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# The “Metropolitan Region”: A Farewell to a Decentralized Regional Structure? Regional Policy in Germany since the 1990s

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## Abstract

In the 1990s, German regional policy experienced a remarkable change. In contrast to the traditional vision of regional policy that emphasized the realization of “equivalent living conditions” across the country by maintaining and fostering a decentralized regional structure, innovation and competitiveness were now featured as the aims of the policy. The acknowledgement of 11 metropolitan regions as core areas of economic development constituted an important component of this new policy. Therefore, in the light of globalization and European integration, this study investigates the process by which the concept of metropolitan region was established. The case of Rhine-Ruhr, wherein the independent development of sub-regional cooperation led to a dysfunction across the metropolitan region, indicates not only the difficulties of the metropolitan region project but also the strength of regional cooperation from the bottom up. Such bottom-up cooperation constitutes an important component in the decentralized regional structure of Germany.

## Keywords:

metropolitan region, globalization, European integration, regionalization, regional governance, the Rhine-Ruhr Metropolitan Region.

## I

In 1995, a council of ministers responsible for spatial planning in German federal states, the MKRO (*Ministerkonferenz für Raumordnung*), published a document with proposals for a future regional policy. In this document titled “*Raumordnungspolitischer Handlungsrahmen*” (Action Framework for Regional Policy), six regions were selected as “*Europäische Metropolregionen*” (European Metropolitan Regions), which were to be “motors” for the social, economic, and cultural development of Germany. After the recognition of one more region two years later, in 2006, another document from the same council acknowledged four more metropolitan regions, bringing the total to eleven.<sup>1</sup>

The introduction of the concept of metropolitan region indicates a remarkable change in German regional policy. In West Germany, after World War II, a decentralized regional structure was an almost undisputed vision for a regional policy; this structure aimed at promoting the development of the nation’s underdeveloped regions toward “equivalent living conditions”—a political aim stated in the German Constitution. The purpose of the abovementioned 2006 document was to propose new visions and strategies for German regional policy. The traditional vision of a decentralized regional structure was maintained, with “poly-centrality” as a desirable regional structure. We also find “equivalent living conditions” to be a central aim of the policy. But, among the three main visions presented in this document, we find “development and innovation” taking precedence over the two other visions, “universal access for services of general interest” (“*Daseinsvorsorge sichern*”) and “preserving natural and cultural

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1 BMBau (1995), p. 27; BMVBS (2006), pp. 8, 14; Blotvogel (2002a), p. 345; Adam (2006), pp. 7–11.

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resources.” We also find a symbolic motto reflecting the new direction of German regional policy: “Strengthen the strength” (“*Stärken zu stärken*”). From “reducing regional imbalances” to “development and innovation,” the change in priorities is clear: Metropolitan regions would be the central focus for this “development and innovation.”<sup>2</sup>

In Japan, the decentralized regional structure of Germany has been often positively mentioned as an antidote to the over-centralized structure dominant in this country.<sup>3</sup> However, this raises another question: Is Germany moving away from this decentralized structure?

In the following discussion, we first examine globalization and European integration as background factors in the development of the metropolitan region concept. In section II, which presents our arguments on globalization, we cite “regionalization” or “region making” as concepts closely related to the recent discussion on metropolitan regions. In section III on European integration, we present the formation of metropolitan regions as part of an EU agenda, after examining a movement among regional organizations in the EU and the problem of confrontation and compromise between the rich North and poor South. Section IV is an investigation of the process and activities behind the establishment of German metropolitan regions, including a case study of the Rhine-Ruhr Metropolitan Region, and finally section V provides concluding remarks.

## II

In a globalized economy, not only large companies but also small and medium-

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2 BMVBS (2006), pp. 5, 7, 14 f., 30. Cf. Schmitt (2009), pp. 62–69; Richter (2006), pp. 665 f.; Miosga (2007), pp. 1–8; Baumheier (2007), S. 3 f.

