

METROPOLITAN COOPERATION: EXAMPLES FROM THE MECOGCE PROJECT

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Abstract

This paper analyses the methodology and outcomes of the Interreg Central Europe MECOG-CE project (2023–2026), focusing on enhancing integrated metropolitan cooperation and governance (MCG) across Central Europe (CE). The project partners, representing both mature institutional systems and emerging governance models, first identified critical thematic challenges, such as sustainable mobility and climate resilience, alongside persistent procedural barriers, notably administrative fragmentation and the general lack of institutional top-down support in many CE member states. Following a structured three-phase methodology – Analysis (Work Package 1, WP1), Capacity Building via Pilot Actions (WP2), and Strategy Formulation (WP3) – the project collected 76 best practices and adapted and refined five of them into five core, transferable solutions, including Food Cooperation for Metropolitan Areas. The resulting Strategy and Action Plans provide a flexible, replicable framework for accelerating integrated territorial development in functionally defined metropolitan areas, specifically addressing the institutional and political recognition gaps prevalent in the Visegrad region. The paper concludes that effective MCG transfer requires hybrid approaches, combining bottom-up stakeholder involvement with tailored financial instruments (such as Integrated Territorial Investments, ITI) to overcome fragmented administrative landscapes.

Keywords: Metropolitan Governance, Interreg Central Europe, Territorial Cohesion, Integrated Territorial Investments (ITI)

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Introduction

Metropolitan Areas (MAs) represent essential territorial units for achieving sustainable development goals and enhancing economic competitiveness within the European Union. The increasing complexity of cross-sectoral challenges—such as climate change, the impacts of suburbanization, and population dynamics—necessitates governance models that transcend rigid administrative boundaries, thus ensuring effective coordination of public services and strategic development (MECOG-CE, 2025b). This paper addresses the MECOG-CE project (Strengthening Metropolitan Cooperation and Governance in Central Europe), which is dedicated to the practical realization of these requirements.

Running from April 2023 to March 2026, the MECOG-CE project aims to identify, test, and apply the best governance tools for integrated metropolitan strategic and spatial development across the Central European region. The consortium of partners is characterized by its political and institutional diversity. It includes partners with long-established institutional systems, such as the Stuttgart Region Association (VRS) or the Metropolitan City of Turin (CMT0), as well as partners with newly forming metropolitan governance models, particularly from the Czech Republic (Brno, Ostrava) and Poland (Warsaw). A special case is represented by the Capital Region of Berlin-Brandenburg, combining two federal states. This diversity is central to the comparative analysis and policy transfer process.

The project also includes research institutions, such as the Metropolitan Research Institute in Budapest (MRI), Charles University in Prague, or the University of Silesia in Katowice. This ensures that the project is enriched by the academic point of view (MECOG-CE, 2025b).

The primary objective of this scientific paper is to present a critical and comprehensive assessment of the structured methodology of the MECOG-CE project. Specifically, the paper focuses on three main aspects:

- Analyzing the documented governance gaps between established and emerging MAs in Central Europe (WP1);
- Detailing the mechanism of policy transfer through study clusters and pilot actions (WP2); and
- Evaluating the five resulting innovative solutions and the final strategic framework (WP3) as a replicable model for metropolitan areas in Central Europe.

Theoretical and Political Context of Metropolitan Cooperation in Central Europe

The imperative for integrated metropolitan governance arises from the need to effectively manage functional regions, bridge the urban–rural divide, and coordinate public services across a fragmented jurisdictional context (MECOG-CE, 2025b). The project's relevance is highlighted by its alignment with current EU policy priorities, which emphasize integrated and sustainable urban and regional development (European Commission, 2020).

European Policy Mandate: From ITI to Common Vision

The European Union's Cohesion Policy framework actively promotes territorial cohesion. Operationalization is realized through instruments like Integrated Territorial Investments (ITI), which necessitate multi-level and multi-sectoral cooperation for the effective use of funds. The implementation of joint projects with metropolitan impact, financed by EU funds, is already active in the Brno, Ostrava, and Warsaw metropolitan areas, pointing to ITI as a crucial opportunity and an existing leverage point for strengthening cooperation (MECOG-CE, 2025b).

