

Metropolitan cities in search of identity: Challenges and opportunities for urban strategic planning in Italy's National Recovery and Resilience Plan

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Abstract

This article explores the interplay between Integrated Urban Plans (IUPs), introduced by Italy's post-Covid National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP), and Metropolitan Cities (MCs) established in 2014 and still pursuing institutionalization. We investigate if IUPs empower MCs as innovative strategic bodies through their direct engagement in urban regeneration. Drawing from institutionalization theory, we analyze documents and interviews from three selected MCs. Findings reveal: diverse approaches to IUPs; varying success in aligning projects with strategic missions; and distinct MC models and degrees of consolidation, shaped by legacies and capacities. The NRRP proves an effective window of opportunity for the institutionalization of MCs.

1. Introduction

This article investigates the relationship between the formulation of Integrated Urban Plans (*Piani Urbani Integrati* – IUPs) – one of the measures of the Italian National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP) funded by the European Union following the Covid-19 pandemic – and the metropolitan governance embodied in Metropolitan Cities (*Città Metropolitane* – MCs), which were established in Italy by law in 2014 and are still in a phase of consolidation.

After nearly twenty years of reform attempts (Citroni et al., 2016), MCs were hastily created within the framework of a constitutional reform aimed at streamlining government layers that later failed. MCs inherited territorial and organizational structures from long-standing provincial authorities and have since remained suspended between a government role, oriented towards services and utilities management, and a governance role that is more focused on coordinating private and public actors with main reference to local governments, since the MCs were established as second-tier entities aggregating the metropolitan area's municipalities (see section 3). Their territorial and institutional configuration is highly heterogeneous (Crivello & Staricco, 2017), thus preventing a single model of MC from emerging, while their capacity to conduct policy processes is widely uncertain.

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Receiving € 191.5 billion in funding for its NRRP, Italy is the main beneficiary of Next Generation EU, the financial package adopted by the EU to help its society and economy recover from the consequences of the pandemic. Great expectations have been built around the ability of the NRRP to restructure territorial economies and administrations in Italy, and a number of preliminary studies have emphasized opportunities for innovation and renewal. Not only has there been a focus on increasing administrative capacity (Polverari & Piattoni, 2022), but also on the reconfiguration of entire policy sectors, such as urban regeneration (Fedeli, 2022) and social protection (Petmesidou et al., 2023), with implications for the historical problem of the North-South divide (Cerruto et al., 2022), and centre-peripheries relations (Fernández de Losada & Martinez, 2022).

This article offers an analysis of how a specific measure of the Italian NRRP that is dedicated to projects of MCs, i.e. the above-mentioned IUPs, may impact on the institutionalization of these territorial entities, which are still in search of a defined role and identity. We aim to understand if the elaboration of IUPs has provided MCs with the opportunity to perform and consolidate their role. Several factors make IUPs a relevant challenge and an interesting test of MCs' strategic role and capacity: totalling over € 3.1 billion in their first draft – which was later adjusted – they are the largest contribution to the Recovery plan of MCs, which are the sole beneficiaries of such funds. The latter are endowed on a non-competitive basis, so that all MCs are equally involved, and funds are targeted at new projects that must comply with existing national, regional, and metropolitan policies. This, in turn, imposes careful planning and balancing between continuity and innovation.

Therefore, studying IUPs may enable us to understand to what extent MCs operate within the framework of the NRRP as innovative metropolitan-scale bodies, in accordance with their original institutional design. This may notably be accomplished by ensuring cooperation and integration among municipalities towards common development strategies, which lies at the core of their innovative mission.

Following the illustration of our conceptual framework and literature review (section 2), the article portrays the reform process and the state of implementation of MCs in Italy (section 3) in order to describe the status quo over which the NRRP has impacted: a piecemeal, uncertain national legislative process, structural deficit in resources, and decentralised regional implementation have contributed to diverse paths of consolidation and unequal levels of policy capacity. Section 3 also describes what we expect to be a window of opportunity for a new wave of institutionalization: the funds and the rules of Integrated Urban Plans (IUPs) within the framework of NRRP provide MCs with the resources and the opportunity to deploy a consolidation strategy and generate a quasi-experimental setting by impacting all MCs similarly and simultaneously. Section 4 presents the three cases we selected and the empirical analysis of how they have responded to the challenges of IUPs and how the institutional legacy has impacted on their agency and their capacity to exploit the window of opportunity. In the final sections we present and discuss our findings, which point to significant diversity based on legacy: IUPs helped strengthen existing paths of institutionalization and fostered strategic consolidation where this was lacking.

2. Conceptual framework and hypothesis

This article draws its conceptual framework from the extensive literature on institutionalization (March & Olsen, 1984; Hall & Taylor, 1996), with notable reference to research that uses concepts from neo-institutional theory to analyse the building of MCs as entities of metropolitan government and governance (Lefèvre, 1998; Fedeli, 2017; Vinci, 2019).

The application of institutional theory to local government and governance has proved useful in recent decades in describing the interplay between formal rules and legislative reforms, on the one hand, and the socio-political dynamics of change and persistence in power structures on the other (Lowndes, 2005). While not necessarily constituting a conceptually consistent, operational theory for empirical research, “tools from the new institutionalism seem particularly well suited to analyzing [...] patterns of change and continuity within local governance” (Lowndes & Wilson 2003, 279): they allow researchers to focus on how actors engage with the “rules of the game”, which include formal, juridical norms and authority, as well as unwritten customs, cultural codes, and embedded capacities; they are particularly well suited to describe and analyse complex institutional environments, where multiple levels of government and multiple fora of decision-making interact in defining roles and logics of action; finally, they elicit questions that touch upon the dialectical relationship between continuity and change through the use of concepts such as adaptation, path-dependency, and context-dependency (*ibidem*).

