Metropolitan regions in EU cohesion policy

SUMMARY

Metropolitan regions currently include three fifths of the EU population – a proportion that is expected to increase in the future. These regions constitute important poles of innovation, research and economic growth, while also offering a wide variety of educational, cultural and professional opportunities to their inhabitants.

Nevertheless, metropolitan regions face a number of important challenges. As they are composed of urban, sub-urban and even rural areas, they require a multidimensional policy approach to help them tackle their complex issues.

One of the major issues that metropolitan regions usually face is the lack of an efficient, inter-connected transport system. Environmental pollution, a major problem in many such regions, is inextricably linked to transport (exacerbated by the high number of commuters), high energy consumption and waste creation.

Metropolitan regions usually constitute poles of population growth and have to cater for the integration of their newly arrived citizens. In certain cases, the increasing demand for accommodation leads to a lack of affordable housing and an escalation of rental and property prices; this problem has worsened in many urban areas of the European Union in recent years. In addition, although metropolitan regions may be hubs of economic growth, they also house big numbers of poor and homeless people. Yet again, a number of de-industrialised EU metropolitan regions are suffering severe economic losses.

The EU is addressing the needs of metropolitan regions through a number of funds and tools, most notably the European structural and investment funds. Other EU instruments, such as the Urban Agenda for the EU also provide opportunities for metropolitan regions.

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Definition and characteristics of a metropolitan region

There are a number of definitions for what constitutes a metropolitan region.¹ Most of these refer to the existence of different types of areas within a wider metropolitan region (usually a predominantly urban area with strong connections to suburban and rural areas). Nevertheless, the status, scope, prerogatives and resources of metropolitan regions differ from one EU country to another. Metropolitan regions usually contain a functional urban area (FUA), which, according to the Eurostat/OECD definition, is an area consisting of a densely inhabited city and its less densely populated commuting zone, whose labour market is highly integrated with the city.

According to Eurostat, metropolitan regions are NUTS 3 regions or a number of such regions that together form an agglomeration of at least 250,000 inhabitants. The Eurostat typology also distinguishes between capital-city metropolitan regions, second-tier metropolitan regions and smaller metropolitan regions. The first category includes national capitals, and the second includes countries’ largest cities other than their capitals (Eurostat lists all EU metropolitan regions). Metropolitan regions may be bigger than the core city, but also smaller than an administrative region. They may also even cut across various local/regional administrative units.

According to Eurostat, there were 296.3 million people living in the EU’s metropolitan regions in 2016. This means that metropolitan regions were home to almost three out of every five EU inhabitants. The countries with the highest number of people living in such regions were Germany (55.3 million), France (43.8 million) and the United Kingdom (43.3 million). Most metropolitan regions are concentrated around large, medium-sized or smaller cities, and, as mentioned above, a specific group of metropolitan regions comprises capital cities.

According to the Eurostat regional yearbook 2018, 100 % of the population in Cyprus and Luxembourg and 92.7 % of the population in Malta lived in metropolitan regions. Countries where more than 65 % of the total population lived in metropolitan regions were Spain (69.2 %), Denmark (69.0 %), Germany (67.5 %), the UK (66.2 %) and France (65.6 %). These figures confirm that the largest and most concentrated share of the population was living in metropolitan regions predominantly located in the western parts of the EU.

Figure 2 shows the speed at which the metropolitan population has been increasing in size. The fastest growth rate, 2.1 % per annum during the 2006-2016 period, was recorded in Luxembourg. Cyprus, Ireland, Sweden and Malta all saw their metropolitan populations increase by 1.1-1.3 % per annum over the same period; by contrast, during this period, the total number of people living in the metropolitan regions of Romania, Greece, Lithuania and Latvia declined.

