1. Introduction

The aim of this article is to present an overview of the recent institutionalisation in Italy of the so-called “Metropolitan cities” through the Law 56/2014, also known as Delrio Law, after the name of the Minister who promoted it. This act, approved by the Italian Parliament in April 2014, reformed the structure of the sub-national levels of government, particularly by institutionalizing Metropolitan cities in place of a few Provinces.

Traditionally, the Italian structure of sub-national government used to be organized on three spatial levels: the Municipality, the Province and the Region (for a general overview, see European Committee of the Regions, 2012). Municipalities, currently over 8.000 in Italy, have a large amount of autonomy in the Italian system; their administrative responsibilities cover fields such as social welfare, education, culture and recreation, spatial planning, local police. The over 100 Provinces are mainly in charge of decentralised implementation of State responsibilities and play a coordinating role for supra-municipal issues such as agriculture, environment, natural reserves and parks, labour market, maintenance of school facilities, tourism, suburban road public transport. Finally, there are 20 Regions which have concurrent legislative power with respect to any matters not expressly attributed to exclusive State competence, i.e. health, foreign trade, scientific and technological research, food, rail transport etc.

This three-tiers system was based on the principles of homogeneity and uniformity, rooted in the Napoleonic model of public administration: the authorities of the same tiers are committed to the same tasks and organizational rules (Boggero, 2016; Mattarella, 2010). This organization proved quite problematic in the case of the Provinces, which are rather heterogeneous: some provinces are mainly rural, while others host major cities like Rome, Milan, Naples or Turin. In particular, over the years, the functions conferred to Provinces turned out to be not adequate and sufficient to promote the socioeconomic development of Italian main urban areas. As intermediate authorities between the powerful Regions and the identity-wrapped Municipalities, Provinces became particular vulnerable in the present austerity period (Bespalova & Andersen, 2013).

In 2001, a revision of the Italian Constitution marked the moving from the principle of uniformity in the distribution of duties to local bodies to the opposite principle of differentiation between structures of the same type: different kinds of local authorities can carry out different tasks in different areas of the country (Boggero, 2016). One corollary of this change was the introduction of the Metropolitan cities among the *constitutive entities* that compose the Republic, together with Municipalities, Provinces, Regions and the State. This new institution was supposed to be able to support the management and promotion of metropolitan area development more effectively than the Province.

Despite the Constitutional provision, Metropolitan cities remained on paper for fourteen years. It was only on 1<sup>st</sup> January 2015 that they were really activated, thanks to a State centralistic action that was launched by the Delrio Law. This approach was successful in making Metropolitan cities effective, but it cannot be taken for granted that they will prove more effective than the former Provinces, because of some problematic issues that will be discussed later in this paper. On a theoretical level, the Italian experience in the introduction of a metropolitan level of government touches important nodes of debates at the core of urban studies. For example, it deals with the rescaling of powers, the governance of development in urban areas, issues of democracy and participation, the need for political reforms in times of austerity (see, for example, Sadioglu & Dede, 2016). Moreover, the concrete definition of the boundaries of the metropolitan city may be connected to debates on the delimitation of functional urban areas and other kinds of urban

systems (such as urban daily systems, local labour systems, functional urban regions, etc. – see for example Bartaletti, 2009; Karlsson & Olsson, 2006). However, this short essay will not develop the argument in all these theoretical directions, but it rather aims at proposing an informed overview of the reform in order to discuss the limits and potentials of the Law.

In order to develop the argument, the article is organized as follows. The next section will analyse the reasons of the delay in the institutionalization of the Italian Metropolitan cities. In section 3, the logics of the reform promoted by the Delrio Law and the reason for its success in making the Metropolitan cities effective will be explained. Sections 4 and 5 will examine two problematic issues that the reform has not solved – and that can weaken the effectiveness of the new institution –: the question of the boundaries and of the inner spatial organization of the Metropolitan cities, and the reallocation of competences from Regions and Municipalities to Metropolitan cities.

