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Research Article

Engaging small and medium-sized towns in metropolitan governance: evidence from Italy

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Abstract

Metropolitan areas represent nowadays the main drivers of global development. Existing territorial units are challenged by phenomena that are hardly manageable within their fixed administrative boundaries, putting traditional spatial governance models into crisis. A growing number of governance experimentations have emerged in Europe aiming to address the metropolitan dimension. In the Italian context, this process led to the introduction of 14 Città Metropolitane, that replaced the respective provinces in particularly complex territorial contexts. However, the reform raised a number of challenges in relation to the actual role that small and medium-sized towns should play within the new governance arrangements, and how their cooperation with the large urban core they gravitate around can bring reciprocal benefits. This paper sheds some light on the matter, discussing the state of the art of metropolitan governance and planning in the country, before using the cases of Torino and Bari to highlight how different levels of territorial fragmentation lead to different challenges for metropolitan governance and planning. In doing so, we reflect on the advantages and disadvantages that small and medium-sized towns encounter when participating in metropolitan governance.

Keywords

Metropolitan governance, small and medium-sized towns, Italy

.1. Introduction

In recent decades, metropolitan areas have usurped the role of cities as catalysts and drivers of global development, as a consequence of complex processes of socioeconomic reorganisation and rescaling (Brenner, 2018; Zimmermann et al., 2020). This puts traditional spatial governance models into crisis, with existing territorial units challenged by phenomena that are hardly manageable within their fixed administrative boundaries. In response, a growing number of governance experimentations have emerged in European countries and

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regions, aiming to address the metropolitan dimension and ranging from informal inter-municipal cooperation to more institutionalised structures that take on responsibility for managing metropolitan development (Salet et al., 2015; ESPON, 2021a; Zimmermann et al., 2020; Demazière, 2021). This raises various challenges in relation to the actual role that small and medium-sized towns (SMSTs)[1] play within the new governance arrangements, and whether their cooperation with the large urban core they gravitate around can bring reciprocal benefits or, on the contrary, may strengthen the existing dominance-dependence relations. This issue is relevant for many European countries – almost 40% of the EU population lives in urban settlements with populations between 5,000 and 100,000 (EUROSTAT, 2022) – and is even more so in the Italian context, where only 44 of the almost 8,000 municipalities have more than 100,000 inhabitants. Almost 50% of the population lives in municipalities with less than 20,000 inhabitants (ISTAT, 2022).

To consider the matter in more detail, since 2015 Italy boasts 14 metropolitan authorities that are responsible for organising strategic, spatial and mobility planning in coordination with the municipalities they encompass. Despite their common institutional nature, these areas differ in population, territory, number of municipalities and institutional capacity (Vinci, 2019). As a consequence, the engagement of SMSTs within metropolitan governance practices and mechanisms is highly differentiated, to the detriment of the further consolidation of the country's overall metropolitan governance system (Crivello & Staricco, 2017; Fedeli, 2017; Vinci, 2019). Aiming at shedding some light on the matter, this article uses the cases of Turin and Bari to discuss how the legal reform that has introduced Metropolitan Cities in Italy has been highly discretional, and has thus helped raise various challenges for the engagement of SMSTs within metropolitan governance. After this brief introduction, Section 2 introduces the thematic context within which our argument is positioned. Section 3 then presents a chronological overview of the institutionalisation of metropolitan governance in Italy and Section 4 discusses its heterogeneous outcome. Section 5 constitutes the core of the discussion: it reflects upon the differential engagement of small and medium-sized towns within metropolitan governance, with particular reference to the Metropolitan Cities of Turin and Bari. A concluding section rounds off the contribution, summarising its main arguments and discussing the potential advantages and disadvantages that SMSTs encounter when participating in metropolitan governance.

[1] No univocal definition of SMSTs exists in the literature (ESPON, 2014). When referring to the role of SMSTs in metropolitan governance we refer in this paper to all municipalities sub-ordered to the main urban core. However, when looking at the two case studies under investigation, when relevant we tried to further detail their situation and concerns depending on their positioning *vis-à-vis* the core city.

2. Setting the context: the role of small and medium-sized towns in metropolitan governance

Metropolitan areas account for almost 70% of the EU's GDP (ESPON, 2021a). However, metropolitan matters remain hard to address, in part due to the complex relations among the centres, the suburban areas and the large peripheries that characterise metropolitan territories, and the different forms of these relations in the different countries and regions (Healey, 2010; Ahrend et al., 2014; Salet et al., 2015; ESPON, 2017; 2021a). Due to this complexity, no univocal definition of the metropolitan dimension has been agreed upon so far. Various methodologies to define functional urban territories have been developed over time, conceptualising such territories as characterised by densely inhabited urban cores and less-populated municipalities whose labour market is highly integrated with the cores (OECD, 2012; 2013; Dijkstra et al., 2019; Fadic et al., 2019). At the same time, metropolitan areas in Europe have represented both the scope of and the reason for institutional experimentation for over three decades. Public authorities progressively engaged in the development of strategic visions and plans to tackle challenges that have a clear metropolitan dimension (i.e. housing, mobility, urban planning, employment, economic development, culture etc.), as a way to guide the integration of differentiated spatial development and engage public and private actors at different scales, beyond the core city alone (Healey, 2010; Albrechts et al., 2016). Whereas this has often occurred via informal inter-municipal cooperation, which varies through time and with the issues at stake, several governance structures have been institutionalised from the bottom up, aiming at strategic planning and policy coordination across local governments. At the same time, formal administrative bodies have been established top-down and made responsible for managing and promoting the development of metropolitan territories.

There are various forms and models of metropolitan governance in Europe that differ greatly in their level of institutionalisation, the distribution of power, competencies and resources, their internal structure and the actors involved (Tomàs, 2016; Zimmermann et al., 2020). Interestingly, in most cases, the metropolitan structures and governance practices resulting from this incremental institutional codification process remain geared towards core-centric urban models, in turn making the interrelationships between SMSTs and core cities increasingly hierarchical (Demazière, 2022) and increasing the dependence of the former on the latter (Salet et al., 2015, ESPON, 2021a). This raises questions about the actual role that SMSTs can play within metropolitan governance arrangements and the benefits and added value that they can gain from their participation in metropolitan governance processes and dynamics. As argued by Lefèvre (2010), the institutionalisation of metropolitan governance in southern Europe has been a failure or, at best, an uncertain success. This is due to the inherently "conflict-laden nature" of the process (Lefèvre, 2010: 636), simultaneously characterised by multiple possible tensions and oppositions – from central regional

governments that are unwilling to devolve power and competencies to new institutions as well as from local authorities that favour strengthening cooperation within intra-municipal territories to counteract the dominance of the core.

Aiming to shed light on this matter, the paper investigates the decision-making and institutional arenas that characterise the metropolitan arrangements in Italy, to explore how metropolitan planning processes accommodate the representation of SMSTs, or, on the contrary, contribute to replicating the dominance of the core urban areas. At the same time, it explores the existence of alternative forms of cooperation among SMSTs that allow them to reach critical mass to counterbalance the larger urban areas in the definition of metropolitan strategies and policies.

3. The turbulent history of Italian metropolitan governance…

The institutionalisation of a metropolitan level of government in Italy followed a rather lengthy and turbulent process (Figure 1). Although metropolitan areas were first mentioned in the 1970s, Italian legislators began to address the issue only in 1990 with National Law No. 142 by the Department for Urban Areas. This occurred as part of a broader decentralisation process, outlining the role and powers of provinces, municipalities and metropolitan areas. More specifically, Art. 17 identified "metropolitan areas such as the areas including the municipalities of Turin, Milan, Venice, Genoa, Bologna, Florence, Rome, Bari and Naples and other municipalities whose settlements are closely integrated with them in terms of economic activities, essential services, social life, cultural relations and territorial characteristics".[2] Whereas the law identified the cities upon which to pivot the new administrative configurations, it required the relevant regions to establish the territorial boundaries of each area after consulting with the municipalities and provinces involved. It was hence considered appropriate to evaluate and define the optimal territorial dimensions based on the characteristics of the metropolitan territory, in order to effectively govern its development and meet its needs (Recupero Bruno, 2001). The reform was, however, opposed by the regions, which were afraid to lose power in the process and never followed up with the implementation.

[2] Art. 17 of Law No 142 of 8 June 1990 – *Ordinamento delle autonomie locali.*

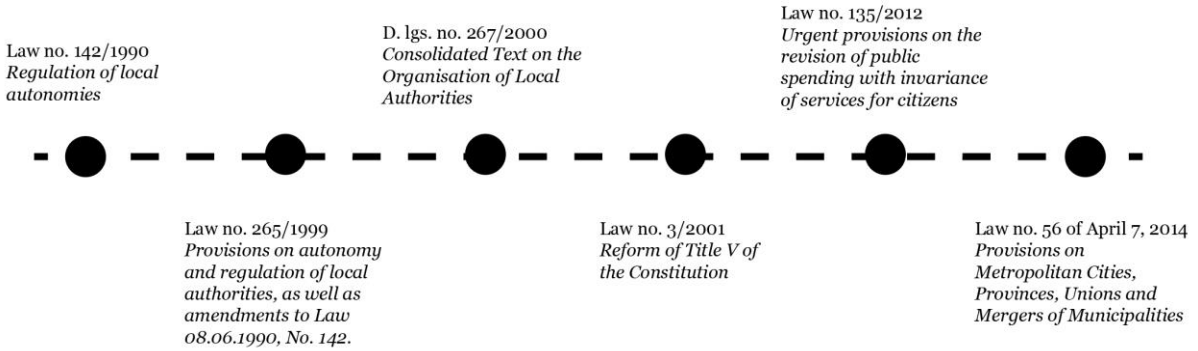

Figure 1 – Main steps of the institutionalisation of metropolitan governance in Italy. Source: authors' elaboration.

