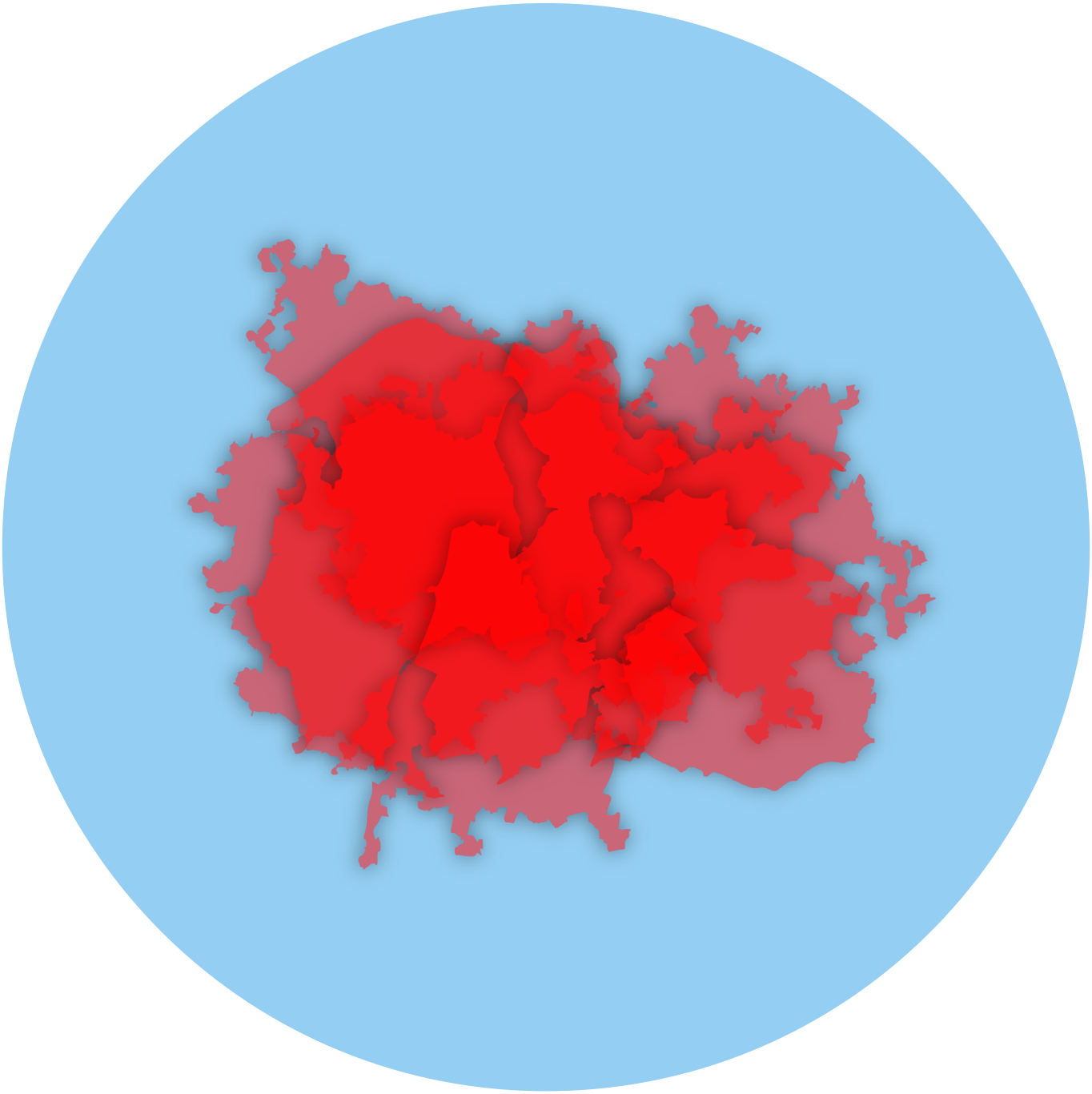
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Metropolitan governance and spatial planning
towards a European typology

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Metropolitan governance and spatial planning
Towards a European typology

Research report by Vereniging Deltametropool,
commissioned by the municipality of Amsterdam

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— Summary

Vereniging Deltametropool has been commissioned by the municipality of Amsterdam to research spatial governance in metropolitan regions, and the difficulties that come with it. Spatial challenges are increasingly present on the metropolitan scale in urbanised areas, rather than just the urban scale. Vereniging Deltametropool has, through interviews, analysed the governance on this scale in five metropolitan regions in Europe, in order to identify the types of governance and their variables. Each region approached governance through its spatial configuration and formal governance structure, and identifies how metropolitan governance fits within these administrative levels. A typology of organisations that work on the metropolitan scale shows that there are many differences between the roles that they can take on and their degree of formalisation, and their effectivity in their respective administrative systems. All organisations are attempting to find the flexibility in their tasks to take on a more strategic role rather than a facilitating one.

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Introduction

We need to address the metropolitan scale in spatial planning governance. In a moment where spatial challenges grow bigger, more complex and intertwined, the metropolitan scale level will be crucial in providing them with an answer through planning and design. However, the metropolitan scale in many regions hardly has any formal governance structures that can take responsibility on this spatial scale.

Definition of the metropolis

To address the question above, an understanding of 'the metropolitan' is needed in this sense. This term needs clarification as it has different semantic and cultural connotations across different countries, including the word's inflictions such as metropolis and metropole. In this research, the metropolitan scale or region means a large city or multiple cities which are close and its or their systemic and spatial relation to the surrounding area, including nearby towns and villages and the non-built environment in between. In this region, there is a large distinguishable converging of people, economy and material and energy flows. This region does not let itself be clearly delineated with a hard, fixed border, nor does it let itself be clearly defined by administrative governing bodies. In general, metropolitan regions are larger than municipalities, but smaller than provinces, cantons, formalised regions or states. This absence of formal governance is both in part a defining element and the issue in metropolitan planning. Metropolitan regions can therefore emerge without formal governance.

The metropolitan reveals itself

A metropolitan region is a phenomenon that emerges through systemic dependencies over spatial regional scales. These dynamics express themselves in terms like a functional urban area, where people live and commute to work and move around. Or the area of economical agglomeration effects of businesses making use of a diverse infrastructure to establish themselves. The spatial mass convergence of flows of people, material, energy and economy in a certain area can also be a lens through which to consider a metropolitan region. A metropolitan region reveals itself through all these different dynamics in a certain region, without a very hard, fixed border. This reveal does not mean it is a natural phenomenon, but rather a result of economy, efficiency and local and regional planning and spatial developments and decisions, whereas those decisions did not specifically happen on the regional scale that they have their effect on. This defines the increasing need to address spatial planning in governance for the metropolitan region.

Planning in the void of the metropolitan region

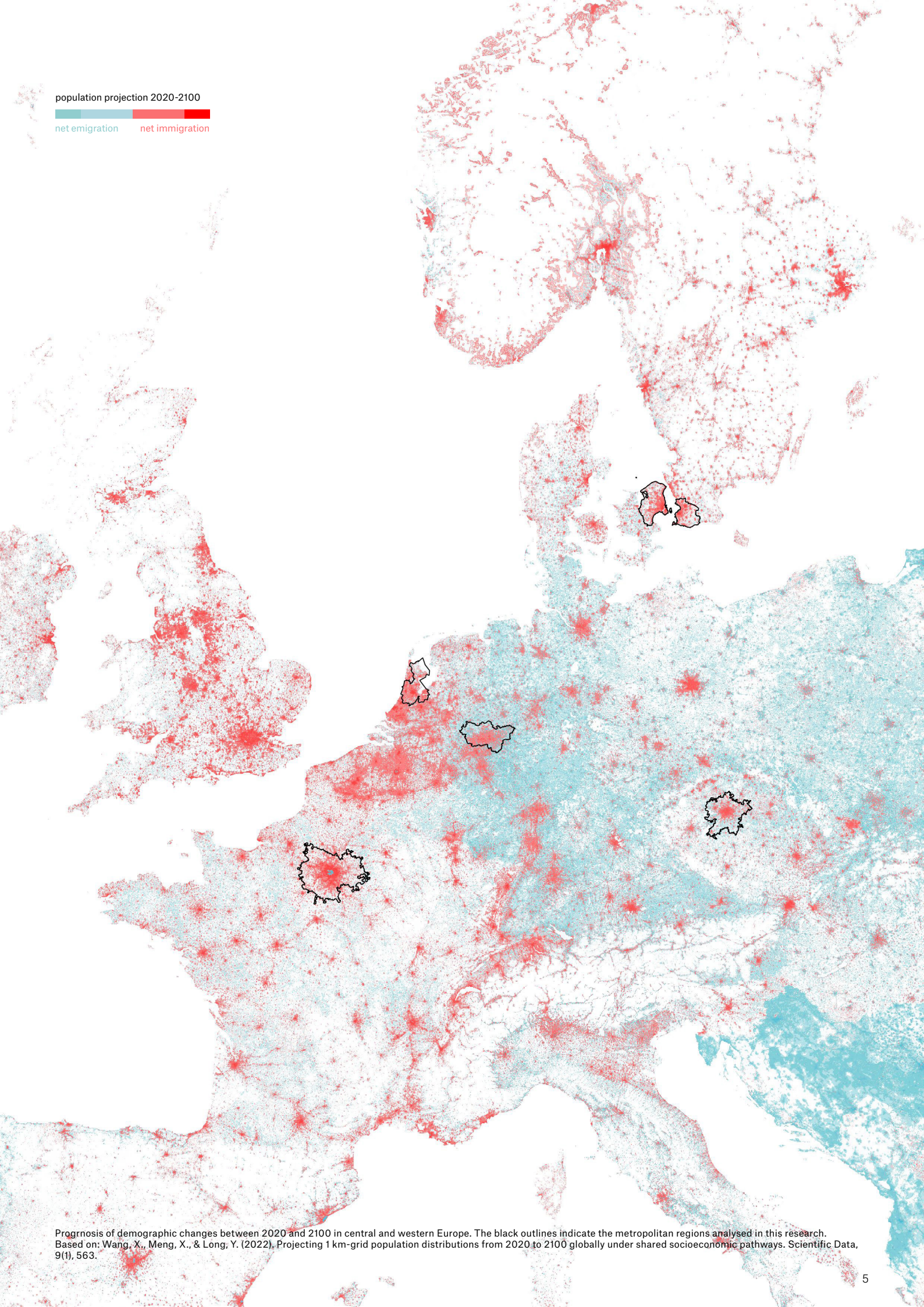
Spatial planning is needed to give the metropolitan region direction: its emergence and growth is not a neutral phenomenon but increases the complexity, dependencies and contrasts in power of the dynamics described above. Spatial planning has the potential to make metropolitan regions more efficient, sustainable, productive and egalitarian. In the sense of mobility, it can shorten travel times, increase transport capacity and accessibility across the region. In demographic developments, housing and amenities it can to an extent prevent economic segregation and increase equal accessibility to public services. It can streamline, redirect, separate or combine flows of energy, water, materials, clean air, to make the metropole more efficient and provide environmental justice for its residents, including the non-human. Through making a just, sustainable and efficient living environment, metropolitan regions can become hotbeds for new, sustainable economies.

Jumps in scale

Not all metropolitan regions are alike: some, like Paris or the Ruhr area have risen through their historically increasing importance in governance, culture, economic activity. In the last couple of decades, cities have grown with economic development, the rise of the suburbs gave way to a blurring between city and countryside, and people have gotten more mobile than ever and commute longer distances. Following suburbanization, urban renewal and investments in infrastructure have increased metropolitan dynamics to a point where they transition from city to a metropolitan region. This development can be observed in some spatial prognoses of urbanisation. Rather than just the cities, it is the region around them that will grow in population. The effect is regional, rather than just urban. This jump in scale, from city to metropolitan region, requires a new perspective for spatial developments, for which the need is only increasing. And this growth is projected to continue: looking at the spatial prognosis of migration in Europe, net influx occurs in the city region rather than just the city.

New challenges

Besides the growth of metropolitan regions and the pressure on the urban systems, there is also climate change, growing inequality and geopolitical instability that have their spatial effects on metropolitan regions. Need for effective large scale climate change adaptation methods, ensuring a 'right to the city' for everyone and providing independency stability amidst conflict, trade wars and resource scarcity on an international level. These threats above also require new ways to go about spatial



Prognosis of demographic changes between 2020 and 2100 in central and western Europe. The black outlines indicate the metropolitan regions analysed in this research. Based on: Wang, X., Meng, X., & Long, Y. (2022). Projecting 1 km-grid population distributions from 2020 to 2100 globally under shared socioeconomic pathways. Scientific Data, 9(1), 563.

governance. Apart from the 'void' in metropolitan governance and the rise of more metropolitan dynamics and regions as reasons to reconsider the form of governance, there is also a need to reconfigure the content of governance in spatial planning.

Planning and institutions

The scale and challenges for metropolitan regions described above raise the question if our current governance structures are adequately equipped to deal with them. Although the aforementioned 'void' in governance may suggest an overhaul of these formal systems, official governments and governance processes are not the only way to provide adequate spatial planning on the metropolitan scale level. Informal intergovernmental lobbying, negotiation, and collaboration between municipalities, provinces and national governments could in some ways be better outcomes. Besides governments, spatial designers, researchers and stakeholders can take an important role through ateliers, think tanks and institutions to provide insights and concepts for metropolitan planning.

Objective

Each European metropolitan area is different, and each country has a different governmental structure and governance culture. Therefore, there is not just one way to go about governance in planning for metropolitan regions. This research aims to provide insight into the different ways this topic is addressed across Europe, which organisations provide a planning perspective on a metropolitan scale, to in the end provide a typology of governance derived from the organisations that work on a metropolitan scale level. Five different European metropolitan regions have been analysed to analyse the components and dynamics of governance, in order to build the typology: Amsterdam, Prague, Paris, Copenhagen-Malmö, and the Ruhr region. For each region, we have tried to indicate an organisation that works on a metropolitan scale level in an interesting way. These respective organisations are the Metropoolregio Amsterdam, The Prague Institute of Planning and Development, Institut Paris Region, Greater Copenhagen Committee, and the Emschergenossenschaft & Lippeverband.



The five analysed metropolitan regions defined by their FUA on comparative spatial scales, from top to bottom and left to right: Copenhagen-Malmö, Paris, Ruhr-region, Prague and Amsterdam. The light red colour indicates the FUA of the core cities as defined by the OECD, the black colour indicates the urban areas inside those FUA's.

Method

Official and successful examples of metropolitan governance are hard to find- as said before, the level is often missing. This research will focus on the planning dynamics and negotiations on a metropolitan scale level that do occur and are often informal. To gain an insight to these informal dynamics, we mainly work through interviews with people who are working on a metropolitan scale level in various capacities: as a researcher, director, planner, civil servant or otherwise. The interviews are semi-structured, moving along the following lines.

First the formal governance structure is laid out in a nutshell and is explained with the metropolitan region in mind. The interviewee also describes their own role and position within this formal structure. Secondly, we talk about the dynamics of metropolitan planning: who takes initiative, does it gain traction and do metropolitan planning initiatives make it to formal and spatial implementation, and in what way? What are the obstacles in metropolitan planning and how should they be overcome? Thirdly, if applicable, we ask the interviewee to explain this process of metropolitan governance in planning according to a specific project, theme or case.

These governance dynamics amidst the formal governance structure of the individual regions are first visualised through a map and an organogram. The map shows administrative districts (blue), built up area (grey) and the FUA (red) as an indication of the metropolitan region. If applicable, an organisation which functions on a metropolitan level with relevant administrative districts is shown with a red outline. The organogram provides at a glance the formal administrative structure that often informal metropolitan governance in the governance system and spatial distribution has to move in between. The official administrative levels are shown, along with their democratic character and the places where planning power resides. In red, metropolitan governmental dynamics and organisations on a metropolitan level are shown.

Typology

The goal for this research is not necessarily to compare different organisations, as their respective formal governance structures and cultures are difficult to compare in effectiveness. What works in one country and system, may not work in another. We do try however to provide an insight into the various roles that organisations that address the metropolitan scale can take on. To see this variation, we define two main variables that we consider with every organisation: the level formalisation and their role. We consider these as 'sliders', making it possible to position the organisations along them.

