

The Metropolitan Dimension of Europe: from Cities to Urban Regions

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The European Union (EU 15, before the latest wave of enlargement) is the most “urbanised” region of the world. According to UN definitions and estimates, in 1992 79% of the EU population lived in urban areas, compared to 77% in Japan, 76% in the United States, 67% in Central and Eastern Europe and 35% in developing countries. All member states of the Community become urbanised, slower in the northern areas, already urbanised since the 60’s and faster in the South and in Ireland: Greece (64%), Italy (69%), and Spain (79%) have a urbanisation rate close to the community average, while Ireland (58%) and Portugal (36%) have a much lower rate, according to the UN definition. Late urbanisation in European southern areas and Ireland partly explain the features of city development in these countries and the continuing rural displacement leading to a faster population growth in medium sized cities than in the northern cities.

European Union’s urban landscape is also characterised by a dense network of urban areas, where a large number of important cities or nodes are relatively close to each others. In 1990 there were around 3,560 towns of over 10,000 inhabitants in the EU, including a total of 237 million people, compared to around 1,000 towns of the same category in the US and Japan. There are 169 cities of more than 200,000 inhabitants in the EU, 32 of over a million inhabitants representing 56% of all urban population. London and Paris are the only EU megalopolis comparable to cities like New York, Tokyo, Mexico City, Cairo or Bombay. Large cities or over 500,000 inhabitants are distributed relatively equally throughout the Community.

A. The Network of European Metropolitan Regions and Areas (METREX)

There are 120 metropolitan regions or areas recognised in the EU. 50 of them are members of the Network of European Metropolitan Regions and Areas (METREX).

METREX is a network of specialists interested in space development and planning at European level. This network connects people involved in the strategic decision making at European level to allow them to share experience, knowledge and know how.

METREX was created in 1996 during the Metropolitan Regions Conference in Glasgow, with the support of the European Commission which took on the responsibility for providing effective ways of promoting metropolitan governance, so that it can deal with the changes in metropolitan issues and all European issues. The mission of METREX is to include a metropolitan dimension in the European activities/business.

With support from the EC, METREX is currently striving to set a better urban balance in Europe, the balance aimed for in the European Strategy for Spatial Development and the guidelines of Europe’s Council of Ministers in charge of regional planning (CEMAT).

B. The Metropolitan Dimension of Europe

There are 80 metropolitan areas in the European Community. The EU enlargement to 28 members will include around 480 million inhabitants; 50-60%* (240-290 million inhabitants) of them will be living in metropolitan regions or areas. The 2002 statistics of metropolitan areas according to country is included in table 1.1.

Metropolitan areas in 2002, sorted by country

Table 1.1

Metropolitan Areas within Europe	Metropolitan Areas	METREX Members
EU – 15	80	26
Germany, UK, France	43	5
Italy, Spain	18	11
EU others	19	10
NON EU – 2		
Norway, Switzerland	4	0
NEW ACCESSION STATES (MAY 2004) +** CANDIDATES (2007) (12)	23	7
Baltic States	3	1
Poland	8	3
Central European States	7	3
Eastern European States	5	0
OTHER EUROPEAN COUNTRIES	12	0
Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova	7	0
Balkan States	5	0
TOTAL	119	33

The urbanisation process going on throughout Europe led to the existence of central cities and suburbs, the groups of cities becoming the main urban organisation form. Many of these areas have a metropolitan character; they work as interrelated urban areas or regions. In order to describe these areas, the Committee of Regions uses the notion of functional urban areas.

Many key issues affecting the sustainability of the European urban lifestyle could be approached more effectively only at a European level. These issues include:

- Balance – urban regeneration and expansion,
- Integration – use of land, transport, infrastructure,
- Sustainability – the vitality and feasibility of cities and urban centres.
- Support – economic competitiveness

* This percentage indicates the importance of metropolitan competition and the beneficial effects it has on Europe's prosperity and social cohesion.

** Central and Eastern European metropolitan areas are facing a set of *opportunities and threats* as a result of the transition:

- Moscow region, the most populated metropolitan region, became the preferred location for international companies quarters;
- Budapest, Prague and Warsaw are competing for international functions in certain areas, such as finance, communication, research, education and training as well as gateways to other parts of the world; this competition is based on attracting large financial resources for restructuring infrastructure and service systems.
- On the other side, capital city regions in Central and Eastern Europe became the scene of serious social imbalances and a favourite destination for national and international migration flows. This requires a double objective to lower economic and social pressures and to better balance opportunities and social responsibility throughout the region..