Unhappy about the outcome, the central government once again took the matter in hand at the end of the 1990s, promoting two regulatory changes that aimed to advance decentralisation further. In detail, Law No. 265/1999 aimed to extend the autonomy of local authorities to all decisions relating to the local administration, such as spatial planning and functional organisation.[3] At the same time, the *Testo Unico sull'ordinamento degli Enti Locali* (TUEL) brought significant changes regarding the establishment of metropolitan authorities: Art. 22 states that, to form a metropolitan area, there must be close territorial integration between the main municipality and the surrounding municipalities in terms of economic activities, services, cultural relations and territorial characteristics, hence downsizing the importance of the core area in favour of a functional-relational perspective. Moreover, to prevent further obstruction from the regional level, the TUEL provided the municipalities and the provinces with a stronger role in the process, allowing them to propose the establishment of a metropolitan area. These important steps were then intertwined with the reform of Title V of the Constitution, defined by Law 3/2001, which radically changed the traditional hierarchy of the various levels of government according to the principle of subsidiarity.[4]

Despite the constitutional reform, the momentum for its implementation remained rather low. The debate on the reorganisation of local autonomies only returned to the political agenda with the public spending review law adopted by the Monti government in 2012 (Law 135/2012), intended to address the reorganisation of the Italian governance system to reduce public expenditure, also following a clear indication from the European Union (EU) (Cotella et al., 2015; Tulumello et al., 2020). It was under these premises that Law no. 56 of 7 April 2014 – *Disposizioni sulle Città metropolitane, sulle Province, sulle Unioni e fusioni di Comuni,* the so-called Delrio law (derived from the name of the ministry that proposed it) –

[3] *Disposizioni in materia di autonomia e ordinamento degli enti locali, nonché modifiche alla legge 08.06.1990, n. 142.*

[4] In detail, the new Art. 114 legitimised the metropolitan cities on an equal footing with regions, provinces and municipalities, stating that "*The Republic is constituted by Municipalities, Provinces, Metropolitan Cities, Regions and the State. Municipalities, Provinces, Metropolitan Cities and Regions are autonomous entities with their own statutes, powers and functions according to the principles established by the Constitution"* (Palombelli, 2003).

came into force. The law has two main objectives: (i) to reduce local fragmentation through the merger of municipalities and (ii) to reorganise the subregional administration through the institution of Metropolitan Cities around ten Italian cities (Rome, Turin, Milan, Venice, Genoa, Bologna, Florence, Bari, Naples and Reggio Calabria), to which four were added following the decision of the autonomous regions of Sicily and Sardinia (Cagliari, Catania, Messina, Palermo) (Figure 2). Importantly, the law distinguishes between two kinds of subnational political representation, so regions and municipalities remain directly elected, while the government of provinces and Metropolitan Cities are elected among the representatives of the municipalities they encompass (Barbieri, 2014).[5]

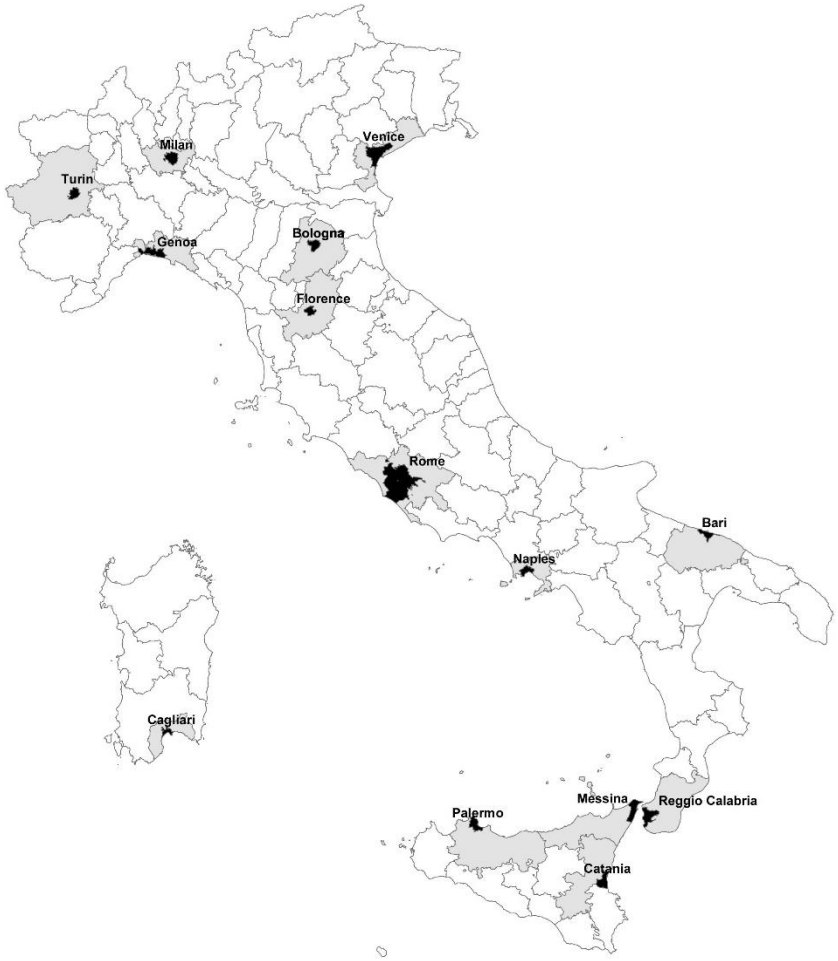

Figure 2 – The 14 Metropolitan Cities established by Law 56/2014. Source: ISTAT 2022. Authors' elaboration.

The institutional bodies responsible for the functioning of Metropolitan Cities are (i) the metropolitan mayor, (ii) the metropolitan council and (iii) the metropolitan conference. The metropolitan mayor is by law the mayor of the main city. The metropolitan council is

[5] All Metropolitan Cities maintain the boundaries of the former provinces, with the exception of Cagliari. The reform was conceived as a move towards a constitutional reform that envisaged the abolition of the provinces, something that, however, was abandoned after the negative outcome of the popular referendum staged in December 2016.

composed of the metropolitan mayor and a specified number of councillors that varies according to the metropolitan population; the councillors are provided with policy-making and control functions. The metropolitan conference is composed of the metropolitan mayor and the mayors of all the municipalities belonging to the Metropolitan City and has the power to approve the statute as well as consultative power in the approval of the budget and other matters. In general, however, the involvement of the mayors of all municipalities is mostly formal within the metropolitan conference. The latter meets annually and occasionally and there is often little participation (Vinci, 2019).[6] According to Piperata (2018), the fundamental functions of the Metropolitan City can be summarised as (i) *steering*, concerning the preparation of the three-year Metropolitan Strategic Plan (PSM); (ii) *planning*, taking over the tasks performed by the Provincial Territorial Coordination Plans (PTCP) through the new General Metropolitan Territorial Plan (PTGM) with the aim of coordinating territorial development; (iii) *coordination*, focusing on the promotion of socioeconomic development and (iv) *support*, concerning the organisation of public services as well as guiding municipalities in applications for resources. When compared to the provinces that they replaced, the main innovative element is the strategic planning competence, which renders them the only Italian institution provided with this function (Donati, 2016). PTGMs are also somewhat innovative, as they go beyond the strictly coordinating role attributed to the PTCPs with a more strategic vision and at the same time with a prescriptive and binding character. An additional instrument available to Metropolitan Cities is the Sustainable Urban Mobility Plan (PUMS), which aims to guide metropolitan mobility policies and planning in the short, medium and long term with a 10-year horizon.

To establish a connection between the metropolitan and the municipal levels, the Delrio reform introduced the possibility for Metropolitan Cities to identify Homogeneous Zones (HZs), where strategies for metropolitan development can be formulated. These areas are determined by each Metropolitan City, considering specific criteria such as the administrative boundaries of the Unions of Municipalities,[7] the administration of services beyond municipal boundaries, the geography of river basins, and well-established local identities. However, the segmentation into HZs has not been adopted by all Metropolitan Cities; a few have instead chosen to engage municipalities through other intermediary tiers. For instance, in the Metropolitan City of Bologna, HZs are not explicitly designated, but the responsibilities of these zones are assigned to the Union of Municipalities.

[6] It should be pointed out that all metropolitan institutional mandates (mayor, metropolitan councillor and participation in the Metropolitan Conference) are voluntary and do not involve any salary.
[7] Unions of Municipalities are compulsory administrative bodies for municipalities with less than 3,000 inhabitants in hilly areas and less than 5,000 inhabitants in lowland areas. It is important to stress that this model of inter-municipal cooperation varies from region to region and is regulated by regional laws. Similarly, other countries adopt different approaches to this matter, as described by Zimmermann and Feiertag (2021) in relation to France and Germany.

4. … and its differential outcome

The recent institutionalisation and the consolidation of metropolitan governance in Italy are still in the making. The 14 Metropolitan Cities are rather young, and the pandemic has recently revealed various challenges in terms of institutional capacity and ongoing power struggles vis-à-vis regional and local governments (Cotella & Berisha, 2022). At the same time, their differential socioeconomic and territorial features make it difficult to figure out one-size-fits-all solutions to these challenges. The territorial extent of the Metropolitan Cities varies from the 6,826 km² of Turin to the 1,178 km² of Naples. In terms of population, the largest Metropolitan City is Rome, followed by Milan, Naples and Turin. On the other hand, Messina, Reggio Calabria and Cagliari are the least populous Metropolitan Cities. Importantly, the distribution of population within metropolitan areas varies widely from context to context, as shown by the share of the population of the core municipalities in the 14 cases (Table 1).

	Population	Surface area (km²)	Population density (inhabitants per km²)	No. of municipalities	Population in the main city		Population in the other municipalities	
					No.	%	No.	%
Bari	1,230,205	3,862	318	41	315,284	26	914,921	74
Bologna	1,021,501	3,702	276	55	395,416	39	626,085	61
Cagliari	422,840	1,248	339	17	151,005	36	271,835	64
Catania	1,072,634	3,573	300	58	296,266	28	776,368	72
Florence	995,517	3,513	283	41	366,927	37	628,590	63
Genoa	826,194	1,833	450	67	565,752	69	260,442	31
Messina	613,887	3,266	188	108	227,424	37	386,463	63
Milan	3,265,327	1,575	2,073	133	1,406,242	44	1.859,085	56
Naples	3,034,410	1,178	2,574	92	948,850	32	2,085,560	68
Palermo	1,222,988	5,009	244	82	647,422	53	575,566	47
Reggio Calabria	530,967	3,210	165	97	174,885	33	356,082	67
Rome	4,253,314	5,363	793	121	2,808,293	66	1,445,021	34
Turin	2,230,946	6,826	327	312	857,910	39	1,373,036	61
Venice	848,829	2,472	343	44	258,685	31	5,090,144	69

Table 1 – Surface and population overview of the 14 Italian Metropolitan Cities. Source: ISTAT 2022. Authors' elaboration.