Economic activity in the EU is highly concentrated in metropolitan regions. According to the Eurostat regional yearbook 2018, these regions contributed almost 72% of the EU-28’s GDP, while being home to 60% of the total EU population. The same source claims that this disproportionate ratio may be partially attributed to the daily flow of commuters that increase the size of the metropolitan workforce and its levels of economic activity. Because of this circumstance, the high levels of GDP per capita being recorded in some metropolitan regions that are characterised by large numbers of net incoming commuters may overstate their true economic well-being. By contrast, the economic well-being of areas that surround capital cities or metropolitan regions is likely to be understated when based on an analysis of average per capita GDP.
According to the European Commission’s *Seventh Report on economic, social and territorial cohesion*, metropolitan regions, especially larger ones, tend to have a more highly educated population than other areas. Metropolitan regions tend to offer an environment that is particularly conducive to the introduction of new ideas and the inception of new products. Their territory can be a breeding ground for a creative and skilled workforce, specialised clusters of economic activity, universities and research institutes.

**Challenges faced by metropolitan regions**

Although metropolitan regions constitute a vibrant part of the EU territory, they also face a number of serious challenges, which are outlined below.

**Fragmentation/dispersion of powers**

Metropolitan regions are characterised by close economic and social linkages between their urban and suburban parts. However, they may be governed by a number of different local or regional entities and other state structures in charge of their economic and spatial development. In terms of policy-making, this may well imply that none of these multiple governmental structures has the powers and tools to address all challenges and opportunities within a metropolitan region on its own. This dispersion of power renders it necessary for the different policy actors to have effective synergies with each other. Nevertheless, as a 2017 ESPON study claims, despite the extensive knowledge of the patterns that are emerging at the urban, suburban and regional levels, current urban policies still seem to have problems when it comes to planning for metropolitan regions. The study concludes that institutional structures and governance practices often remain geared towards the radial (core-centric) urban model, which may put outer areas in a dependent position in their relations with the core cities. In addition, a 2015 OECD study mentions that quality governance can have a strong impact when it comes to the economic development of metropolitan regions. It furthermore argues that metropolitan regions with fragmented governance structures tend to have lower levels of productivity: for a given population size, a metropolitan region with twice the number of municipalities is associated with lower productivity of around 6%. This percentage drops by almost half whenever there is a governance body at the metropolitan level. The study also finds that it is often the case that administrative boundaries within metropolitan regions are based on centuries-old borders that do not correspond to today’s patterns of human activity. It suggests that governance structures should take the functional realities of metropolitan regions into account. It also states that land-use planning and transport planning, in particular, need to be coordinated effectively, and recommends applying integrated public transport strategies.

**Effective transport network**

Metropolitan regions face a number of issues, especially when it comes to transport. Inconsistencies in the design of public transport connections and lack of connections amongst the different areas of the metropolitan regions may hinder access to jobs and services. Furthermore, traffic within the core-city centres of metropolitan regions is usually congested and incoming commuters during the working week make it even worse. In order to sort out this problem, metropolitan-wide governance arrangements may be necessary to allow efficient public transport connections to be constructed and operated.

**Environmental issues**

Environmental pollution is a major problem in many metropolitan regions, which is inextricably linked to transport (exacerbated by the high number of commuters), high energy consumption and waste creation. A 2016 European Metropolitan Authorities – CIDOB report claims that improving air quality, reducing high levels of noise, tackling contaminated sites, addressing water scarcity/quality, and fostering efficient waste-management cycles are the most prominent challenges for urban areas. The report also mentions a number of other environmental dangers stemming from climate
change, such as high temperatures and the risk of flooding. Projects aiming at modernising metropolitan infrastructure and new public works need to take into account environmental challenges and seek to mitigate the effects of climate change. Greener transport and energy are also of utmost importance to metropolitan regions.

Economic issues

Metropolitan regions are considered to be centres of economic growth. Nevertheless, not all of them are characterised by economic prosperity. Many include former industrial heartlands that have lagged behind in terms of economic development. One such example is the eastern German regions, which were severely impacted by globalisation, de-industrialisation and/or reunification. In addition, metropolitan regions are characterised by considerable diversity. One part of a metropolitan region may be urban and another might be predominantly rural. Similarly, some of the richest metropolitan regions may include areas of extreme poverty. Therefore, metropolitan regions need a number of different policy tools to tackle the diverse challenges that stem from their geographical, economic and social diversity. Figure 3 shows the disparities between EU metropolitan regions in terms of GDP.