- Promotion – social cohesion
- Assessment – impact of development on environment
- Protection – natural resources and urban heritage

The unique character of metropolitan Europe resides in its variety and vitality, and effective urban governance and spatial planning have the lead role in sustaining these features on the long term.

C. From Cities to Metropolitan Regions: Reasons for Change

Cities can be considered key factors of the future development of Europe. Nevertheless, in order to respond to the needs of an enlarged Europe, METREX proposed the adoption of a broader perspective focused on metropolitan areas.

There are **four main reasons** why METREX proposed this:

Reason 1 – The region is the city of tomorrow

There is an increasing number of metropolitan areas in Europe, each consisting of many interconnected municipalities and cities of various sizes and features (e.g. Barcelona, London, Stuttgart, Randstat or Oresund region).

Within these metropolitan regions:

- people live, work and relax;
- businesses run, sell and invest several communities;
- research establishments are located are spread throughout;
- environmental problems affect the entire region.

Thus, metropolitan regions need to be considered by European policy, their problems addresses and their opportunities valued.

Reason 2 – Metropolitan regions contribute to Europe’s development

The evolution of metropolitan regions will have a direct effect on the four large European policies:

- The Lisbon Strategy;
- The European Strategy for Spatial Development*;
- EU Enlargement;
- Economic and Social Cohesion.

Without a doubt, Europe needs successful metropolitan regions, the same way metropolitan regions need Europe in order to ensure their own success.

- They are hosts and promoter of competitiveness;
- They have an important role in achieving the European urban balance and sustainability;

* Published in 1999, the ESSD provided the framework for undertaking the METREX initiatives and activities. It shows that in order to maintain its competitiveness on global markets, Europe has to reach a better urban balance. It provides for the creation of polycentric groups of metropolitan areas and regions, similar to the Paris/London/Rhine/Ruhr economic area.

- They will have to act like engines of economic growth in the older and more recent EU Member States;
- They are the core of EU's development.

Reason 3 – Metropolitan regions need better international integration

Global economy is no longer an organised hierarchical structure of nations and their economies. Now and in the future, most stakeholders use as an interface the networks of and within metropolitan regions.

Inside these metropolitan regions, at regional, national, European and global level, the finance, knowledge, production, decision makers and infrastructure meet. This encourages the cooperation between all the stakeholders of the business, scientific and political communities aimed at the common good. In this context, the central cities have an important role, but the development potential can only be fully exploited within larger metropolitan regions.

Reason 4 – Metropolitan regions need to be integrated into European networks

Metropolitan regions have the opening function by providing access to know how and by their contribution to the application of this know how. They are also nodes of trans-European transport networks. The integration of metropolitan areas must address the creation of European network and the alliance between metropolitan areas to support growth, competitiveness and global integration.

In order to build metropolitan regions networks and to allow them to fulfil their opening function, a real and a virtual infrastructure are needed.

- **The real infrastructure** includes the provision of passenger and freight transport on roads, railways and air, the existence of commercial fairs and technical and research capacities.
- **The virtual infrastructure** is a network of companies and public bodies, as well as their representation in the discussion and decision forums, and in Brussels.

D. Proposals for the development of European metropolitan areas

As far as metropolitan regions are concerned, there are **six areas of action**:

- 7. Focus policies on the major themes** such as competitiveness, sustainability, employment.
- 8. Stress the importance of metropolitan regions** in implementing the Lisbon Strategy, the Gothenburg Strategy and in the increase of employment and strengthening economic and social cohesion.
- 9. Include in the priorities and programmes** of the Member States, the European Parliament, the European Commission, the Economic and Social Committee **the development problems and potential of metropolitan regions**, not just city related issues.
- 10. Use the funding allocated to metropolitan regions** to finance objectives like urban regeneration, social exclusion, economic restructuring and public transport, issues which are typical of metropolitan areas.
- 11. It must be taken into account some aspects regarding territorial cooperation.** Thus:
 - include activities on regional development and spatial planning in all cooperation areas;
 - consider the possibility of having cross-border cooperation between metropolitan areas with a large impact on services, infrastructure and employment; this would truly add a metropolitan dimension to the concept of cross-border cooperation;

- consider the investment component and overlap of cooperation areas at a trans-national level; the limits of cooperation areas do not have any negative effects and do not prevent in any way the possibilities for cooperation;
- direct activities and financial resources to European territorial cooperation; national coordination would hinder inter-regional activities and thus should not be considered.

12. METREX should be making partnerships for the elaboration and implementation of the EU structural funds policy and participate in discussions on these issues with the Member States, the European Parliament, the European Commission, the Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of Regions.

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