Level of Formalisation

The first variable considers the type of organisation within a governance framework. An organisation can be formalised in the legal framework, such as a government agency or a department within an administrative level. On the other end of the spectrum, one could find an organisation which does not have any administrative ties. On a sliding scale of institutionalisation, organisations like NGOs, associations and research institutes could be found. It should be noticed that we are talking about organisations and their formalisation on the metropolitan scale level: an organisation can be formalised on a city scale, but informal on a metropolitan one.

Strategic or facilitating

Organisations can take on different roles: they can research, make plans, provide a platform or push an agenda, to name a couple of things. The variable here is the extent to which they try to actively push certain agendas and strategise to reach certain goals in planning, or whether they consider themselves to be a neutral facilitator of planning discussion and practice, and simply operate on the tasks that are set for them. The bandwidth between these two attitudes defines the slider of this variable.

Movement

Organisations that are placed along these variables are not stagnant in these positions. They have changed over the years, like becoming more institutionalised or have taken on different roles. Therefore, we define their position along the sliders also in relation to where they came from. We also consider from the interviews the direction along the variables in which the organisation could move along in order to be more effective for metropolitan governance.

Next steps

Having positioned the organisations, we draw conclusions from the typology and notable points from the individual analyses of the metropolitan regions and their organisations. We close off this research with several recommendations for follow up research. This research is also intended to lead up to the conference "Celebrating the Future" of the municipality of Amsterdam, taking place on the 15th and 16th of September 2025. Next steps, agenda setting and more concrete recommendations will follow during and after this conference.

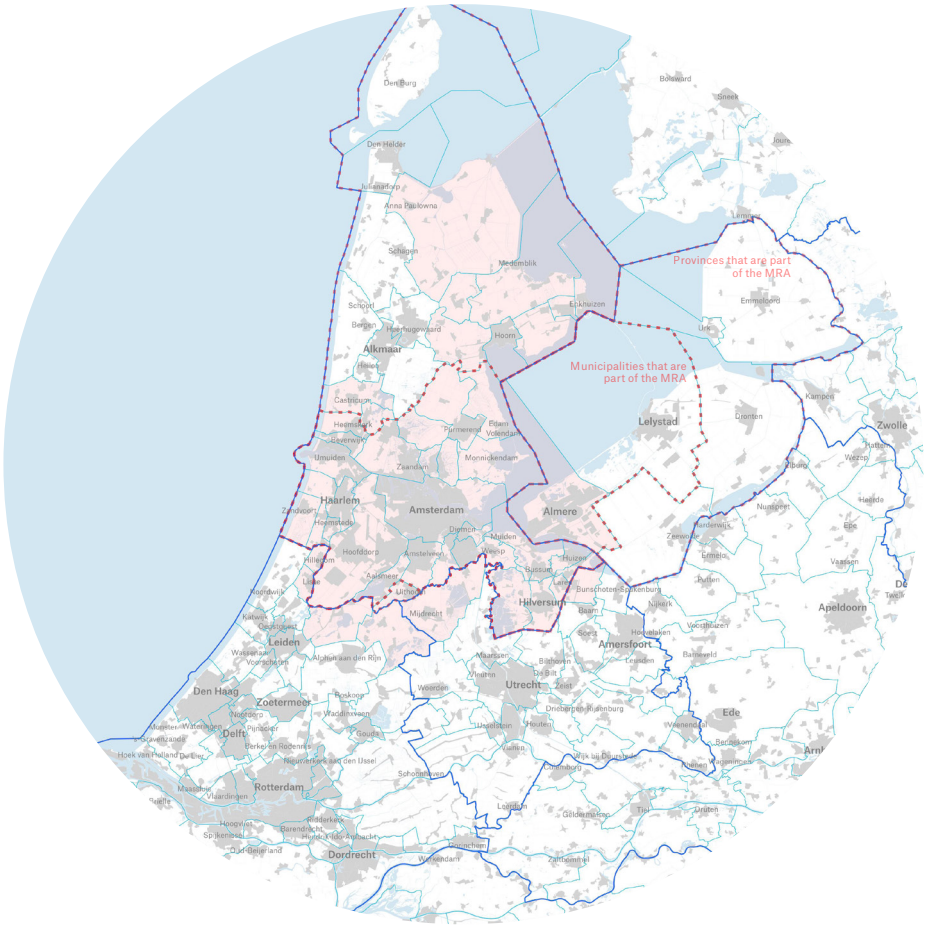
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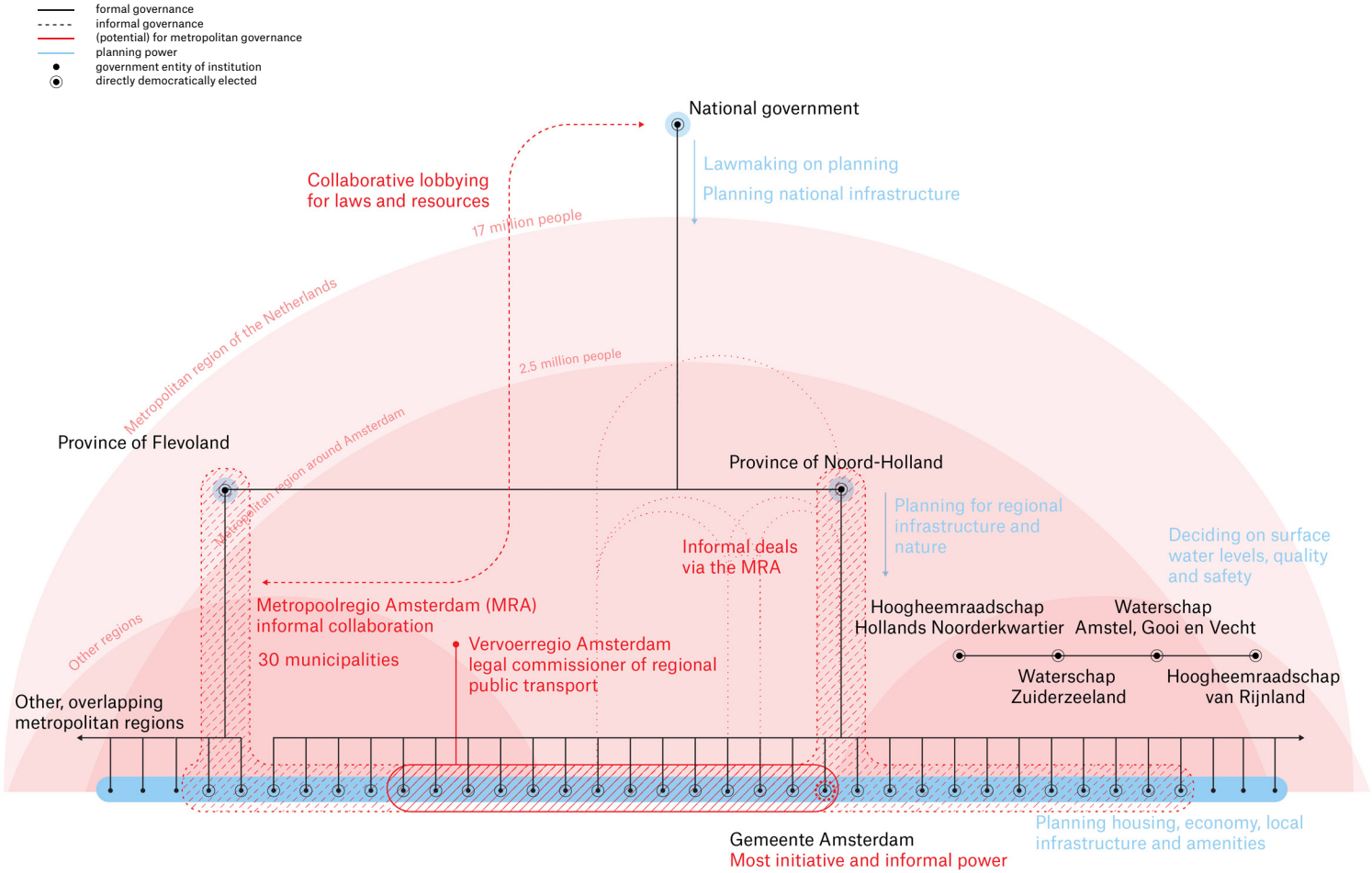
An equal meeting table for the region

Dutch governance in spatial planning between different administrative levels have been defined by a strong negotiation and dealmaking, or "poldering". This has been increasingly necessary with the national government having had little interest in centralised metropolitan planning over the last decade. The Metropolitan Region fo Amsterdam (MRA) offers an egalitarian table for municipalities and provinces to organise around the topic.

Metropolitan dynamics

The Dutch urban context is defined by many mid-sized towns and cities that are close together, with many metropolitan dynamics between them. Although some people go as far to say that the 'Randstad' (the urbanised region composed of Amsterdam, Rotterdam, The Hague and Utrecht) is a single city, or that the entire Netherlands is not a densely populated country, but one sparse and empty city, this is not the case. Rather, the Netherlands are a patchwork of overlapping and highly dynamic metropolitan regions. Amsterdam, the country's largest city (less than a million inhabitants) but not by a lot, exists in the metropolitan contexts and dynamics of the entire country, the Randstad, and it's close neighbours such as Almere and Haarlem. The FUA of Amsterdam in the map slightly "cut off" on the south side, as the FUA's of Rotterdam, The Hague and Utrecht are treated as separate. But in practice, many of those regions are overlapping and interconnected in commuter regions. The metropolitan region of Amsterdam is highly polycentric in this nature. Although Amsterdam is the





largest city, many jobs, amenities and houses are found in towns and cities in the larger region around and are reachable through frequently running public transport. For the sake of this research, the from here on mentioned metropolitan region of Amsterdam will focus on these more immediate relations around the city in around a 30 kilometre radius.

Governance

This metropolitan region of Amsterdam covers around 30-40 municipalities in 2-3 provinces, the two administrative levels below that of the national government. Over the last decades, governance in spatial planning has been more and more decentralised to the level of municipalities where most of the planning power resides. Some spatial elements and topics are directed to the national level (large waterbodies and rivers, highways) or the province (nature, farming, groundwater, regional roads). A notable spatial administrative level is that of the waterboards, a democratically elected administrative level, geographically divided by hydrological basins, that manages surface water and water safety.

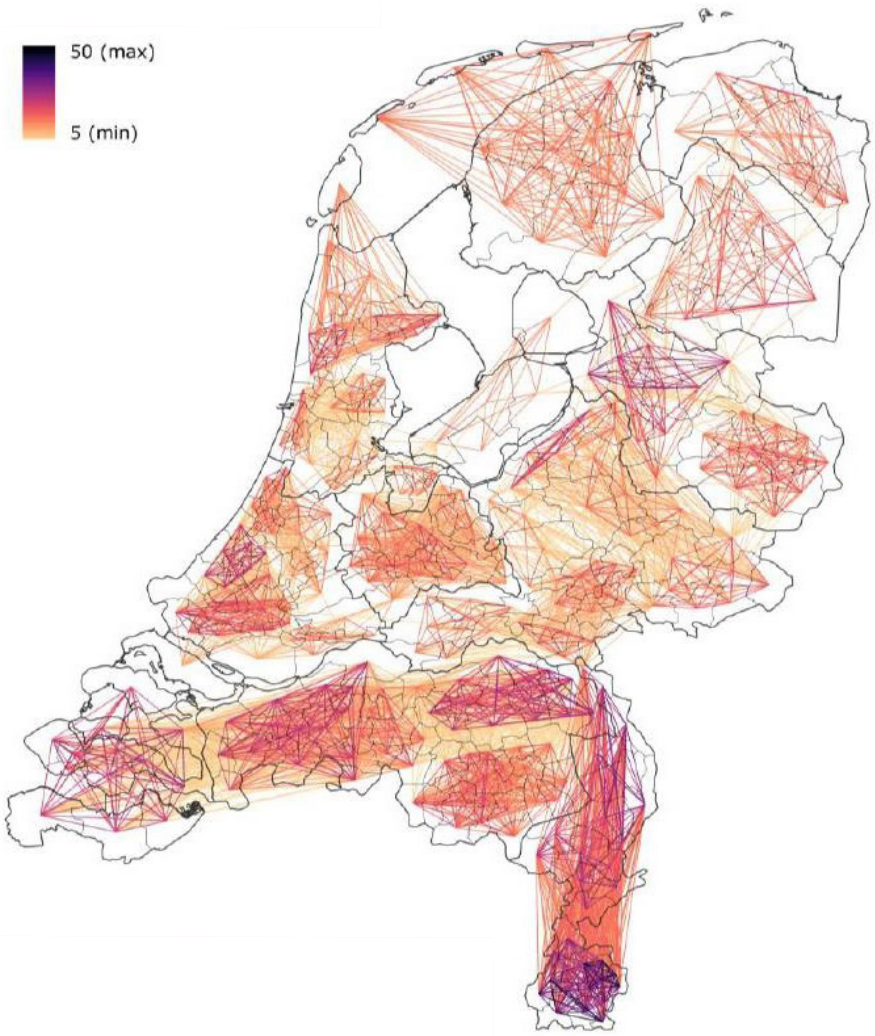
Another thematic level of governance in the region, but in a cooperative way would be the Vervoerregio Amsterdam. This transport authority is managed by a administrative collaboration of 14 municipalities in the region and is the legal commissioner for public transport. The Vervoerregio operates on a metropolitan scale level on mobility on a single topic. The Metropoolregio Amsterdam (Metropolitan Region of Amsterdam) is an informal administrative partnership that focuses on the metropolitan dynamics on other topics, but in a different way.
In general, Dutch planning governance is delegated fairly clearly, and the many mid-sized municipalities with the most planning responsibilities without any exceptional statuses provides an egalitarian playing field in terms of planning. This causes Dutch planning culture on a regional level to be mostly defined through thorough negotiations, collaboration and dealmaking through intermunicipal platforms.

MRA

The MRA was founded in 2007, as a new form of the informal collaboration in the 'northern wing' of the Randstad, a highly dynamic metropolitan area. Noticable about the MRA that it is a collaboration in the purest form: it is first and foremost defined by its members and does not (and cannot) 'speak for itself'. It has no legal basis or is not defined by law. The reason the MRA exists is a willingness of 30 municipalities and two provinces to cooperate on metropolitan topics on equal footing. The MRA has a board, which is chaired by the mayor of Amsterdam, and is checked by the general assembly of its member municipalities and provinces. The primary goal of the MRA is to foster partnership among the members, but also along certain topics through its internal platforms of economy, space and mobility. The lightness of the organisation of the MRA is reflected in it's actual workforce: the civil servants working for the MRA are a small number of municipal employees of its members posted temporarily.
The purposes in spatial planning of the MRA are mostly coordination and spatial distribution of topics like housing, mobility and economy that are too big to solve on the respective municipal scale. A good example is

The relatively high planning power for municipalities and a culture of 'poldering' (decision making based on concensus) results in a culture of many collaborations based on regional deals between municipalities.

Number of inter-municipal partnerships and collaboration programmes mapped out across the Netherlands. Source: Geodienst (CIT, Rijksuniversiteit Groningen), KWINK groep, PROOF adviseurs, Ministerie BZK (2020), CBS (2020)



the PlaBeKa (Platform Companies and Offices), that dealt with spatial coordination of office parks and building across the region. The primary method to foster this collaboration is through its role as a platform for the members. As mentioned previously, many spatial regional challenges land at the planning power of the subregional municipalities: collaboration is key. The MRA has an egalitarian model: all the members of the MRA have an equal position within the organisation, making it interesting to participate for small municipalities. That makes the MRA an effective 'meeting table' to strike deals between municipalities as well. Another reason to participate is that the MRA together has a stronger position in negotiations with the national government for resources for these spatial developments. These developments are for example large, costly infrastructure projects like possibly extending the north-south metro line in Amsterdam, or the possible metro across the IJmeer. The MRA can be the negotiation partner with the ministries on a national level, rather than individual municipalities. This can bring about a stronger bargaining position.
This requires the members to all have similar ambitions and agendas to an extent. To align these ambitions between the members is not easy, but when achieved the MRA can bring about broad support. This often takes time and a lot of careful negotiating between the municipalities. The MRA works on strategy and agendas that the member municipalities can formally adopt in their policy and planning practice. An example is agreeing on certain principles for new housing, such as densification. Although the MRA cannot formally enforce these agreements, the intention is that municipalities will formalise these themselves.