## **2. Two decades of genesis**

The hypothesis at the basis of Metropolitan cities concerns the idea that, within metropolitan areas, the main city and the smaller edge towns are characterised by close economic and social interdependences, which are, however, beyond the jurisdiction of individual municipal governments (see the classic work of Pred, 1977). The quest for the most effective institutional configurations to manage these areas is at the core of a long-standing debate among academics and policy makers (Feiock, 2010; Heinelt & Kübler, 2004). The proposed solutions range from purely informal associations of local governments to the institutionalisation of new sub-national government units. Between those two extremes (governance vs. government), many different intermediate models can be found: they vary not only among countries, but sometimes also among metropolitan areas within the same country (Ahrend & Schumann, 2014).

In Italy, the Metropolitan city, intended as an institutional level between Municipalities and Provinces, was first introduced in the Italian administrative organization by Law 142/1990, ten years before the Constitutional provision. The law defined nine Metropolitan cities (Turin, Milan, Genoa, Venice, Bologna, Florence, Rome, Naples and Bari), but did not draw their boundaries, leaving this task to Regions, after consultation with Municipalities and Provinces. The successive Law 436/1993 made the delimitation of the Metropolitan cities by the Regions optional, and no longer compulsory, while Law 265/1999 delegated the institutionalization of Metropolitan cities to Municipalities and Provinces, and no longer to Regions. Yet in 2009, after the introduction of Metropolitan cities in Constitution, Law 42/2009 confirmed this delegation.

This bottom-up approach was aimed to reduce possible local conflicts deriving from the introduction of a new government level, by entrusting existing local governments the authority to define boundaries, organization and tasks of this new level. But it proved ineffective, for two reasons. First, Municipalities, Provinces and Regions were reluctant to lose power and political roles by transferring them to Metropolitan Cities, and with their inertia and vetoes boycotted the process (Mantini, 1996). Second, the “doughnut dilemma” was not dealt with. Metropolitan cities were supposed to include all the towns and suburbs that are linked to the main city by strong interdependences (interdependences that Metropolitan cities should manage), but the extent of this functional area may be quite different from that of the Province. What to do with the doughnut, i.e. the territory between the boundaries of the functional area and those of the Province (Mangiamei, 2012)?

Waiting for a real activation of the “hard” *government* solution, since the Nineties many urban areas experimented a wide set of “soft” *governance* structures and informal inter-municipal cooperation forms to manage metropolitan issues (Governa & Salone, 2004; Tortorella & Allulli, 2014): among them, *convenzioni* (conventions among Municipalities to coordinate their own resources in order to deliver services more effectively and efficiently), *accordi di programma* (agreements favouring institutional cooperation in pursuing the operational outcomes of policy decisions), *consorzi* (voluntary single-purpose partnerships), *patti territoriali* (agreements to coordinate local policies and actions to promote economic development) (Ermini & Salvucci, 2008). In this sense, Rivièrè (2012) has defined the metropolitan question in Italy as something paradoxical: the governance model became dominant just in the years when the government solution was proposed by law.

### 3. The rationale of the reform

This impasse was overcome by the Delrio Law, which aimed at solving the two above-mentioned problematic issues adopting a centralistic, top-down simplifying action. First, the decision about the institutionalization of the Metropolitan cities was assumed directly by the State, and no longer attributed to sub-national institutions. Second, it has been decided to make the boundaries of Metropolitan cities the same of the corresponding Provinces (for example, the territory of the Metropolitan City of Milan is the same of the Province of Milan): in this way, any new institutional level was created and the delimitation problem was circumvented. On 1<sup>st</sup> January 2015, nine Metropolitan cities replaced the former Provinces of Turin, Milan, Genoa, Venice, Florence, Bologna, Roma, Naples and Bari<sup>1</sup>; by January 2016, all of them adopted a Statute and became operative.

The aims of the Delrio reform was threefold.

First, it aimed at cost containments and savings, as the newly appointed councillors of the remaining Provinces and Metropolitan cities do not receive a salary. While governors of former Provinces were elected by citizens, the mayor of the chief town of the Metropolitan city is automatically nominated mayor of the Metropolitan city, and the Metropolitan Council members are identified among (and appointed by) the mayors and the Council officials of the Municipalities of the Metropolitan city. Also the remaining Provinces (i.e. the Provinces which have not been turned in Metropolitan Cities) have been turned by the Delrio Law into local authorities based on indirect democracy: their officials have been reduced in number, and are now appointed by Municipalities’ mayors and councillors (who, in turn, keep to be elected by popular vote). In this way, councillors of Metropolitan cities and Provinces do not need a new salary, in addition to the one paid for their activity in Municipalities.

