Governance in the Metropolitan Region: The Vienna-Bratislava Case

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1 ABSTRACT

The discrepancy between the de facto city and the de jure city has brought to the attention the pressing issue of metropolitan governance, either by instituting a specific body responsible for the whole territory or by strengthening cooperation among existing institutions.

The latter is currently the most preferred because of its flexibility and reduced operational costs, but how easy is it to implement?

The case of the Vienna-Bratislava metropolitan region, illustrates a particularly challenging example because of its cross-border condition, with no institution solely responsible for the management of the territory.

2 INTRODUCTION

It is widely known that 75 % of the population in Europe live in cities and that these have now sprawled beyond their administrative boundaries (EEA, 2006).

However, what is less known is that the new urban form that has been shaped, known also as peri-urban,[1] today nearly matches the surface of urban areas, with 48,000 km² against 49,000 km² (Piorr, 2011), which thus makes it at least statistically relevant.

This is why territorial cohesion, especially at the metropolitan level, has been strongly promoted by the European Commission from the European Spatial Development Perspective (1999) to the Territorial Agenda (2011). Cities need to look beyond their boundaries and towards their functional areas, cooperating with their neighbouring municipalities.

Metropolitan governance has therefore gained more importance over the past years, especially when having to manage projects of great interest to all parties, such as infrastructures (Forum of Federations and Committee of Regions, 2011).

But how does cooperation among municipalities work in metropolitan regions?

A very particular case in Europe is that of the Vienna-Bratislava region, a recently developed two-headed cross-border metropolitan system (Brzica, 2009), which covers 2 countries with 2 languages and 4 different spatial planning laws (Slovak, Viennese, Lower Austrian and Burgenland).[2]

But here is the big challenge: there is no sole institution managing this territory.

There is rather a 'Russian Doll' system of institutions responsible only for portions of the region and with different tools at their disposal for its management (STEP, 2005).

The paper will briefly outline some aspects of the current debate around governance; present an overview of the governance bodies acting on the territory and explain their competence and planning tools; conclude with considerations on the effects of metropolitan governance on the territory.

3 ABOUT META-GOVERNANCE AND GOVERNANCE

Governance can be so called when there is "interdependence between organisations; continuing interactions between network members; game-like interactions, rooted in trust and regulated by rules of the game negotiated and agreed by network participants; a significant degree of autonomy from the state" (Rhodes, 1997).

The European Commission's white paper on governance adds an additional perspective, promoting principles such as openness, participation, accountability, effectiveness and coherence (CEC, 2001).

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[1] Various European studies have researched upon the definition and functioning of peri-urban areas, that we can therefore define as the territory part of the Functional Urban Area (considered mainly on the basis of the commuter area) without the Urban Core, with an average population of 40 persons per km².

[2] It needs to be clarified that the Vienna-Bratislava region includes also part of Hungary, but there is currently no relevant cooperation and therefore little available data. For these reasons the article will not include the Hungarian part in the description.

Therefore when looking into governance there are a series of stakeholders involved from public to private that are organised in a manner that takes the form of networks, defined by Sørensen & Torfing (2009, p. 236) as "a stable articulation of mutually dependent, but operationally autonomous actors from state, market and civic society, who interact through conflict-ridden negotiations that take place within an institutionalised framework of rules, norms, shared knowledge and social imaginaries; and contribute to the production of 'public value' in a broad sense of problem definitions, vision, ideas, plans and concrete regulations that are deemed relevant to broad sections of the population."

Although there is a degree of spontaneity in the governance processes that is usually given by the contingency that brings the actors round the same table, this is also fostered by a framework of policies and financial mechanisms often referred to as 'metagovernance'. According to Sørensen (2006) this must allow coordination, coherence and integration within the fragmentation of structures of governance allowing at the same time its autonomy and self-regulation.

Metagovernance can take mainly four forms, one consisting of the framework of policies, goals and financial mechanisms, therefore how; it can consist in the design of the actors' network, therefore who; it can define the management of tensions within the network or it can consist of network participation, where planners and politicians directly influence the decision making.

What we can see is that complexity science enters the decision making processes, developing what Innes and Boheer (2010) call 'collaborative rationality': "The complexity and rapid change in contemporary society have created an increasing awareness among policy leaders of the limits to hierarchical control by government agencies and to formal expertise in solving problems. This awareness leads to growing uncertainty about policy and a new focus on the need to manage uncertainty, rather than create programs and regulatory regimes that deny its existence. As society has become more culturally diverse, decision makers have to deal with an array of publics with different values, perspectives, cognitive styles and worldviews. Complexity is also reflected in growing interdependence among government players, as agencies find they cannot be successful, even on their own limited agendas if they continue to work unilaterally."

This opens also some reflection on the sustainability and resilience of decision making, no longer to be seen as end products but rather as an ongoing process.

How does this theory translate into practice?

4 THE METROPOLITAN GOVERNANCE BODIES IN THE REGION

The Vienna-Bratislava Region has been recognised as a functional entity by the European Union and studies from the OECD have been available for various years (Schremmer, 2003).