Difficulties

The MRA therefore hardly exists as its own institution, but mostly as a combination of governments. This has both strengths and weaknesses. The working of the MRA as a 'meeting table' and a collective voice is not without downsides. The informal, neutral, and no-obligatory nature of the MRA causes it to lack weight and efficient decisiveness to a certain degree. Everything agreed, proposed, or decided within the MRA is technically non-binding: it is up to the willingness of the members to follow through with what's happening in the MRA. The MRA has, as an informal collaboration, no executive power. There is a risk when the MRA becomes too much its own voice and institution, municipalities and provinces can see the institution as an adversary rather than an ally in the metropolitan debate.
Because all members are on equal levels, different interests, priorities and responsibilities are sometimes conflicting on an egalitarian meeting table. Examples could include certain infrastructure lines that only cover certain parts of the regions, or differences between more rural municipalities and more urban. Or the different responsibilities of provinces and municipalities, while having an equal seat at the table.
The lightness of the MRA also poses its challenges in the capacity to contribute to the metropolitan discussions: staff and resources are limited. Due to the posting of civil servants, it is difficult to provide continuity or build a strong knowledge base. At the same time, the MRA is quite varied in its activities, causing fragmentation of its tasks and focus to turn into a risk for its effectiveness.

Addressing the Metropolitan

To address the regional scale in the Netherlands, spatial policy is defined by dealmaking and collaboration between municipalities. Although the MRA seems like the perfect vehicle to make this happen, its lightness causes difficulties. More capacity and continuity could make the organisation more stable and helpful to municipalities, rather than just providing a platform. The MRA can also grow closer to its members with more

capacity, making the organisation seem less distant. The MRA could also be an inviting platform, albeit in a different way, of involving designers and researchers. Combined, this could provide the metropolitan region with an implicit but slowly materialising stronger narrative and vision for its spatial distribution. Rather than just making collaboration its goal, the goal should be a well-functioning and just metropolis put into spatial practice.
There is not just the question of the relation between the MRA and the municipalities and provinces: to properly address the urgency and pressure of metropolitan dynamics, the national government must be more involved. As said before, almost the entire country functions as an overlapping patchwork of metropolitan regions. The national government needs first and foremost take a stance on their metropolitan role and subsequently act on it rather than relying on the decentralised responsibility for municipalities to solve them.

Future challenges

The Netherlands is a very dense country- there is an increasing awareness that all the spatial challenges will be difficult to solve in a limited amount of space. Difficult choices for land use need to be made: housing, infrastructure, agriculture, nature, water or energy cannot be located just anywhere, and clever combinations are necessary. For example, the relation to the water and soil system is under pressure: the Amsterdam metropolitan area is mostly situated in low-lying, swampy areas that are vulnerable to the effects of climate change. Much needed affordable housing needs to be found in already existing urban and metropolitan areas, making use of the infrastructure that is already there. These are not just external, technical challenges, but require a willingness on a political level.

— Urgent spatial developments moved down to municipalities with little resources and low capacity

The metropolitan spatial governance in the Netherlands is characterised by making deals between the municipalities that hold most of the responsibility for spatial development but must do so with little resources. Regional developments are therefore the result of long negotiations between municipalities, while the national government only recently has slowly started taking back responsibility in spatial governance.

— A low-threshold, informal collective runs the risk of becoming a victim of its own success

The MRA is defined by the willingness of its members, making it relatively easy for them to join for collective discussion on planning. This ease is a risk for following through with the decisions made in the MRA, as they officially hold no formal obligation to be included in municipal policy. The lightness of the MRA within the dealmaking culture between municipalities is a double-edged sword.

Characterisation

Low formalisation on a metropolitan scale level

Although working on a metropolitan scale level, the MRA is extremely light in its organisation and has no formal power. The MRA frames itself as a coalition rather than an organisation with its own agenda. This status is used to its advantage but also poses difficulties.

Both operational and strategic in its role

One role of the MRA is a facilitating discussion platform for its members, but it also tries to set agendas collectively, but the effectivity is somewhat limited by its lightness. When achieved however, there is broad support among the municipalities, though the MRA cannot formally operationalise decisions in practice. The MRA as a collective also functions as a collective conversation partner with the administrative level of the national government.

Movement

Since its foundation, the MRA has become increasingly known as a platform for intermunicipal collaboration for metropolitan dynamics, especially with successes as PlaBeKa or an agreement on urbanisation concepts. We see the MRA not necessarily needing more formalisation, but more institutionalisation in its capacity to provide capacity and continuity for the increasing strategic role.

Vereniging Deltametropool spoke to and would like to thank the Metropoolregio Amsterdam (MRA), specifically Els Meines, Secretary of the Spatial Platform, and Emiel Reiding, Secretary-Director.

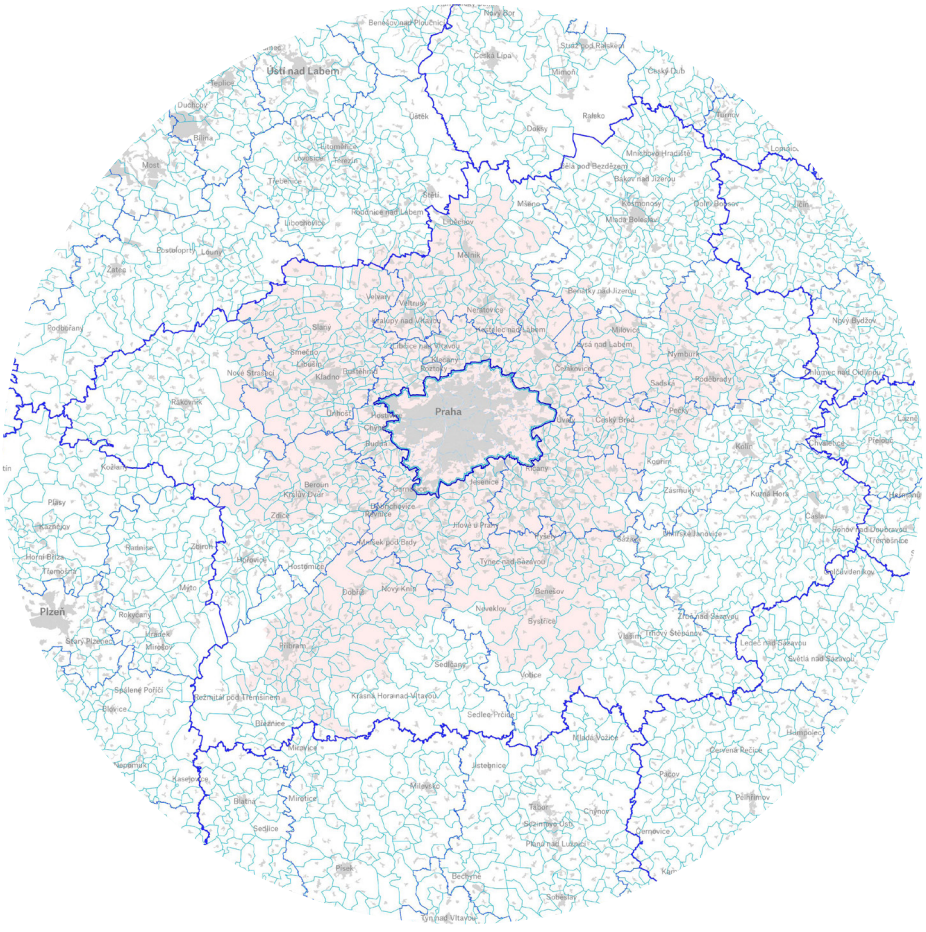
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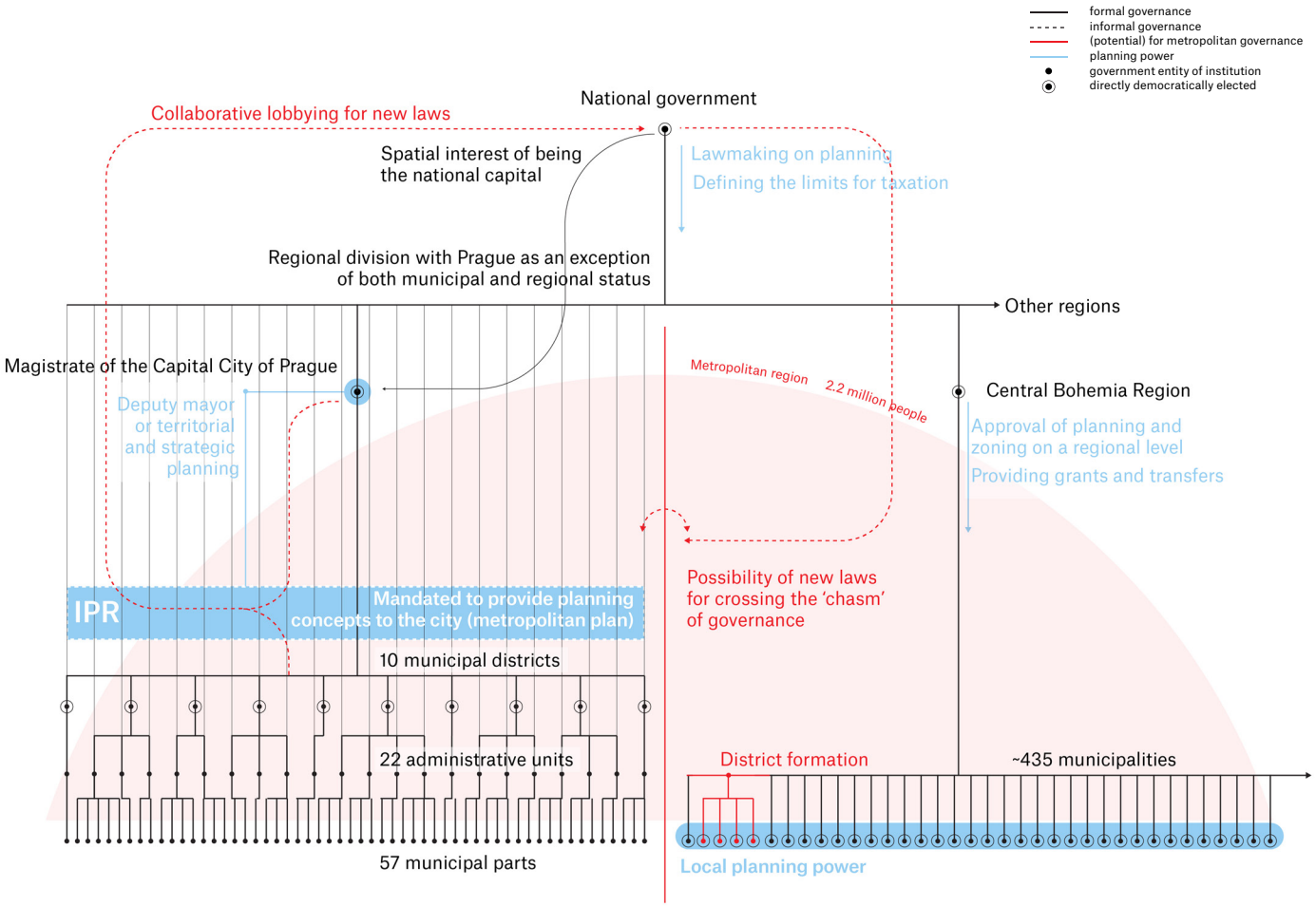
Bridging the chasm between city and region

Prague has as its most influential city in Czechia a significant exceptional status in governance- so far that it may be its own obstacle in addressing the metropolitan scale in planning in crossing the gap between Prague and the municipalities in the Central Bohemian Region. The Prague Institute of Planning and Development (IPR), functioning as a planning office for the city and a spatial institute, attempts to bridge this gap through lobbying for new laws.

Metropolitan dynamics

The metropolitan region of Prague defined by its FUA is significantly larger than its built-up area and the city limits of Prague. Prague's monopoly on relative economic importance on a regional scale and large peri- and suburban growth is part of the reason for this discrepancy. Prague is also, maybe apart from the former industrial town of Kladno, the only major urban core in the larger area. The municipalities around Prague's urbanised core do usually not consist of larger towns or cities but rather a large number of scattered villages, causing the metropolitan dynamic to be mostly monocentric in its functioning. Prague itself has many former industrial sites have undergone transformation into urban functions which fit more with its nowadays service economy. With pressure on the scattered landownership for densification within the existing fabric of Prague, metropolitan dynamics for dynamics are putting increasing pressure on development on peri-urban developments. This puts a strain on the mostly car-based infrastructure around the city and the urban amenities within the city.





Governance

The metropolitan region on a governance level covers two major governmental systems. On one side there is the Central Bohemian Region (province) with around 435 small municipalities, each with their own planning power. There used to be an intermediate administrative level between region and municipality, but these former districts have until recently become practically obsolete in terms of governance since they were abolished in 2000.

Centrally located as an enclave surrounded by the above, is the Magistrate of the Capital City of Prague. Prague has an administrative exceptional status as both a region and a municipality, with several subdivisions for which the national government caries responsibility to a certain degree. The municipality and region of Prague is subsequently subdivided in three tiers: 10 municipal districts, 22, administrative districts, and 57 municipal parts. Each tier holds certain responsibilities ranging from citywide planning to neighbourhood amenities. The citywide governments and municipal districts are both democratically elected.

Planning power is distributed across all levels of governance, where the national governance sets the grounds and responsibilities for spatial planning, regions do this in more detail and provides a regional plan for e.g. infrastructure, and municipalities make land-use and regulatory plans. Prague, being a municipality, region and seat of government as the capital, carries almost all responsibilities at the same time. The planning power of municipalities relative to their small size causes them to coordinate little with each other in their land use (see the example on the next page). The former intermediate level of districts has since recently become relevant again under new laws, where municipalities have the possibility to organise certain planning decisions on different themes collectively in these districts, under the condition that they prepare a strategic plan together.

An important shift to note in Prague's urban and metropolitan development in relation to its governance is the end of the communist regime in 1989. A rigid and authoritarian spatial policy was abruptly changed into that of a free market, causing a period where formerly publicly owned land was sold to (foreign) investors and private parties. This caused a fragmented mosaic of partly foreign landownership which frustrates effective planning until today, also due to the low trust in the planning process that this caused. With Prague's metropolitan dynamics increasing, planning governance has arrived at a pivotal moment to increase its effectiveness.

IPR

Spatial policy has developed in Prague over the last century, responding to rapid industrialization and population growth, and has for a large part done so in ever-evolving zoning plans. These plans became increasingly inflexible and difficult to work with due to their continuous adaptations and additions. In 2013, the former planning office of the city was renamed and rebranded into the the Prague Institute of Planning and Development (Institut plánování a rozvoje hl. m. Prahy), IPR for short. The motivation here was to revise the old zoning plan of 1999. IPR does not have any right for decision making, but falls under the responsibility of the deputy mayor.IPR has in the many

years since also taken on the tasks of strategic analysis and research for planning on the themes of public space, mobility, green infrastructure, as well as emergent topics such as the 'Airbnbification' that arose with Prague's increasing popularity as a tourist destination. IPR also initiated CAMP in 2017, a public information centre with exhibitions and events to inform and foster discussion with Prague's inhabitants. The task of revising the zoning plan, instigated in 2013, has by now in 2025 almost been put into formal policy. This 'Metropolitan Plan' is a land use plan that lays out the development and zoning of the land in Prague- but unlike the name, the plan only covers the area of the city state of Prague, which is the area IPR is directed to plan for and for which the representatives have jurisdiction over. This long, legal process is exemplary for the relative rigid policy- and lawmaking of the country.

Difficulties

IPR has, as one of the largest planning institutions in the country, a key role to play in putting the metropolitan scale on the agenda. For Prague, there are however plenty of roadblocks in the spatial governance. First, there is a chasm between the two administrative systems in the area: The larger, mostly independently acting city-region of Prague and the small municipalities of the Central Bohemia Region. Their different administrative levels, contexts and independence in planning power makes administrative cross-border planning very difficult. This border is both physical as well as legal. The governance culture in Czechia is relatively rigid, and parties will not deviate from conventional legal frameworks for planning. This restricts governments in their abilities to look beyond their borders or on larger scale levels. The large number of smaller municipalities around Prague causes a lot of fragmentation of planning, even though these municipalities are the ones that face the immediate effects of the pressure that metropolitan dynamics put on their systems. As seen in the example below, individual municipalities hardly coordinate with each other in their development. Even though Prague has the attention of the national government, the metropolitan dynamics in the municipalities around it are not sufficiently addressed as municipalities are all treated equally while their problems differ. On the ground, planning processes are frustrated not only by this governmental fragmentation but also fragmented landownership, due to effects of the aforementioned rapid privatisation in the early 1990's.