Second, the law tried to promote inter-municipal cooperation as the main governance approach at the intermediate level between Municipalities and Regions. This was supposed to be true not only for

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<sup>1</sup> In 2016, also the tenth Metropolitan city identified by the Delrio Act, Reggio Calabria, was activated. The list of the ten Metropolitan cities proposed in the law has been criticized as inconsistent, as it does not seem to refer to clear spatial or demographic parameters: for example, it does not include areas such as Bergamo or Padua, whose population weight is greater than Reggio Calabria’s one. Four more Metropolitan cities were activated by Italian Regions having Special status and autonomy, which were empowered by the Delrio Law to establish themselves this new institution in their territory: Catania, Palermo and Messina in Sicily in 2016, and Cagliari in Sardinia in 2017.

Metropolitan Cities (which, de facto, are managed by an assembly of municipal mayors and councillors), but also in the rest of the Italian territory through so-called 'Municipal Unions'. In fact, the Delrio Law was conceived as a first step toward a more general reform of local authorities, aimed at completely abolishing the Provinces. In the same month when the Delrio Law was approved (April 2014), another law was proposed to change a more general part of the Italian Constitution, cancelling the Provinces and re-scaling their tasks, on the one hand to the upper institutional level, i.e. the Regions, and on the other hand to Municipal Unions, i.e. inter-municipal cooperation forms that the same Law 56/2014 promotes. This law was approved by the Parliament in April 2016, but rejected by a popular referendum in December 2016: at the moment, therefore, Provinces survive.

Third, the law conferred to Metropolitan Cities not only functions originally held by Provinces, but also new ones concerning infrastructures, services and national and international relations. Nowadays, the ten Metropolitan cities directly identified by the Law 56/2014 cover 16% of the national territory and host 17% of the municipalities, but their economic and functional relevance is much higher, as they accommodate 36% of the Italian population, produce 39% of the GDP and create 42% of the Italian patents presented to the European Patent Office. Just because the main competitive and innovative socio-economic assets are concentrated in Metropolitan cities, they are conceived as institutions which should not only address the needs of their local communities (the mission of Provinces and Municipal Unions), but they also – and above all – are supposed to contribute to national development, first of all by activating relations and networks with other European cities (Pizzetti, 2015).

#### **4. The spatial organization of Metropolitan cities: the question of boundaries and inner subdivision**

The Delrio Law has been undoubtedly effective in activating the Metropolitan cities thanks to its top-down approach, that simplified two problematic aspects of the bottom-up approach adopted by previous normative acts, i.e. the question of the metropolitan boundaries and the redistribution of power and tasks between local authorities level. However, this success does not necessary mean that the Metropolitan Cities will prove to be a relevant tool for promoting effective metropolitan management, just because of this *Gordian-knot cutting* approach (Calafati, 2016).