3 Cf. Fujimoto (1992).

sized companies often conduct business across national borders. But, this globalization does not regard location as inconsequential. For companies seeking favorable locations for pursuits such as production, marketing, and corporate headquarters, several factors have increased in importance, such as roads, railroads, airports, and other transportation infrastructures, the availability of qualified labor forces, research institutions, and government offices. Cultural facilities and the natural environment have also become increasingly important. These factors are often evaluated not for entire countries or single municipalities, but larger regional areas within a country (and sometimes across the nation's borders). This phenomenon of a region's increasing importance has been called "regionalization" (*Regionalisierung*) and has been discussed in academic circles since the 1990s.<sup>4</sup> The concept of the metropolitan region emerged from this trend of regionalization.

The word "regionalization," however, has an additional meaning. Since the 1970s and 1980s, many developed countries in the world experienced a "crisis of the welfare state." Instead of Keynesianism, Neo-Liberalism became a doctrine that dominated economic policies. Privatization of public functions gained popularity. But, at least in Germany, this trend did not lead to a one-way dash toward a market economy. Instead, the "retreat of the state" (Susan George) led to an additional focus on the role of public and private networks on a regional level.

In the field of regional policy, a new trend emerged in the mid-1980s. In the 1960s, the prime of spatial planning in West Germany, the federal state governments developed a regional development plan as a general framework for their regional development policies. Since the 1980s, however, in contrast to such a

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4 Benz et al. (1999), pp. 27-29.

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top-down style of regional policy, it was emphasized that various actors within regions, such as municipalities, companies, employers and workers associations, as well as ordinary citizens, should play an active role in developing their own regions. This phenomenon provided an alternative meaning to “regionalization,” often called “region making” or “endogenous regional development.”<sup>5</sup>

These efforts have raised numerous questions: How best to promote the participation of regional actors? How to coordinate sometimes or often conflicting interests of these actors? Since the 1990s, these issues have been actively discussed as a problem of “regional governance.” Combined with the concept of the metropolitan region, we find the word “metropolitan governance” as well.<sup>6</sup>

### III

We turn to the second background factor in establishment of the metropolitan region concept: European integration. In Europe, the impact of the “retreat of the state” is amplified by the presence of the EU: Member states must cede a part of their sovereignty to the EU. Over this partial transfer of sovereignty, we often see complicated conflicts between the EU and its member countries. But, the importance of regions in European policy should not be neglected. The Maastricht Treaty of 1992 established an advisory body, the “Committee of the Regions,” with regional representatives from EU countries. This committee is a product of long years of lobbying by regional organizations under the motto “Europe of the Regions.” German federal states, especially Bavaria, were the

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5 Benz et al. (1999), pp. 36-39, 50-52; Diller et al. (2009), pp. 3-5; Diller (2012), pp. 11 f.; Reimer (2012), p. 46; Blatter (2005), pp. 131-134.

6 Fürst (2001), p. 371; Fürst (2003), pp. 441-444; Blatter/Knieling (2009), pp. 232-237.

leading powers behind this movement, since they did not want their voices to be superseded by that of the German federal government and wanted to have an independent voice in the EU.<sup>7</sup>

This movement, however, lost its influence after the conclusion of the Maastricht Treaty and the Treaty of Amsterdam in 1997. The Committee of the Regions suffered from conflicts between the rich North and poor South. Poor regions hoped that the EU could contribute to reducing regional disparities, whereas rich regions led by the German states questioned the granting of increasing power to EU institutions.<sup>8</sup>

Similar conflicts are reflected in the EU regional policy. In 1999, the European Commission published a vision document for EU regional policy, the European Spatial Development Perspective (ESDP). The basic tone of the ESDP was that of a traditional “cohesion policy,” which aimed at a balanced regional structure by promoting the development of backward regions. But, at the same time, this document showed a new direction for regional policy; it proposed to establish metropolitan regions as the core of EU competitiveness in the world economy. More precisely, the ESDP proposed to establish a poly-centric system of cities, in which the development of metropolitan regions and other development centers would be promoted in the EU, not only in the central areas (Germany, France, and north Italy) but also in the peripheral areas.<sup>9</sup>

The leading forces for introducing the metropolitan region concept in the ESDP were Germany and the Netherlands. In the process of drafting the ESDP, these two countries criticized an earlier document by the European Commission,

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7 Benz et al. (1999), pp. 31-33; Ruge (2003), pp. 300-305.