The EU also has a number of cross-border metropolitan regions that require close cooperation among their constituent agglomerations belonging to different Member States. Linguistic, political and bureaucratic issues render this a difficult task. An ESPON study on these regions concludes that cross-border polycentric metropolitan regions are an important emerging phenomenon of European spatial organisation and have potential for further development.

Societal challenges

Other important challenges for metropolitan regions include social exclusion, homelessness, crime, in-work poverty, the absence of affordable housing and the quality of provision of public services. A 2015 Eurostat survey on the quality of life in EU cities states that health services, unemployment, education and training are perceived by respondents as the most important issues for their city. The 2015 OECD report mentioned above states that inequality tends to be higher in larger cities, and that the gap between the rich and the poor there appears to have widened in recent decades. Furthermore, social exclusion is a pressing problem and is often strongly prevalent among certain social groups, such as immigrants, ethnic minorities and young people from low-income households. Social and economic
segregation is also common in many metropolitan regions, as poor and wealthy neighbourhoods are often clearly separated from each other. The study claims that such separation contributes to self-perpetuating patterns of inequality.

In addition, according to Eurostat, in 2014 the proportion of people in the EU-28 who were living in an area with problems related to crime, violence or vandalism was considerably higher among those living in cities (19.9 %) than in towns and suburbs (11.8 %), and considerably lower among those living in rural areas (7.3 %). City-dwellers in the EU-28 were, on average, 2.7 times more likely to be living in an area with problems related to crime, violence or vandalism than people living in rural areas.

It should also be noted that not all those who commute within a metropolitan area use all public services and thus create additional costs, especially for the core cities. According to a 2015 OECD study, effective metropolitan governance mechanisms can also reduce disparities in public service provision, by ensuring more equal distribution of public services and by preventing land-use and other planning policies from further exacerbating the social stratification of neighbourhoods. However, the lack of spatial planning powers for various EU metropolitan regions also exacerbates many issues which affect the environment such as urban sprawl expansion, ineffective traffic networks, etc.

Metropolitan regions may attract wide sectors of the population. In certain cases, the steady growth of their population leads to a lack of affordable housing. Eurostat data suggest the presence of a trade-off, insofar as people living in cities with the most dynamic labour markets appear to face difficulties in locating adequate housing at a reasonable price, whereas in cities in which housing is relatively easy to find, the local labour market is often depressed.

**Budgetary constraints**

Metropolitan regions have to cope with costly challenges associated with transport, the environment and social inclusion, at a time when increasing demand for services is coupled with limited financial resources. Metropolitan regions do not always have sufficient resources. They also face limitations when it comes to benefitting from various sources of EU funding. This is due to the fact that the method for reallocating resources under the European structural and investment funds is based primarily on the per capita GDP/purchasing power parity for every EU region and does not include social, territorial and environmental aspects that could have been beneficial for metropolitan regions. An EPRS briefing analyses the issues stemming from the use of the GDP indicator as the main source of funding allocation and provides background information on possible alternative indicators.

**EU funding and other related tools for metropolitan areas**

Several OECD reports and ESPON projects have shown that supporting metropolitan regions fosters more balanced development not only within the metropolitan region concerned but also within a wider area. Significant investment in infrastructure is necessary so that the challenges of metropolitan regions can be tackled successfully.

As metropolitan regions may cover areas with different territorial characteristics (urban, suburban and rural), a number of EU funds (such as the ESIFs described below) and tools can be used to cater to their diverse needs.