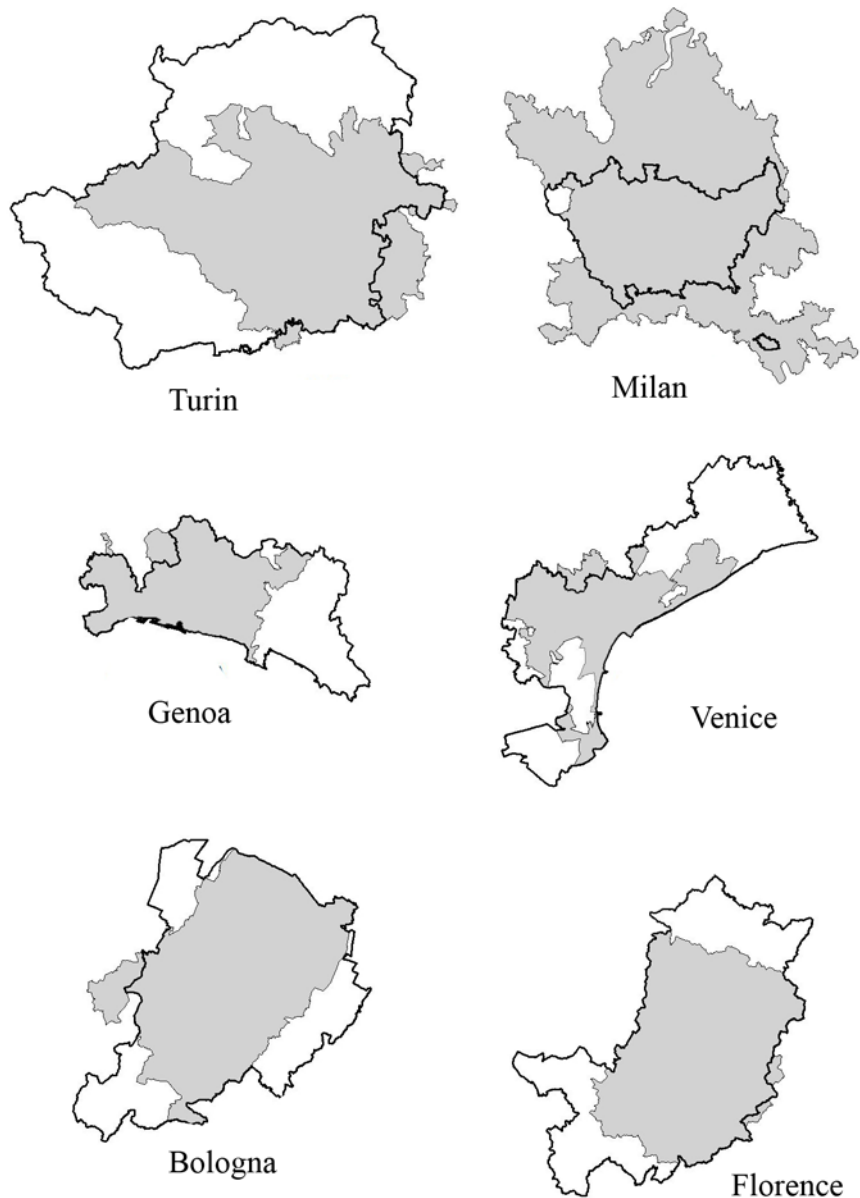
First of all, as we anticipated, the boundaries of the “de facto” metropolitan areas only in few cases correspond to the boundaries of the former Provinces; therefore, it cannot be taken for granted that the new-born Metropolitan cities will actually be able to manage those functional interdependences that underpin metropolitan dynamics<sup>2</sup>.