8 Ruge (2003), pp. 306-309, 312-314.

9 European Commission (1999), pp. 7-9, 20 f.

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“Europe 2000,” published in 1991. They insisted that it adhered too closely to the cohesion policy. The ESDP intended to justify the development of large metropolitan regions in core countries on one hand, while simultaneously considering peripheral countries with the notion that they also could establish metropolitan regions or other development centers. In this sense, the ESDP was the product of a compromise between the rich North and poor South.<sup>10</sup>

Nevertheless, with the ESDP of 1999, promotion of metropolitan regions featured on the EU agenda. Not only Germany but also many other European countries have engaged in promoting their metropolitan region projects, such as the “Delta Metropolis” (Randstad, around Amsterdam and Rotterdam) in the Netherlands; “Projects Métropolitains” in France; “Europolen” in Poland; “Gateway-Cities” in Ireland; “Perl”-cities in Sweden; and “anchor cities” in Portugal.<sup>11</sup> It is common knowledge that the EU intensified its competitiveness-oriented policy with the Lisbon Strategy of 2000. The concept of the metropolitan region is a major component of this policy.

## IV

Now, we come to German metropolitan regions. Figure 1<sup>12</sup> shows the distribution of metropolitan regions in Germany. An impressive and perhaps curious fact is that the 11 metropolitan regions occupy a very large part of German territory, about 60% of the territory with about 70% of German population.<sup>13</sup> However, not all of this area is “metropolitan”; a metropolitan region consists not only of

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10 Wiechmann (2009), pp. 105, 113, 115.

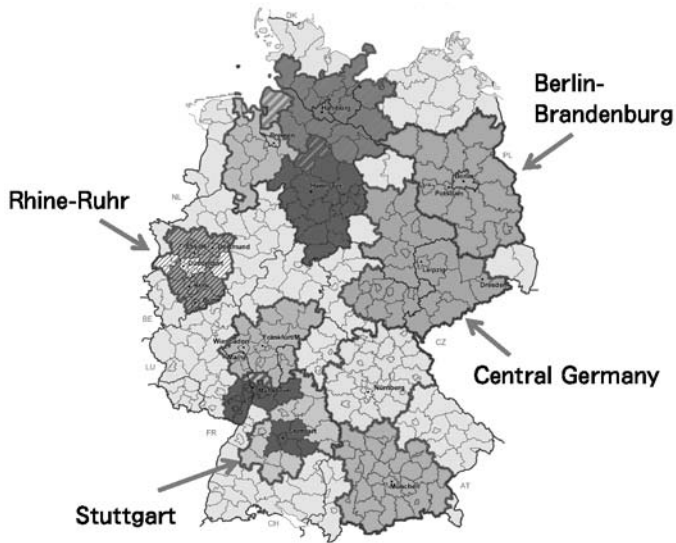
11 Wiechmann (2009), p. 121-123.

12 IKM (2013), p. 4.

13 IMK/BBSR (2012), pp. 12, 14.



Figure 1: Metropolitan Regions in Germany (2012)



a core “metropolitan” city (or core metropolitan cities) but also other smaller cities and municipalities with their catchment area. But, such structures of a metropolitan region are not sufficient to explain the wide extent of these regions, that is, why are these areas so large?

An important reason is the political consideration for “non-metropolitan” areas; many cities and municipalities, even far from the core city did not want to be excluded from the “club” of nearby metropolitan regions.<sup>14</sup> Another political consideration could have worked more effectively for selecting metropolitan regions. In the case of the Central German Metropolitan Region, for example, Saxony was recognized as a metropolitan region in 1997, two years after the first

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14 Cf. Schmitt (2009), pp. 79 f.

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selection of six metropolitan regions. Probably, this recognition of Saxony was affected by the political consideration for East Germany, where only one region (Berlin-Brandenburg) was recognized as a metropolitan region, whereas there were five in West Germany.<sup>15</sup>

Partly because of such an artificial construction, every metropolitan region has difficulties coordinating the interests of various actors in its area, although we can find remarkably active metropolitan regions as well. The Stuttgart Metropolitan Region is probably the most active. Its core institution, *Verband Region Stuttgart* (Stuttgart Region Association), has its own regional parliament, which is elected directly by its residents. Through its four subsidiary companies, the association has engaged itself in various activities for regional development.<sup>16</sup>

In contrast, the Rhine-Ruhr Metropolitan Region is probably the most problematic and is sometimes called a failed attempt at regionalism.<sup>17</sup> This region could not succeed in developing an internal identity and was practically split into two sub-regional organizations. From this unsuccessful attempt, however, we can learn much about the mechanisms and problems of metropolitan regions.