Addressing the Metropolitan

IPR has a broad set of tasks and role set out: it carries out planning duties of the government, it does research and collects and organises data about Prague and informs and involves citizens about urban development through CAMP. IPR utilises this plural form to address the metropolitan scale as well, and can act as an instigator and networker in intergovernmental discussions. The formal position of IPR within the city-region limits this position somewhat. This is part of the reason why the main efforts of IPR to make sure metropolitan planning happens are not put in larger scale plans or designs but are focused on lobbying to the national lawmakers for new planning laws. IPR has through its experience relatively a lot of knowledge to know which legislation causes obstacles in addressing the metropolitan. The upcoming elections in October 2025



Satellite photos from 2006 (left) and 2024 (right), showing the uneven development across small municpalities in the metropolitan region. Noticiable is the large scale expansion of Vysoký Újezd compared to its southern neighbour Lužce, right up to the municipal borders (indicated in white)

have also been used as a momentum to put metropolitan planning on the agenda of the national government. Planning laws recently have opened some possibilities to work on a more regional scale as municipalities- the aforementioned abolished administrative level of districts can be utilized to collectively deal with certain spatial topics, such as nature or (waste) water, by municipalities. This can help combating the fragmentation effects of the small municipalities and can organise municipalities in planning collaborations with Prague, but also poses the risk of more complexity in administration- especially considering bridging the gap between Prague and the surrounding municipalities.
IPR is currently positioning themselves as an organiser to get municipalities just around Prague to meet with the city around administrative cross-border planning topics. These informal meetings have been effective so far and IPR is using both its status as a government body as well as knowledge institute to position themselves as a knowledgeable facilitator of these meetings. Increasing metropolitan pressures require IPR to take more of a strategic and agenda setting role in order to address the metropolitan scale successfully.

Future challenges

These increasing pressures are increasingly being defined by the pressure on amenities such as schools or healthcare facilities, especially in the municipalities just outside the city region. Prague is projected to keep growing and has faced in the last couple of years sudden changes in its resident count. The invasion of Ukraine has caused around 125.000 Ukrainians to reside in the Prague metropolitan region. Around half of these Ukrainians are planning to stay here for a longer period of time, placing an urgency on providing the capacity in the region to accommodate this sudden growth.

— A chasm in governance

Due to the national importance of the city of Prague, it has an exceptional administrative status, but its metropolitan dynamics surpass these boundaries. The result is a 'chasm' between Prague and the peri-urban developments directly outside it. For effective metropolitan planning to take place, it is crucial that there is legal space to provide adequate administrative cross-border planning.

— Addressing the metropolitan by lobbying for spatial lawmaking

Due to the versatile role of IPR, they can besides planning, researching and informing the public, also work on being a platform for lobbying in new spatial laws. As this is the primary obstacle for metropolitan governance, the knowledge and experience of IPR comes in handy.

Characterisation

Low formalisation in metropolitan governance

Prague is missing an institution that operates specifically on the metropolitan scale level. IPR is a government agency of and operating within the city region of Prague, but uses its position as the relatively biggest planning institution in the larger region to address the metropolitan scale in planning, putting it on the agenda of the national government.

Facilitating in its position as a government institute

IPR falls under the responsibility of the deputy mayor of planning Prague- it does not possess any formal planning power and is tasked with planning. However, due to their plural responsibilities such as spatial research, facilitating discussion and informing the public through CAMP, they use their versatility to address spatial issues, put them on both the municipal, regional and national agenda, and organise subsequent strategic lobbying and informal meetings.

Increasingly strategic capability, but no sideward movement

The formalised position of IPR within the city region of Prague causes it to be very inflexible in a process of formalisation on the metropolitan level. IPR could require a more strategic and agenda-setting role as metropolitan pressures increase to take them on. Its position can be used tactical mediator in informal deals and discussions between municipalities and regions on a metropolitan level.

Vereniging Deltametropool spoke to and would like to thank the Prague Institute of Planning and Development (IPR), specifically Jaromír Hainc, Director of the Department of City Development, Judita Eisenberger, Urban Planner and International Relations Specialist, and Martin Kebza, Strategy and Development Specialist.

Copenhagen-Malmö

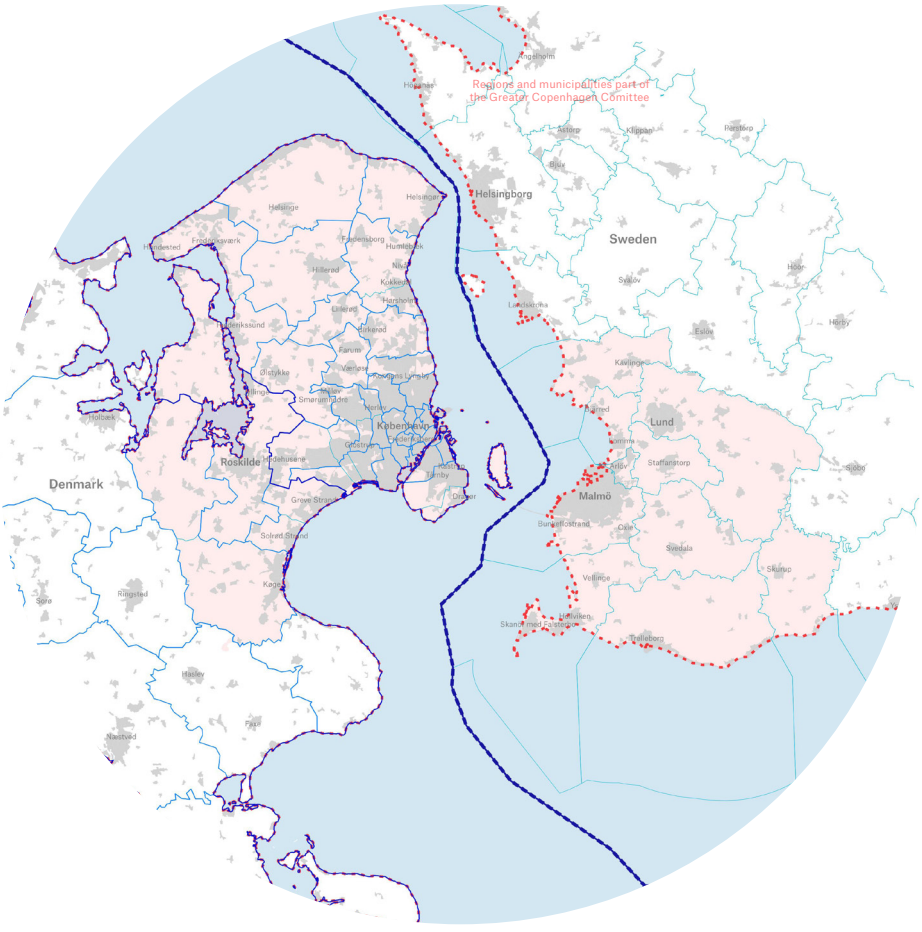
An established connection in need of a new vision

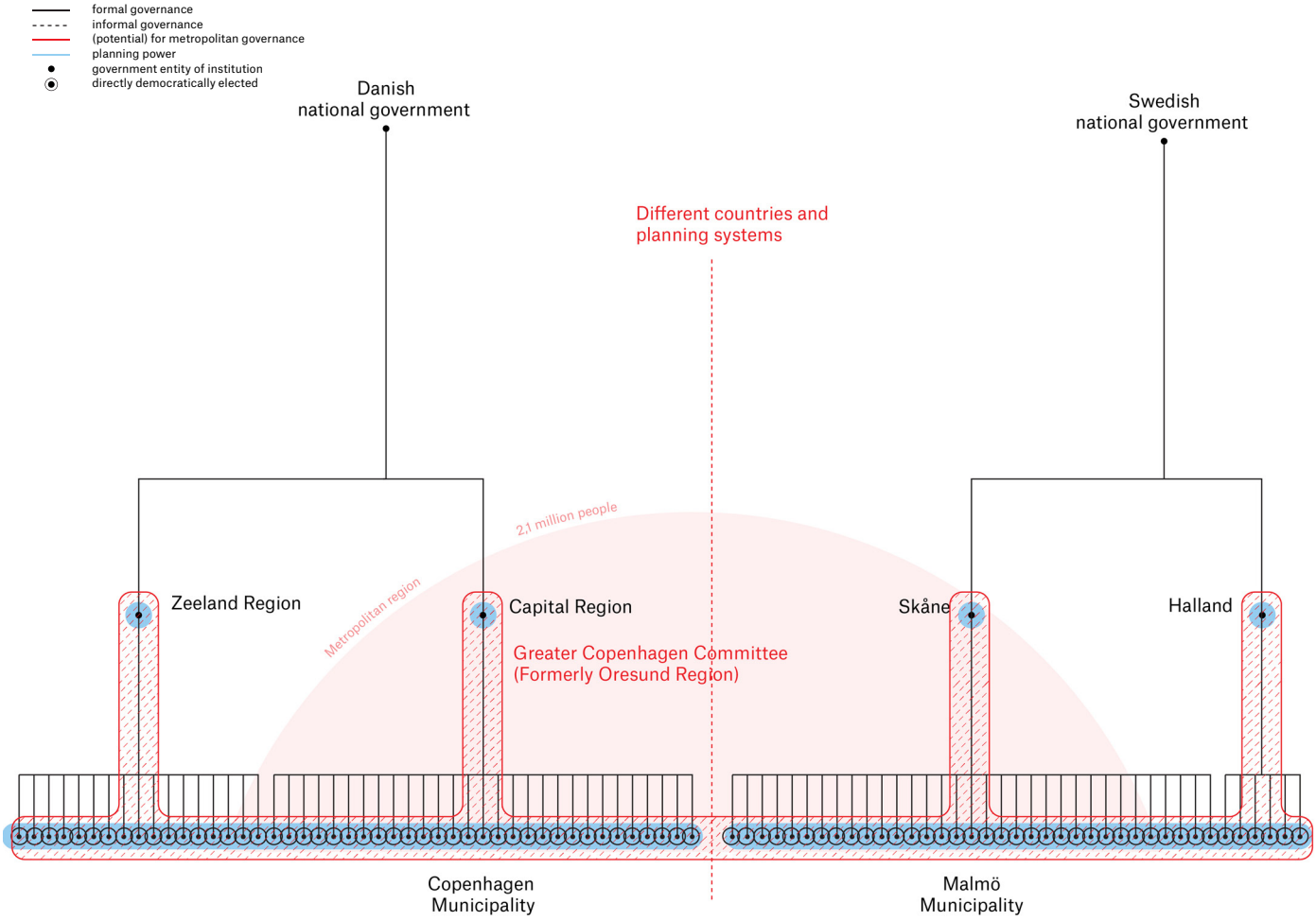
Where lies the metropolitan region and governance? Is it the Capital Region of Denmark or Greater Copenhagen Committee? The Copenhagen–Malmö metropolitan region can be understood through three overlapping but distinct framings.

Metropolitan dynamics

First, the Capital Region of Denmark (Region Hovedstaden) functions as an administrative and statistical unit, covering 29 municipalities plus Bornholm. With around 1.91 million inhabitants and a GDP of €161 billion (2023), it combines Copenhagen's dense urban core, peri-urban North Zealand, and the Baltic outlier of Bornholm. Its mandate focuses on healthcare, regional development, and international cooperation, but it has no formal spatial-planning competences. Second, the Greater Copenhagen Committee operates as a strategic cross-border platform, uniting municipalities and regions across eastern Denmark and southern Sweden. Building on earlier versions of the Øresund and Greater Copenhagen and Skåne Committees, it promotes collaboration in talent attraction, innovation, and investment. This Committee convenes Danish and Swedish municipalities and regions to align strategy, clusters, and funding, but it holds no transferred statutory powers.

The Capital Region operates within Denmark's two-tier system, aligning municipal plans with national





interests and the state-led metropolitan framework of the Finger Plan. Administrative "regions" have health and service roles, no spatial-planning competences. Physical planning is "as a starting point a municipal competence," designed to empower the 98 municipalities after consolidation, yet at the cost of lost regional planning and duplicated efforts in inter-municipal competition. The Finger Plan is the state's metropolitan overlay, now a legal act, imposing compact-city logics (rail "fingers," station proximity, green wedges). The high volume of municipal change requests illustrates the tension between local flexibility and metropolitan coherence: rather than steering development proactively, the Finger Plan often functions as a compliance filter.

The Copenhagen–Malmö region operates across two countries, separated by the Øresund strait, creating both physical and institutional barriers but also strong interdependencies. This hybridity produces both interdependencies (labour markets, airport, housing flows) and imbalances. Economic dominance and political visibility of Copenhagen create imbalances in collaboration. Malmö benefits from proximity but faces disadvantages as a non-capital city, with fewer resources and weaker national attention. Although the cross-border urban system rests on complementarities, Copenhagen's HQ functions and global connectivity; Malmö/Skåne's housing/land and strong universities, made tangible by the Øresund fixed link and operationalised through Copenhagen–Malmö Port. Yet political incentives have cooled the integration narrative: "When the bridge was built… there was much more focus on synergies," but with today's asymmetry, cross-border commuters are still a minority, and electoral returns are limited. Together these arrangements advance metropolitan integration primarily through state instruments and project vehicles (ports, utilities, corridor initiatives) rather than a binding regional authority. In the interview with Tina Saaby, she emphasizes that the metropolitan region is more than functional integration, it is a cultural and symbolic landscape where identity and values matter as much as economic flows.

Governance and Politics

Denmark's two-tier system (state and municipalities) empowers local authorities but weakens regional coordination. The Capital Region is the only exception, governed by the Finger Plan. Once visionary (1947), it is now highly restrictive, fragmented, and more reactive than future oriented. Sweden operates with municipal planning monopolies, which, while granting autonomy, hinder formal regional coordination. Interviewees warns that contemporary planning lacks equivalent long-term metropolitan visions. Tina Saaby adds that crises like climate change, housing pressures are often the only triggers that mobilise metropolitan cooperation. Some of the interviewees warn that planning has become highly short-termist, shaped by electoral cycles and small-scale political compromises. The Planning Act frames national interests, ministerial directives, and a duty to object when municipal plans conflict with those interests, binding sectoral plans (water, Natura 2000, risk management, raw materials, marine) further shape municipal plans.

On the transnational scale, the Greater Copenhagen Committee is member cooperation, strategic not regulatory, good at branding, cluster-building, and fundraising, but with no transferred powers. The Greater Copenhagen Committee sets agendas and advocates; municipal and regional governments retain statutory competences; national governments enter for treaties, taxation, border regimes, and megaprojects. The Agency describes it as a platform "a bit more business-oriented," aligning universities and research facilities to attract investment; infrastructure and ports remain national/ministerial domains. Denmark's reforms weakened regional planning, empowering municipalities, while Sweden grants municipalities near-total monopoly over physical planning. Both sides struggle with limited formal regional coordination. Platforms like Greater Copenhagen Committee and joint municipal initiatives around energy, climate adaptation, and infrastructure fill the governance gap. Interviewees describe cooperation by necessity rather than by design: "we're being forced into multi-municipal collaborations on climate adaptation... we collaborate more when we need to than when it's nice to."