The European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) can be used for projects mostly related to innovation and research, digitalisation, support for SMEs and the low-carbon economy. ERDF can fund initiatives linked to sustainable urban development, covering areas such as urban mobility, the regeneration of deprived communities, improving research and innovation capacity, and tackling climate change. At least 5 % of ERDF allocations must be dedicated to Sustainable Urban Development strategies. The ERDF also funds European Territorial Cooperation (ETC), also known as Interreg projects, which provide a framework for the implementation of joint actions and policy.
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exchanges between national, regional and local actors from different EU Member States. The European Social Fund (ESF) supports employment-related projects throughout Europe and invests in Europe's human capital – its workers, its young people and all those seeking a job. The European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) focuses on resolving the particular challenges facing EU rural areas. The European Maritime and Fisheries Fund (EMFF) helps fishermen to adopt sustainable fishing practices and coastal communities to diversify their economies, thereby improving quality of life along European coasts. Any EU region may benefit from the ERDF and the ESF. However, only less developed regions receive support from the Cohesion Fund (CF), which funds transport and environment projects in countries with gross national income (GNI) per inhabitant below 90% of the EU average (in 2014-2020: Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czechia, Estonia, Greece, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia).

In order to ensure greater flexibility in tailoring the allocation of ESIF resources to territorial needs, new delivery mechanisms – the Integrated Territorial Investment (ITI) and the Community-Led Local Development (CLLD) – have been put in place for the 2014-2020 programming period. Integrated Territorial Investment is the implementation of an integrated metropolitan development strategy that involves key investments addressing the problems of the given area from more than one priority axis of one or more programmes funded by the European structural and investment funds. CLLD is a specific tool for use at sub-regional level, which is complementary to other development support at local level. CLLD can mobilise and involve local communities and organisations to contribute to achieving the Europe 2020 Strategy goals of smart, sustainable and inclusive growth, fostering territorial cohesion and reaching specific policy objectives.

According to the Commission’s seventh report on economic, territorial and social cohesion, when it comes to blending different financial sources, in most cases, the ERDF provides the bulk of financing together with the ESF, but the other ESIFs, other EU instruments and national or regional public and private funding can also make a significant contribution in some Member States, especially for ITI related strategies. The same report also claims that the ITI mechanism is being used flexibly for multidimensional place-based interventions to tackle complex territorial problems in 13 Member States. It has been adopted by around 150 different territorial strategies, which were developed to replace regional programmes not only for administrative regions but also for functional areas such as remote and sparsely populated rural areas, islands and coastal areas, environmental protection sites and functional urban areas. However, a 2015 report from the Council of European Municipalities and Regions also states that the use of the ITI mechanism amongst EU countries is uneven. A 2018 EPRS briefing also analyses the difficulties stemming from ITIs, such as their complex structure, the administrative burden they place on local authorities, and the reluctance of many EU Member States to delegate responsibilities to the local level for the take-off of ITIs.

Another initiative from which metropolitan regions can benefit is the Urban Agenda for the EU, which was launched in May 2016 with the Pact of Amsterdam. It represents a new multilevel working method promoting cooperation among Member States, cities, the European Commission and other stakeholders in order to stimulate growth, liveability and innovation in the cities of Europe, and to identify and successfully tackle social challenges. The Urban Agenda for the EU focuses specifically on three pillars of EU policy-making and implementation: better regulation, better funding and better knowledge of urban issues. It covers a number of themes, listed in Table 1.

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<th>Table 1 – The 12 themes of the Urban Agenda for the EU</th>
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<td>Jobs and skills in the local economy</td>
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<td>Urban poverty</td>
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<td>Climate adaptation</td>
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A number of thematic partnerships representing various levels of government and stakeholders are the key delivery mechanism within the Urban Agenda for the EU. The Commission launched a one-stop shop, a website that provides information about the Urban Agenda for the EU and funding for cities, including access to databases (such as the urban data platform) that promote knowledge-sharing and better policy-making on urban issues. Furthermore, Urban Innovative Actions (UIA) is an EU initiative that provides urban areas throughout Europe with resources to test new and unproven solutions to address urban challenges.