The MECOG-CE project is structurally underpinned by significant European policy documents. The New Leipzig Charter (2020) stresses the necessity of fostering integrated and sustainable urban development to address urgent global challenges. The Charter thus positions cities as drivers of the common good and environmental sustainability, which aligns with the goals of the European Green Deal (European Commission, 2020). Similarly, the Territorial Agenda 2030 reinforces the importance of strategic territorial planning to address growing territorial disparities and achieve Sustainable Development Goals (Ministers Responsible for Spatial Planning and Territorial Development, 2020). The project therefore serves as a practical tool for implementing these high-level policies.

A key output of the initial analysis phase (WP1) was the adoption of the Common Metropolitan Vision by the entire partnership. This document serves as a formal political advocacy tool aimed at promoting the metropolitan dimension in national and EU policy dialogues and creating a shared narrative about the importance of metropolitan areas (MECOG-CE, 2025b).

A fundamental dichotomy emerges in the data. While the opportunities arising from EU policies like ITI are favorable, metropolitan areas still exhibit core procedural problems related to institutional fragmentation and insufficient competence. This suggests the existence of a policy implementation gap, where a financial and political mandate exists from Brussels, but national and regional governance structures—particularly in the Central European context—are not yet sufficiently legally or institutionally mature to fully utilize integrated funding mechanisms without significant technical assistance and capacity building (MECOG-CE, 2025b).

The success of MECOG-CE therefore lies not only in the development of tools but in sharing transferable institutional capacity—a framework that enables Central European partners to meet the integrated planning requirements arising from EU funding.

Governance Disparities: Challenges, Procedural Barriers and Institutional Maturity in Central Europe

The analysis of the metropolitan dimension conducted in WP1 identified a number of challenges common to all partners and requiring cooperation due to their inherent territorial scope.

- **Common Thematic Challenges:** These issues include climate change, deficiencies in sustainable mobility, suburbanization and urban sprawl, population shifts, and energy supply.
- **Common Procedural Barriers:** These institutional deficiencies hinder effective cooperation and include fragmented administrative structures, high diversity of municipalities within metropolitan areas, a critical lack of competences and instruments for planning at the metropolitan level, and the widespread “missing recognition of the added value of the metropolitan dimension” (MECOG-CE, 2025b).

A crucial finding from WP1 is the difference in perceived needs, reflecting the institutional maturity of the regions:

- **Central European Context (CZ/PL):** Procedurally, respondents from MAs emphasize the fundamental need for an established top-down institutional framework and sufficient support from central governments for metropolitan cooperation. The economic focus is primarily centered on reindustrialization and structural economic transformation.
- **Western European Context (DE/IT):** Procedurally, partners emphasize the optimization of existing robust structures through bottom-up activities and practices that improve already functioning systems. The economic focus concerns the more advanced challenge of ensuring a green transition in metropolitan economies (MECOG-CE, 2025b).

The contrast between the requirement for “top-down” frameworks (CZ/PL) and the preference for “bottom-up optimization” (DE/IT) represents a direct measure of institutional maturity. While metropolitan areas like Stuttgart have legally secured competences in key sectors (e.g., regional transport planning), Central European areas lack this foundational institutional framework, making their cooperation volatile and dependent on project funding (ITI) (MECOG-CE, 2025b).

The focus on reindustrialization in CZ/PL signals a stage of development where fundamental economic shifts are prioritized, contrasting with the advanced focus on sustainability of their Western counterparts. Policy transfer must therefore be highly adaptive; institutional practices from Germany or Italy cannot be directly replicated but must be modularized into processes and tools (New Solutions) that are functional even within the restrictive legal environments of the Visegrad countries.

Methodology: A Phased Approach to Integrated Governance Transfer

The MECOG-CE project adopted a structured, three-phase methodology (WP1, WP2, WP3) designed to systematically move from complex spatial analysis to tested and replicable strategic actions (MECOG-CE, 2025b). This approach ensures that the resulting policy tools are evidence-based, capacity-tested, and regionally relevant.

Phase I: Analysis and Identification of Best Practices (WP1)

WP1 established the foundational understanding of the metropolitan dimension and culminated in the adoption of the Common Metropolitan Vision (MECOG-CE, 2024). This phase included both a status analysis and an inventory of successful governance tools.