Reference to these theories in the analysis of metropolitan governance is not new: there are numerous examples of their use to question local and metropolitan government reforms and the diversity of implementation processes and outcomes, which can vary both in terms of degree of institutionalization and of the shape and content of the governance structure (Blatter, 2006; Hulst & Montfort, 2007).

In neo-institutionalist studies of processes of consolidation of new metropolitan bodies, prominent independent variables include the enabling role played by existing traditions of cooperative attitudes among local political elites, as well as policies aimed at overcoming municipal fragmentation through inter-communal practices (Heinelt & Kübler, 2005; Heinelt & Zimmermann, 2011; Le Lidec 2018, 97-98). These have consolidated in territories where élites are characterized by political homogeneity as well as – though less frequently – where, despite belonging to different parties, they are able to overcome partisan barriers to enhance supra-municipal strategies and services. Such legacy has been a driver for metropolitan authorities’ consolidation since not only does it help newly established metropolitan governments to inaugurate and then manage their functions in a smooth and effective manner but, by helping to develop trust among local actors, it also contributes to their legitimization (Jouve & Lefèvre, 2002; Demazière et al., 2022), which is a considerable factor for their success. Case studies, hence, emphasize the relevance for metropolitan institutionalization of previous governance arrangements and experiences of intergovernmental collaboration among municipalities, as well as informal practices of exchange and partnership between local authorities and stakeholders (Mikuła et al., 2024). This has occurred, for instance, in Lyons (*ibidem*; Ben Mabrouk & Jouve, 2002; Le Lidec 2018, 98), Hanover, and Rhine-Neckar (Heinelt & Zimmermann, 2011). On the contrary, in territories where new

metropolitan entities did not inherit this legacy of cooperation, they faced a more difficult path in proving as effective protagonists of local governance, as happened in Frankfurt Rhine-Main (*ibidem*) and Paris (Le Lidec, 2018) or, until recently, Lisbon (Gonçalves et al., 2023) and Poznań (Mikuła et al., 2024).

Scholars in this field have also developed indicators to measure local governments' institutional performance and political capacity (Putnam, 1993; Cole & Pasquier, 2015; Pasquier, 2016), autonomy (Lefèvre, 1998), and institutional sustainability (Bolgherini, 2015). With partly different interpretations and operationalizations, all these concepts describe different aspects of institutionalization, insofar as they refer to the degree to which metropolitan institutions have succeeded in establishing themselves as effective policy actors and as contexts of action that influence other actors, not only in terms of their formal prerogatives but also in terms of their ability to shape strategies and expectations. For example, territorial identity factors linked to the metropolitan rather than the municipal dimension, or interest representation networks acting on a metropolitan scale, are not mere indicators of organizational or legal-formal consolidation but can have equally concrete effects in the exercise of metropolitan powers.

In addition to organizational continuity and consolidation, the neo-institutional theory also makes it possible to study change or, at least, the dynamics with which organizations and institutions react to external shocks or stresses. In this sense, the study of the impact of the NRRP's rules and procedures on local political-administrative behaviour and logic of action references a well-established literature on the Europeanisation of Italian institutions (Ferrera & Gualmini, 1999; Fabbrini et al., 2000; Fargion et al., 2006).

Based on this literature, our research question is whether and how the funding provided by IUPs in the framework of NRRP has contributed to the institutionalization of MCs and to what extent the legacy of previous local governance experience and early implementation of metropolitan government reform has influenced their capacity to exploit such window of opportunity. Our hypothesis is that, in an institutional context characterized by uncertainty and ambiguities, as will be illustrated in section 3, different legacies lead new institutions (MCs) to divergent paths of consolidation.

The article therefore examines how different MCs have tackled the challenge of formulating IUPs as a process of innovative policymaking, where uniform NRRP rules have been applied to entities that not only are different in their geographical, demographic, and economic dimensions, but especially in their institutional legacy, as it will be illustrated in the next section. To this purpose, we conducted our analysis on both primary and secondary sources in a sample of three MCs: Bologna, Milan, and Reggio Calabria (see section 4 for a discussion of case selection). First, we analysed a series of documents (reports, working papers, proceedings, and deliberations) published by these cities before and during the process of drafting and adopting IUPs. Second, we held several interviews with key informants (Table 1), aimed at observing roles performed by the different actors of the process. The full list of documents and interviewees is available in the Appendix.

Table 1. Empirical analysis.

Interviewees	N.
Metropolitan and municipal elected officers	7
Metropolitan officials	4
Municipal officials	2

Source: own elaboration. Note: Statutorily, metropolitan officers can only be elected among municipal ones. Therefore, interviewees in the first category can provide information from the perspective of both metropolitan and local governments.

3. Metropolitan Cities in Italy and the opportunity of the NRRP

Within the frame of territorial reorganization policies, which developed in Italy in the 1990s (Law No. 142/1990), the creation of Metropolitan Cities by the Law No. 56 of 2014 (known as ‘Delrio law’ after its promoter) was welcomed as a significant novelty: Italian metropolitan areas (Figure 1), where 36 percent of the population resided (Table 2), could finally have their own government, thus overcoming their delay in comparison to other European countries (Zimmermann & Feiertag, 2022), and implementing Article 114 of the Constitution which - following constitutional law No. 3/2001 - had already included MCs among the territorial entities that compose the Italian Republic. Sardinia and Sicily – both special autonomous regions – followed on and introduced further MCs. The final picture of this reform is presented in Figure 1 and Table 2, which show the location of MCs in the Italian peninsula and their basic geographic, demographic, and economic data.

Figure 1. Metropolitan Cities

Source: www.tuttitalia.it/citta-metropolitane/mappa/

Table 2. Italian Metropolitan Cities: geographical, demographic, and economic features.