URBACT is a European Territorial Cooperation programme aimed at fostering sustainable integrated urban development in cities across Europe. It has a number of projects on issues that matter to metropolitan regions, such as the urban sprawl and the urban-rural relationship. ESPON, an EU-funded applied research programme aimed at supporting the formulation of territorial development policies in Europe, also runs the project SPIMA – Spatial Dynamics and Strategic Planning in Metropolitan Areas. The Joint Research Centre's URBADEV project, 'Support knowledge management of EU measures in Integrated Urban and Territorial development', has a knowledge base, made public through the STRAT-Board website. This is an interactive mapping tool that provides a visual overview of sustainable urban development and ITI strategies currently implemented across Europe.

When it comes to the environment, a source of funding in addition to the ESIFs is the current LIFE programme, which has a budget of €3.4 billion. It is divided into two sub-programmes, one for the environment (representing 75% of the overall financial envelope) and one for climate action (representing 25% of the envelope). There is also a new category, Jointly Funded Integrated Projects, which will operate on a large territorial scale. Furthermore, in December 2017 the Commission launched the platform on coal regions in transition in order to better understand the challenges and needs on the ground, as well as the potential for EU-level assistance. The initiative was first announced in the clean energy package, which stressed the importance of enabling clean energy transition on the ground.

As part of a shift towards a circular economy, the Commission adopted four legislative proposals introducing new waste management targets regarding reuse, recycling and landfilling. Their aim was to strengthen the provisions on waste prevention and extended producer responsibility, and to streamline the definitions, reporting obligations and calculation methods for the targets. In 2019, the Commission also adopted a report on the implementation of the Circular Economy Action Plan. The report presents the main achievements under the action plan and sketches out future challenges to shaping the economy and paving the way towards a climate-neutral, circular economy, where pressure on natural and freshwater resources as well as ecosystems is minimised.

Furthermore, the European Globalisation Adjustment Fund (EGF) provides support to people who have lost their jobs as a result of major structural changes in world trade patterns due to globalisation, e.g. when a large company shuts down or production is moved outside the EU, or as a result of the global economic and financial crisis.

To facilitate beneficiaries' access to EU funding, EPRS has prepared a Guide to EU Funding for the 2014-2020 period, covering major sources of EU funding in each relevant sector.

Future budgetary and legislative elements

In its proposal for the 2021-2027 multiannual financial framework (MFF), the Commission has allocated €330 billion for economic, social and territorial cohesion. Furthermore, the proposed Common Provisions Regulation (CPR) for this period includes a number of provisions that may be beneficial to metropolitan regions. These provisions still have to be negotiated by the Council and the Parliament. Nevertheless, the proposal is for a smaller budget than that of the 2014-2020 period.

In the 2021-2027 MFF proposal, the Commission seeks to further strengthen the urban dimension of cohesion policy. As a result, 6% of the ERDF envelope has been earmarked for investments in
sustainable urban development at Member State level. The 2021-2027 MFF proposal also creates the European Urban Initiative, a new instrument for city-to-city cooperation, innovation and capacity-building across all the thematic priorities of the Urban Agenda. Allocations are still predominantly based on GDP per capita, but now also include new criteria for all categories relevant to regions – youth unemployment, low education level, climate change and the reception and integration of migrants – in order to better reflect the socio-economic situation on the ground. The Asylum and Migration Fund, together with cohesion policy resources, can finance local integration strategies for migrants and asylum-seekers. In addition, the bulk of ERDF and CF investments will go towards innovation, support to small businesses, digital technologies and industrial modernisation. It will also go to the shift towards a low-carbon, circular economy and the fight against climate change, delivering on the Paris Agreement.