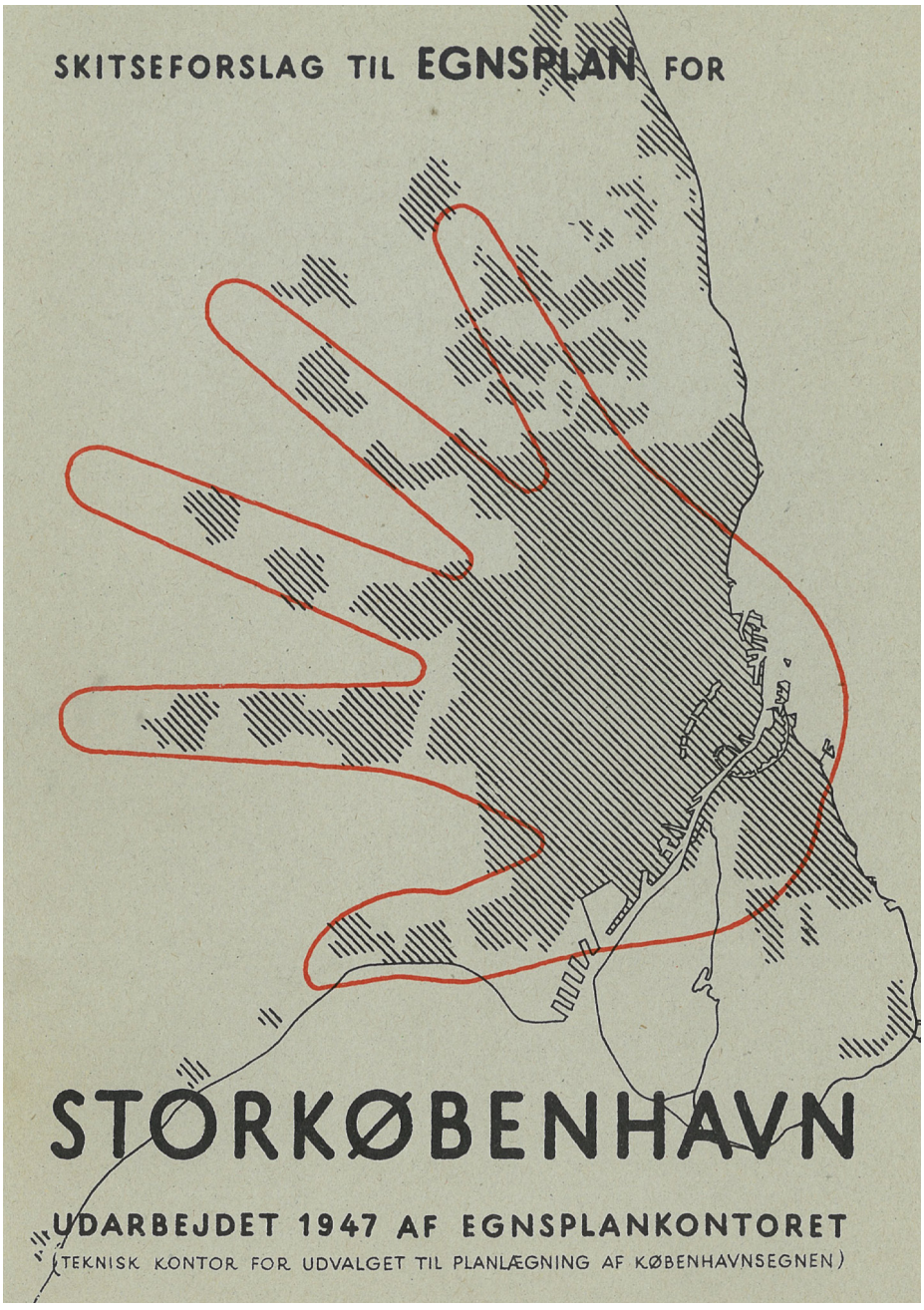
Spatial policy – Finger Plan as an act

The Finger Plan (1947) remains the Capital Region's central spatial instrument, concentrating growth along rail corridors, protecting green wedges, and requiring station-proximity for labour- and consumer-intensive functions. In practice, however, major transport decisions (highways, bridges, rail) are taken by national agencies, so the metropolitan framework often responds rather than leads infrastructure choices. The Planning Act sets clear aims balanced development, environmental protection, climate adaptation, and public participation but metropolitan steering is dispersed across multiple instruments, and special laws (e.g., Lynetteholm) can bypass ordinary planning sequences.
At the municipal scale, competition dominates between the cities for investments, housing, and labour markets, often at the expense of regional coherence. At the national scale, political priorities and electoral incentives override metropolitan visions, with state ministers framing investments in Copenhagen as zero-sum vis-à-vis the rest of Denmark. To make the metropolitan scale work, keep growth anchored to rail and govern transport capacity at the regional level, locking these priorities into national rules that outlast election cycles (the Stockholm model of regional transport governance is instructive). When formal reform stalls, use functional vehicles that already deliver cross-municipal utilities, port and energy companies, and open "innovation arenas" to move from plans to projects. As Tina Saaby's practice shows, city-making, the post-2011 cloudburst turn, and a pragmatic municipal "yes-office" can convert citizen initiatives and interdepartmental collaboration into concrete metropolitan action beyond individual municipal borders.

Current Difficulties

The current regional tier is quite weak. The Capital Region has no elected spatial authority; the Finger Plan has become restrictive and reactive: "not near... future proofing of the capital area." It is also not updated and flexible for the transitions necessary in the future. Transport–planning is also not appropriately connected

The original fingerplan from 1947 for Copenhagen, showing the simple, yet effective concept of the plan.
Source: Plan- og Landdistriktsstyrelsen





The Øresund bridge as seen from Copenhagen. Source: Tuan P., Unsplash

with other spatial governance. Infrastructure governance sits outside the Finger Plan, reducing alignment of land use with capacity. There is also a general dynamic of short-termism and patch work. Electoral cycles encourage micro-adjustments to local plans, which fragment long-term settlement patterns and replace regional strategy with short-term bargaining. At the cross-border scale, practical frictions, differing professional certifications, tax systems, and funding structures, limit deeper integration. Malmö faces national obstacles, with Stockholm prioritizing defence spending and internal cohesion over cross-border infrastructure. Climate adaptation, however, forces collaboration: municipalities along the Øresund are compelled to work together to address rising sea levels and flood risks. Noted across the three interviews, the opinions of practitioners converge on three persistent frictions. First, sectoral silos across Denmark and Sweden, including non-aligned professional certifications, force slow case-by-case "translations" and raise transaction costs for firms and commuters. Second, asymmetry matters, since Copenhagen's fiscal and branding weight weakens incentives to bargain while Malmö's gains remain uneven. Third, recurring security cycles in the form of ID checks and border controls undermine perceptions of reliability even when cross-border flows later recover, which dampens confidence in deeper integration.

Future challenges

Challenges for the region are plural. First there is the matter of capacity & redundancy in infrastructure: rail and metro have to be seen as metropolitan instruments, not afterthoughts, and no future visions. For climate change, the climate baselines and coastal risk being handled within municipal borders. Another future risk is the lack of planning coherence. It would be better to align ministerial directives, sector plans, and special laws into an intelligible metropolitan pipeline from national Interests to the Finger Plan, then to municipal/local plans and then to spatial projects.

Infrastructure and port as a driver

The Øresund Bridge remains the landmark infrastructure shaping regional integration, symbolizing both economic synergy and cultural hybridity. Yet congestion and lack of new investment limit its capacity. Proposals for future metro connections across the sound illustrate how infrastructure continues to act as a driver of cooperation. Interviewees connect this to urban trajectories. Copenhagen moved from a deep late-20th-century crisis to global acclaim; that very success now dulls the incentive to regionalise: "we needed to connect to our neighbours when the city was in crisis... [but] now everything is running very well... it actually creates the obstacle of not needing to address our neighbors." While Malmö initially benefitted from the regionalist momentum of the bridge era, shifting national agendas in Stockholm, focused on defence and internal cohesion, now deprioritise cross-border investment, reinforcing asymmetries with Copenhagen.

The Copenhagen–Malmö Port Authority, operating jointly across borders, provides a rare example of institutionalized binational governance. At the same time, major projects like Lynetteholm bypass the planning system, being steered directly by parliament, which weakens metropolitan co-ownership. Some of the interviewees note that such mega-projects highlight the fragmentation of responsibilities between state transport ministries, municipalities, and planning authorities.

Knowledge, culture and missing dimensions

Copenhagen's strong design culture fosters architectural visions, but both sides note the lack of integrated approaches bridging design, economy, and politics. Historical precedents (1970s regional planning) show more coordinated capacities than today. Lars Jensen and Tina Saaby caution that design alone cannot drive change without integration of economics and politics. The loss of metropolitan planning offices since the 1970s represents a structural decline in coordinated, cross-sectoral knowledge production, replaced today by fragmented, project-based studies with weaker authority. Today, planning has lost much of its authority and systemic vision, becoming reactive and fragmented. Nevertheless, knowledge networks, universities, and cultural narratives around the Øresund region continue to function as soft infrastructures, fostering cooperation through research, innovation, and shared identity.
Beyond governance mechanics and infrastructure, several crucial dimensions remain underrepresented in the Copenhagen–Malmö narrative. The European Union acts as a hidden metropolitan driver, with programmes such as TEN-T, Interreg, Horizon, and the New European Bauhaus providing resources and legitimacy for cross-border projects in the absence of binding authority. Social justice and distributional effects, including housing affordability, labour market inequalities, and migrant integration, shape the functional region, particularly in Malmö where uneven development and limited national recognition constrain metropolitan benefits. Meanwhile, environmental governance is framed too narrowly through climate adaptation, overlooking biodiversity, coastal wetlands, sediment regimes, and resource metabolism that are essential for resilience. Taken together, these gaps highlight that metropolitan cooperation cannot rely on infrastructural fixes alone but must integrate European frameworks, social justice, and ecological systems to secure long-term sustainability.

Addressing the metropolitan

All interviewees converge on the need for stronger metropolitan visions that move beyond reactive, crisis-driven cooperation. Lars Jensen stresses that climate change and housing pressures must become drivers for renewed regional thinking. Saaby advocates for a planning culture that integrates values, sustainability, and democracy at the metropolitan scale, moving away from branding toward substance. Some interviewees call for more actors and institutions to explicitly adopt a regional perspective, particularly in transport governance, and warns that without this, Greater Copenhagen risks remaining symbolic. Interviewees converge on the need to institutionalise metropolitan cooperation. Yet the challenge lies in designing mechanisms flexible enough to address ecological risk and social justice, while also ensuring competitiveness in a global context.

To address the metropolitan scale pragmatically, two things can be done. Use the Greater Copenhagen Committee to prepare shared evidence, standardised baselines (climate, skills), coalitions, and funding so that when national windows (transport decisions, special laws) open, metropolitan choices are ready. Rising sea levels and flood risks force cross-municipal collaboration, showing how environmental risks can create a basis for regional solidarity. Utilising the existing collaborations and networks as operational vehicles: Copenhagen–Malmö Port (CMP), cross-municipal utilities, EU corridor networks (e.g., STRING). There is network fatigue, STRING, Nordic city networks, bilateral forums, without a clear division of labour: "we have a lot of networks… struggling to find out which subjects we discuss with which cities." Still, STRING remains "very practical" given its corridor focus.

To conclude, in the Capital Region, metropolitan governance is state-shaped and municipally executed: effective locally, fragmented regionally. The Finger Plan now protects more than it reimagines; transport remains outside its grasp; special laws warp sequencing. The remedy is capacity governance (transport at regional scale), a forward-looking Finger Plan, and a functional in-between tier that actually delivers projects.
Across Copenhagen–Malmö, the Greater Copenhagen Committee convenes and catalyses but cannot regulate; integration therefore advances through project vehicles and national decisions. The realistic agenda is to prepare, codify, and deliver, so metropolitan choices survive electoral cycles and sectoral silos.

— Binational hybridity with asymmetries

The region is both interconnected and divided: Copenhagen dominates economically and politically, while Malmö struggles for equal recognition despite strong functional ties.

— Reactive, crisis-driven collaboration

Cooperation often emerges only when forced by crises (climate risks, infrastructure bottlenecks, housing shortages), rather than through stable institutional frameworks

— Loss of long-term vision

While historic instruments like the Finger Plan once provided strong metropolitan direction, today governance is fragmented, short-termist, and reliant on informal platforms rather than future-oriented strategies.

Characterisation

Strategic and agenda-setting for its members

The Greater Copenhagen Committee is highly strategic in its current role, focussing on setting agendas and advocating. It also has its place in bridging complexities in cross-border governance for its members.

Limited formalisation, but institutionalised in its history

Due to the two countries, and therefore two legal systems, formalisation is limited. However, its long history and success with the Oresund connection has increasingly institutionalised the Greater Copenhagen Committee.

Movement

The history and former activities have changed quite significantly over the years. The realisaiton of the Oresund connection was very operational and practically driven, while the current Greater Copenhagen Comittee is way more strategic. For more effective metropolitan governance however, it needs to be move to more tactical and practical attitudes to work on the cross-border challenges.

Vereniging Deltametropool spoke to and would like to thank Lars Jensen, City Architect in Copenhagen, Marcus Horning, Director of City Planning in Malmö, Tina Saaby, director of the Danish Town Planning Institute and former City Architect of Copenhagen, and Jeppe Høst, Senior Adviser for International Coordination at the Danish Agency for Planning and Rural Development.

Ruhr

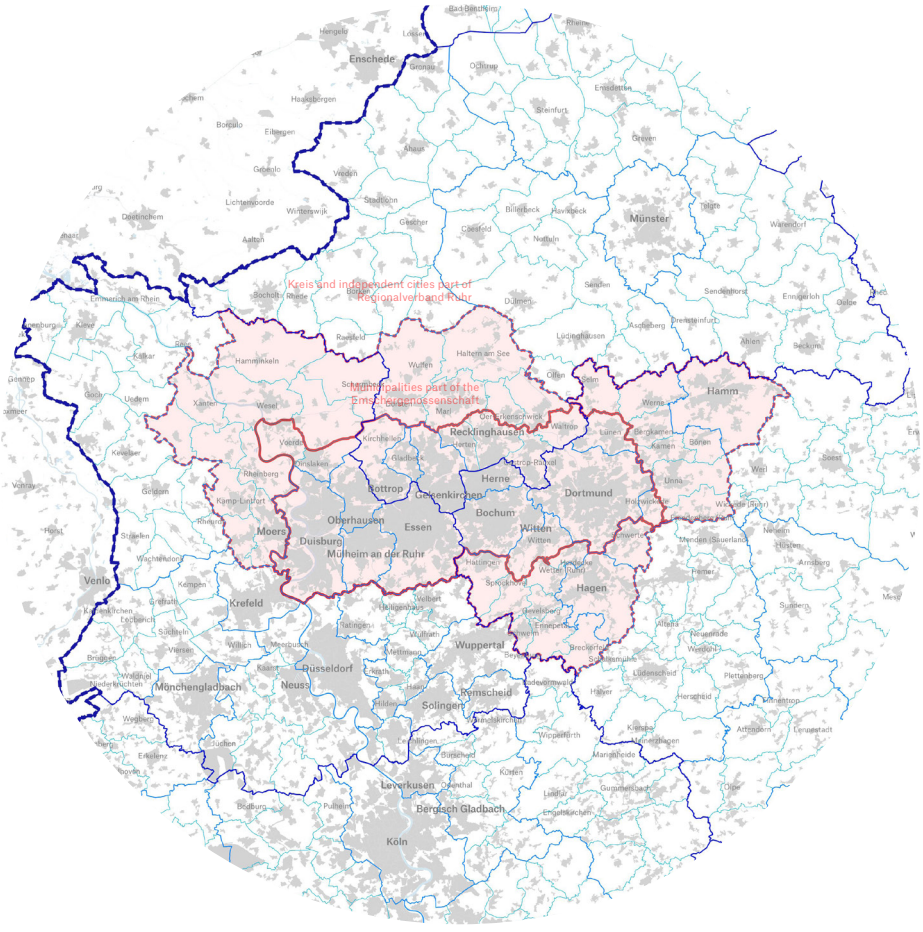
Structured, topical governance in a past industrial region