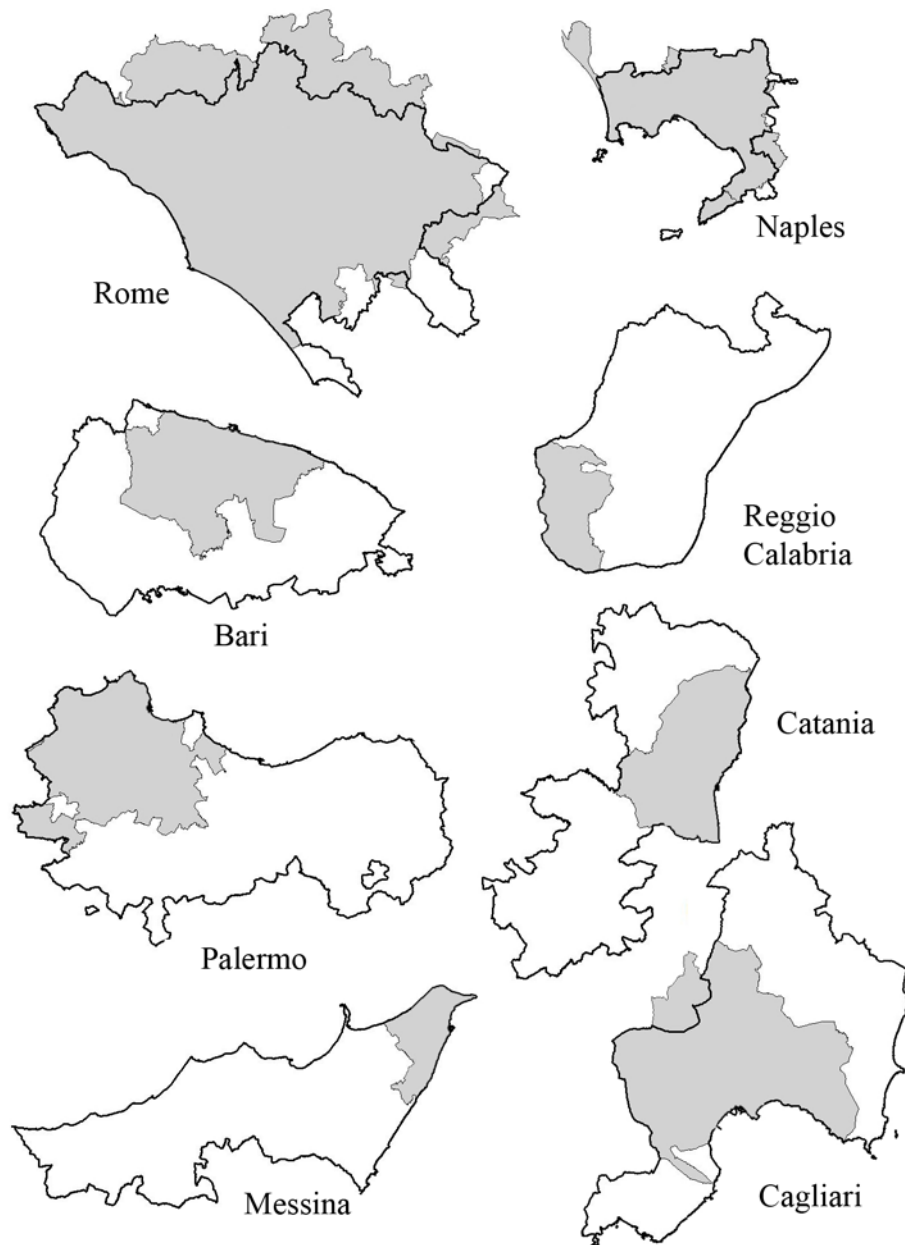
In fact, it is just the case to mention that different procedures and algorithms have been proposed in scientific literature for the delimitation of functional urban areas (Calafati & Veneri, 2013). Espon (2007),

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<sup>2</sup> An example of these potential difficulties concerns transport planning. In the guidelines for developing and implementing Sustainable urban mobility plans (SUMP), European Commission (2013) recommends that SUMP should address spatial interdependencies and traffic flows by referring to travel-to-work areas. However, mobility plans are developed at the municipal level in Italy, as no metropolitan transport authorities exist at an intermediate level between Municipalities and Metropolitan cities (with the exception of Turin, whose authority however has effective legal power only on public transports). Put it differently, metropolitan cities' mobility planning (as we will see in section 5) may be inadequate for the regulation of traffic flows.

for example, identifies morphological urban areas (MUAs) as all the contiguous municipalities with more than 650 inhab./km<sup>2</sup> (including those municipalities not reaching this threshold but enclosed by the others); functional urban areas (FUAs) are then determined as the labour basin of MUAs; they include all the municipalities having 10% or more of the occupied active population commuting towards MUAs. If we compare the boundaries of the Italian Metropolitan cities with those of the Espon's FUAs (figure 1), we can find that only in two cases (Bologna, Florence), the FUA is quite similar to the Metropolitan city. In most cases, the FUA is narrower than the Metropolitan city, and in three cases (Milan, Rome and Naples) it is wider.





*Figure 1 A comparison between the boundaries of the Metropolitan cities and the boundaries of their Espon FUAs (in grey)*

If we consider the delimitation approach proposed by Oecd (2013), the non-correspondence of the boundaries is even more apparent (figure 2). Oecd defines an urban core as a high-density cluster of contiguous grid cells of 1 km<sup>2</sup> with a density of at least 1,500 inhabitants per km<sup>2</sup> and the filled gaps, and a total population of at least 50,000 people in Europe; functional urban areas consist then of all municipalities with at least 15% of their employed residents working in the same urban core. Applied for example to Turin and Naples, this approach reveals huge differences between the extension of OECD's metropolitan areas and Metropolitan cities. In Turin, the Oecd's functional urban area is made up of only 89 out of the 315 municipalities that are included in the Metropolitan city. In Naples, the FUA gathers 116 municipalities, instead of the 92 of the former Province. Therefore, in the first case the Metropolitan city manages over 200 municipalities which are not really interdependent with the central town; on the



contrary, in Naples 24 municipalities are beyond the jurisdiction of the Metropolitan city, although strictly interdependent with the central town.