Another interesting aspect concerns the population size of municipalities within Metropolitan Cities (Tables 2 and 3). Here it is possible to distinguish between Metropolitan Cities where most municipalities feature less than 5,000 inhabitants (i.e. around 80% of the total municipalities in the case of the Metropolitan Cities of Genoa, Torino, Reggio Calabria and Messina) and, at the other end of the spectrum, those characterised by municipalities featuring larger populations (with the Metropolitan Cities of Naples and Cagliari where, respectively, 10.9% and 11.8% of municipalities are in the 50,000 – 250,000 inhabitants range). From the data reported in the tables, it is evident that Metropolitan Cities also vary in

relation to the concentration of their population: in some cases, such as the MCs of Genoa and Rome, approx. two-thirds of the inhabitants reside in the core municipality while in others the population is more spread out.

Number of municipalities by population size											
	0 - 5,000 inh		5 - 15,000 inh		15 - 50,000 inh		50 - 250,000 inh		250,000 and over		Tot
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.
Bari	2	4.9	11	26.8	24	58.5	3	7.3	1	2.4	41
Bologna	15	27.3	26	47.3	12	21.8	1	1.8	1	1.8	55
Cagliari	1	5.9	8	47.1	6	35.3	2	11.8			17
Catania	15	25.9	24	41.4	17	29.3	1	1.7	1	1.7	58
Florence	7	17.1	17	41.5	15	36.6	1	2.4	1	2.4	41
Genoa	51	76.1	12	17.9	3	4.5			1	1.5	67
Messina	88	81.5	17	15.7	2	1.9	2	0.9			108
Milan	32	24.1	58	43.6	38	28.6	4	3.0	1	0.8	133
Naples	10	10.9	32	34.8	39	42.4	10	10.9	1	1.1	92
Palermo	49	59.8	25	30.5	6	7.3	1	1.2	1	1.2	82
Reggio Calabria	75	77.3	17	17.5	4	4.1	1	1.0			97
Rome	61	50.4	28	23.1	24	19.8	7	5.8	1	0.8	121
Turin	250	80.1	37	11.9	23	7.4	1	0.3	1	0.3	312
Venice	8	18.2	22	50.0	13	29.5			1	2.3	44

Table 2 – Number of municipalities of each Metropolitan City by population size. Source: ISTAT 2022. Authors' elaboration.

Population by the demographic size of municipalities										
	0 - 5,000 inh		5 - 15,000 inh		15 - 50,000 inh		50 - 250,000 inh		Main City	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Bari	3,532	0.3	117,702	9.6	612,997	49.8	180,690	14.7	315,284	25.6
Bologna	49,349	4.8	235,143	23.0	271,005	26.5	70,588	6.9	395,416	38.7
Cagliari	2,133	0.5	66,505	15.7	134,914	31.9	68,283	16.1	151,005	35.7
Catania	48,824	4.6	220,351	20.5	456,017	42.5	51,176	4.8	296,266	27.6
Florence	20,010	2.0	180,442	18.1	377,095	37.9	51,043	5.1	366,927	36.9
Genoa	91,367	11.1	94,283	11.4	74,792	9.1			565,752	68.5
Messina	169,668	27.6	146,361	23.8	70,434	11.5			227,424	37.0
Milan	106,808	3.3	513,492	15.7	973,576	29.8	265,209	8.1	1,406,242	43.1
Naples	31,832	1.0	294,553	9.7	1,053,716	34.7	705,459	23.2	948,850	31.3
Palermo	117,645	9.6	224,299	18.3	180,213	14.7	53,409	4.4	647,422	52.9
Reggio Calabria	139,936	26.4	145,963	27.5	70,183	13.2			174,885	32.9
Rome	94,391	2.2	259,360	6.1	655,460	15.4	435,810	10.2	2,808,293	66.0
Turin	389,334	17.5	303,625	13.6	623,340	27.9	56,737	2.5	857,910	38.5
Venice	28,582	3.4	219,914	25.9	341,648	40.2			258,685	30.5

Table 3 – Population size of municipalities. Source: ISTAT 2022. Authors' elaboration.

A diverse picture also emerges regarding the preparation of the main planning instruments for which Metropolitan Cities are responsible (PTGM, PSM, PUMS). Since 2015,

most Metropolitan Cities have tried to update their PTGM and introduce the PSM and PUMS. But although more than seven years have passed since their establishment, to date the number of planning instruments drawn up by them remains limited and diverse (Staricco & Vitale Brovarone, 2023) (Table 4). This becomes particularly clear when the PSM is considered. This three-year strategic plan for the metropolitan territory introduced by Law 56/2014 was implemented by most Metropolitan Cities (10 out of 14) between 2018 and 2022, while the Metropolitan Cities of Palermo, Messina and Reggio Calabria adopted the preliminary document of the PSM during 2022, and the Metropolitan City of Bari is currently drafting its plan. As regards the PUMS, as of January 2023, five cities have approved it, eight have adopted it, and one is still drafting it. Finally, the only Metropolitan Cities to have approved the PTGM are those of Bologna and Milan. The Metropolitan City of Turin has approved the draft technical proposal, others have updated the instrument based on the contents of the previous PTCPs, others have approved the guidelines, and finally, some Metropolitan Cities have not started the process at all.

	PSM	**PTGM**	**PUMS**
Bari	In the process of drafting	-	Adopted - 2021
Bologna	Approved - 2018	Approved - 2021	Approved - 2019
Cagliari	Approved 2021	-	Adopted - 2018
Catania	Approved 2022	-	Adopted - 2022
Florence	Approved - 2018	Preliminary Document for Strategic Environmental Assessment - 2018	Approved - 2021
Genoa	Approved - 2017	Approved guidelines for the preparation of the PTGM - 2015	Approved - 2019
Messina	Adopted the Preliminary Document - 2022	-	Adopted - 2022
Milan	Approved - 2019	Approved - 2021	Approved - 2021
Naples	Approved - 2020	Guidelines approved - 2020	Adopted - 2022
Palermo	Adopted the Preliminary Document - 2022	-	In the process of drafting
Reggio Calabria	Adopted the Preliminary Document - 2022	Approved - 2016 (same contents of 2011 PTP)	Adopted - 2022
Rome	Approved - 2022	Approved the Provincial General Territorial Plan - 2010	Adopted - 2022
Turin	Approved - 2021	Approved the Preliminary Document - 2021	Approved - 2021
Venice	Approved - 2018	Approved - 2019 (same contents as the 2010 Provincial Plan)	Adopted - 2022

Table 4 – The planning instruments in the Italian Metropolitan Cities. Source: ANCI 2023. Authors' elaboration.

Finally, the heterogeneity of Italian Metropolitan Cities in relation to the main forms of inter-municipal cooperation (Homogeneous Zones and Unions of Municipalities) is worthy of further consideration. In particular, as shown in Table 5, the number of Unions of Municipalities varies considerably among the different Metropolitan Cities. They range from 0 (Bari and Naples) to 27 Unions of Municipalities (Turin). Also, the institution of Homogeneous Zones (HZs) is heterogeneous, with only five out of 14 Metropolitan Cities having established these within their territories. This differential use of inter-municipal cooperation settings depends on several factors: the varied territorial extent and morphology of the MCs, the stronger or weaker tradition of inter-municipal cooperation, the level of administrative fragmentation and the actual institutional capacities of the SMSTs.

	Unions of Municipalities	Homogeneous Zones
Turin	27	11
Genoa	7	9
Milan	5	7
Venice	3	-
Bologna	8	-
Florence	4	-
Rome	6	-
Naples	-	5
Bari	-	-
Reggio Calabria	1	5
Palermo	19	-
Messina	15	-
Catania	2	-
Cagliari	2	-

Table 5 – The main forms of inter-municipal cooperation. Source: ANCI 2023. Authors' elaboration.

5. Metropolitan governance and the role of small and medium-sized towns: the cases of Bari and Turin

To study the relationship between metropolitan authorities and the SMSTs they encompass, we investigate two very different cases: the Metropolitan City of Turin and the Metropolitan City of Bari. In this way, we aim to highlight how the same type of institution can work with and relate to SMSTs in rather different ways, as a consequence of the leeway left to metropolitan authorities by the Delrio reform.

The Metropolitan City of Turin is an interesting case study due to its wide territorial extent, the great difference between its institutional and functional areas (the former is much wider than the latter), the very strong role of the City of Turin vis-à-vis the other municipalities in the metropolitan area (in terms of demographic weight as well as political power), and the

very recent planning instruments (ESPON, 2021b). The Metropolitan City of Bari has very different characteristics from those of Turin. The population is distributed over the entire metropolitan area, and the municipalities are fewer but have much greater demographic weight.

The analysis adopted a qualitative methodology, mixing quantitative data with information gathered from the academic literature, policy documents and semi-structured interviews. More precisely, eight interviews were performed in each of the two Metropolitan Cities, engaging policy- and decision-makers active at the metropolitan level as well as at the regional level and in selected municipalities, representatives of civil society and private entrepreneurs. A second round of interviews was then held with selected actors to explore critical elements in more depth. In addition, scholars engaged in the national debate on the matter were contacted to discuss and validate the findings of the research. Instead of individual SMSTs, we interviewed representatives of the institutions representing them (LAGs, Homogeneous Areas, Unions of Municipalities).[8] In particular, for the Metropolitan City of Turin, we interviewed policymakers of the municipality of Turin, the Metropolitan City and the Piedmont region, mayors of municipalities in the first belt, representatives of the Unions of Municipalities and Unions of Mountain Municipalities, and spokespersons of the Homogeneous Zones. For the Metropolitan City of Bari, we interviewed policymakers of the Apulia region, of the Metropolitan City and of the municipality of Bari, and the presidents of the LAGs located within the metropolitan area.[9]

In the remainder of this section, the results of this analytical work are presented, with particular emphasis on how the two Metropolitan Cities relate to SMSTs in the processes of metropolitan planning and how municipalities contribute to metropolitan governance, either applying for European funding or networking among themselves autonomously.[10] The two Metropolitan Cities are very different in territorial extent, demographically and in terms of their governance. The Metropolitan City of Bari, with a population of 1.2 million (the fifth largest of the Italian Metropolitan Cities) covers an area of 3,862 km² (the fourth largest Metropolitan City by surface) and encompasses 41 municipalities. Of these, 27 are found in hilly areas while the remaining 14 municipalities are in flat areas. The Metropolitan City of Turin is the largest metropolitan area in Italy, with an area of 6,827 km², a population of 2.2 million, and a population density of 330 inhabitants per square kilometre (ISTAT, 2019). It is surrounded by the Alps on its western and northern fronts and encompasses 312 municipalities, covering a very large and heterogeneous territory, from dense urban areas to small towns and hill and mountain villages. Both perimeters, tailored exactly to the perimeters

[8] It is important to highlight that these representatives often also serve as mayors of SMSTs.
[9] Moreover, we were directly involved in the drafting process of the PTGM of Turin and the PSM of Bari.
[10] As will be further discussed below, this activity mostly concerns initiatives framed in the context of the EU cohesion policy (Cotella et al., 2021). However, there is evidence of autonomous networking also outside the latter, for instance, the establishment of Unions of Municipalities, or the development of the so-called “Territorial Pacts”.

of the former provinces, are larger than their respective FUAs. However, this difference is much more marked in the case of Turin, which leads, together with the morphological characteristics of the MC and the greater number of municipalities, to a much higher level of territorial fragmentation (Figure 3).