	Area (km2)	Population	Population density (2020, km2)	Value added per capita (2021, current €)	Per capita income (2021) €
Bari	3.863	1.226.784	318	20.990,6	11.100
Bologna	3.702	1.010.812	274	38.244,2	18.060
Cagliari	1.248	421.688	338	25.697,7	13.270
Catania	3.574	1.077.515	301	17.554,9	9.080
Florence	3.514	987.260	289	35.143,7	15.930
Genoa	1.838	817.402	449	31.798,0	16.910
Messina	3.266	603.229	185	17.244,4	10.440
Milan	1.575	3.214.630	2.058	53.816,7	19.750
Naples	1.179	2.988.376	2.533	18.362,7	8.990
Palermo	5.009	1.208.991	241	18.117,7	9.450
Reggio Calabria	3.210	522.127	163	16.773,4	9.380
Rome	5.363	4.216.874	789	34.766,9	15.530
Turin	6.830	2.208.370	325	30.784,7	15.990
Venice	2.473	836.916	341	28.305,4	14.960

Source: Istat (<http://dati.istat.it/>), own elaboration.

However, MCs originated in a different form than envisaged by Law No. 142/1990, as they replaced the former Provinces, taking over their boundaries, apparatuses, and functions – consisting mainly of territorial planning, urban mobility, suburban roads, and maintenance of school buildings. The concomitance between the establishment of the MCs and the contextual reform of the Provinces, which the Delrio Law downsized due to their planned (but failed) abolition¹, penalized the consolidation of the MCs. As a result, the latter have struggled to find their own institutional identity within the complex and fragmented frame of Italian local government (Zimmermann & Feiertag, 2022). The choice of ex-provincial boundaries for the delimitation of metropolises has hampered the MCs’ strategic mission of territorial development as they do not always coincide with the actual metropolitan area, often excluding relevant urban territories or including nonurban, sparsely populated, and peripheral areas (Vinci, 2019). Moreover, the ownership of ex-provincial functions has raised doubts surrounding the innovative nature of MCs, which have often been perceived as a revival of the old and “useless” Provinces according to the political debate of that time (Fedeli, 2017; Zimmermann & Feiertag, 2022). Furthermore, in line with the reform of the Provinces, the Delrio Law devised the status of MCs as second-tier governmental entities, thus weakening their political role. In fact, they were created as aggregations of the municipalities of the

¹ The so-called “Renzi Reform”, a constitutional revision that included the abolition of the Provinces, was later approved by Parliament but rejected in a 2016 referendum.

former Provinces with political bodies that are not directly elected by citizens but expressed by these municipalities, which have to exercise metropolitan functions in cooperation with each other. Indeed, the Delrio Law conceived MCs as governance entities rather than government entities and called them to coordinate the activities of the municipalities in metropolitan-scale policies without assuming a hierarchical position over them. Finally, on a financial level, MCs were equated with the still-existing Provinces, sharing drastic cuts in central transfers, also given the severe economic and financial crisis Italy was facing at that time². Such a contradiction – i.e. MCs’ being financially downsized just when they needed solid financial support in their start-up phase – has not facilitated the consolidation of MCs as innovative metropolitan entities (*Ibidem*).

The expected innovativeness of MCs mainly concerns their function in strategic planning for territorial development. As required by the Delrio Law, MCs must develop (and regularly update) a Metropolitan Strategic Plan (MSP) that calls for a metropolitan development strategy as the master vision of the area’s future in terms of socioeconomic, urban, and local development. This strategy must be negotiated and co-decided with all the territory’s institutional actors and stakeholders through participatory political practices (Fedeli, 2017). In drafting, approving, and implementing the MSP, each MC is responsible for directing and coordinating municipal policies toward a common metropolitan development strategy. The Delrio Law also requires that municipalities adopt a metropolitan-scale territorial plan (MTP) that refers to communication facilities, utility networks, and infrastructure to support this strategic development.

Such an innovative and priority mission was later combined with other wide-scale functions inherited from the former Provinces with varying arrangements depending on the reorganization policy enacted by the Regions, which have the power to redistribute the ex-provincial functions and took their time to proceed (Bolgherini et al., 2016; Simoncini & Mobilio, 2016; Camera dei Deputati, 2017; Zimmermann & Feiertag, 2022).

To high demographic, geographical, and economic heterogeneity (Table 2), the MCs soon added institutional diversity stemming from their different legacy and paths of consolidation (Table 3). Some successfully approved both the MSP and MTP within a clear framework of assigned functions, while others accumulated a delay likely to undermine their operability. With reference to metropolitan governance, as the new strategic mission of MCs, the high variability of associative practices already in place among municipalities (Unions) affected the possibility of coordination in metropolitan policymaking, facilitating it in territories already accustomed to inter-municipal cooperation.

Such a strenuous and uneven process of consolidating MCs was also hampered by the scarcity of funding, given the phase of financial austerity that Italy was facing, at least up to 2018, when new national programs were launched, offering consistent funds for local development projects. The first program consisted of a call to redevelop urban suburbs (*Bando Periferie*) promoted by the Prime Minister’s Office, followed by the Innovative Plan for Housing Quality (*PINQuA*), launched by the Ministry of

² Since the Monti government (2011-2013), Provinces and (since 2014) MCs have experienced gradual cuts in central government transfers, totaling more than € 5 billion; see: www.camera.it/temiap/documentazione/temi/pdf/1129942.pdf?_1652783065031.

Infrastructure and Sustainable Mobility. Both addressed local government with main, but not exclusively, reference to MCs. However, only a few MCs succeeded in these opportunities (Table 3). As a summary of the context in which Italian MCs were entrusted with NRRP funds and actions, Table 3 displays some indicators of the legacy of institutional and administrative capacity exhibited by them prior to the introduction of IUPs.