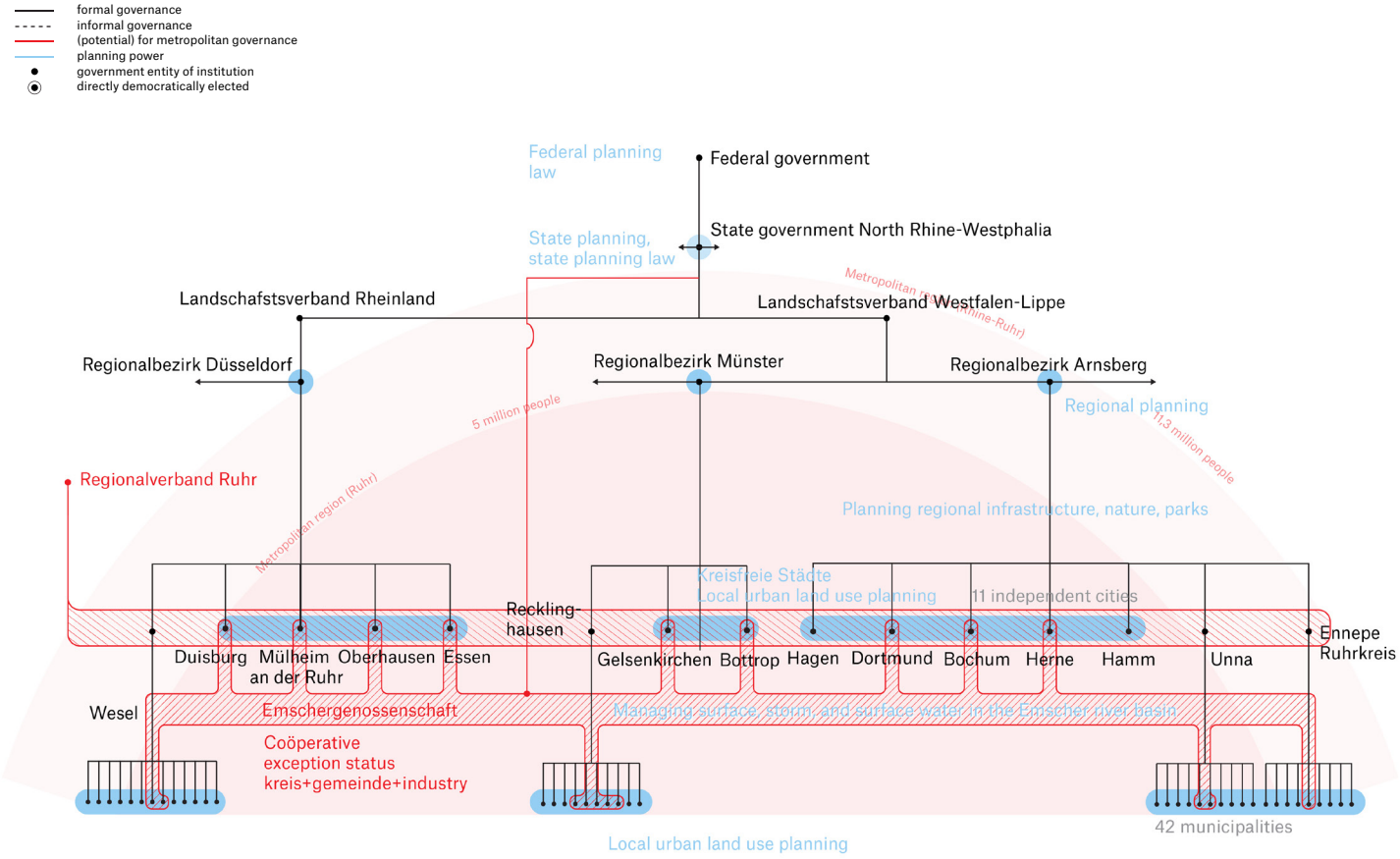
The Ruhr area has passed its economic peak in history by now but is still the home of around 5 million people. In large swathes of urban areas and former industrial areas, metropolitan governance must put its focus on increasing the liveability of the region. The EGLV, a formalised association and oldest water board of Germany, has been busy over the last couple of decades to re-naturalise the river Emscher and directing its focus to climate change adaptation.

Metropolitan dynamics

The Ruhr area is a polycentric urban region located in North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW), Germany's most populous and most densely settled state, home to more than 18 million inhabitants. The Ruhr's functional urban area (FUA) accommodates over five million residents, with central zones reaching densities of around 2,100 inhabitants per km². Around 38 per cent of the area is built up; major cities include Dortmund, Essen and Duisburg. The Ruhr sits adjacent to an equally urbanised corridor along the Rhine, stretching south through Düsseldorf, Cologne and Bonn. Together, the Rhine-Ruhr region hold over ten million people. This makes the one of Europe's largest metropolitan regions, comparable in scale to Greater London or Paris.

For more than a century, the Ruhr was the heart of German industrialisation. Rich coal and iron ore deposits, combined with a dense network of rivers, canals and railways, powered the growth of mining and heavy industry. Urban districts expanded rapidly. They have become tightly interconnected, first by public transport and later on by a grid-like





motorway network.
From the late 1950s onwards, however, the industrial base entered decline, accelerated by globalisation. This left derelict sites, unemployment, outmigration of younger generations and severe pollution. Population shrinkage remains a concern today, setting the Ruhr apart from many other German regions.
The region has since diversified into services and high-tech, while reusing its industrial heritage as a cultural and tourist asset. Nature has reclaimed many former sites, sometimes spontaneously, sometimes through deliberate planning. Yet socio-economic divides remain, with a struggling northern Ruhr contrasting with more middle-class southern parts – an imbalance that policy has not always adequately addressed.

Governance

Germany is a federal republic composed of sixteen constituent states (Bundesländer), each with its own constitution, parliament and government. The states are largely autonomous in their internal organisation and raise their own taxes. North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW) is further divided into five Regierungsbezirke (governmental regions), which oversee 31 Kreise (rural districts, comprising several municipalities) and 23 kreisfreie Städte (cities constituting a district in their own right). This administrative framework reflects historical boundaries rather than current metropolitan realities. The Ruhr area is split among three governmental regions – Arnsberg, Düsseldorf and Münster – instead of having a governmental region of its own.
To compensate, cooperation among local governments in the Ruhr area has long been central. As early as 1920, municipalities in the Ruhr began working together through inter-municipal structures. This culminated in the establishment of the Ruhr Regional Association (Regionalverband Ruhr, RVR) in its present form in 2004, bringing together the region's 11 urban districts and four rural districts. The RVR holds responsibility for regional spatial planning, infrastructure projects, cycling networks, and the maintenance of forests and green spaces. Through subsidiary bodies, it also promotes business, tourism and leisure, and provides waste management services. The naming of two subsidiaries – the Business Metropole Ruhr and the Freizeitgesellschaft Metropole Ruhr – shows the region's aspiration to be seen as a metropolitan entity, though this branding and self-perception remain contested.
In recent years, regional branding has become an important part of the RVR's role, with large events and cultural initiatives used to foster identity. The organisation also acts as a platform for coordination in fields beyond its formal mandate, such as education and migration. A major institutional innovation came in 2020 with the creation of the directly elected Ruhrparlament in Essen, which provides a democratic foundation for regional governance. The RVR is funded by contributions from its member districts and cities, and supported by project-based funding from NRW, the federal government and the European Union. This directly elected body is unique in Germany and signals a step towards stronger metropolitan governance.

Spatial policy

Spatial planning in Germany is distributed across multiple levels. The

Bundesländer develop state-wide strategies: in NRW these take the form of a Landesentwicklungsprogramm (state development programme) and Landesentwicklungsplan (state development plan). At the intermediate scale, the governmental regions prepare Regionalpläne, which translate state priorities to the regional scale and provide a framework for municipal planning. Municipalities are responsible for land-use (Flächennutzungsplan) and development plans (Bebauungspläne).
The Ruhr is an exception to this general system. In 2009, the state of NRW empowered the Regionalverband to draft its own regional plan, rather than relying on the three governmental regions covering the area. The Regionalplan Ruhr, in force since 2024, provides a unified, cross-sectoral framework for the entire area. It takes into account demographic change, economic restructuring and climate adaptation, while offering binding guidance for local land-use planning.
Broader frameworks have also shaped spatial policy. In 1995, NRW designated the "European Metropolitan Region Rhine-Ruhr" in its state development plan, aligning with the EU's European Spatial Development Perspective. The goal was to enhance international competitiveness, but the concept remained descriptive, lacked binding measures, and competed with other spatial strategies. NRW's complex administrative structure further hindered its implementation. In the 2017 state development plan, the Rhine-Ruhr Metropolitan Region was replaced by the broader concept of "Metropolitan Area North Rhine-Westphalia", covering the entire state. To this day, a formal institutional framework at the Rhine-Ruhr level is absent, underscoring the persistent mismatch between territorial realities and administrative structures.

Emschergenossenschaft

An important actor within the Ruhr's metropolitan governance is the Emschergenossenschaft. Founded in 1899, it is not active in the entire Ruhr region, but it is responsible for water management across the Emscher catchment area, stretching between Dortmund and Duisburg. In terms of the metropolitan scale, it uses a hydrological regional perspective and can in that sense effectively work on water management. Its tasks include river maintenance, wastewater treatment, groundwater management and the regulation of mining-related impacts, which are a legacy of the region's industrial past. The Emschergenossenschaft is in its operation working together in with the Lippeverband, a similar organisation of a neighbouring basin, and are in their operational capacity often named together (EGLV).
As a corporation under public law, the Emschergenossenschaft is funded and steered by its members, which must include municipalities, industry and the mining sector that cover or operate within the Emscher basin. Through annual assemblies and representation in its council, members actively participate in shaping decisions. The board is elected by this council, and one of its members is appointed as chairperson. This corporatist structure is fairly unique in Germany and reflects the Ruhr's tradition of problem-solving through collective arrangements.
Although its remit differs from that of the Regionalverband Ruhr (RVR), the Emschergenossenschaft's work sometimes overlaps, as both address the consequences of industrial decline. Its flagship task has been the ecological restoration of the Emscher River, which had been an open sewer since the 19th century. Launched through the Internationale Bauausstellung Emscher Park (1989-1999), this long-term project has since transformed former industrial sites into parks and recreational areas, most notably the Emscher Landscape Park. Linking green corridors from the 1920s with newly created spaces, it now forms a continuous east-west belt and ranks among Europe's largest landscape projects, covering more than 450 square kilometres. The Emschergenossenschaft has been tasked with this conversion by the state to start in 1992 and finish the project in 30 years with a budget of 9.6 billion Deutschmark (around 4.8 billion euros) and has finished the project to the day with a final spending of 5.5 billion euros. The political momentum back then, with a broad political alignment across all administrative levels in the region, instigated and committed to 30 year project.



The renaturalised Emscher near Dortmund.
Source: Stefan Kunzmann, Wikimedia Commons

The independence from there on out in which the Emschagenossenschaft could operate, without frustration of changing governments and perspective and loans from the European Investment Bank and the Bank of North Rhine-Westphalia, gave the project the continuity it needed. Nowadays the project is finished and the project is widely recognised as a success. The objective of the Emschergenossenschaft is currently shifting to more strategic and agenda-setting work on the topic of climate change adaptation, with a larger set of topics than just water management. Integration of bicycle infrastructure, biodiversity This is quite a shift from the Emscher conversion, but having the experience and knowledge of the area plays to their advantage in working together with other institutions, planners, and the execution of projects.

Difficulties

For the Ruhr region in general, the spatial arrangement of cities and towns cause cities to sometimes compete rather than cooperate on economical scale. Cities and urban areas within it often pursue separate investment policies against each other. Economic spatial segregation, fragmentation of the towns and cities and political fragmentation cause decisiveness on the metropolitan scale to be limited. The Regionalverband Ruhr is tasked with the topics that the more local governments cannot pick up, such as the conversion of

former industrial sites.
The Emschergenossenschaft is a formalised organisation with an exceptional status in the German administrative system. This gives them a unique position but also poses obstacles. Within their set tasks, their flexibility is limited. The Emscher Umbau, a successful project, had to be given from higher government levels; the executive power amidst the planning power of other administrative levels is therefore somewhat constrained, or could risk conflict. The Emschergenossenschaft holds for example no management authority over specific landcape elements, but must go through other levels to operate on them to a certain extent: they would prefer direct authority on spatial adaptations. The Emschergenossenschaft is in fact looking towards the Dutch Waterschappen for inspiration on this issue, where the latter are a formalised democratic government that holds direct power over surface water and safety.

Addressing the metropolitan

The Ruhr area is facing many challenges in its industry history and spatial result, but the gains from the Emscher conversion, the converted industrial sites and the landscape park show successes in providing a new spatial narrative for the region. Continuing in strategic attitudes for the topics of liveability and climate change adaptation works well to keep addressing the topics that people find urgent and important; especially after the 2021 floods in the region tested the water system.
Fragmentation in the region needs to be addressed into creating a new spatial narrative overall. Urgencies on certain topics can help, but the region requires a new story. The metropolitan organisations that already exist can play a pivotal role in this task. A requirement for this is that they provide longevity and continuity to their tasks, the people that work on them and the narrative that they create.

— A region past its economic peak with a heavy industrial history

The Ruhr region is defined by its history of industrialisation, with its spatial result being a fragmented patchwork of towns, cities, industrial sites, infrastructure and green belts. Unlike many of the other metropolitan regions in this research, it is not an economic powerhouse of national importance anymore. Fragmentation is an obstacle in providing a prosperous new narrative for the region.

— A topical organisation with continuity can provide tangible results

The Emschergenossenschaft has been working on a set task and has been granted the continuative capabilities to work on water management without too much political turbulence. The organisation can capitalise on its success with the Emscher conversion, and from their position and experience take on more strategic roles for addressing climate change adaptation.

Characterisation

Formalised as an exceptional association

The Emschergenossenschaft has an interesting administrative status: an association that the administrations and industry in its basin are obliged to contribute to. For the limited topic of water management and the urgency that it brings (such as the open-air sewer that the Emscher used to be), consensus among its members can be efficiently reached.

Operational, with strategic tendencies

The Emschergenossenschaft is an association, but also a service provider for the wastewater treatment in the region. This makes the organisation highly operational and facilitating originally, focusing on very practical tasks, but has over the last years also taken on a more strategic role.

Movement

Now that the Emscher conversion is complete, the Emschergenossenschaft is moving from its only operational and facilitating origins to an also more strategic and agenda-setting profile for climate change adaptation. The highly formalised nature of the organisation is flexible enough to accommodate that and does not require, also seen the importance of its other tasks, a shift in formalisation.

Vereniging Deltametropool spoke to and would like to thank Stefan Gärtner, head of the Institut Arbeit und Technik (IAT) and head of its research department “Spatial Capital”, and Uli Paetzel, chair of the executive board of the Emschergenossenschaft & Lippeverband.

Paris

Navigating an administrative millefeuille towards polycentricity

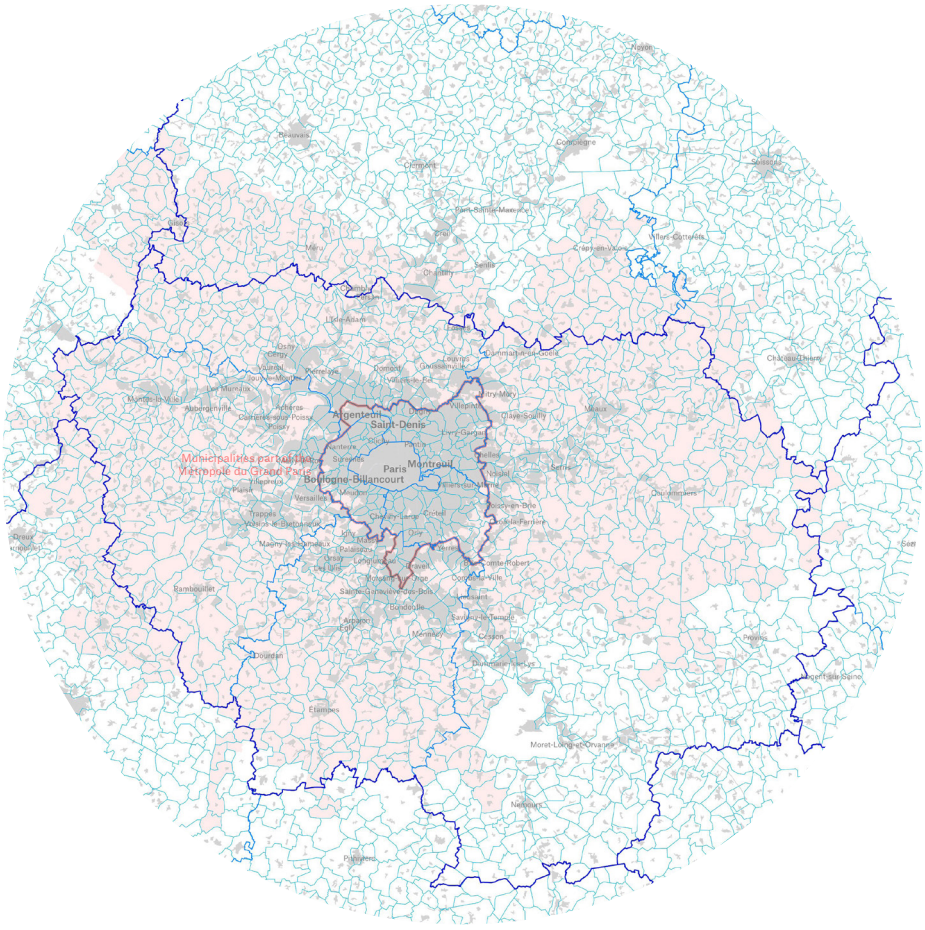
Paris is a major European metropolis, and also one of the more complex to govern. Its layered institutions bring together the state, the Region, the City and more than a thousand municipalities. Constant negotiation shapes the design and implementation of policies. Although responsibilities can overlap and political leaders may pursue different agendas, there is broad recognition that the metropolitan reality demands collective solutions.