Now the two cities create a functional metropolitan region with 3.5 million inhabitants that, as both Austria and Slovakia are part of the European Union, is connected by labour market, housing and transport corridors. Although the cross-border collaborations are growing in number there still is no institution responsible for the coordination of the metropolitan region.

The challenge is that although the area works as a metropolitan region, the governance structures are not still too fragmented to coordinate actions easily.

The Region is characterised by different Länder on the Austrian side, each one having a different Urban Planning Law (Vienna, Lower Austria and Burgenland) and Bratislava following the Slovak Urban Planning Law.

Many super-national initiatives are active on the territory yet none of them have binding decisional power. Among the most relevant are:

- the Centrope Initiative[3] which brings together eight federal provinces, regions and counties that make up the Central European Region, with 6,5 million inhabitants.
- the PGO (Planungsgemeinschaft Ost)[4] is an organization for the administration of Burgenland, Lower Austria and Vienna to coordinate the preparation of regional planning issues, also in cross-border activities and regional networks.

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[3] For further information on the Centrope Initiative : www.centrope.com

- the Danube Strategy[5] interests 14 countries in the river basin area relating to topics from transport and environment to society and culture, without financial support.

Although these are all very important initiatives, they do not directly intervene in the decision making of the land uses destined for the metropolitan region.

Very relevant initiatives in the coordination of actions in the metropolitan region are the Stadt Umland Management (SUM), an association of Municipalities of the Vienna Metropolitan Area, and the Bratislava Umland Management (BAUM), recently developed on the blueprint of the SUM, which is financed by a European cross-border program (Creating the Future), including Bratislava and the Austrian municipalities close to the border.
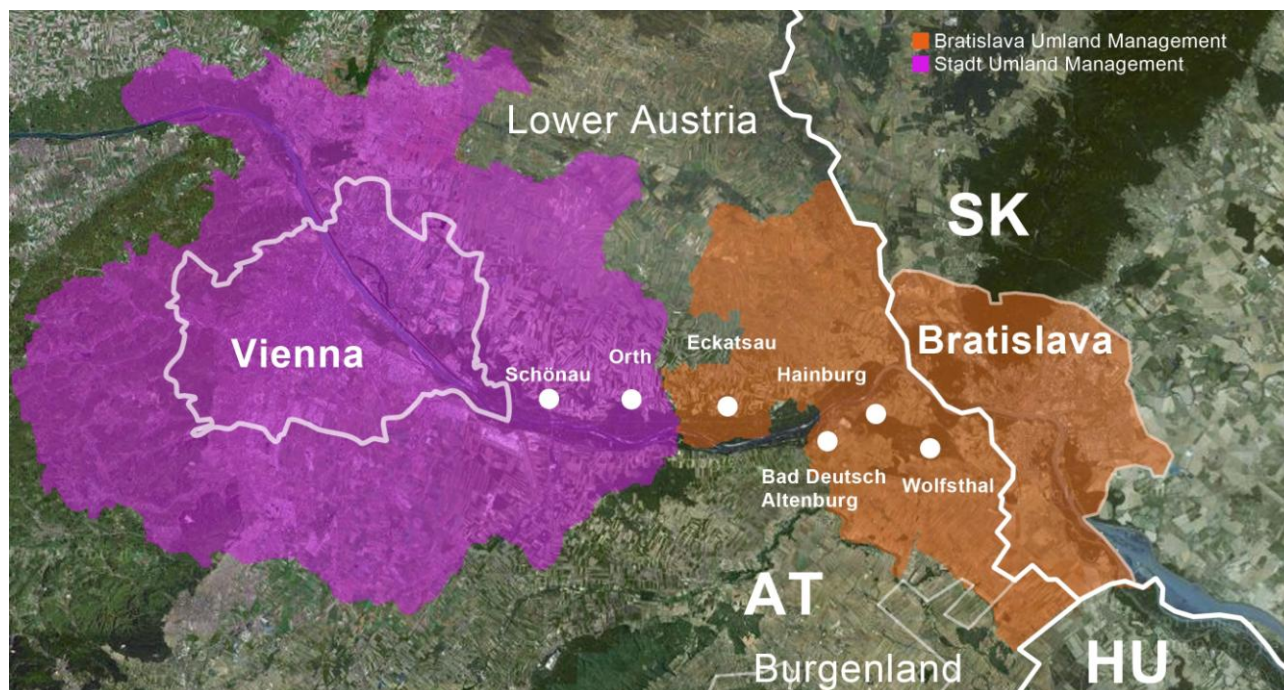

Image 1: The areas of influence of SUM and BAUM. Source: Image made by the author

Both SUM and BAUM are associations of the municipalities of the region that also include other relevant actors on their boards. They do not have budgets to enable the funding of projects in the Region nor do they have binding instruments that can enforce decisions, but rather they are responsible for the moderation and communication amongst institutions, mainly concerning projects such as transport infrastructures, water management and ecological corridors.

(a) SUM (Stadt Umland Management)[6]

Austria is a federation of States (Länder) of which Vienna is one of them and is surrounded by the Land of Lower Austria, each having a different Urban Planning Law. The city of Vienna, therefore, has the dual status of being a city and a State at the same time, but the functional area of the city goes beyond the administrative borders and covers parts of Lower Austria, especially in the southern part.