The Rhine-Ruhr Metropolitan Region is one of the first six metropolitan regions recognized in 1995. But, for several years after its recognition, there was almost no attempt to enhance cooperation among its cities and municipalities. Two large projects that began in 2001, the Olympic candidacy of the Düsseldorf/Rhine-Ruhr area and the “Metrorapid”-project, a project to construct a rapid railway from Dortmund to Düsseldorf, ended in failure, and instead of enhancing re-

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15 Priebis (2004), p. 104.

16 Cf. Ludwig et al. (2009), pp. 169ff.; Benz (2003); Blatter (2005), pp. 140-143.

17 Schulze/Terfrüchte (2010), p. 32.

gional cooperation, came to severely undermine it.<sup>18</sup>

This area has a strongly polycentric structure with 11 high-order and 74 middle-order central places.<sup>19</sup> Among large cities in this area, we sometimes find long years of rivalry or even animosity, for example, between Cologne and Düsseldorf or Essen and Dortmund. As often noted, this region has at least two sub-regions, so-called the Rhine corridor (*Rheinschiene*) with Cologne and Bonn), and the Ruhr district (with Bochum and Essen). Each of these two regions went a different way in their historical development without developing a close relationship. In addition, their different temperaments (“Rhinelanders’ cheerfulness” versus “Westphalian circumspection”) are also well known.<sup>20</sup>

The state government of North Rhine-Westphalia took an initiative to group these heterogeneous regions into a single metropolitan region, despite the regional actors’ weak interest in the project. But, the attitude of the government was indecisive. In a governmental report on regional planning in 2001, for example, we find an “action concept” for the Rhine-Ruhr Metropolitan Region, but without any concrete proposals of implementation. The government hesitated to take an active role considering the immense difficulty of coordinating the varied

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18 Schmitt (2006), pp. 58 f.; Schmitt (2009), p. 89.

19 Schmitt (2006), p. 55 (note 8). The central place theory, which can be traced back to a famous book of Walter Christaller in 1933, became the main concept of regional policy in West Germany after World War II. The central place system constitutes a hierarchy of basic, low-, middle-, and high-order centers (There can be additional ranks of centers). A central place performs service and development functions not only for its own population but also for those of its catchment area. For example, middle-order centers meet medium-term needs of the population, such as secondary schools, hospitals, and various shopping opportunities. This system was (and is) considered as an important tool with which the realization of “equivalent living conditions” could be pursued. For more on the central place theory and the debate on it, see Blotevogel (2002b).

20 Schmitt (2006), p. 57; Schulze/Terfrüchte (2010), p. 33; Kujath/Schlippenbach (2002), p. 57.

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interests of cities, municipalities, and other actors in this region. It was also apprehensive that economic promotion of a metropolitan region could lead to complaints from municipalities outside of it; “Nordrhein-*Restfalen*” (the rest part of North Rhine-Westphalia) became a widely circulated word.<sup>21</sup>

The Rhine-Ruhr Metropolitan Region was a “designer-region” created using the top-down approach, and the designer did not stand firm on its policy. But, the dysfunction of this metropolitan region was not due to the absence of regional cooperation in this area. In particular, activities to enhance regional cooperation have existed in the Ruhr district from the beginning of the 21st century, such as the “*städtereion ruhr* (City-Region Ruhr) 2030” (2001–2003), a trans-municipal project for regional development, and a joint presentation for location marketing at the real estate fair EXPO Real in Munich from 2002, with the slogan “Metropolitan Region Ruhr.” In the Ruhr district, we find an unfavorable attitude toward being “remote controlled” by the state government, whose seat lies in Düsseldorf, outside of the district. Such feelings are probably an important factor that could have motivated these projects from the bottom up. The growth of such activities could be found in the Rhine corridor and, at lower levels, in the area around Düsseldorf as well.<sup>22</sup>