The financial opportunities for the MCs improved significantly with the NRRP, which provided the necessary funding to develop IUPs. More specifically, in fall 2021, alongside other NRRP schemes aimed at regional and local authorities amounting to € 12,330 million, Italy's government earmarked € 2.49 billion to MCs to finance the Integrated Urban Plans. Resources were granted according to MCs' respective population and an Index of Social and Material Vulnerability. Another € 210 million was added by the national government, and a further € 370 million was provided by local authorities.

Since Law 56/2014 precisely assigned MCs the "purpose" of "caring for the strategic development of the metropolitan area", IUPs represent an unprecedented opportunity as to the extent of the investment, the involvement of all MCs, and the recognition of their innovative mission. The aim of IUPs, in fact, consists of transforming vulnerable territories into smart and sustainable ones, particularly by mending urban and peripheral fabrics and bridging infrastructural and mobility deficits. In particular, IUPs are meant to tackle urban decay and infrastructural and economic underdevelopment by promoting the renovation of public areas and the redevelopment of public buildings aimed at fostering social, cultural, and sporting activities, as well as reducing CO₂ emissions. A governmental decree issued in November 2021 (DL n. 152/2021) specified that IUPs should enable innovative and integrated urban regeneration, amounting to over €50 million each, and be fully realized by June 30th, 2026. March 22nd, 2022 was set as the deadline for MCs to submit their proposals. Within this legislative framework, all MCs prepared IUPs and obtained the allocated funds: 31 IUPs were submitted and approved by the central government in April 2022³.

In brief, the Delrio law designed MCs as ambiguous bodies. They are intended as innovative entities focused on strategic planning and metropolitan governance. Yet, their boundaries coincide with ex-provincial ones rather than with their 'functional' areas (Crivello & Staricco, 2017). In addition, their ruling bodies are made up of municipal elected officers, potentially making the MCs subordinate to or, at least, depending on the municipalities' will for their effective functioning. Moreover, the final definition of their functions was subject to regional legislation reorganizing inherited provincial functions. The 2010s financial austerity additionally weakened MCs' capacity with harsh financial cuts. Against this background, the NRRP has offered MCs the first effective prospect of launching and implementing their own strategies thanks to substantial funding. In fact, the IUPs align with one of the basic functions with which the Delrio law entrusted MCs, i.e., strategic planning. Moreover, the NRRP established

³ While the decree envisaged the possibility of private contributions, the intervention of start-ups in the public utilities sector, and the co-drafting of projects with NGOs, due to the time constraint, this eventually turned out to be wishful thinking. In fact, the IUPs that were approved by the central government in April 2022 include no revenue from private sponsors or public-private partnerships, and a sizable local contribution only in a few MCs.

homogeneous procedures and mandatory deadlines for adopting and realizing IUPs. For the first time, MCs have been facing a pressing challenge, which, at the same time, provides them all with the resources to fulfill the mission for which they were created (strategic planning). This breaks with the legal and financial uncertainty that MCs had experienced for years after their establishment. Therefore, as regards our analytical framework, IUPs can be depicted as an extraordinary window of opportunity for MCs.

Table 3. Italian Metropolitan Cities: institutional features and legacy.

	Municipalities in Unions	MSP - strategic plan adopted before IUPs	MTP - territorial plan adopted before IUPs ⁴	Previous successes in calls for bids: Bando Periferie ⁵	Previous successes in calls for bids: PINQuA ⁶
Bari	12%	-	-	✓	✓
Bologna	89%	2013 (1 st) July 2018 (2 nd)	May 2021	✓	✓
Cagliari	56%	-	-	-	-
Catania	12%	-	-	-	-
Florence	69%	April 2017	-	✓	
Genoa	46%	April 2017	Yes	-	-
Messina	54%	-	-	-	-
Milan	8%	May 2016	May 2021	✓	
Naples	3%	October 2020	-	-	-
Palermo	77%	-	-	-	-
Reggio Calabria	6%	-	-	-	-
Rome	20%	-	-	-	✓
Turin	57%	May 2018	-	-	✓
Venice	23%	December 2018	Yes	-	✓

Source: Istat (<http://dati.istat.it/>), own elaboration.

4. Case studies

To investigate the impact of the NRRP on MCs' roles and consolidation, we selected three cases that differ on demographic and economic grounds, considered according to the conventional indicators displayed in Table 2, as well as on other dimensions: the North/South divide, which is still the main factor of heterogeneity amongst MCs (Capello et al. 2023, 98), and – in accordance with our conceptual framework – the legacy

⁴ Both Genoa and Venice MCs opted for formally reapproving the already existing provincial territorial plans, instead of setting up new ones.

⁵ DPCM 6 December 2016, *Approvazione della graduatoria del Programma straordinario di intervento per la riqualificazione urbana e la sicurezza delle periferie, di cui al decreto del Presidente del Consiglio dei ministri 25 maggio 2016*. (GU Serie Generale n.4 del 05-01-2017).

⁶ DM Ministero delle Infrastrutture e della Mobilità Sostenibili, October 2021.

of institutional and administrative capacity, with data in Table 3 illustrating the relevant indicators. In fact, as summarised in Table 4, the three MCs differ in their ability to adopt the statutory tools of metropolitan planning, portraying a different capacity to play their own innovative role. Moreover, they vary in their degree of success in national calls for bids in urban regeneration and housing, the most relevant national funding aimed at MCs before IUPs were introduced. Lastly, the extent of voluntary municipal aggregation in sharing governmental functions through the establishment of formal Unions also diverges in the three territories, pointing to varying legacies of cooperative practices among local governments.

Table 4. Analytical dimensions in the selected cases.