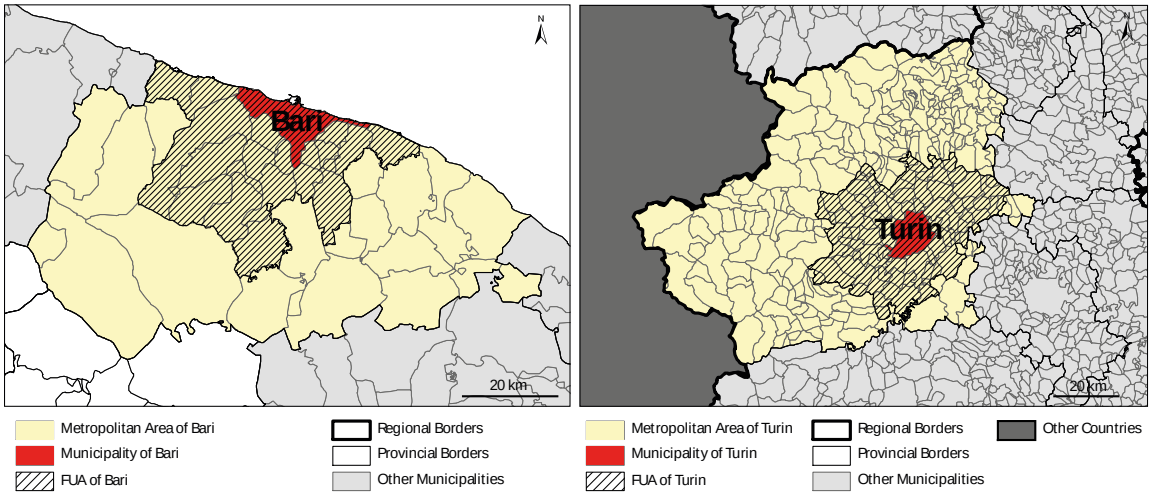

Figure 3 – The territorial extent of the Metropolitan Cities of Bari and Turin compared with their FUAs. Source: authors' elaboration.

The distribution of the population varies significantly between the two cases. In the Metropolitan City of Bari, only 25% of the population lives in the municipality of Bari itself, with the majority of municipalities having between 5,000 and 50,000 inhabitants. The largest municipalities in this area are Bari, Altamura, Molfetta and Bitonto. In contrast, 38% of the population of the Metropolitan City of Turin resides in the main city and 80% of its municipalities have less than 5,000 inhabitants (Figure 4). This leads to differences in institutional capacity and often also in willingness to cooperate among the SMSTs: the high administrative fragmentation of the Metropolitan City of Turin drives the SMSTs to cooperate internally to try to balance the dominance of the core area; in contrast, given the more balanced territorial structure, the municipalities of the Metropolitan City of Bari are less driven by this need, except when it comes to applying for EU resources.

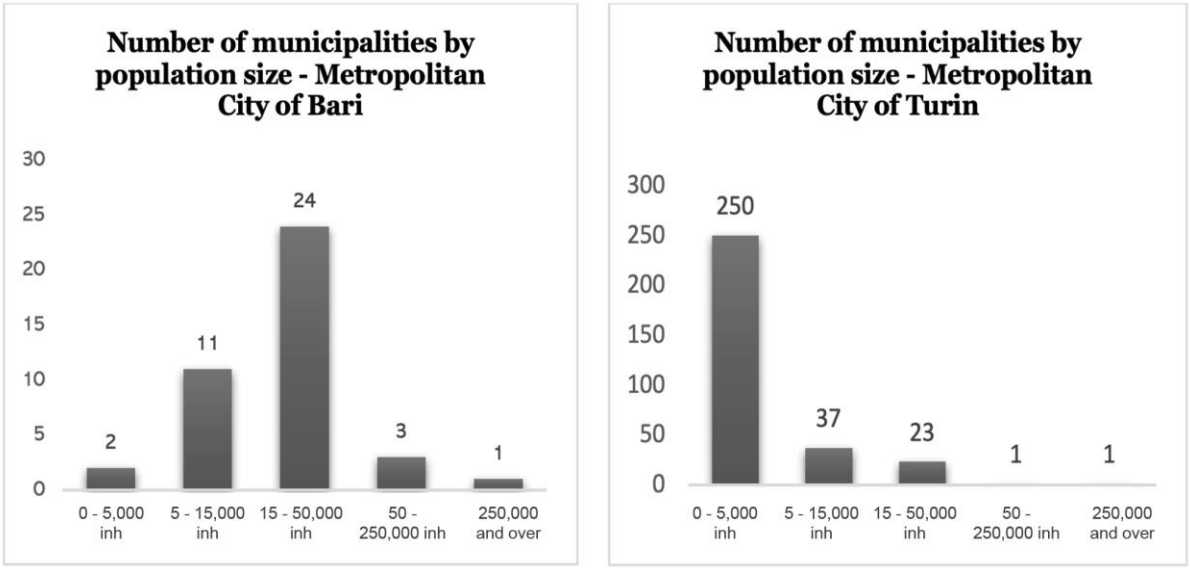

Figure 4 – Number of municipalities by population size. Source: ISTAT 2022. Authors' elaboration.

Further evidence of this concern is constituted by the fact that the Metropolitan City of Bari does not include a union of municipalities and opted not to set up Homogeneous Zones (HZs) (which can be established voluntarily as per Law 56/2014). Given the smaller number and larger size of municipalities in the Apulia region compared to those in the Piedmont region, inter-municipal cooperation has not been a priority historically, and the only forms of cooperation active within the Metropolitan City of Bari are the LAGs aimed at channelling European rural development resources to local development initiatives. In contrast, the Metropolitan City of Turin has focused more on inter-municipal cooperation (Figure 5), dividing the Metropolitan Conference into 11 Homogeneous Zones that represent the interests of their respective municipalities in the preparation of the PSM and the PTGM. These HZs are privileged places of inter-institutional cooperation and may develop into an optimal sphere for organising municipal services in the associated form and for delegating metropolitan level competencies. Their definition was guided by the Territory Department of the Metropolitan City, taking into consideration various factors, including the distribution of settlements, existing forms of cooperation, the subdivisions proposed by existing planning instruments, and geomorphological, environmental and sociocultural factors. This approach should favour the sharing and implementation of joint principles and goals, thus helping turn diversity into strength and ensuring equal access to services and resources. Moreover, the Metropolitan City includes 24 Unions of Municipalities, of which 16 are Unions of Mountain Municipalities (an institutional association of mountain municipalities provided by Art. 32 of the Legislative Decree n.267/2000) aimed at the protection and promotion of the mountain areas.

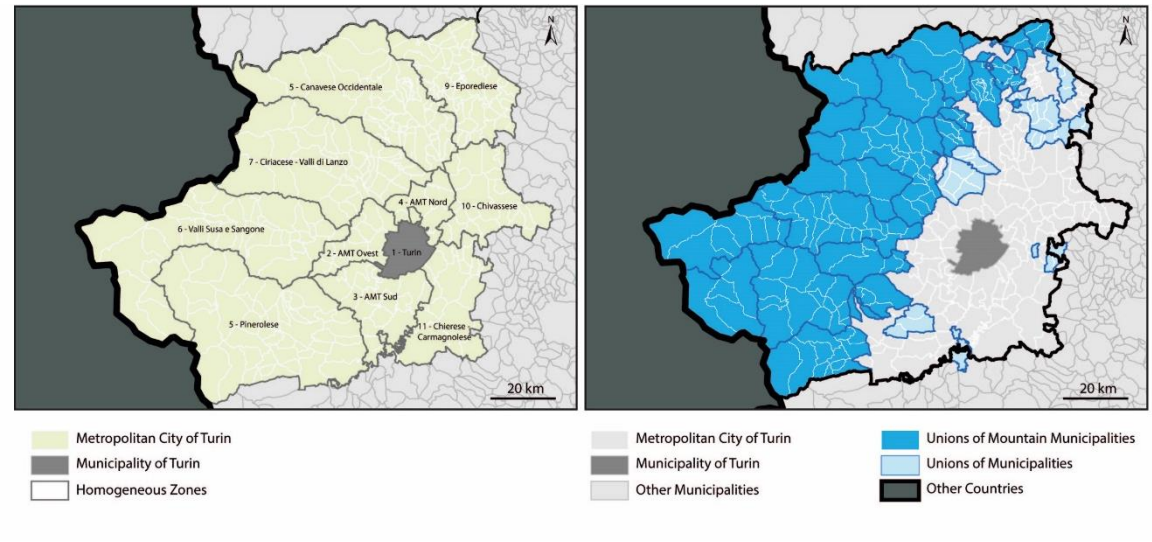

Figure 5 – Homogeneous Zones and Unions of Municipalities in the Metropolitan City of Turin. Source: authors' elaboration.

5.1 Engagement of small and medium-sized municipalities in metropolitan planning instruments

As mentioned in Section 3, Metropolitan Cities are in charge of three important planning instruments: the PSM, the PTGM and the PUMS. The PSM has a strategic value, while the PTGM and PUMS deal with the governance of the transformations of spaces, flows, and mobility and transportation systems by the strategies and actions defined by the Strategic Plan. In brief, these planning tools constitute a unified and integrated system that encompasses shared visions, strategies, projects and actions (Figure 6).