- **Diagnosis and Stakeholder Engagement:** The status analysis identified challenges and opportunities through systematic stakeholder engagement, including by the **Questionnaire among Mayors of the Brno Metropolitan Area (BMA)**, aimed at regularly identifying the opinions, needs, and problems of all municipalities in the area.
- **Inventory of Governance Tools:** A core activity was the identification of an extensive set of successful tools. The project documented a total of **76 best practices and tools** for strengthening cooperation, detailing governance systems in partner MAs and beyond (MECOG-CE, 2025b).

Phase II: Capacity Building, Study Clusters, and Piloting (WP2)

WP2 represents the main mechanism for knowledge exchange and practical policy adaptation, moving the project “from best practices to learning” and “from learning to testing” (MECOG-CE, 2025b).

Study Clusters for Thematic Learning

Best practices were grouped into five thematic Study Clusters to facilitate targeted knowledge transfer and capacity building. They were focused on these tools (MECOG-CE, 2025d):

- Food Districts (best practice from Metropolitan City of Turin).
- Prototyping Academies (best practice from Metropolis GZM).
- Mobility and Planning/Transport Association (best practices from Stuttgart and Berlin-Brandenburg metropolitan areas).
- Warsaw Metropolitan Association (model for joint opinions and training).
- Semi-formal structures and dialogues (e.g., Municipal Neighbourhood Forum from Berlin-Brandenburg, Questionnaire among mayors from BMA).

Pilot Actions: Localized Testing and Adaptation

Pilot Actions were implemented to test and adapt selected best practices within specific partner MAs, ensuring regional fit and validation of the resulting solutions (MECOG-CE, 2025c).

- **Brno MA:** Pilot action on **Potential for food cooperation and its governance network** (Testing the Food Districts concept from Turin).
- **Ostrava MA/VRS:** Pilot action focused on **Participatory approach to transforming metropolitan territories** (Testing Prototyping Academies concepts in diverse institutional/geographical settings).
- **Warsaw MA:** Pilot action addressing **Possibilities of integrating bus transport** (Testing regional transport platform mechanisms derived from Stuttgart/Berlin).
- **Metropolitan Area Berlin-Brandenburg:** Pilot action on **Informal and participatory planning approach** (Referring to workshops/trainings delivered to members of Warsaw Metropolis Association developed by the City of Warsaw).
- **Metropolitan City of Turin:** Pilot action on **Structured dialogue for evaluating the strategic planning process** (Refining strategic stakeholder engagement including the Questionnaire among Mayors of the Brno Metropolitan Area).

The transfer of policy across vastly different institutional environments (such as German federal structures versus unitary structures in CZ/PL) carries significant political and administrative risk. The use of Pilot Actions minimizes this risk by forcing partners to confront and resolve localized legal, political, and financial constraints before formalizing the tool into a New Solution. This ensures that the final

output is a proven, adapted solution, not merely a theoretical best practice. The success of the MECOG-CE methodology therefore rests on WP2 generating measurable results from these pilot actions that directly shape the structure of the final Strategy (MECOG-CE, 2025b).

Results: Formulation and Implementation of New Solutions

The culmination of the analysis and testing phases (WP1 and WP2) is the development of five New Solutions (WP2 output) and their integration into the final Strategic and Action Plans (WP3) (MECOG-CE, 2025b).

Innovative Governance Tools for Metropolitan Areas

These five key solutions provide practical, transferable tools for strengthening integrated metropolitan governance and cooperation (MECOG-CE, 2025a).

Food Cooperation for Metropolitan Areas

This solution focuses on sustainability and economic stability by creating a framework for the voluntary governance of local food systems, linking urban and rural interests. It demonstrates institutional entrepreneurship and the ability to establish a new cooperation topic “from scratch,” even where formal structures are lacking. Its origin is derived from the Food Districts practice in the Metropolitan City of Turin and was validated by the pilot action in the BMA (MECOG-CE, 2025a).

Cooperation Platform for the Development of Metropolitan Public Transport

This solution is designed to address mobility deficits and fragmentation. It proposes a dedicated governance platform focused on the integration and coordination of public transport services (e.g., bus integration) across metropolitan boundaries. The platform builds on the robust models of the Stuttgart Region (VRS) and Berlin-Brandenburg and was validated through the bus integration pilot action in the Warsaw MA (MECOG-CE, 2025a).

Innovative Metropolitan Prototyping

This solution advocates for a cross-sectoral, participatory, and data-driven co-creative design thinking process to rapidly find and test solutions for complex urban challenges. It strengthens capacities for multidisciplinary creativity and innovation in governance. It was adapted from the Metropolis GZM Prototyping Academies and validated through participatory transformation pilot actions in Ostrava and Stuttgart (MECOG-CE, 2025a).