	Inhabitants (rank)	Population density (2020, km2) (rank)	% of Municipaliti es in Unions (rank)	added value per capita (2021, € PPP) (rank)	Strategic plan (rank of date of adoption)	New MTP (rank of adoption)	Previous successes in calls for bids
Bologna	8 th	11 th	1 st	2 nd	1 st	1 st	YES
Milan	2 nd	2 nd	12 th	1 st	2 nd	1 st	YES
Reggio Calabria	13 th	13 th	13 th	14 th	-	-	NO

Source: own elaboration.

While being among the lowest places on demographic and economic dimensions, Reggio Calabria can be characterized as a laggard in the implementation of the provisions of the Delrio law concerned with its strategic mission. Bologna and Milan clearly stand out as the frontrunners by leading the process of adopting strategic planning tools and demonstrating the ability to seize previous financial opportunities. Both have recently innovated physical planning as well, with new territorial plans. Nevertheless, Milan and Bologna show different legacies as far as the capacity of aggregation among municipalities is concerned. This is poor in the Lombard city, despite the high number of municipalities (see Table 2). Incidentally, this case backs the argument offered by Hulst and van Montfort (2011), who assert that the pressure on local authorities to provide for coordination and planning through cooperation is lower when there is a strong intermediate tier of government with formal competences, resources, and willingness to coordinate local policies or to establish regional plans, as the Milanese provincial government did (see below in this section).

To sum up, homogeneous goals and rules together with sizable funds have been played out by the NRRP on MCs with divergent legacies of institutional and administrative capability. The following paragraphs summarize how the selected cases have managed the process of drafting and adopting IUPs, while section 5 will centre on the path of consolidation they have been experiencing in facing this challenge.

4.1. Bologna

The MC of Bologna was established in 2015. However, a bottom-up experience of metropolitan governance was already in place, based on voluntary cooperation among

municipalities with the support of the then-province (Gabellini et al., 2017). This experience, which predated the Delrio Law, led to the approval of a metropolitan strategic plan (MSP) as early as 2013, creating a favorable ground for the new MC to act (Zimmermann & Feiertag, 2022). The MC of Bologna was designed as a lean governmental entity that was primarily responsible for its strategic planning mission (CM Bologna, 2017a; Interviews 2, 5). It inherited provincial functions but had a special status based on joint agreements with the Region to perform tasks consistent with its new institutional mission (CM Bologna, 2015; Camera dei Deputati, 2017). This gave way to the consolidation of an innovative metropolitan body, which soon led to the approval of a renewed MSP (2.0) in 2018 open to citizens and negotiated with stakeholders (CM Bologna, 2018b; Interview 5; Zimmermann & Feiertag, 2022).

In relation to the window of opportunity offered by the NPRR, the MC elaborated a unitary IUP that stands out by embracing a specific strategy of territorial development, known as “Metropolitan Knowledge Network. Greater Bologna” (CM Bologna 2022a, 2022e). It consists of a unitary vision based on MSP 2.0, which is articulated into 4 macro-projects and 19 policy actions that are all integrated among one another and based on previous participatory processes open to stakeholders (Interviews 1, 4, 5). The overall plan costs € 173 billion, and it resulted from an intensive joint decision-making process between the MC, the 55 municipalities, and the 7 Unions of the area (CM Bologna, 2022e). The role played by the MC in the planning process was one of upstream direction, based on both the metropolitan plans that were already in place and the consolidated practice of cooperative governance (Interviews 1, 2, 5).

More specifically, the Metropolitan Strategic Plan 2.0 and the Metropolitan Territorial Plan (MTP), a new version of the one elaborated by the Province in 2004 (CM Bologna 2020), guided the entire process by directing the municipalities and Unions in their submission of proposals and, at the same time, enabling the MC’s selection of integrated projects (Interviews 1, 4, 5). These plans and processes denote the MC’s remarkable planning capacity, partly a legacy of the former Province that had already experimented with innovative forms of supra-municipal planning (Gabellini et al., 2017; Interviews 2, 3).

The consolidated practice of cooperative governance comes from a long history of municipal associationism that eased the MC’s coordination in the IUP planning process (CM Bologna, 2021b, 2022a). The high rate of territorial integration in the area, where 89.1% of municipalities are associated with one another in Unions (Table 3), facilitated a close dialogue between the MC and the local governments, also thanks to the representation of the Presidents of the Unions in the Bureau of the MC, an institutional innovation provided by Article 32 of the Bologna Metropolitan Statute (CM Bologna, 2016a, 2016b, 2018a). A fruitful exchange among all the governmental entities involved in the process was also favored by the political homogeneity of the territory (CM Bologna, 2022b), with 76% of the municipalities, including the Capital City, governed by the same political majority (center-left parties, mainly the Democratic Party). Finally, in the planning process of the IUP, the MC also made use of the experience that had been gained through its participation in the national programs *Bando Periferie* and *PINQuA*, which enabled it to obtain funding totaling € 103 million (CM Bologna 2017b, 2022c; Interview 5).

Such an integrated, cooperative, and consensual context allowed the MC, through a Commission specially established, to select the 4 macro-projects that composed the IUP out of the 66 proposals submitted by the municipalities and their Unions without producing any conflict (Interviews 1, 4, 5). The selected projects - one by the Capital City, one by the Municipality of Imola, and two by the Union of the Apennines - were in line with the strategic objectives that, in compliance with MSP 2.0, the MC deliberative bodies (i.e., the Mayor and the Metropolitan Conference) had chosen as being consistent with the urban regeneration innovative goals required by the NRRP (CM Bologna, 2022d; Interviews 1, 2, 4).