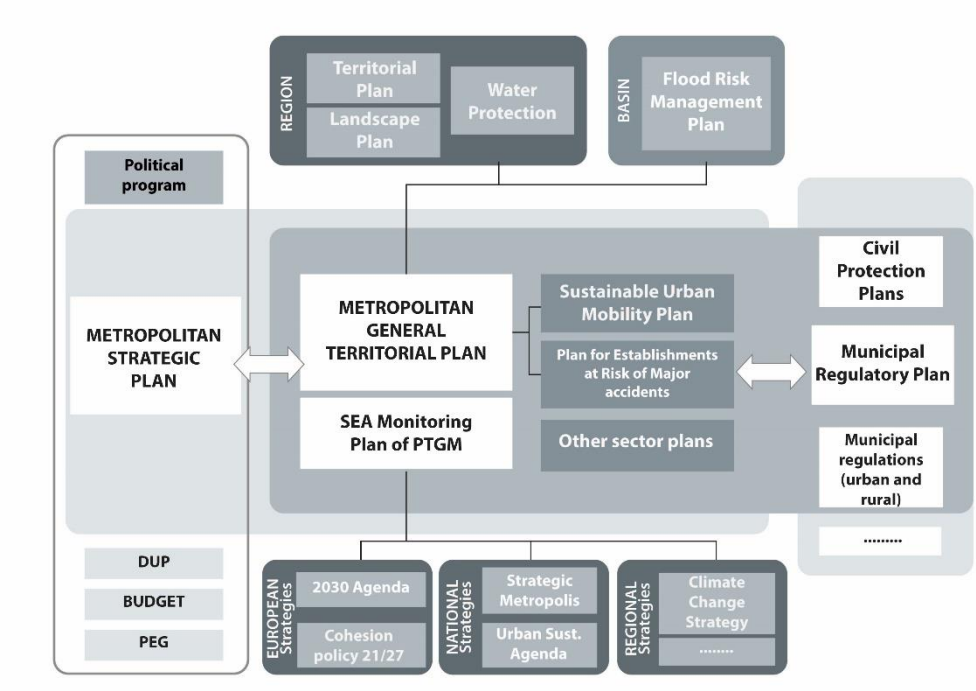

Figure 6 – Example of the metropolitan planning instruments framework in MC of Turin. Source: authors' re-elaboration based on PTGM of Turin, 2022.

Discussion turns first to the strategic planning instrument. The PSM of Bari is currently in the middle of a drafting process, initiated by the signing of the *"Pact for the Development of the Metropolitan City of Bari - Implementation of Priority Interventions and Identification of Strategic Areas of Intervention*" in May 2016 by the Metropolitan City of Bari and the Presidency of the Council of Ministers. This gave the process a quick start and ensured the implementation of strategic interventions through multiple sources of funding. The relationship between the Metropolitan Authority and its SMSTs is articulated in two different ways. Strategic activities are organised within the framework of what is statutorily assigned to the mayor, the Metropolitan Council and the Metropolitan Conference. Moreover, 11 Strategic Actions and Flagship Projects identified in 2016 with the involvement of all the mayors of the metropolitan municipalities formed the 11 Planning Axes and hence the programmatic framework of the PSM, which "re-started" its process in 2021 (Figure 7). More particularly, the shared vision was developed with the 41 mayors of the area, to create new opportunities for a better future for the whole of the metropolitan territory.

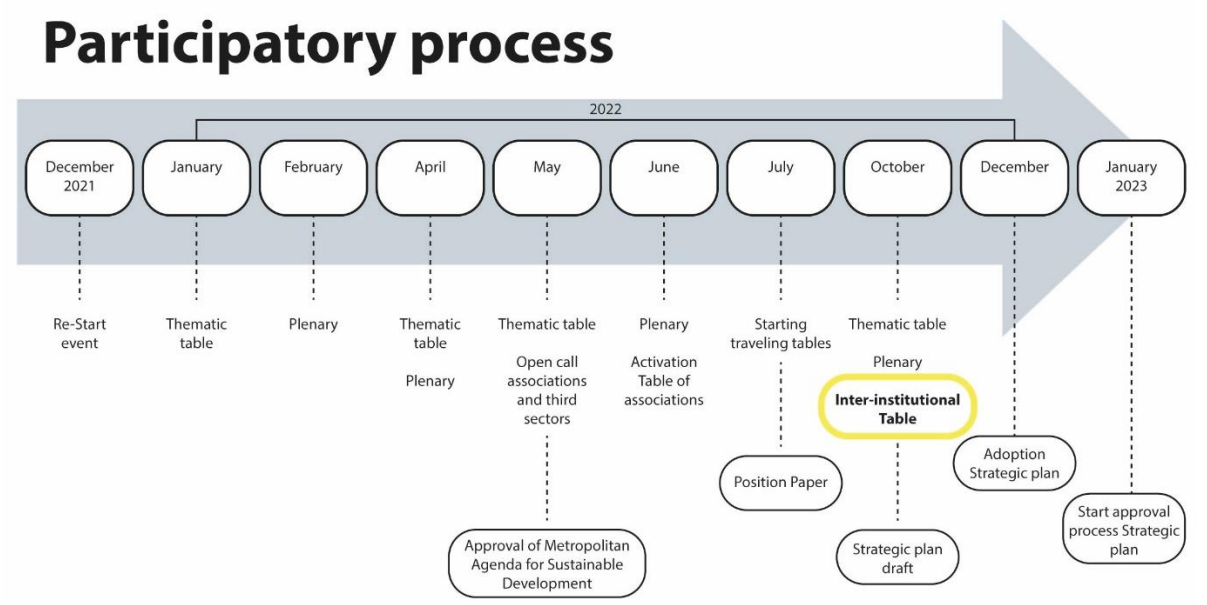

Figure 7 – Bari PSM Participatory process. Source: authors' re-elaboration based on Metropolitan City of Bari.

The PSM aims to build strategies based on systemic measures with a long conceptual reach, capable of responding to the pandemic crisis by drawing inspiration from EU policies and agendas, to trigger and support recovery. The process features continuous dialogue and shared participation between the metropolitan body and the territory. To this end, the Metropolitan Council approved the "Regulation on Collective and Individual Participation", which: i) promotes consultation and individual and collective participation in the administrative life of the Metropolitan City; ii) defines the different modes of participation including petitions, consultations through online questionnaires and surveys, public

assemblies, thematic forums and conferences, social networks and Working Tables. The latter is the real space where ideas and strategies that will form the new PSM are shared. In particular, the Working Tables are defined as follows: a) Interinstitutional Platform of the Metropolitan City of Bari, in which representatives of the public institutions (mayors of the metropolitan municipalities, labour unions, hospital directors, private stakeholders at the regional/national level, spokespersons for industry associations, etc.) responsible for the protection and enhancement of general public interests in the territory may participate;[11] b) Table of Associations and Active Citizenship, whatever legal form they take; c) Table of Talents and New Generations, in which representatives of youth movements, educational institutions and/or active citizens aged 16-30 participate. The Table of Talents and New Generations constitutes the centre of interpretation and elaboration of proposals (with the support of tutors and a technical-scientific committee), which are then discussed, compared and approved in cooperation with the Table of Associations and Active Citizenship and the Interinstitutional Table, through digital tools and public assemblies in the territories.

The Interinstitutional Table of the Metropolitan City of Bari is the place where the 41 metropolitan mayors can bring up issues for consideration and discussion, building metropolitan network governance which is unprecedented in the Italian context. The Governance Model of the Metropolitan City of Bari's strategic planning process highlights constant work and continuous co-planning and co-designing with the 41 metropolitan municipalities, allowing them to carry out their development programs using the Apulia Region's and national programming instruments. All of this is done with the primary goal of implementing metropolitan level interventions that are aligned with the main aims of the EU cohesion policy 2021-2027.

The Metropolitan Strategic Plan 2021-2023 of the Metropolitan City of Turin was the result of an articulated participatory planning process that was innovative for the Piedmont context. This process took place between September and December 2020 and included listening to and consultation with the territory and opportunities for the shared identification and definition of objectives and priorities. More precisely, the planning process was divided into two phases (Figure 8): the first phase – called the *forum phase* – was aimed at framing the main problems of the metropolitan territory and, based on them, the priority guidelines for development consistent with the interests of the different subjects and areas that compose it; the second phase – called the *convergent phase* – was aimed at formulating planning ideas that took into account the results of the forum phase, to structure the contents of the Metropolitan Strategic Plan.

[11] An example of an initiative is the Open Manifesto of the 41 mayors of metropolitan municipalities called "A great common goal". The Manifesto focuses on the sharing of a more general goal of building a shared "metropolitan sense", understood as a collective territorial imaginary to be referred to in terms of identity, belonging and ambition for community development.

The Forum Phase included some preliminary activities to frame the reference context and define territorial homogeneities and thematic convergences. During this phase the metropolitan authority engaged with the territories by carrying out preliminary surveys through 37 in-depth interviews, including 11 with the Spokespersons of the Homogeneous Zones[12] and 26 with qualified actors, selected according to their ability to represent a broad and heterogeneous spectrum of views and interests. The planning process included several public meetings, including in particular a discussion meeting for each of the 11 Homogeneous Zones, aimed at identifying the needs, priorities and visions of different parts of the metropolitan area. It should also be noted that since its establishment the Metropolitan City had requested that the HZs draw up area-wide strategic plans for the respective territories, in preparation for the new strategic plan. Some HZs responded positively, others, perhaps due to limited financial and technical resources, less so. All meetings recorded an extraordinary participation of various stakeholders, both in terms of number of participants and active involvement in the activities. One of the main reasons for the extraordinary participation of the community probably lies in the fact that the online mode (due to the pandemic emergency) facilitated the participation of those residing in the most remote areas of the Metropolitan City, requiring very little investment of time and money.