The new rules for 2021-2027 cohesion policy claim that they support locally led development strategies developed at the level closest to citizens. They emphasise the need for inclusive partnership agreements with local and regional authorities. The proposal includes the possibility of transferring money from one priority to another within an EU funding programme, without the need for formal Commission approval. The threshold for such a transfer is set at 5% of the budget for the given priority. It also aims to facilitate synergies, for example, between the ERDF and the European Social Fund+ in the context of integrated city development plans, for the regeneration of deprived urban areas. The proposed CPR also includes a number of suggestions for measures to achieve further flexibility and simplification.

European Parliament

The 2018 resolution on ‘strengthening economic, social and territorial cohesion in the European Union: the 7th report of the European Commission’ (rapporteur: Marc Joulaud, EPP, France), emphasises that efforts to consolidate the territorial dimension of cohesion policy require greater attention to be paid to peri-urban and rural problems, with reference to the expertise of the local authorities and a particular focus on the Member States’ medium-sized towns. The resolution states that the introduction of integrated strategies for sustainable urban development has been a success and should therefore be strengthened as well as replicated in other sub-regional territories. This could happen, for example, by establishing an integrated territorial approach alongside the thematic objectives, but without prejudice to thematic concentration. The resolution also stresses the need to explore the possibility of launching the preparation of national and regional operational programmes based on integrated territorial strategies and smart specialisation strategies.

The 2015 resolution on the urban dimension of EU policies (rapporteur: Kerstin Westphal, S&D, Germany) calls on the Commission to apply a more place-based integrated territorial approach when conceptualising new policy initiatives aimed at urban areas, in order to ensure consistency and to empower towns, cities, and functional urban areas to deliver the Europe 2020 objectives of smart, sustainable and inclusive growth. It suggests assessing urban areas more accurately than just on the basis of the GDP indicator and furthermore states that Eurostat should provide and compile more detailed local data to this end. Furthermore, the resolution calls on the Commission to work on instruments that could measure the progress and impact of an integrated urban agenda at EU level. It asks both the Commission and the Member States to ensure the application of the partnership principle when implementing programmes and projects supported by EU funding, and to give particular attention to the involvement of cities, towns and functional urban areas in the preparation, management and governance of the programmes, including at cross-border level.

Yet again, the resolution stresses that administrative borders are becoming less and less pertinent when trying to address development challenges at the regional and local levels. Therefore, it states that the European Urban Agenda should be inclusive and take clear account of the diversity of territorial entities in the EU and the cross-border and rural-urban linkages, including the services that functional urban areas provide for their surrounding countryside. The resolution recalls that today’s key economic, social and environmental challenges transcend traditional administrative
boundaries. It furthermore points out that the growing mismatch between administrative and territorial structures (urban and peri-urban cooperation, urban-rural cooperation, etc.) requires new forms of flexible governance in order to facilitate the integrated territorial development of functional areas.

Advisory bodies and stakeholders

The European Committee of the Regions (CoR) is currently preparing an opinion on the challenges of metropolitan regions and their position in the post-2020 cohesion policy. The opinion is expected to give interesting insights on the importance of metropolitan regions in the EU and to highlight their potential but also a number of challenges that affect directly them. It is also expected to provide recommendations on how to better assess the real situation of metropolitan regions and use ESI funds more effectively. The opinion will also include a number proposals so that the post-2020 Cohesion Policy could further enhance the role of metropolitan regions. The opinion is expected to be adopted by the Commission for Territorial Cohesion Policy and EU Budget (COTER) on 23 October 2019 and by the CoR plenary on 4/5 December 2019. An exchange of views took place in COTER in May 2019 on the basis of the rapporteur's working document.

In its 2018 opinion on the implementation assessment of the Urban Agenda for the EU, the CoR advocates adopting an Urban Agenda for the EU that addresses all urban areas, including the often rural functional areas, in order to achieve a more integrated and holistic approach to EU policy/legislation and to involve towns and cities more closely at all stages of the preparation of these policies. The opinion also underlines the need to broaden participation to the greatest extent so as to truly involve all urban areas.