Projects that were not selected but still fell within the framework of the MSP 2.0 were brought to the attention of the Steering Committee for NRRP and European funds, that the MC had established in partnership with the Capital city, and most of them were found eligible for other forms of funding (Interview 5). The MC did not submit any project proposals of its own, thus limiting itself to a behind-the-scenes directorial role in line with its governance institutional mission, i.e., a governmental entity that stands alongside municipalities and their Unions without playing a hierarchical role (Interviews 1, 3, 5).

4.2. Milan

In respect of the legacy, the Milanese MC inherited a consolidated political-administrative strategic capacity from the old Province. It features a long history, dating back to the 1960s and revamped since the 1990s, of large-scale spatial planning (Vinci, 2019; Zimmermann & Feiertag, 2022), i.e. efforts to build a vision, a “shared image” and “narrative” of the territory (Pasquier, 2016), made up of several voluntary cooperation processes surrounding the need to plan for the future of the territory. The MC was among the first to approve its new strategic planning tools (CM Milano, 2019). In contrast, institutionalized cooperation at the municipal level (Unions) is scarce due to the relatively high average population of its municipalities: 14.133 inhabitants excluding the city of Milan. Thus, in recent years, the MC has activated a series of initiatives to support Municipalities in personnel recruitment, the preparation of tender notices, and participation in European calls. Furthermore, it has built its own capacity throughout the planning and implementation of large-area projects. In fact, it has participated in national tenders (such as *Bando Periferie* and *PINQuA*) since 2016 and has been awarded €73 million for the regeneration of several areas. These ventures have been understood as opportunities to implement the metropolitan strategy of territorial regeneration and have political and bureaucratic personnel learn how to network projects and information between Municipalities and the MC (Interview 3).

With regard to metropolitan functions, instead of designing a lean entity focused on core statutory tasks, a regional law dated 2015 reassigned functions that had been previously exercised by the Province entirely to the MC, with the sole exception of agriculture and hunting. By doing so, it confirmed the MC’s status as a government body with its own undertakings of making and implementing policies and services in many fields. Moreover, the law enhances the institutional role of the MC through the establishment of the permanent Region-Metropolitan City Conference as a joint

institutional forum for the coordination of objectives of common interest (Camera dei Deputati 2017, 246, 259, 267).

Against this background, in the making of IUPs, the MC, on the one hand, operated as an autonomous government entity in developing and later carrying out one entire IUP concerned with sustainable mobility through long-distance cycleways (CM Milano 2022c). On the other hand, it was capable of taking up a role of direction, and not one of mere collection, of local projects in drafting two other IUPs focused on flood risk reduction (CM Milano 2022b) and territorial regeneration (CM Milano 2022a). Through a process of participation and sharing with the municipalities both at informal and formal levels⁷, the institution has been able to integrate local projects into broader strategies, to achieve some of the objectives that had been set in its own planning. This involved a targeted selection based on criteria established by the MC itself (CM Milano, 2021b), of the projects that had been advanced by municipalities: 34 were selected out of 347 proposed for the IUP on regeneration.

The main exception consists in a further IUP (CM Milano 2022d), which is entirely delegated to the city of Milan – that has the full capacity to both design and carry out its own plans – and to which almost 40% of the total budget is allocated, in proportion to the city’s population; this plan is nonetheless coherent with the Metropolitan strategy on regeneration (Interviews 1, 3, 4).

It is worth stressing that all this was accomplished in a phase of uncertainty for the MC, characterized by a political vacuum that was solved only on 19 December 2021, when the elections for the new Metropolitan Council were held after the start of the IUP drafting process. Thanks to collective political leadership involving both the outgoing and the newly appointed (in January 2022) delegates, together with the top management, the institution has therefore proved itself capable of steering local projects and connecting them to metropolitan-scale strategies (Interviews 1, 3).

In brief, the window of opportunity offered by the NRRP, combined with the “strategic elaboration” legacy and “capacity of the MC, has made it possible to intercept and finalize a series of interventions on which the municipalities individually do not have the means to intervene” (Interview 2).

Nevertheless, particularly due to tight time constraints, the process showed limitations, with the remarkable absence of public and stakeholder participation in promoting and selecting projects on one side, and the missing supra-municipal dimension of the projects on the other (Interviews 1, 3, 5). In fact, projects drafted by single municipalities (no Union did so) are all exclusively concerned with their territory. This manifestly confirms the legacy of relatively scarce inter-municipal cooperation in the MC’s territory.

4.3. Reggio Calabria

The MC of Reggio Calabria is characterized by a predominantly mountainous and sparsely populated territory. It comprises 97 municipalities, with an average population of just 5.000 inhabitants, and its capital is peripheral to the territorial structure.

⁷ See <https://www.cittametropolitana.mi.it/portale/news/conferenza/Conferenza-metropolitana-16-dicembre-2021-ore-15/> and https://www.cittametropolitana.mi.it/welfare_metropolitano/progetti/PNRR-Piani-Integrati/

Furthermore, a significant infrastructure deficit places a quarter of its municipalities in the “ultra-peripheral” category of the government’s national cohesion policy. However, the strong need for coordination and integration that is dictated by this geographic and administrative peculiarity is matched by a legacy of limited inter-institutional collaboration and planning capacity (see CM Reggio Calabria, 2021). Moreover, municipal cooperation is virtually non-existent in the Unions of this territory (see Table 2), and previous planning efforts by the MC were largely ineffective. In fact, its participation in previous tenders, such as *Bando Periferie* and *PINQuA*, was either unsuccessful or led directly by the municipality of Reggio Calabria, and no MSP or MTP had been approved at the start of the IUP’s elaboration process (Interview 1; Table 3).