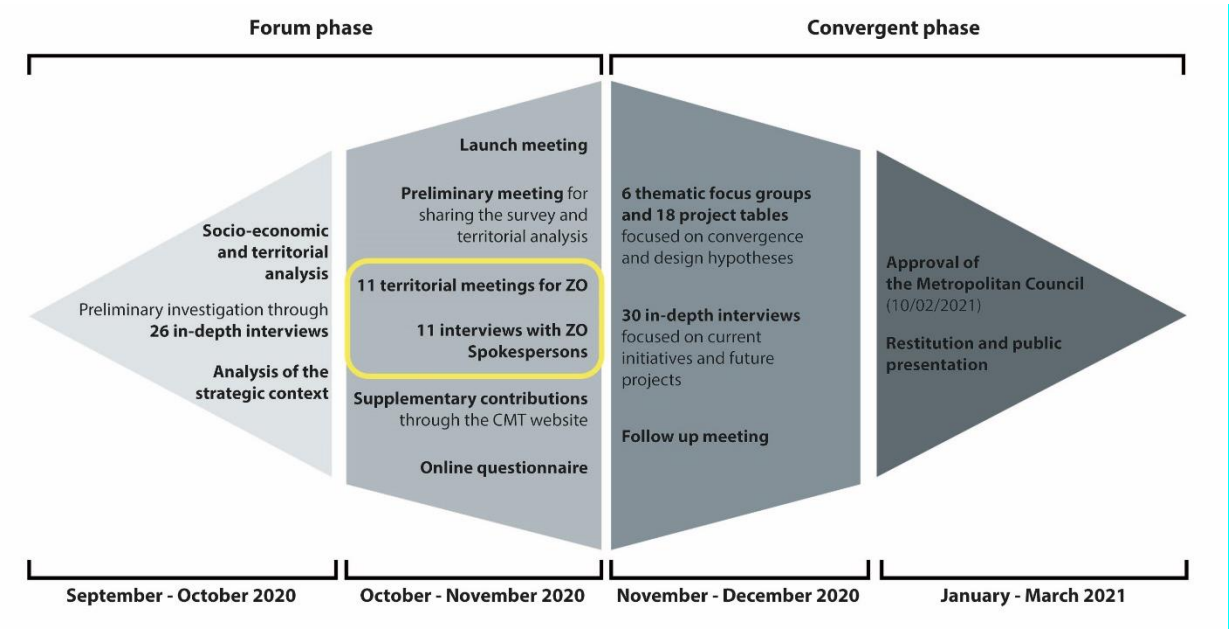

Figure 8 - Involvement of metropolitan actors in the Metropolitan Strategic Plan. Source: authors' re-elaboration based on Metropolitan City of Turin.

The second key metropolitan planning instrument is the General Metropolitan Territorial Plan (PTGM). To date, the Metropolitan City of Bari does not yet have a PTGM, while the

[12] The spokesperson for the Homogeneous Zones is established through internal voting among the mayors of the municipalities belonging to the Homogeneous Zones. Generally, but not always, the spokesperson for the Homogenous Zone is also the mayor of the most important municipality.

Metropolitan City of Turin adopted the preliminary document in 2022. In the Metropolitan City of Bari, the process of drafting the plan for the former province was interrupted by the approval of the Delrio Law. The Metropolitan City then began to draft the PTGM, combining the guidelines of the Provincial Territorial Plan (PTCP)[13] and the 11 flagship actions envisaged in the Metropolitan Strategic Plan. As for the Metropolitan City of Turin, the PTGM has almost reached the end of the adoption process. Small and medium-sized municipalities have been involved in the planning process since the scoping phase, during which opinions and suggestions were drawn from municipalities and other associative forms, following the adoption of the preliminary draft technical proposal (Figure 9). In principle, the latter should then have been drafted with contributions from the municipalities and the associative forms responsible for local planning (Art. 9 ter LR 56/77), and approved by the Metropolitan Council, having acquired the mandatory opinion of the Assembly of Mayors of the Homogeneous Zones and the binding opinion of the Metropolitan Conference (Art. 8 of the Metropolitan Statute). However, due to the limits imposed by the pandemic during the early stages of the process of definition of the PTGM, the metropolitan authority limited consultation to the compulsory requirements required by regional law. Some online meetings were organised with the Homogenous Zones, but they were merely intended for the presentation of the PTGM technical proposal and provided no room for action by small and medium-sized municipalities.

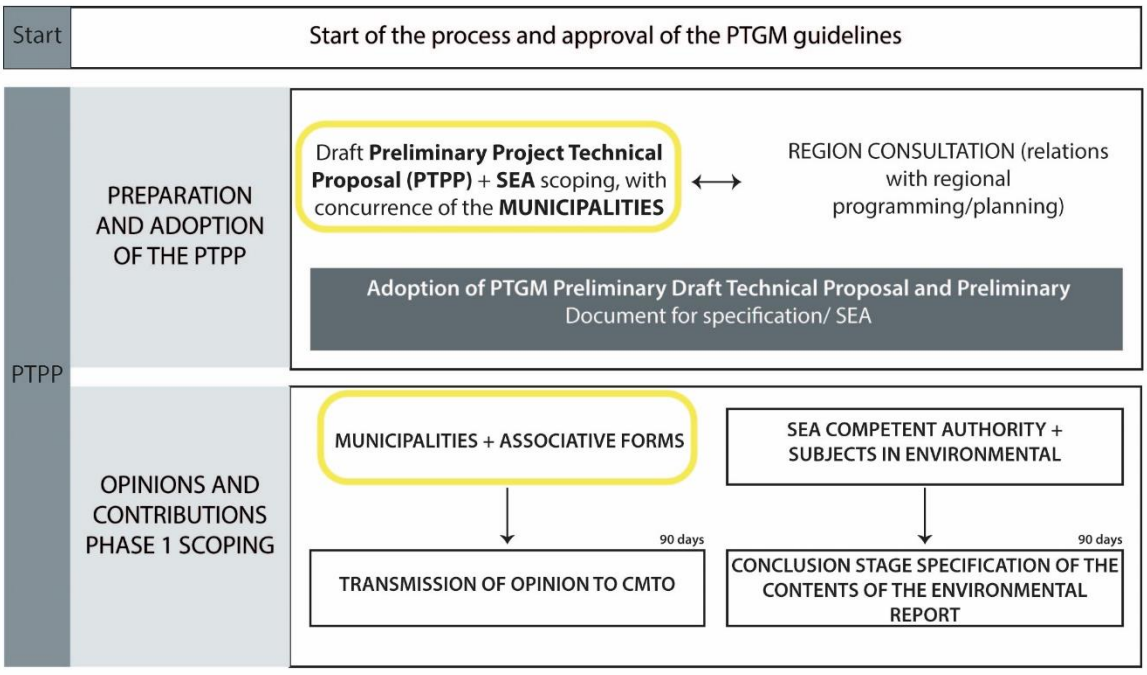

Figure 9 – Extract outline of the construction of the PTGM of the Metropolitan City of Turin. Source: authors' re-elaboration based on Metropolitan City of Turin.

[13] The main objective of the PTCP was to promote the formation of general urban plans that take a conscious view of the dynamics of the vast area and contribute to inter-municipal relations networks, to optimise the use of territorial and urban resources and endowments.

The third metropolitan planning instrument in which the role of small and medium-sized municipalities can be highlighted is the PUMS, the Sustainable Urban Mobility Plan. For both Bari and Turin, the PUMS is the most recently adopted of the three metropolitan planning instruments under scrutiny (PSM, PTGM and PUMS). In Bari, the PUMS was approved in February 2022. It suggests a polycentric planning scenario that is distinguished by integration and balance, and takes the requirements of the 41 municipalities into account while integrating the systemic goal with certain unique characteristics. As regards the participation process, each municipality was actively involved during all phases of the plan's construction, through continuous dialogue between the metropolitan authority and the 41 mayors (Figure 10). First, a questionnaire was sent to representatives of all the municipalities of the Metropolitan City. The questionnaire aimed to gather information on plans and projects but also the visions and perspectives of the various municipalities, with reference to mobility within each specific context and the metropolitan scenario. Municipalities were asked to evaluate which of the objectives defined by the Ministerial Guidelines[14] had greater weight for mobility within their municipality and which objectives they considered to be priorities for metropolitan mobility, choosing from Accessibility, Walkability, Public Transport and Logistics. Municipalities were then involved in a process of recognising internal mobility goals, reconciling municipal and metropolitan goals, and defining a SWOT to ensure the concreteness of the overall vision. Thirty-five out of 41 municipalities (85 per cent) completed the questionnaire. The responses were used to outline the state of play of the Metropolitan City's planning, as well as existing or planned infrastructure endowments and any practices or incentives related to sustainable mobility.

With regard to the Metropolitan City of Turin and its Sustainable Urban Mobility Plan, the drafting process has been underway since 2019, directly involving the spokespersons of the Homogeneous Zones and the municipalities in meetings dedicated to each zone, with an initial collection of data for the drafting of the shared cognitive framework. The participatory process was formalised in the first Metropolitan Forum of the PUMS, held in December 2019. This shared with the main actors in the territory the process of drafting and approving the plan and the macro-objectives defined by the Ministry of Infrastructure and Transport, to articulate them into specific objectives in the Working Tables held after the general plenary presentations (Figure 11). The working groups – organised by the Homogeneous Zones – also shared their main challenges, in terms of accessibility, network congestion, saturation of local public transport, accident rates, etc., to reach a shared SWOT analysis. In addition, the preparatory work of the Forum included further survey activities, aimed at mapping priority issues to structure the work. In-depth interviews were therefore conducted with key stakeholders from each of the 11 Homogeneous Zones.

[14] Decree of 4 August 2017 and by Ministerial Decree No. 396 of 28/08/2019, Vademecum for the drafting of the Sustainable Urban Mobility Plan.

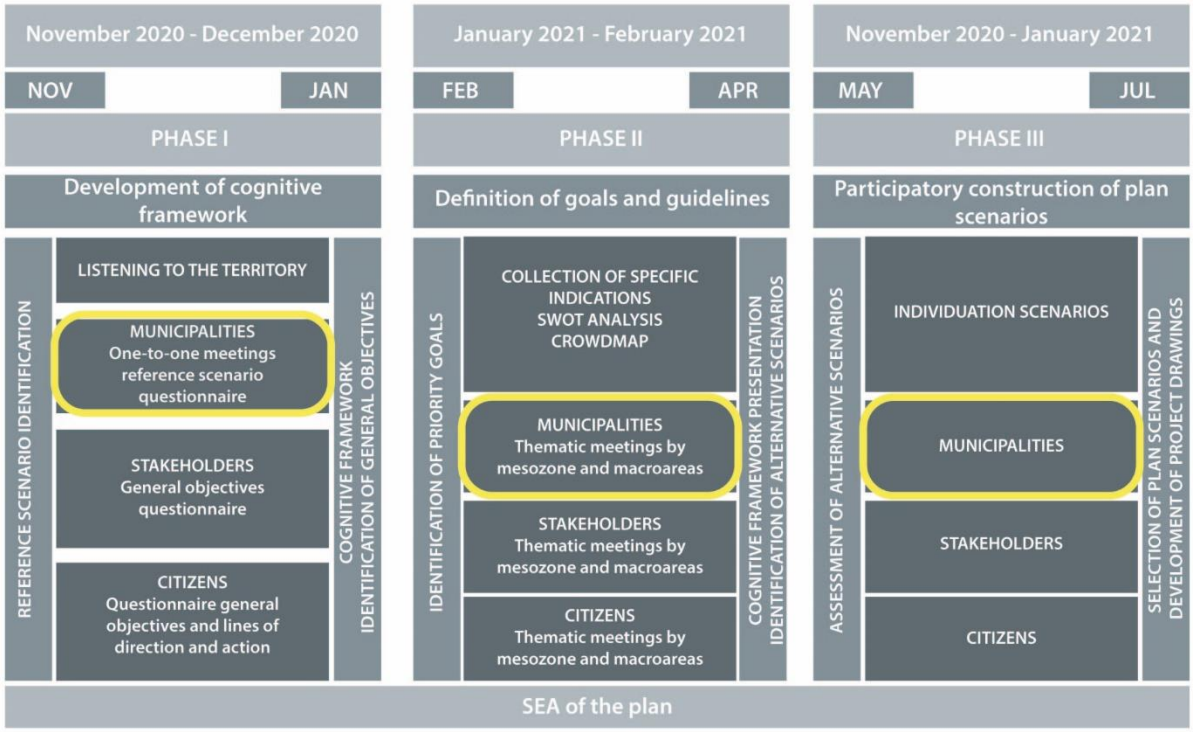

Figure 10 – Outline of the construction process of the PUMS of Bari. Source: authors' re-elaboration based on Metropolitan City of Bari.