A 2017 working paper from the Eurocities working group on metropolitan areas, entitled ‘Beyond boundaries: metropolitan areas matter’, advocates support for metropolitan cooperation in the context of growing urbanisation and the ongoing debate on the future of the EU and its policies after 2020. The authors support the idea of developing and strengthening the metropolitan dimension in future EU policies and plead for a place-based approach when it comes to EU funding. They also recommend increasing the allocation for sustainable urban development. They furthermore state that both top-down and bottom-up approaches are necessary and that they could facilitate the creation of linkages between ITI and CLLD tools and multi-level governance, as well as the involvement of metropolitan regions’ representatives in the preparation and implementation of the future cohesion policy. The paper suggests including specific actions in support of metropolitan areas in the EU operational programmes; it furthermore recommends applying more favourable co-funding rates for projects that are planned and realised by formal metropolitan area governance authorities. Last but not least, the paper states that the focus should be on integrated approaches and not on thematic concentration, and that EU funds need to become even more flexible and simple to use.

METREX, the network of European Metropolitan Regions and areas, also provides a platform for the exchange of knowledge, expertise/experience on metropolitan affairs and develops joint action on issues of common interest. It has adopted a number of opinions and carried out studies aimed at supporting the EU metropolitan dimension and related policies.

European Metropolitan Authorities (EMA) is a forum for leading politicians from Europe’s metropolitan cities and metropolitan areas, established with the aim to discuss the main concerns regarding metropolitan governance. An EMA policy paper analyses the challenges that metropolitan regions are facing. In its 2019 political declaration, the EMA calls on the European institutions to give metropolitan authorities greater say in the European governance process. It calls for a stronger link between efforts aimed at achieving the UN sustainable development goals by 2030, respect for the principles of the European Pillar of Social Rights, and the recommendations made in the context of the European Semester to not only address the economic dimension without also considering the social and environmental ones. It suggests that the 2021-2027 MFF should
support a more social Europe, and that the definition of future policies, in particular the cohesion policy, must integrate metropolitan areas more actively, insofar as they are key participants in the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights. It also calls for strengthening the urban element within the cohesion policy.

Outlook

Metropolitan regions are characterised by a number of opportunities and challenges. Without proper attention, many of the issues that they face are expected to become more serious. While metropolitan regions are not among the key topics in the EU cohesion policy discourse, much of the academic and political debate is focused on the importance of addressing the needs of urban areas/functional urban areas as well rural-urban connections and sustainable development. This trend may boost the importance of metropolitan regions in the future.

EU metropolitan regions have at their disposal a number of EU funds and related tools. In addition, various local and regional strategies across the EU aim to address some of the challenges they are facing. A number of provisions included in the proposed common provisions regulation for the 2021-2027 programming period may be explored as potentially beneficial to metropolitan regions. The trend towards innovation, digitalisation, industrial modernisation and environmental protection that the European Commission suggest for the post-2020 programming period fits well with the necessities of the metropolitan regions. In addition, a number of provisions regarding flexibility and simplification for EU funds may help metropolitan regions to use them in a simpler and efficient manner.

Nevertheless, many metropolitan regions still lack the policy tools, jurisdiction and funding that would allow them to tackle their challenges and to unfold their full potential. In addition, funding for the post-2020 cohesion policy will be reduced compared to the 2014-2020 period. EU-level authorities could attach more weight to integrated development at the metropolitan level, by allocating funding for achieving this goal. Another option could also be to provide further EU financial incentives to programmes and projects at the metropolitan level, thereby encouraging Member States to focus more on issues related to this level. It goes without saying that the prioritisation of metropolitan regions can only occur if EU national governments support it too. In this respect, Member States can adapt and upgrade their administrative structures to reflect the needs of metropolitan regions.
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ENDNOTES

1 For instance, OECD Report, The Metropolitan Century (2015) defines metropolitan areas as urban agglomerations with more than 500 000 inhabitants (p. 20). For other definitions see also ESPON, SPIMA - Spatial dynamics and strategic planning in metropolitan areas final report, 2018, p. 8-9.


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