In this case, the establishment of the metropolitan authority occurred later than in other MCs because the capital city was under the responsibility of a commissioner for mafia infiltration. In November 2021, the Mayor was suspended again, due to a conviction in a case of administrative malpractice. The fact that the Calabria Region has not definitively and clearly defined the competencies that are to be transferred to the MC adds to this unfavorable political and institutional landscape for the development of a coherent governance project, thus leaving it in a state of uncertainty in terms of functions and resources (Interview 1).

In this context of structural weakness, delays, and uncertainties, the decision-making process surrounding the Integrated Urban Plan (IUP) was innovative and surprisingly effective. The effectiveness of the process revolved around two institutional bodies: a multi-stakeholder “Steering Committee” (*Cabina di regia*), which was established in April 2021 for political direction and coordination purposes (Interviews 2, 3), and the administrative office for Planning, whose personnel was increased and that became the core of the planning functions of the MC (Interview 1). Within a few months, the MC managed to approve the Development and Cohesion Plan, the Metropolitan Strategic Plan, and the IUP (CM Reggio Calabria, 2022a, 2017, 2022e).

The IUP was developed through a dialectical and iterative exchange between the MC and all the municipalities in the territory. The municipalities were convened for an initial meeting to present the call for proposals and discuss some programmatic guidelines that had been approved by the Steering committee. Approximately a month later, during another meeting between the MC and the municipalities, the project idea “Aspromonte in città” (“Aspromonte in the city”) was presented. This was followed by a call for projects, in which only aggregations of municipalities adding up to a minimum of five thousand inhabitants could participate. These projects were then discussed and negotiated between the municipalities and the planning office of the MC for inclusion in the IUP based on their adherence to the guidelines and to the goals and strategy of the overall project (Interviews 1, 2; CM Reggio Calabria, 2022e).

Several significant strategic choices were made in the course of this process, such as the definition of an overall strategy – “Aspromonte in città”, aimed at “stitching” the mountain (Aspromonte) with the urban and coastal areas – to ensure the coherence of the IUP with the call and its eligibility for funding; the decision to include all of the municipalities in the territory to ensure political consensus and promote the role of the Metropolitan City as a territorial liaison entity; and finally, the choice to compel

municipalities to aggregate to make the IUP more consistent and easily implementable (Interviews 1, 2; CM Reggio Calabria, 2022e).

As a result, 28 projects were identified out of the approximately 50 that were initially proposed by municipalities. Five are directly managed by the Metropolitan City, one by the Municipality of Reggio, and the remaining 22 by *ad-hoc* aggregations of municipalities. These projects largely focus on sustainable mobility and environmental revitalization.

Two critical aspects have emerged from the analysis, both of which seem to stem from the MC's fragile political-administrative legacy. Firstly, there was no listening or co-design activity with social actors (businesses, third sector, etc.) and only the presence of stakeholders in the "Steering Committee" allowed for a discussion on general guidelines with a selection of representative organizations. In addition to the strict timelines dictated by the government, this lack of co-design can also be attributed to the limited institutionalization and weak legacy of strategic planning that characterize metropolitan territorial governance. A second critical aspect is related to the lack of project detail, which, according to the gathered testimonies (Interviews 1, 2, 3), will impact its implementation capacity. For example, many of the interventions involve the creation of infrastructure for which no long-term management plan is in place.

5. Discussion

The previous section illustrated that the three MCs have followed different ways in taking advantage of the window of opportunity provided by the NRRP. In Bologna, the metropolitan authority has assumed a pivotal role in a governance arrangement characterized by the presence of established networks and collaborative culture among municipalities. As a result, the MC fully undertook a recognizable and coherent wide-area strategy on whose basis local projects have been selected and integrated with one another to make up the city's sole IUP. In Milan, IUPs that are decidedly top-down coexist with loosely integrated multi-project schemes. Thus, the MC still appears to be acting as a governmental authority, asserting itself as a body that is not only focused on discharging its statutory duty in strategic planning but also capable of conceiving and realizing its own projects. In Reggio Calabria, for the first time, the IUP experience itself has made it possible for the MC to take up a strategic role in coordinating and steering local development policies, which was supposed to be its core mission since the establishment of MCs, although with a weak integration of projects.

Therefore, as far as our hypothesis is concerned, the IUP processing turned out to be affected by previous metropolitan planning experiences, with notable reference to, on the one hand, the MSP and MTP as strategic master plans negotiated with stakeholders and, on the other hand, to metropolitan regeneration policies financed by the national programs *Bando Periferie* and *PINQuA*. This was evident in the cases of both Bologna and Milan, where pioneering legacies and established practices were found to be just as capable of enhancing the role of MCs. In continuity with its own legacy, the former city has deepened its mission of a strategic body capable of integrating interventions and projects into a single strategy involving multiple municipalities, with the MC playing the director. Milan displays a more mixed image of an entity that is both able to produce (to then execute) its own plan and willing to delegate to municipalities the drafting and

carrying out of further plans, although coherent with its own MSP. Instead, in Reggio Calabria metropolitan regeneration policies emerge as scarce and weakly joined in its IUP. Nevertheless, this was successfully submitted by the MC, where the MSP, which is the fundamental and required master plan, was not approved until 2022, with the IUP opportunity playing a powerful push factor. As displayed in Table 5, this last point is the main discontinuity with institutional legacies that we have detected.

Table 5. IUPs in selected cases: a comparative overview.

MC	Budget NRRP, €	N. of IUPs	Project selection	MCs' own projects	N. of municipalities involved in IUPs	Continuity with legacy
Bologna	173.068.200	1	4 out of 66	No	2 + 1 Union (4 municipalities)	YES
Milan	287.338.092	4	34 out of 347	Yes (one IUP with 5 projects)	45	YES
Reggio Calabria	118.596.100	1	28 out of 50	Yes (5 projects)	87	NO

Source: own elaboration.