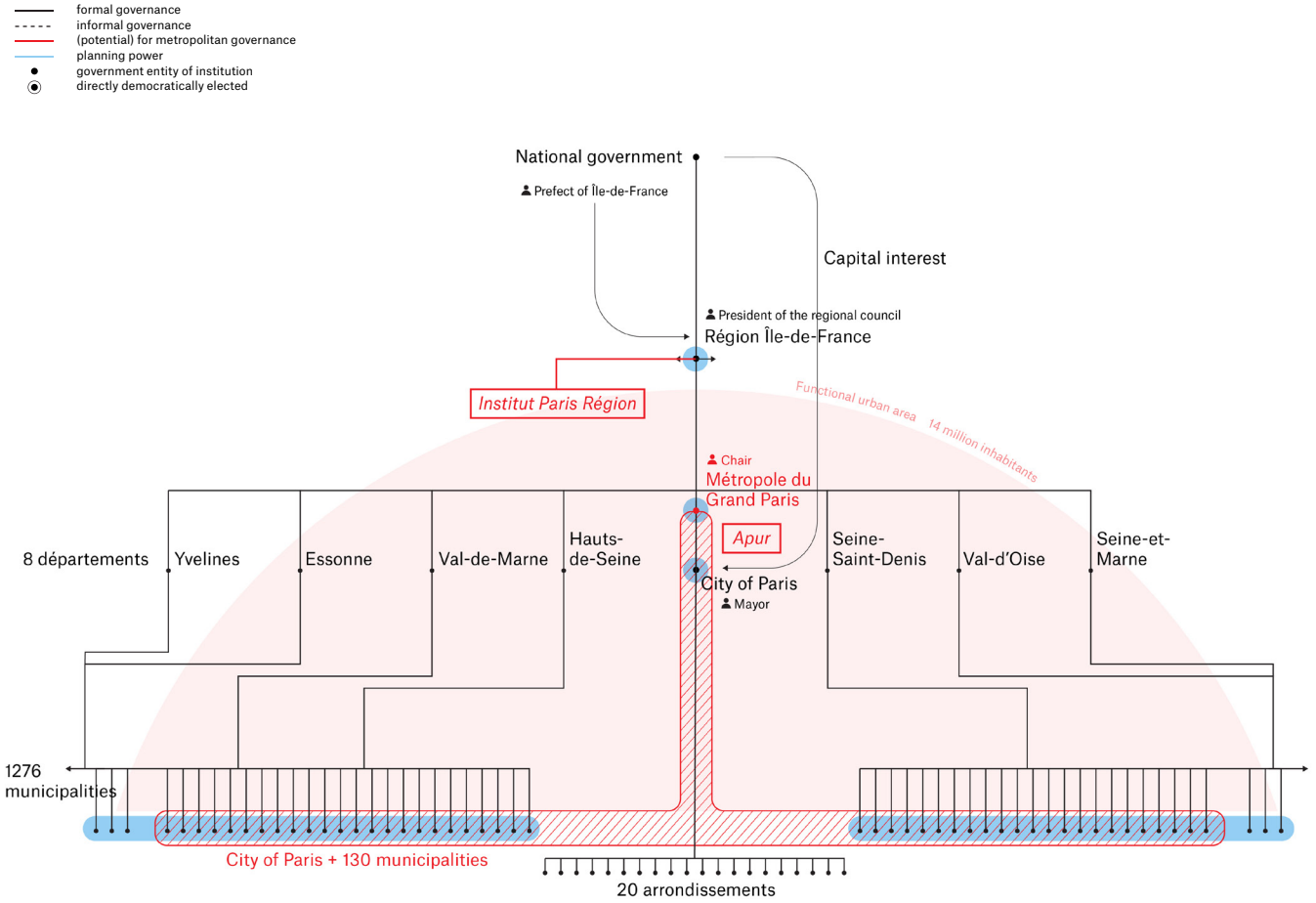
Metropolitan dynamics

Paris, founded more than 2,000 years ago on an island in the Seine, has expanded over the centuries in a radial and concentric fashion. The enceinte de Thiers, a defensive wall built in 1840, still defines the administrative boundary of the city proper (Paris intra muros). By the late nineteenth century, however, urbanisation had already spilled beyond this limit, transforming surrounding villages into suburbs.

Today, the City of Paris has about 2.2 million inhabitants, while the wider agglomeration counts nearly 11 million. With a density of 3,875 inhabitants per km², it is the most densely populated urban area in Western Europe. The broader functional urban area (FUA) reaches some 14 million people.

In the 1960s, planners sought to connect the suburbs with the city centre through a metropolitan network of radial rail lines, the Réseau Express Régional (RER). In order to channel the continuing growth of the Paris metropolitan area more sustainably and equitably, current policy aims at a polycentric spatial structure. This ambition is reinforced by the Grand





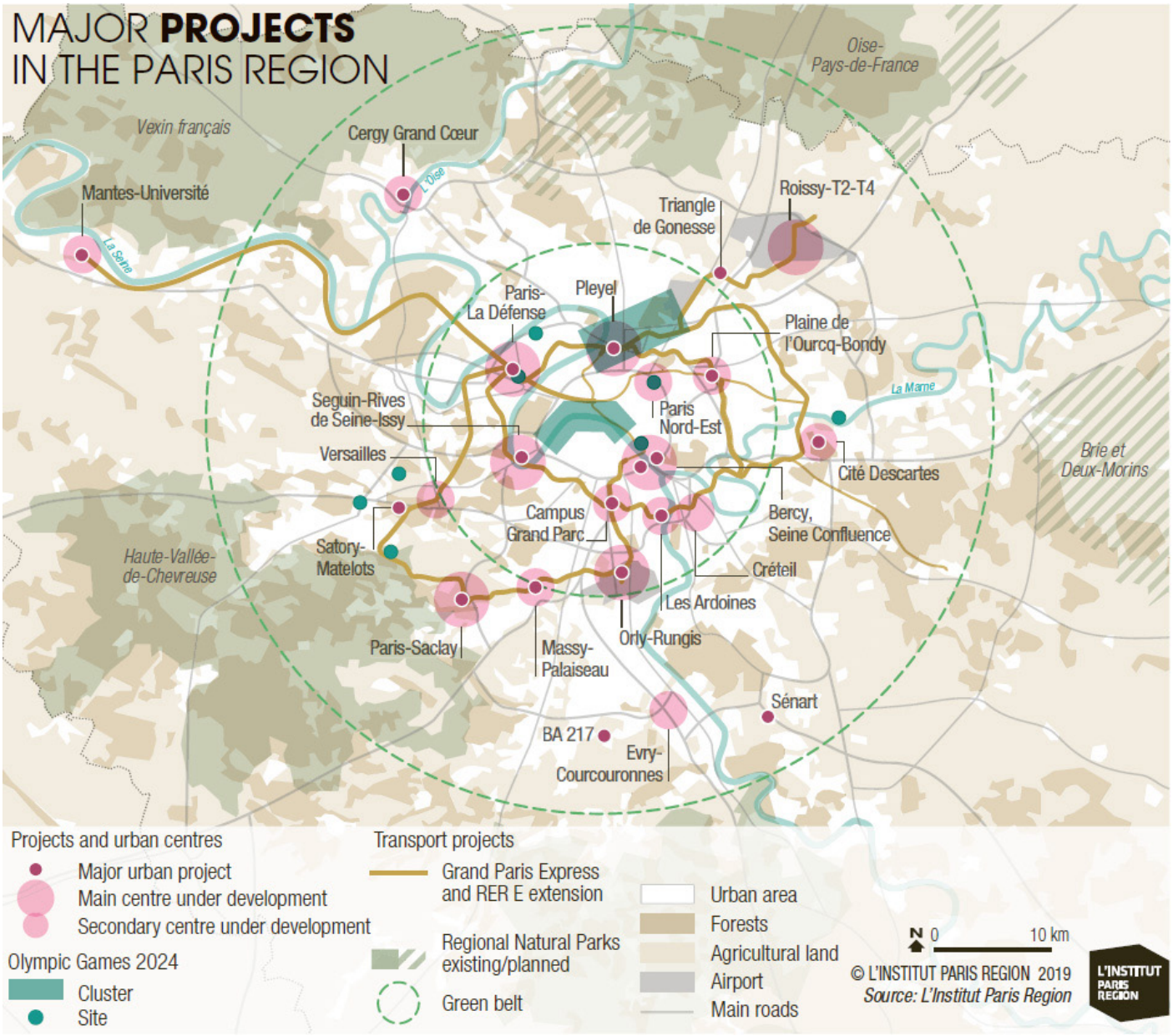
Paris Express, a major extension of the metro network beyond the city boundaries, designed not only to link suburbs to the centre but also to connect them to one another.

Governance

The governance of metropolitan Paris involves multiple layers of authority. France is a unitary state that, throughout the twentieth century, underwent both déconcentration (delegating state functions to territorial representatives) and décentralisation (empowering elected local governments). Beneath the national government, a hierarchy of territorial authorities exists: régions (created as administrative entities in 1960 and as elected bodies in 1982), départements and communes (both established in 1789), as well as other forms of collectivités territoriales. Each has an elected council and specific competences. This arrangement is widely referred to as the millefeuille territorial – a complex layering of institutions. Regions lack legislative autonomy but exercise regulatory powers and dispose of their own financial resources. Their main competences include spatial planning, interurban transport and economic development. Paris is located within the Île-de-France Region, which comprises eight départements. The territory of Paris intra muros constitutes one of these départements; since 2019, the City of Paris has assumed both municipal and departmental responsibilities.
An important element of French governance is the framework for intermunicipal cooperation. In Île-de-France there are around 1,200 communes. Most are very small in area – the median size is less than 10 km² – which makes cooperation essential. By law, communes must join intercommunal bodies (intercommunalités), which are governed by councils made up of representatives of member municipalities and endowed with delegated powers and financial resources.
Since 2010, municipalities that together have at least 400,000 inhabitants can form métropoles. In the Paris region, the Métropole du Grand Paris (MGP) was established in 2016 with a special status. It brings together the City of Paris and 130 surrounding municipalities, encompassing more than seven million inhabitants – primarily Paris and the three départements of the petite couronne. It is worth noting that this administrative entity covers fewer inhabitants than the morphological agglomeration, and far fewer than the functional urban area of Paris. The MGP took over the competences of 16 former intercommunal bodies. It is responsible for strategic policy in housing, spatial planning, climate and energy, as well as the construction and management of cultural and sports facilities of national and international importance.

Spatial policy

French law distributes competences for spatial planning mainly among regions, communes and, increasingly, intercommunal bodies. In 1965, the national government created a precursor to the Île-de-France Region in order to produce a first metropolitan master plan (Schéma Directeur d'Aménagement et d'Urbanisme, SDAU). The Region remains in charge of updating this plan, today known as the Schéma Directeur de la Région Île-de-France (SDRIF).
Local implementation of the SDRIF has traditionally been the responsibility of communes, though increasingly



Major projects in the Paris Region, such as the Grand Paris Express. Source: L'Institut Paris Region

it falls to intercommunal bodies. Legislation passed in 2014–15 transferred the preparation of strategic spatial frameworks (Schémas de Cohérence Territoriale, SCoT) and local development plans (Plans Locaux d'Urbanisme intercommunaux, PLUi) from individual communes to their intercommunal bodies, including the MGP. The granting of building permits, however, remains at municipal level.

Since the 1960s, agences d'urbanisme (urban planning agencies) have been established in major French agglomerations to guide spatial development. They combine data production, monitoring and prospective research with the preparation of plans and regulatory tools. In Paris, these roles are fulfilled by the Atelier Parisien d'Urbanisme (Apur), a non-profit association created in 1967 and funded by public members including the City of Paris and the MGP, and the Institut Paris Région (IPR), a regional public body directly accountable to the Île-de-France assembly. Both agencies often collaborate, exchanging data and expertise. Their remit extends beyond land-use planning to mobility, health, energy and climate, environment and biodiversity, and the circular economy.

Grand Paris Express

The Grand Paris Express (GPE) deserves special mention as a metropolitan project with unique governance arrangements. It is an ambitious expansion of the metro network, adding 200 km of new lines and 68 stations. The project was launched in 2007 at the initiative of President Nicolas Sarkozy, who sought to steer the development of the Île-de-France region more directly. It represents the largest transport project in Europe since the RER system.

To deliver it, the state created a dedicated project company, the Société du Grand Paris (SGP). Until 2015, SGP had little contact with the region or local authorities. However, for the urban development of the neighbourhoods surrounding the new metro stations, cooperation with and representation of regional and local governments was required. "Station area hubs" were created to facilitate joint planning, and extensive public participation was organised. The Institut Paris Région has played

a supporting role with preparatory studies and data collection.
As tunnelling nears completion, SGP has shifted its focus to shaping the urban environment of the new stations, including environmental, energy, economic and biodiversity dimensions. The project company has undergone a twentyfold expansion of staff. SGP has also begun cooperating with the region on other mobility projects, including financing extensions of RER lines. Conversely, regional transport operators will run the Grand Paris Express metro lines once they open.

Difficulties

The millefeuille is an undeniable reality. While constant reforms aim to simplify administrative structures, the system generally functions because actors recognise cooperation as unavoidable. Relations between levels of government can range from conflict and competition to collaboration and coalition-building, often depending on political affiliation. Power is highly personalised: mayors, council presidents and prefects play decisive roles. Though complex, the system is flexible enough to make things work in practice.
National sectoral policies can create tensions. For example, the state's target of building 70,000 dwellings annually in the Île-de-France Region often conflicts with other policies and with local priorities. Similarly, large-scale metropolitan projects such as the siting of data centres, the transformation of motorways or the planning of infrastructure for the 2024 Olympic Games require lengthy negotiations involving numerous mayors and municipal councils and higher levels of government, each with their own agenda.
The City of Paris retains a distinctive position in the metropolis. Historically, it could push policies through, and in some areas – such as cycling infrastructure – it continues to wield disproportionate influence, since much infrastructure radiates from the territory intra muros, reinforcing its central role. However, the City's decision to ally closely with the Département of Seine-Saint-Denis for the Olympics is a clear illustration of the recognition of the metropolitan reality.

— Institutionalisation and politicisation at every level

The institutional landscape is highly dynamic, with bodies being created, merged, redefined in scope, or dissolved in response to shifting needs and political agendas. Each layer of the millefeuille rests on national legislation defining its composition, objectives and competences. Policy levels are closely interlinked, with representation in one another's institutions, including the urban planning agencies. Combined with the prominent role of political leaders, such as mayors, council presidents and prefects, these interdependencies generate relations that oscillate between collaboration, competition and conflict, yet remain bound by mutual dependence.

— Centralisation and decentralisation in Île-de-France spatial planning

The state's recurring interventions in the metropolitan development of the capital region underline its status as a matter of national priority. In 1960, spatial planning needs prompted the government to create the District de la région de Paris, soon to evolve into the Île-de-France Region. In the early 1980s, the Region became a fully-fledged tier of decentralised government with an elected council. With the Grand Paris initiative (2007), the state again took the lead, only for local and regional authorities gradually to reclaim a stronger role in implementation.