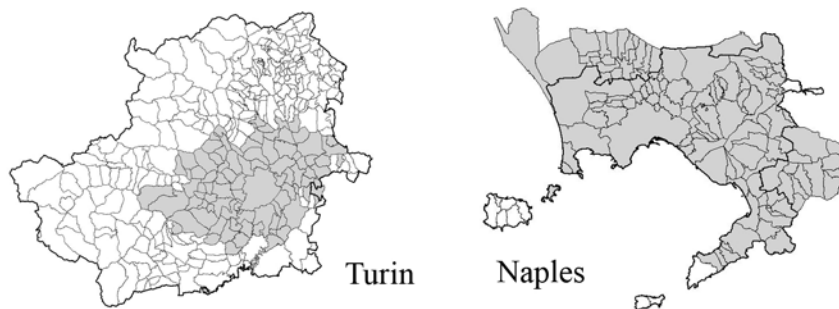


Figure 2. A comparison between the boundaries of the Metropolitan cities of Turin and Naples and the boundaries of their Oecd FUAs (in grey)

Where the FUA is narrower than the Metropolitan cities, as in Turin, the portion of the metropolitan City surrounding the FUA is generally rural or mountain; so, it need specific strategies and policies, which in general has to be diversified from those promoted for the “de facto” metropolitan area. The Delrio Law allowed Metropolitan cities to articulate themselves in spatial “homogeneous areas”, which are not new local authorities, but rather geographical subdivisions for adapting measures and actions to particular territorial conformation (i.e., mountainous areas) or socio-economic characteristics. But just in the case of Turin, these areas turned out to be drawn mainly to counter-balance the strength of the main urban centre: the two rings of Municipalities surrounding it were partitioned in five homogeneous areas, and now the risk of competition between these areas could prevent a coherent and cohesive planning and management even inside the FUA (Staricco, 2015).

## 5. The difficult reallocation on competences

As it was anticipated in section 3, according to the Delrio Law Metropolitan cities not only preserve all the fundamental functions traditionally assigned to Provinces – concerning agriculture, environment, school facilities, tourism, etc.<sup>3</sup> –, but are also given new competences ranging from strategic and general spatial planning to coordination and management of local infrastructures and general interest services, to promotion of economic and social development. The Delrio Law doesn’t define administrative rules to realize and implement these functions, which in most cases overlap with competences of Regions and Municipalities (as outlined in table 1); therefore, a rescaling of tasks and power is needed to empower Metropolitan cities, but Regions in particular are slowing down this process.

| <i>Function</i>    | <i>Clashing and overlapping competences</i>                         |
|--------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Strategic planning | Strategic plans are generally promoted by the Municipalities at the |

<sup>3</sup> The provinces lose many of their traditional competences: with the Law 56/2014 they maintain only urban coordination, transport and maintenance of schools.

|                                        |                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
|----------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                                        | FUA level, or by Regions (see for examples the Smart Specialization Strategy documents for the EU)                                                                                                            |
| Economic and social development        | The main financial resources for promoting this development are European structural funds, which are managed by Regions                                                                                       |
| General spatial planning               | Metropolitan cities develop “metropolitan general spatial plans” which become effective after being approved by Regional laws                                                                                 |
| Mobility and transport infrastructures | At present, Metropolitan cities can just manage suburban roads and on-road public transports (i.e. busses), while metropolitan railways (the main transport service at this scale) are under Regions’ control |
| Coordination of public services        | Most supra-municipal public services (professional education and training, water supply, waste disposal, park management etc.) are managed by Regions, which can transfer them to Metropolitan cities         |
| Coordination of ICT infrastructures    | Regions manage ICT broadband infrastructures and related services                                                                                                                                             |

*Table 1. Inter-institutional conflicts concerning the new functions conferred to Metropolitan Cities by Law 56/2014*