Bottom-up Process-Oriented Stakeholder Involvement

This tool focuses on institutionalizing regular, informal channels of cooperation between city districts and adjacent municipalities, optimizing existing governance through consistent dialogue. The solution directly addresses the identified barrier of “missing recognition of the added value” by continuously demonstrating the benefits of cooperation. It is derived from the Warsaw Metropolis Association processes and was tested via the informal planning pilot action (MECOG-CE, 2025a).

Engaging Metropolitan Stakeholders in the Strategic Planning Process

This solution provides a structured methodology for engaging diverse metropolitan actors in evaluating and refining strategic planning documents, thereby ensuring legitimacy and buy-in for long-term strategies. Its origin lies in the questionnaire tool from the BMA, and it was directly validated by the structured dialogue in the Metropolitan City of Turin (MECOG-CE, 2025a).

Strategy and Action Plans: Policy Consolidation (WP 3)

The project's final outputs consolidate the knowledge and validated solutions into scalable strategic documents.

- **Strategy for Strengthening Cooperation:** The “Strategy for strengthening metropolitan cooperation and governance in Central Europe” is going to present a unified, flexible, and comprehensive methodology. It details the best tools and models for integrated territorial development, reflecting the outcomes of the five developed New Solutions. This strategy will be designed to be fully utilized by newly emerging MAs or partially adopted for the incremental improvement of existing structures (MECOG-CE, 2025b).
- **Action Plans for MAs:** Six partner metropolitan areas are going to prepare individual Action Plans for the implementation of the New Solutions, incorporating the results of their respective pilot actions. These plans define detailed timelines, financing mechanisms, and assigned responsibilities, tailored to the local context and the direct needs of each metropolitan area (MECOG-CE, 2025b).

Given the acute need for an established top-down institutional framework in the MAs of CZ and PL, this Strategy functions as a pragmatic institutional blueprint. It is a validated guide that provides the structural

framework necessary to achieve integrated governance functionally, even without immediate formal legal reform from central governments. This makes the final outputs highly valuable for policy transfer across Central Europe (MECOG-CE, 2025b).

Discussion and Conclusion: Policy Transfer and Strategic Outlook

The MECOG-CE project has successfully navigated the complex challenge of transferring policies from institutionally mature regions to emerging ones. The focus on transferring process-oriented tools (prototyping, structured dialogue) rather than requiring costly and politically demanding institutional restructuring represents a pragmatic and adaptive approach to strengthening metropolitan cooperation and governance in Central European MAs.

Success of Policy Transfer and Institutional Adaptation

The developed solutions directly target the common procedural barriers identified in WP1, such as fragmented administration and lack of MA-level competence. For example, Solution 1 (Food Cooperation) provides formalized yet voluntary frameworks that operate even without a comprehensive top-down mandate, effectively creating de facto metropolitan competence through collaborative agreement. This methodology validates that, in institutionally weaker environments, cooperation must be built from the ground up, demonstrating added value and progressively building consensus rather than waiting for legislative support.

By generating a Strategy that reflects integrated territorial development principles and aligns with key EU policy documents, the MECOG-CE project directly enhances the capacity of Central European partners to effectively utilize EU funding (ITI). This strengthens territorial cohesion and contributes to regional convergence, particularly in addressing the critical economic transformation needs in the Czech Republic and Poland.

Future Directions and Conclusion

The final Action Plans, poised for implementation, are going to represent the ultimate test of the project's sustainability and political acceptance. If these plans are successfully integrated, financed, and maintained, the MECOG-CE model will serve as a validated, repeatable approach for newly forming metropolitan areas across Europe facing similar issues of fragmentation and institutional deficit.

In conclusion, the MECOG-CE project provides an exhaustive and evidence-based methodology for strengthening metropolitan cooperation and governance. By successfully identifying 76 best practices, adapting them through pilot actions, and consolidating the results into five innovative governance solutions, the project has delivered a robust strategic framework that can accelerate the integrated development necessary for Central European metropolitan areas to effectively address local and global challenges. The resulting model emphasizes that the most successful transfer of governance models lies in their tailored adaptation to local institutional maturity and political structure, aiming to create functional cooperation even in a legislatively restricted environment.

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