The innovativeness of metropolitan governance in Bologna is influenced by the well-established practice of inter-municipal cooperation (Unions) that is very widespread in the area, an experience that is not shared by Milan and Reggio Calabria, where municipal fragmentation is higher and inter-municipal associationism underdeveloped (see Tables 2 and 3). This must be taken into account in understanding the significant differences in the investigated IUPs: only 6 municipalities (10.9% of the total number – with 4 associated in a Union) receive funds in Bologna, versus 45 (33.8%) in Milan and 87 (89.7%) in Reggio Calabria. High territorial integration, as well as low political and institutional fragmentation in Bologna, have permitted a clearly focused strategy that is less manifest in both Milan and Reggio Calabria. Again, this appears to be consistent with the hypothesis and in line with the literature presented in section 2.

To recap, context-related and legacy variables explain the different paths and solutions that have been adopted by the investigated MCs in the face of the same challenge, that of IUPs. These path-dependent processes are not surprising as, in a timeframe of a few months (November 2021 - March 2022), MCs had to: become familiar with IUPs as a new and mostly unexpected opportunity for them; opt for a metropolitan regeneration and development strategy to prioritize; create a process of co-designing with municipalities; collect and/or process urban projects; assess and select projects through an articulated and complex inquiry, given the size and multidimensional nature of many projects; prepare and submit the IUP proposals to the central government (Ministry of the Interior) for approval. All this had to occur in the absence of a national metropolitan policy with a certain degree of stability and within the ambiguous and uncertain framework provided by the Delrio Law. Therefore, MCs brought what they already had into play, clearly highlighting their different trajectories of development and consolidation to date.

However, the novelty of the experience of Reggio Calabria should be noted once more: the MC seized the opportunity of IUPs to mark a break with its legacy of weak

performance, thus initiating its own institutionalization process. Future studies on IUP implementation will be able to assess whether these diverse patterns are stable, or whether metropolitan governance is destined for new phases of uncertainty.

6. Conclusions

The Delrio Law gave MCs an innovative role but, at the same time, provided for their marked continuity with the former Provinces, while deferring to the discretion of the Regions, which may legislate autonomously on the exact definition of the functions of MCs, and in a time of financial austerity. Within this ambiguous and uncertain framework, we have traced the processes that led three different Italian MCs to elaborate their integrated urban plans to be granted funds from the NRRP. The aim was to understand whether this window of opportunity has led to either converging or diverging trajectories in the route toward their full institutionalization.

In light of the analysis of these cases, we believe that the drafting of IUPs highlights the undeniable capacity of MCs to promote, coordinate, and even direct local policies. In the case of Reggio Calabria, the southern MC in this study, the IUP appears to be a game changer: thanks to it, the MC began playing its own strategic role, which had remained on paper for several years. The strengthening of MCs' role has occurred in varying forms with regard to IUPs. In line with the main findings of the literature we presented as our theoretical frame, the differences can be traced back to the institutional and territorial legacy of MCs, consisting of former Provinces, territorial fragmentation, governance practices, inter-municipal associationism, and administrative capacity. However, the specific legacy of the strategic planning function should also be considered.

This leads us to see signs of emerging divergent models of metropolitan governance in the various cities that are largely, but not ineluctably, linked to their institutional legacy: an innovative and pure governance model in the case of Bologna, where the MC stands alongside and supports the municipalities; a more conservative model in the case of Milan, where the MC retains all the competencies of the former Province and plays an autonomous and partly hierarchical role with respect to the municipalities; a hybrid and still undefined model in the case of Reggio Calabria, which is penalized by the legacy of low administrative performance (cfr. Putnam 1993). However, thanks to the opportunity provided by IUPs, the MC of Reggio Calabria has taken its first steps in strategic planning, thus overcoming years of delay.

To conclude, the window of opportunity that we identified as strategic for the consolidation of MCs has proved effective in pushing them to produce new strategies and/or coherent projects as well as to set up networks, processes, and internal structures for their successful realization. The time pressure, visibility, and legitimization of IUPs as part of the NRRP were fundamental drivers, particularly for Reggio Calabria MC, that seized the momentum and outlined new spatial strategies. However, lessons learned from different legacies of previous experiences in strategic planning, inter-municipal cooperation, and administrative capacity have led the three MCs to varying pathways of institutionalization of their role in local governance.

The change of national government following the parliamentary election of September 2022 – with the Meloni cabinet taking over from the Draghi government that had approved the NRRP – produced, however, further uncertainties in the outlined

framework. In July 2023, after our research was conducted, the new cabinet drafted a proposal for revision of the NRRP to be submitted to the EU Commission, which unexpectedly and abruptly expunged IUPs from funding. Government officials reassured MCs and municipalities that funds would be drawn from other sources to keep IUPs running – after all, most MCs had already started to assign tasks by contract, as required by the original timeline. In March 2024 a ministerial decree (No. 19/2004)⁸ was issued that once again included IUPs in NRRP funding with their full original amount. While this new uncertainty does not affect the research presented in this article, it supports our understanding of the persisting ambiguous condition of MCs in Italy: despite the new window of opportunity, they are still in search of stable political and institutional legitimacy.

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7. Appendix

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Table A2. Interviews

Interviews MC Bologna

1. Mayor of a municipality and MC executive councillor
2. Municipality Department director and former MC director
3. Municipality Department director
4. Mayor of a municipality, President of a Union, and MC executive councillor
5. MC Department director

Interviews MC Milan

1. Mayor of a municipality and MC executive councillor
2. Department director
3. Service director
4. Mayor of a municipality and MC executive councillor
5. Mayor of a municipality and MC minority councillor.

Interviews MC Reggio Calabria

1. Department director
 2. Mayor of a municipality and MC executive councillor
 3. Mayor of a municipality and MC executive councillor
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