If, for example, we consider strategic planning, the Metropolitan city has to adopt, and to yearly update, a three years strategic plan. Strategic planning didn’t use to be managed at the provincial level, but rather at the municipal one: in the last fifteen years many major Italian cities (such as Turin, Bologna, Florence, Bologna) have promoted strategic plans, often on some metropolitan functional spatial scale (Sartorio, 2005). The relationship between these two tools (the voluntary bottom-up strategic plan promoted at a FUA level and the compulsory plan that the Metropolitan city has to adopt) is proving quite controversial (Donati, 2016): for example, in 2014, after a two-years participatory process, the Municipality of Turin (together with 37 surrounding Municipalities) had approved its third “metropolitan” strategic plan, while the Metropolitan city of Turin is still preparing (as requested by the Delrio Law) its first strategic plan (Crivello, 2016).

Strategic planning introduced by Law 56/2014 could be a meaningful innovation if interpreted by Metropolitan cities according to rationales and perspectives typically mobilised in regional planning. In this sense, it could be the base for another function of Metropolitan cities, i.e. the promotion and coordination of economic and social development through EU Structural Funds, which till now have been traditionally managed by Regions. Also in this field, the relationship between Regions and Metropolitan cities has yet to be defined and regulated: the most credible path for the future is the development of mandatory cooperation frameworks, for example in terms of provision of binding advices by Metropolitan cities in the management and planning of regional issues. But most Regions seem reluctant to concede their role in managing European funds, and the Partnership Agreement signed between Italy and the EU in Brussels on

29th October 2014 (referring to the 2014-2020 Structural Funds period) has confirmed the pivotal role of Regions.

The relationship with the Regions is crucial also for a third task assigned by the Delrio Law to Metropolitan cities: the adoption of a “metropolitan general spatial plan”. The Law does not define details about this plan; they should be defined by each Region in their urban and regional planning laws. At present, most Regions have not yet regulated this new planning tool, and Metropolitan cities cannot implement one of their fundamental functions.

## 6. Concluding remarks

The centralistic, simplifying approach of the Delrio reform was successful in activating Metropolitan cities fifteen years after their constitutional provision, but an effective metropolitan governance is a goal yet to be reached. The two main problems that prevented this institutionalization for over twenty years – the gap between the legal city and the actual city, and the reshuffling of power between administrative levels – have not really been solved by the Law 56/2014. The actual impact of the reform will depend in particular on the decisions of Regions in rescaling tasks and powers: so far, Regions have been reluctant in transferring some of their competences to Metropolitan cities (Bolgherini & Lippi, 2016). At the moment, in a few cases (Turin, Milan, Florence and Bologna) a sort of cooperative framework has been set up: Metropolitan cities are required to conclude *ad hoc* agreements with their Regions for most initiatives, which are then bound to the ultimate will of the Region. In other cases (Venice, Naples and Bari), Regions seem do not willing to delegate functions and to promote a cooperative approach (Boggero, 2016).

By comparing European polycentric areas (Amsterdam, Rotterdam-Den, Lille, Barcelona and Ruhrgebiet), Pioletti and Soriani (2016) have argued that effective metropolitan governance generally depends on cooperative and no-statutory efforts. In this perspective, the Italian top-down approach, based on government-driven regulation, seems on the one hand too strict (as for example it does not take into consideration local differences in spatial correspondence between FUA and administrative boundaries) and on the other hand too weak (as it does not impose Regions to transfer the required functions to Metropolitan cities). Moreover, the Delrio Law does not define details for this transfer, nor any economic incentive or bonus has been introduced in order to encourage the process, as cost containment proved dominant in the reform rationale: despite being charged of additional functions, Metropolitan cities had to undergo a 30% cut of their personnel and a general reduction of financial contribution not only from the Regions, but also, quite paradoxically, from the State. In fact, although it is difficult to detect the actual connections between the regime of austerity characterising Italian urban policies (and cities more in general; see for example Tonkiss, 2013) and the reform process described in this short commentary, it is plausible that the logics of the so-called austerity urbanism have deeply influenced the initiative, limiting the scope for a radical redefinition of Italian urban planning. Moreover, if we consider that Metropolitan cities are not democratically legitimized by direct popular election, they can turn out to be very weak political actors, and the Delrio reform can be – even more after the rejection of Province abolition by the recent popular referendum – not so relevant in reshaping Italian local authorities.

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