In Austria municipalities have to manage their planning activities, therefore each one of the approximately 100 municipalities surrounding the city of Vienna is responsible for their own plan.

Vienna and the municipalities of Lower Austria do not have a common inter-municipal planning body due to political reasons, economic prosperity and rivalry between the city and the suburban area. Regional planning and planning between the city of Vienna and the municipalities of Lower Austria is mainly based on single projects.

In 2006 an association was founded between the City and Land of Vienna and the Land of Lower Austria, whose jurisdiction would involve ensuring communication and coordination among the various institutions.

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[4] For further information on the PGO: www.pgo.wien.at

[5] For further information on the Danube Strategy : www.danube-region.eu

[6] For further information on the Stadt Umland Management: www.stadt-umland.at

One may assume that this would end up being a large bureaucratic machine, but this is not the case, as SUM is formed by two people, one in charge of the northern part and one of the southern one.

SUM has no decision power as such, as funding coming equally from Vienna and Lower Austria covers maintenance expenses, but influences the process because of its communication facilitator's role in priorities recognised by involved partners, mainly being transport and environmental issues.

There are no planning tools for the SUM as it is an association, a network that is based on the skills of those people involved.

As SUM is initiated by Länder it can support planning issues that are under their competence, and not on land use for example, which is under municipalities. Though related to this scale is a tool that has been recently introduced with great involvement also by SUM: the Landschaftskonto. This is a planning tool for environmental compensation, based on the German instrument of the Ökokonto, and uses a system where municipalities can collect points according to environmentally sustainable projects they carry out (creating a park for example) that can then be exchanged also with other municipalities to compensate projects with a higher environmental impact (such as a housing project).

The durability of this initiative currently seems to be stable but the fragility of this system stands in the dependency on political will and personal capacities of those people involved.

(b) BAUM (Bratislava Umland Management)[7]

The Bratislava Umland Management is an EU funded project that involves the city of Bratislava, the Regional Management of Lower Austria and the Regional Management of Burgenland, which over a period of two years (2011-2013) aims at developing a Multilateral Expert Platform that will prepare an Urban and Regional Planning Concept.

The project is the current result of a need for cooperation and coordination among municipalities across the border that has developed since the fall of the Iron Curtain and first took shape in the Jordes+ project[8] between 2002 and 2004, then the KoBra project from 2003 to 2007 and now the BAUM project.

What is interesting about the evolution of these projects is that the city of Bratislava became more and more involved in them up until today where it is the Project's Lead Partner.

In fact, the Jordes+ project included a very vast area which is more or less the one of the Centrope initiative, whilst the KoBra project, which stands for Cooperation Bratislava, was a project that included various Austrian municipalities along the border but strangely enough only involved the City of Bratislava in a very limited way (Schaffer, 2008).

The project KoBra was started as a form of institutional cooperation among Austrian municipalities from different Länder but did not manage to really communicate nor establish a cross-border collaboration as the current project BAUM is doing.

Although the BAUM project is still not completed it is already possible to see some strategies being implemented.

The Multilateral Expert Forum, composed by representatives of the regions from Austria and Slovakia, has already had a series of meetings that have up to now focused on the development of the Urban Planning Study and will be assessed in the closing phase of the project (BAUM, 2011).

This study includes comprehensive aims and targets agreed upon by both sides for issues concerning transport, water management, landscape protection and cultural heritage.

The value of BAUM lies in the fact that it is bringing round the same table institutions for the metropolitan region of Bratislava but its durability is only granted until the end of the EU financing unless the actors decide to build a more permanent structure at their own expense.

Both SUM and BAUM communicate with one another as they have representatives on one another's boards, but there is no official collaboration agreement among them nor is the coordination of the whole area one of their aims.

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[7] For further information on the Bratislava Umland Management: www.projekt-baum.eu
[8] For further information on the Jordes+ Project: http://www.pgo.wien.at/projekte/f_JORDES.htm

5 CONCLUSIONS

In the case of the Vienna-Bratislava metropolitan region we can see that the network governance is still at an initial phase, often facing problems due to budget and communication among stakeholders, but nonetheless it must be also noted that this symbolises a great advancement in order to dim the traces of the Iron Curtain.

This is in fact an interesting governance condition as in the past century the geo-political relationship between the two cities has changed radically, from the times of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, where the two cities were governed under the same legislation but playing very different geopolitical roles, to the independence of Czechoslovakia after WWI, from the rise and fall of the Iron Curtain; from 1993, following the Velvet Divorce, when Bratislava became the capital of the newly formed State of Slovakia to the entry in the European Union; from the entry in the Shenghen area until today, when they are a functional metropolitan region.

If 'collaborative rationality' gives much value to the interaction among individuals, being that the more these are linked by various networks, the more they will be able to combine various interests, in can be noted that both SUM and BAUM are based on a collaborative model, but they still do not cover the whole metropolitan region.

Will there be a joint project in the coming years between SUM and BAUM?

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