— Broad embrace of the metropolitan reality

Across all levels of government, the metropolitan reality is increasingly acknowledged and reflected in governance structures. The métropole has recently been conceived as a new tier of intermunicipal cooperation, but at least in Paris its territory is too limited to capture all metropolitan dynamics. The Île-de-France Region functions de facto as much a metropolitan authority as the Métropole du Grand Paris. This underlines the need for agile cooperation across different layers of government to address metropolitan challenges.

Characterisation

Formalised under the region

The Institut Paris Region is officially formalised under the Region Île-de-France, granting it a large working area and metropolitan perspective.

Very versatile in their role

The institute has no decision power, but has an important supporting role for urban planning on the metropolitan scale. Its roles shift from being more operational and facilitating for planning processes to being more strategic.

Movement

The institute is relatively well positioned in terms of scale and formalisation and is already very flexible to the role it takes on. For tackling future metropolitan developments, this flexibility will remain crucial.

Vereniging Deltametropool spoke to and would like to thank the Institut Paris Région (IPR), specifically Dany Nguyen-Luong, Director of the Mobility and Transports Department, and Paul Lecroart, Senior urbanist in the Urban Planning, Development and Territories Department.

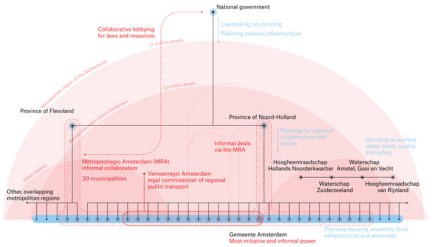
Typology

To create a typology of the different types of governance in metropolitan regions, we use the described organisations that in some way work on a metropolitan scale level as their representations.

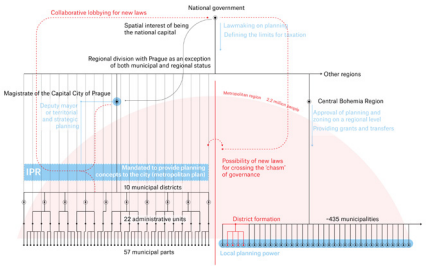
The reason for this is the difficulty of characterising the often lacking metropolitan governance in very different government systems. The organisations will be addressed through the variables of formalisation and their role. These 'sliders' have been put on an x- and y-axis on a diagram to see the relative positions of the organisations on these scales at a glance in the bright red dots. Their lighter and fading dots show the trajectory of where they came from. The red arrow shows the direction in which the organisation can move towards to be more effective for metropolitan governance, in the assessment of the researchers. The position of the organisations in the diagram is not defined by calculations but are indicative and relative to each other.

What we see in the diagram is that all organisations have been dynamic in their roles, many of them moving towards more strategic and agenda-setting activities as they also notice that metropolitan dynamics and pressures increase. In the direction of institutionalisation, less movement is observed for some organisations. These organisations, such as IPR Prague, Institut Paris Region and the Emschergenossenschaft are, albeit not necessarily on a metropolitan scale, formalised and less flexible in this sense. Organisations with the biggest movement, specifically the Greater Copenhagen Committee, has already achieved its metropolitan successes in the past (the Oresund Bridge) and is reconfiguring its role and status. Somewhat similarly, the versatile Institut Paris Region is constantly bouncing between different roles. Lighter organisations, such as the MRA, are found on the left side of the diagram, and although getting more institutionalised, more formalisation for this level is not directly necessary.

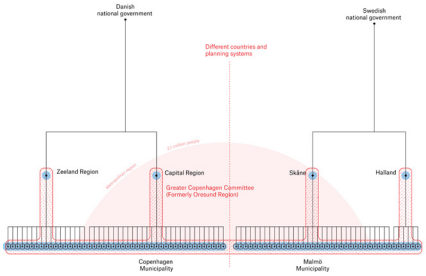
Amsterdam



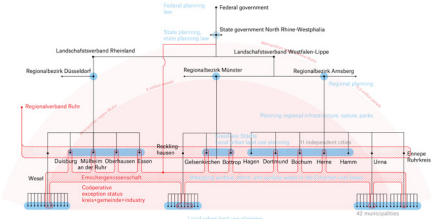
Prague



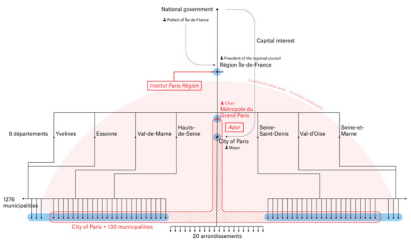
Copenhagen-Malmö

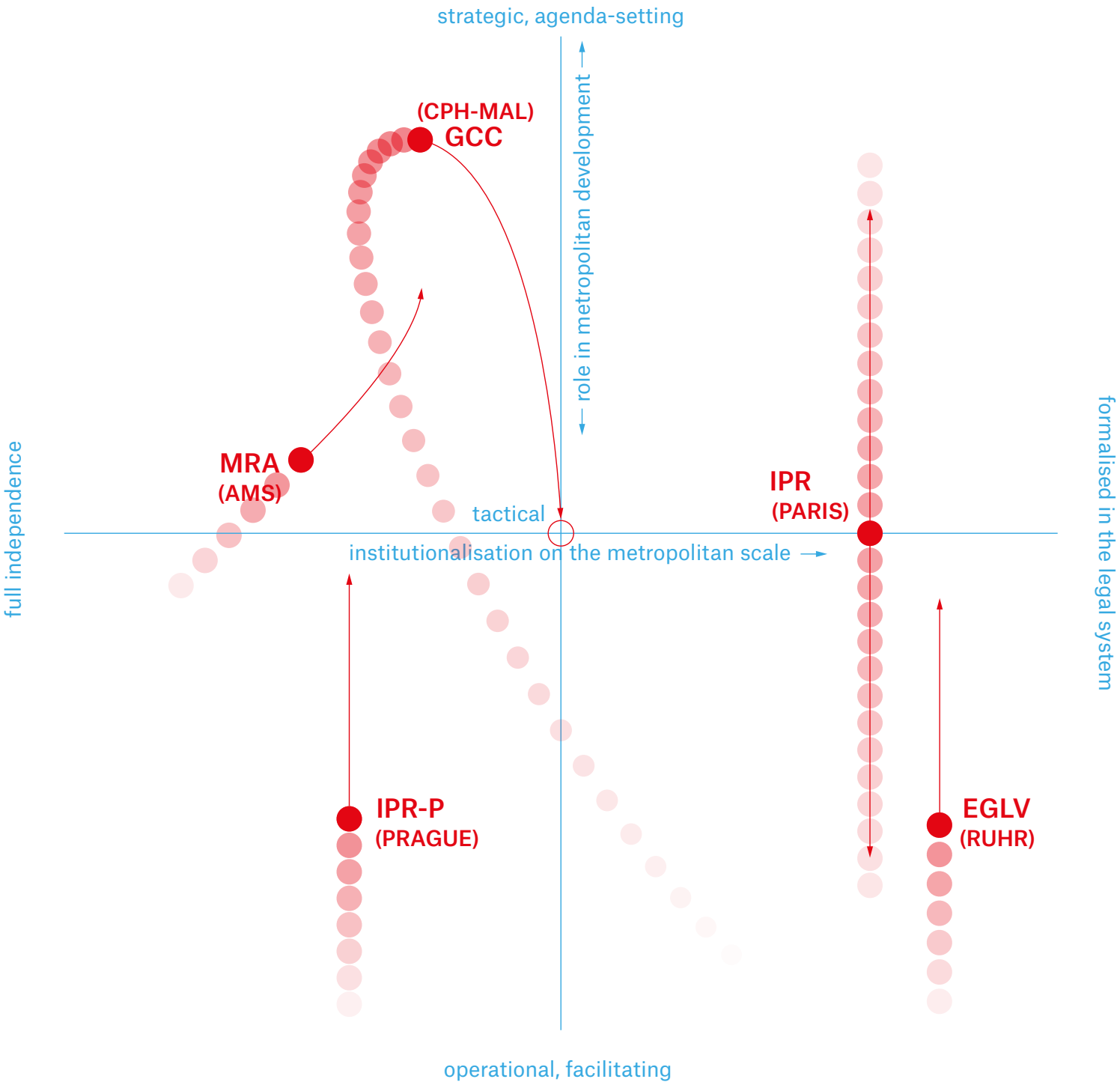


Ruhr



Paris




strategic, agenda-setting
role in metropolitan development
(CPH-MAL)
GCC
MRA
(AMS)
IPR
(PARIS)
tactical
institutionalisation on the metropolitan scale
full independence
formalised in the legal system
IPR-P
(PRAGUE)
EGLV
(RUHR)
operational, facilitating

Conclusions

Together with the typology and the interviews, we can draw up several conclusions on the dynamics of metropolitan spatial governance. These points are set out in three categories. First, the different types of context matters. Secondly, there are some interesting observations about the organisations to be made. Thirdly, we draw conclusions on addressing the metropolitan scale directly.

Context

A hard comparison between organisations and governance types is impossible, because the administrative, legislative, cultural and spatial contexts differ greatly. In some ways, the importance of the context is an important element across all the metropolitan regions in considering their governance. After analysing the regions and the interviews, we noticed through the subtext that not just increasing metropolitan dynamics put pressure on the void in governance. Decentralisation of planning responsibilities and neoliberalisation of spatial policy across Europe has made it increasingly difficult to address the metropolitan scale level. We also found that the spatial configuration of metropolitan regions matters greatly. Whether regions are more monocentric or polycentric has its effect on the governance dynamic and the role an organisation must play. More collaborative and association-style roles were taken in regions with more equally distributed 'weight' in terms of size of cores or larger municipal sizes. More polycentric regions like Amsterdam or Ruhr are more focused on providing a platform for consensus, rather than more monocentric regions where the biggest city are required take on a leadership role.

Organisation

No organisation is stagnant in its position, nor should they be. There is no 'perfect' position for these organisations, they require constant steering on what is expected of them and what they think that the region needs at this point. All organisations are seeking new positions and should also allow themselves more flexibility. This includes carefully stepping beyond their initial tasks to probe in what way they can explore more strategic roles. This move to more strategic roles is necessary, as the urgency for addressing the metropolitan scale increases.
The informal or formal status of organisations can be used to their respective advantage, but in general, more formal organisations are less flexible yet can provide breakthroughs on certain topics. It should also be noted that organisations with exceptional formalised status within the administrative system are effective when they have secured their position over a longer period of time. New strongly formalised organisations on the metropolitan scales are risky, as they cause more administrative complexity and are easily seen by other organisations and administrative levels as adversaries when they have not yet established themselves in the discussion.
Informality on the other side is also not without its risks. The organisation can be often fragile and limited in its executive power. Here, the factor for success is not just a collaborative attitude but also continuity and longevity in staff and message of the organisation.

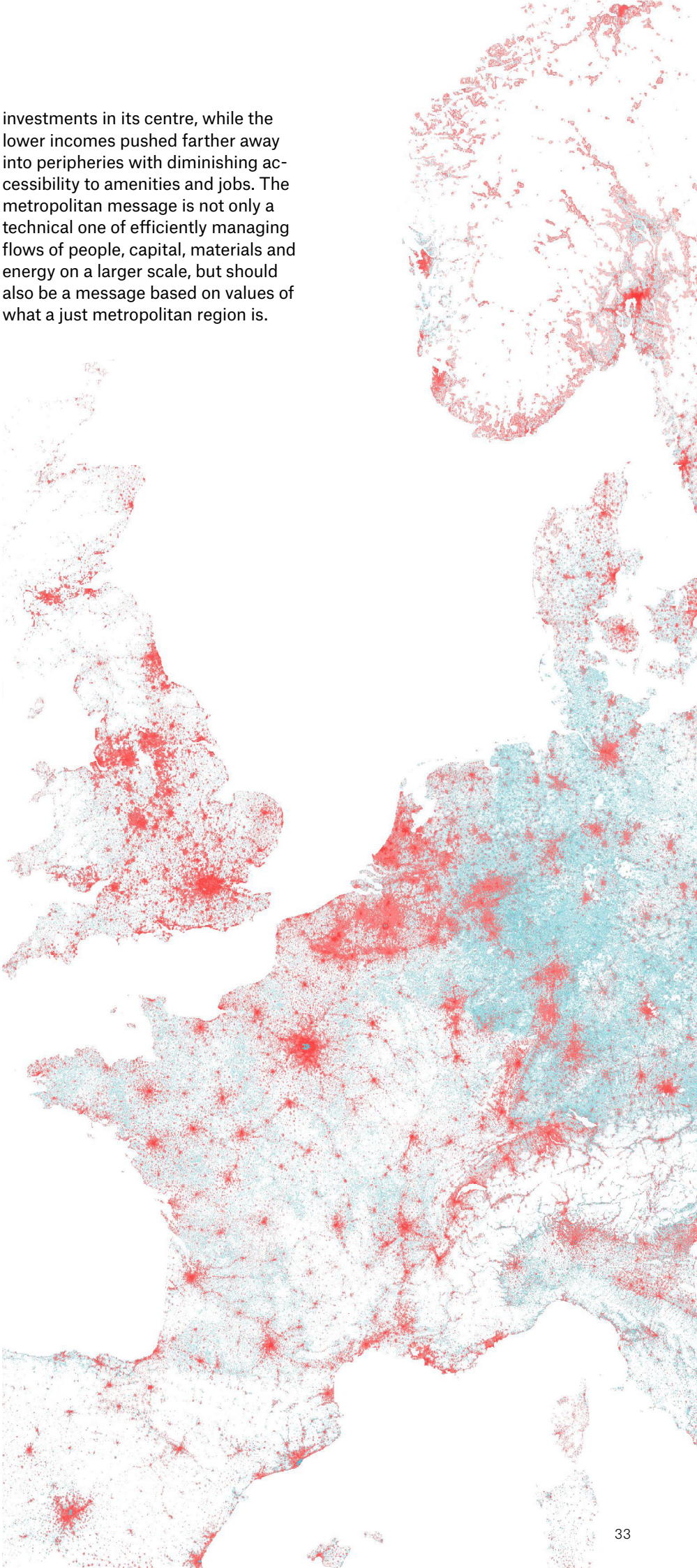
The metropolitan message

Considering the lack of metropolitan governance in spatial planning, stressing the importance and urgency of the message should be a priority. The way in which this is done can be in different ways that not always directly address spatial plans, as seen in the variety of approaches of the organisation. When the main obstacle is legislation for planning power and responsibilities, one can, in order to address the metropolitan scale levels, focus the energy for the metropolitan message on lobbying for

new laws. The attention can also be strategically put into certain themes, such as climate change adaptation, housing, energy or mobility on the metropolitan scale level, instead of on integral spatial planning. Achieving a breakthrough on one topic can open the doors for other topics and more integral perspectives. A third option that was not specifically mentioned during the interviews but could fit into one of these strategies, is to make more use of speculative power of spatial design. Historically, there have been many examples of spatial designs on a metropolitan scale. The resulting designs are not directly meant for top-down implementation but can rather make use of scenarios or a design to open up the conversation on spatial planning. Allowing for budget and capacity for creating such new narratives could be a fruitful strategy for creating a "metropolitan awareness".

For the metropolitan message it is not only a question how to convey it, but also to whom. For metropolitan governance there is a quick tendency to focus on the municipal scale level with the most direct planning power. But as can be seen with addressing the legislation and gathering the necessary resources, the national levels are just as, if not more important. Especially when, such as in the Netherlands, the metropolitan dynamic is not confined to the main cities but a defining factor of the spatial dynamics in the entire national territory. Looking at the levels above the national, there is a movement towards a "Europe of Regions" rather than that of nations, considering the economic relationships, geopolitical turbulence, and ongoing urbanisation (or rather "metropolitanisation"). Besides the metropolitan regions themselves, national governments as well as Brussels should define a clear stance and agenda on the metropolitan question.

It is with the recommendations above easy to get lost in technocratic governance and planning. As said before, metropolitan dynamics left unchecked do not only result in inefficient and unproductive regions, but also spatial injustice. The metropolitan region risks, especially amidst a housing crisis, to become a machine for segregation on a regional scale. The wealthy are capitalising on investments in its centre, while the lower incomes pushed farther away into peripheries with diminishing accessibility to amenities and jobs. The metropolitan message is not only a technical one of efficiently managing flows of people, capital, materials and energy on a larger scale, but should also be a message based on values of what a just metropolitan region is.



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