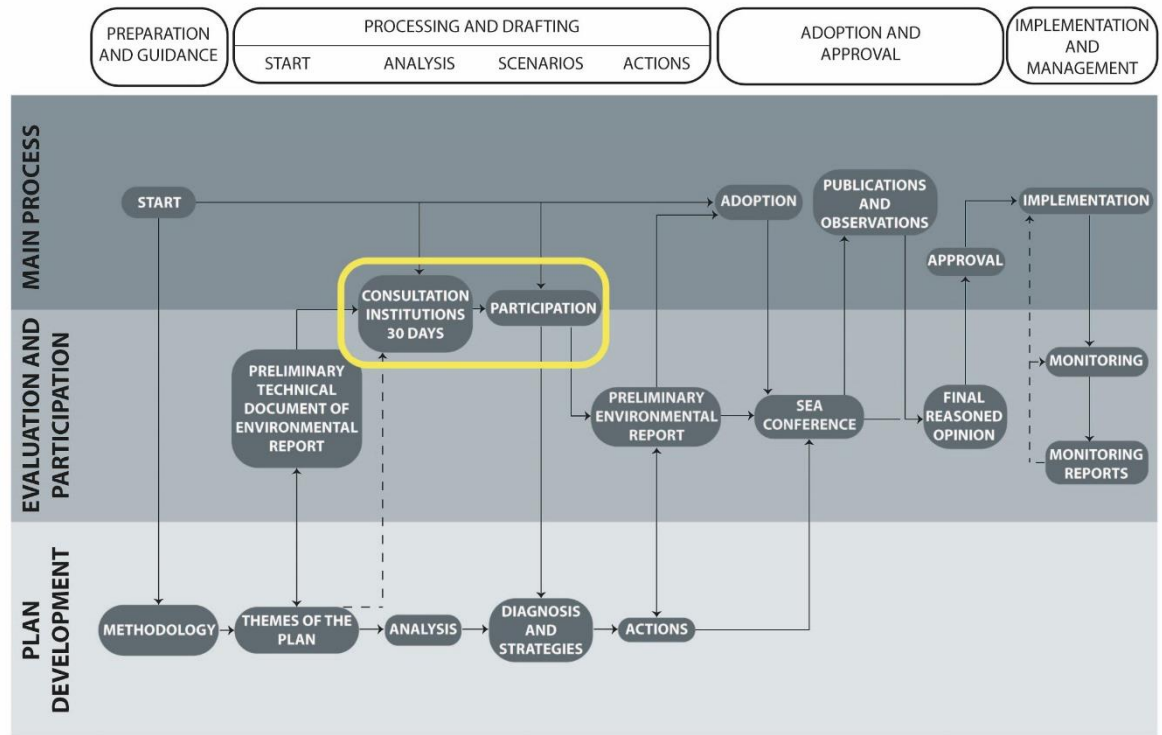

Figure 11 - Outline of the construction process of the PUMS of Turin. Source: authors' re-elaboration based on Metropolitan City of Turin.

5.2 The role of small and medium-sized towns in the EU Cohesion Policy and negotiated planning

After considering the role of SMSTs with regards to metropolitan planning instruments, it is worth investigating their role in relation to the EU cohesion policy. The analysis reveals rather similar trends in the two case studies (Figure 12). In Bari, the distribution of funds is mainly concentrated in the main city and some municipalities in the first belt. In addition, some coastal municipalities receive more funds than the inner areas. The funds are mainly allocated to strengthening the infrastructure network and incentives for small and medium-sized enterprises to increase their competitiveness. This is followed by investments in research and innovation, social and health inclusiveness, education and the environment. In Turin, a differential impact on the metropolitan territory emerges, depending on the type of funds, governance of the instruments, and capacity of local actors to participate in programmes and benefit from funded projects. The funds are concentrated in the core and to a lesser extent in the remote areas, while suburban municipalities receive a relatively low amount of funds. Funds for capacity building in public administration are mostly concentrated in Turin (ESPON, 2021b).

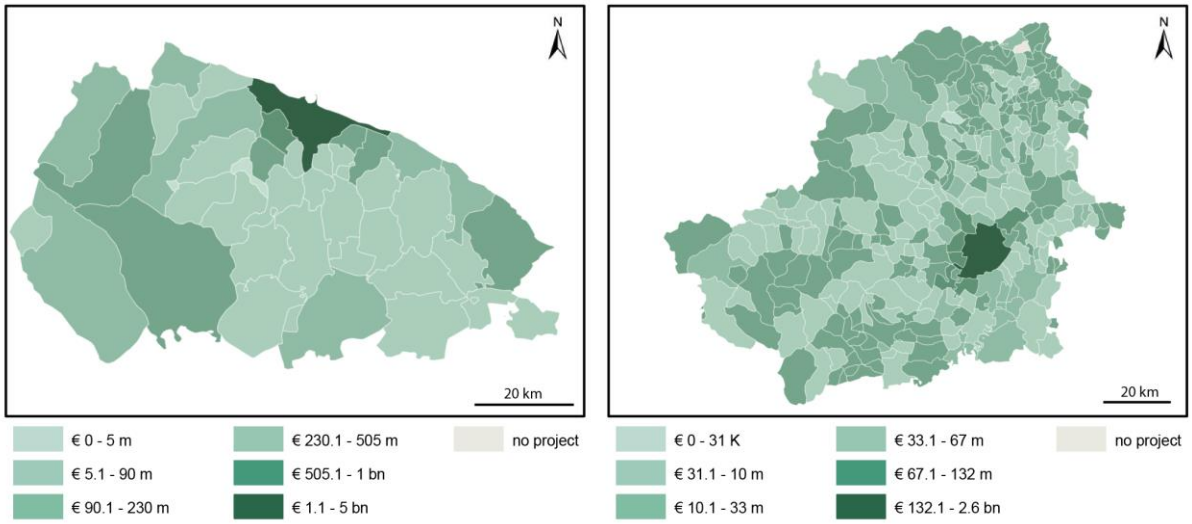

Figure 12 – Distribution of funding in the metropolitan area (on 31/10/2022). Source: Opencoesione 2023. Authors' elaboration.

To make up for their lower institutional capacity, SMSTs within metropolitan areas often join forces through different forms of association, enabling them to access European funds and maximise their territorial impact. Among them, Local Action Groups (LAGs)[15] play a particularly relevant role, joining both public and private actors in the management of funds

[15] The actors involved in the LAGs are quite diverse and encompass all the specific entities within their own territories. These include mayors, sports and cultural associations, universities, banks, food and wine associations, rural associations, local consortia, cooperatives, labour unions, local entrepreneurs and citizens.

(Figure 13). Although both Bari and Turin LAGs are very active and play an important role as inter-municipal actors bringing together SMSTs, some differences emerged between the two case studies. In the Metropolitan City of Bari, there are eight LAGs, covering almost the entire metropolitan territory except for the main city and a few surrounding municipalities. The presence of LAGs within the metropolitan territory of Turin is much more limited, with three LAGs located mainly in the mountainous area of the metropolitan territory. Moreover, in the Bari metropolitan area, some LAGs cross metropolitan boundaries, showing how functional relationships between SMSTs do not follow the metropolitan boundary. Unlike in Bari, the LAGs within the Metropolitan City of Turin respect metropolitan boundaries. This may be due to the different morphological conformation of the territory of the two metropolitan areas, with the Metropolitan City of Bari, due to its plains nature, allowing metropolitan municipalities to establish functional relations with municipalities outside metropolitan areas.[16]

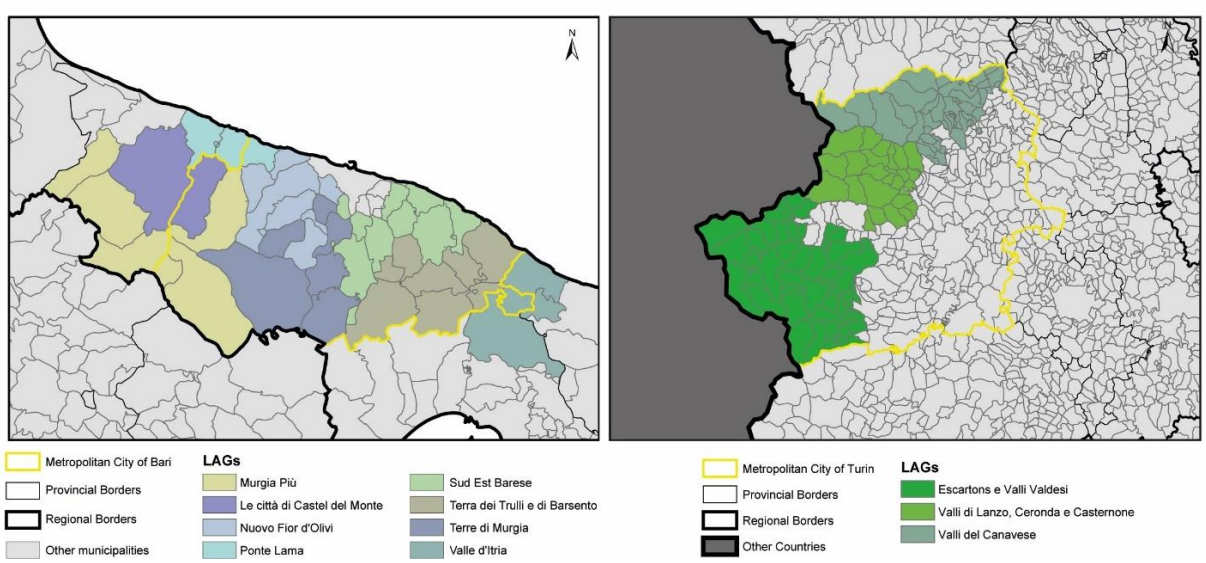

Figure 13 - Local Action Groups in the Metropolitan City of Bari and Turin. Source: authors' elaboration.