In a networking organization for the metropolitan regions in Germany, the IKM (*Initiativkreis Europäische Metropolregionen*), the Rhine-Ruhr Metropolitan Region now has two independent representatives: Metropole Ruhr and Cologne/Bonn Metropolitan Region (Figure 2).<sup>23</sup> The division into two or three sub-

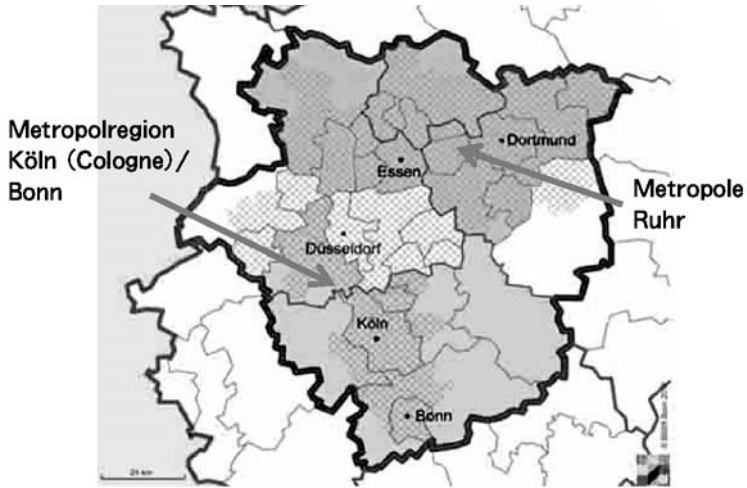
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21 Schmitt (2009), pp. 84–86, 90 f.

22 Schulze/Terfrüchte (2010), pp. 33–35; Schmitt (2006), pp. 59 f.; Schmitt (2009), p. 91; Reimer (2012), pp. 48–50; Danielzyk et al. (2008), pp. 550, 560 f.; Blotvogel/Schulze (2010), pp. 256, 265 f.

23 IKM Portal site.

Figure 2: Metropolitan Region Rhine-Ruhr



regions has rendered the Rhine-Ruhr Metropolitan Region dysfunctional. But, this dysfunction can probably be interpreted as a sign of the potential power of regional cooperation from the bottom up; without such power, a region would only have a tenuous existence.

## V

In Germany, we find numerous regional associations of municipalities and other actors in a region, including a metropolitan region; the larger the territory of a region, the more difficult the coordination of its varied interests. Metropolitan regions are, therefore, inclined to avoid conflict-laden issues and concentrate on activities that can ensure win-win results; joint location marketing for investment and tourism are among the popular projects for metropolitan regions. Festivals and other events are also popular, since they are relatively

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“harmless”.<sup>24</sup> Thus, we have adequate reasons to wonder whether metropolitan regions could really be “motors” of economic development in Germany.

But, this drawback of metropolitan regions does not reflect a weakness in German regional cooperation. In the case of Rhine-Ruhr, the growth of sub-regional cooperation has hindered the development of a metropolitan region for the entire area. However, we also know of several cases in which sub-regional cooperation could contribute to the development of a metropolitan region, for example, in Stuttgart. Nevertheless, it is only with the active participation of regional actors that a metropolitan region or other type of regional cooperation can be successful.

Now, we must answer the question presented at the beginning of this study: Is Germany moving away from its decentralized regional structure? The answer is “yes” and “no.” It cannot be denied that German regional policy has taken a new direction since the 1990s: more inclination toward economic growth and competitiveness. But, the traditional concept of a decentralized regional structure has never been abandoned and continues to be the central vision of German regional policy. It is particularly important to know that such a decentralized structure is based on a distinctive bottom-up regional cooperation, which has involved many difficulties and limitations, but regional activities that cannot be absorbed by the central government are an important component of German regional structure. Moving away from the decentralized structure would imply changing a society dependent on such regional and local activities; a change of not only the political or economic but also the societal structure of Germany. Such a change seems to be neither intended nor desired in Germany.

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24 Küpper (2012), p. 90; Petrin/Knieling (2009), p. 302.

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