Other tools used by SMSTs to network and provide them with greater political clout vis-à-vis the supra-ordinate levels are the Territorial Pacts – five of which are active in the Metropolitan Area of Bari and six in the Metropolitan City of Turin – framed by so-called "negotiated planning" (CIPE Resolution of 21 March 1997) (Figure 14). These agreements between different public and private actors aim to activate infrastructural investments and entrepreneurial initiatives in the sectors of industry, agribusiness, services, tourism, agriculture, fishing and aquaculture. Over the years, they have helped increase the

[16] On the other hand, the LAGs of the Metropolitan City of Turin concern mountain regions that are self-contained in the metropolitan territory.

competitiveness of local small and medium-sized enterprises in the context of the global economy and increased local employment (Marx, 2019).

There are some excellent examples of inter-municipal cooperation between small municipalities and metropolitan authorities. For instance, various Interreg ALCOTRA projects, or more recently, the Integrated Urban Programmes (PUIs).[17] The latter is a particularly interesting and promising instrument that favours the engagement of SMSTs in metropolitan governance. PUIs are concerned exclusively with Metropolitan Cities and are aimed at improving suburbs and peripheries (broadly understood) by creating new services for citizens and upgrading logistics infrastructure, thus transforming the most vulnerable parts of metropolitan territories into more sustainable, smarter places. The Metropolitan City of Bari has presented two PUIs with different themes. The first one, labelled "Identity is Community", focuses on social and cultural infrastructure and aims to preserve and consolidate local historical and cultural identity, starting from the redevelopment of public spaces and degraded locations, with a view to social and energy sustainability while implementing interventions to regenerate the social and economic fabric. There are 26 municipalities with 28 planned interventions that will benefit from over 113 million euros. The second PUI focuses on urban regeneration and public space. The plan is called "Metropolitan Greening" and aims to implement a metropolitan greening program in urban and peri-urban areas characterised by physical and social degradation in order to build opportunities for urban and landscape redevelopment. The 21 interventions of this PUI will benefit from over 7 million euros. The identification of the interventions of both PUIs was undertaken in close coordination with the metropolitan municipalities, which will also contribute to co-financing. Importantly, they are also interconnected with the twelve axes of the PSM.

The Metropolitan City of Turin has divided its available funds between two PUIs. One targeted the main city of Turin, while the second PUI focused on the remaining metropolitan territory. The first, "PLUS – Integrated Urban Plan of the City of Turin", concerns 36 interventions that will benefit from over 113 million euros, and aims to address urban regeneration starting with the city library system as an element of urban social infrastructure. The second PUI, "Turin augmented metropolis", concerns the remaining municipalities of the Metropolitan City and complements the first one. It is explicitly positioned in continuity with the Metropolitan Strategic Plan 2021-2023 and aims to intervene in the social infrastructure of different urban nodes, at the various elevation zones, to counter inequalities of opportunity involving a range of social targets, particularly elderly, disabled and young people, families and, in general, people in economic difficulties. The subdivision into two PUIs and the

[17] The investment in Integrated Urban Plans (PUIs) is part of Mission 5 Inclusion and Cohesion and benefits from 2.49 billion euros of funding, in addition to 210 million euros allocated by the Complementary Plan, for a total of 2.7 billion. It is targeted entirely at metropolitan cities, to improve their suburbs by creating new services for citizens and upgrading logistics infrastructure, thus transforming the most vulnerable parts of metropolitan territories into more sustainable, smarter places.

definition of their contents were born out of a communication effort between the HZ, the mayors of metropolitan municipalities and the Metropolitan City.

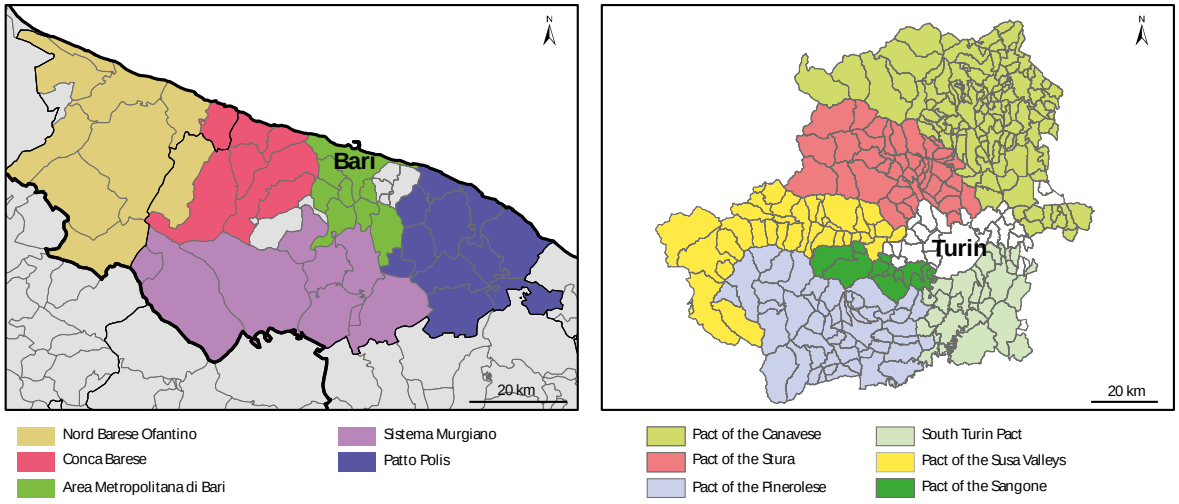

Figure 14 – Territorial Pacts in the Metropolitan Cities of Bari and Turin. Source: authors' elaboration.

6. Concluding remarks and future perspectives

The Italian territorial administrative system features a high degree of territorial fragmentation; 90% of the almost 8,000 municipalities have less than 20,000 inhabitants (70% less than 5,000 inhabitants). In order to overcome this fragmentation within territories characterised by complex functional socioeconomic dynamics, the central government has, since the 1990s, tried to introduce some sort of metropolitan governance. After some decades of impasse, 14 Metropolitan Cities were eventually instituted in 2014, with governance arrangements intended to favour inter-municipal cooperation in the field of territorial development, thus also ensuring the positive engagement of SMSTs.

Due to the nature of the reform, however, this occurred to a different extent in the different metropolitan contexts. Especially in the more fragmented contexts dominated by a strong core, the main city hegemonised policy-making dynamics, *de facto* leading to the consolidation of "two-speed" territorial development dynamics. At the same time, SMSTs are very often organised into sub-metropolitan networks (Unions of Municipalities, LAGs, Territorial Pacts) to counterbalance the influence of the core area, give the SMSTs greater influence in metropolitan policymaking and increase the possibility of attracting resources from various EU programmes. Municipalities are most often free to decide which other municipalities to cooperate with and on what topics. However, instead of a sub-metropolitan cooperation network that fits together like pieces of a puzzle and is spatially consistent and thematically complementary, the result is a complicated framework of sub-metropolitan cooperation that depends on the actual willingness of local actors to cooperate. Whereas this heterogeneity is not necessarily a negative element *per se*, it is undoubtedly recommendable

that the various forms of cooperation that coexist in metropolitan areas establish some sort of dialogue, in search of potential synergies and cross-fertilisation. In this, the strategic action of Metropolitan Cities could certainly represent an added value.

Despite the potential role they could play, however, the two cases discussed in the paper have shown how some elements of the Delrio reform have actually helped undermine the newly introduced metropolitan institutions. Their second-level nature and the fact that the metropolitan mayor is also often the mayor of the main municipality have led to the reinforcing of the dominance of the latter, a polarisation that is reflected in the strategic choices made within the various planning instruments and in the "economic" choices related to the EU cohesion policy funds. On the one hand, due to their minimal influence on metropolitan processes, SMSTs find it hard to develop "metropolitan affection", and often feel detached and in need of fending for themselves. In the case of the Metropolitan City of Bari, municipalities have a greater influence in the planning processes, due to the more balanced territorial structure and the lower level of administrative fragmentation here. While the City of Bari intercepts the lion's share of the EU cohesion policy resources, the Metropolitan City's SMSTs join forces through Territorial Pacts and LAGs to access European funds in support of local development. This also occurs in Turin where, however, small administrations in rural and mountain areas are less engaged in the processes led by the metropolitan institution and appear less persuaded of the advantages of metropolitan cooperation. Proximity matters, and despite the efforts of the metropolitan authority to involve all its municipalities and stakeholders in planning processes, the governance system is still very much centred in the core. Additional, more recent evidence of the differing engagement of SMSTs in metropolitan governance dynamics is provided by the PUIs. In the case of the Metropolitan City of Bari, PUIs are organised thematically and target the whole metropolitan territory, while in Turin they adopt a "donut" structure, targeting the main municipalities and the rest of the metropolitan territory through two separate instruments.

Overall, the analysis suggests that integrated planning is an unavoidable requirement for metropolitan areas aiming to strengthen their ability to work as a system and enhance common potential while respecting the specificity and autonomy of SMSTs. Both Bari and Turin are making attempts to give voice and room for action to SMSTs in their planning processes. At the same time, in both cases, territorial fragmentation, the coexistence of different forms of inter-municipal networking, functional dynamics going beyond the institutional boundaries, and imbalances of power and competencies between the core and SMSTs challenge the effectiveness of metropolitan governance and planning. The evidence presented here can inform research and policy on the role of SMSTs in metropolitan governance and planning. Future research should investigate the role of SMSTs in other Italian Metropolitan Cities, as well as in other metropolitan areas across Europe.

Author contributions

All sections of the paper were written and revised by all three authors, under D.C.'s leadership. D.C. carried out data collection and interviews for the Bari case. E.V.B. and D.C. carried out data collection and interviews for the Torino case. D.C. produced maps and figures.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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