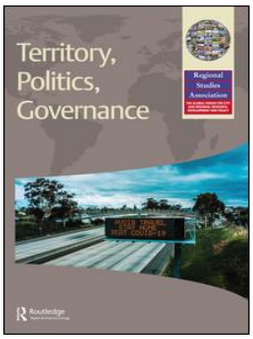

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Metropolitanization, civic capacity and metropolitan governance: Ireland in the metropolitan century

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ABSTRACT

The dynamics and politics of metropolitanization in Ireland have received limited attention, attributed in part to Ireland's historic culturally embedded urban–rural divide. The publication of the National Planning Framework (2018) demonstrates an effort by the Irish government to centre spatial thinking on Ireland's five major cities. However, despite evidence of enhanced civic engagement, the Irish case demonstrates the challenges of creating a metropolitan state-space in a country with a traditionally strong rural identity. Drawing on Nelles' concept of civic capital and the importance of mobilizing a metropolitan identity, in this paper we draw attention to four factors that constrain the formation of the metropolitan civic identity necessary for spatial planning efforts to succeed: the lack of an urban identity, discordant temporalities, the absence of key enablers and misaligned governance structures. Our study adopts an exploratory research design using critical discourse analysis of key documents, participant observation, semi-structured interviews and survey methodology to further the understanding of metropolitanization processes, provide insights into alternative forms of metropolitan governance and discuss the limits of civic capital. We conclude that it is critical to understand the nature of the state in order to understand the accumulation (or not) of metropolitan civic capital.

KEYWORDS

metropolitan governance; civic capacity; civic capital; spatial planning; regional development; metropolitanization; Ireland; centralized state

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1. INTRODUCTION

Metrophilia – the championing of the metropolitan[1] narrative regardless of spatial context (Waite & Morgan, 2019) – is evident in countries and regions across the globe. However, while policies that shift the scalar focus towards the metropolitan may be written, championed and supported by stakeholders from the local to the supranational level, cases demonstrating the successful application of policies and effective governance of the city-region as a new state scale and space are limited. While there is evidence of significant policy experimentation in this domain across a range of global contexts, an apparent resistance is evident in some contexts. As a result, the promise of metropolitanization and metropolitan governance to address pressing city-regional imbalances is not always met (Moore-Cherry et al., 2022).

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Growth in population and increased development in expanding metropolitan areas has posed a series of challenges that are felt across the widest variety of settlement types – from city centres to peri-urban and rural areas. In the past four decades, governments seeking to address these challenges and shifts in population settlement patterns have turned their policy attention toward metropolitan regions (Cox, 1997; Brenner, 2004a; Swyngedouw, 2004). As spaces that afford a density of people and resources, metropolitan economies are asserted as the main motors of economic growth (Scott et al., 2001; Katz & Bradley, 2013). Channelling resources in the direction of urban agglomerations is perceived to raise productivity (Glaeser, 2011; OECD, 2006), while also protecting the land and livelihoods of individuals and ecosystems in the peripheries of the metropolitan area by concentrating growth and reducing sprawl (Ehrström, 2016).

Until relatively recently, in Ireland there has been no identifiable urban agenda. This is attributed in part to an historically and deeply rooted reluctance to engage with the metropolitan as a distinct territorial scale across institutions and tiers of government (Moore-Cherry & Tomaney, 2019). Despite long academic and policy concern with regional development in Ireland and stuttering attempts by central government policy to strengthen the roles of city-regions, the dynamics and politics of metropolitanization have received limited attention. From as far back as the 1968 Buchanan Report (Colin Buchanan & Partners, 1968) to the National Planning Framework (NPF) (Government of Ireland, 2018b), central government has experimented with new towns, decentralization and designated growth poles as a way to effect more balanced regional development. The challenges and failures of these initiatives have been analysed and discussed, but little work to date has focused on the policy and politics of city and metropolitan governance in the context of a culturally embedded divide between the city and the Irish countryside (Walsh, 2014).

In this paper, we draw on the concept of civic capital (Nelles, 2012, 2013; Nelles & Wolfe, 2022) to understand the dynamics of metropolitan governance in Ireland. Civic capital within the city-region is evident when interpersonal networks enable cooperative arrangements between and across municipalities that generate a common purpose, identity and set of expectations. Nelles (2013) suggests 'the willingness to engage in metropolitan partnerships may be more closely tied to the strength of the *metropolitan idea*' (p. 1359; emphasis added). A willingness to acknowledge the metropolitan idea is a key indicator of the existence of civic capital. The metropolitan idea moves beyond the stated existence of metropolitan partnerships to the qualities, characteristics and activities of the metropolitan partnerships that allow for effective intermunicipal cooperation or interlocal partnerships (Nelles, 2012).

Building on this conceptualization of the metropolitan idea, we might assume that strong civic capital should enable more effective governance of the metro region and thus better outcomes from processes of metropolitanization. A focus on the concept of civic capital enables us to identify barriers and enablers in developing a metropolitan agenda, or what we are calling civic capacity – the ability to think and desire to act at the metropolitan scale. If metropolitan civic capital is positively correlated with the emergence of strong partnerships, as Nelles (2009, 2012, 2013) argues in relation to Canada and Germany, it is therefore a precondition for metropolitan civic capacity-building. However, in a context of a highly centralized government, and where there is little history of urban and regional autonomy, we explore what might be the limits of civic capital.

Previously observed deep-seated political reluctance to engage at the metropolitan scale in Ireland (Kitchin & Moore-Cherry, 2021; Moore-Cherry & Tomaney, 2019) is further interrogated to identify possible underlying dynamics. Based on empirical analysis, our explanation of the difficulties of generating civic capacity at the metropolitan scale in Ireland emphasizes four interacting characteristics. The first is the lack of historical frameworks to guide political action and policy development. The second is discordant temporalities, including the mismatch between political cycles and the time required to successfully engage key stakeholders and

planning horizons. The third is the absence of enabling conditions such as confidence, collegiality, and the presence of political or institutional champions. The fourth is the lack of appropriate governance structures and institutional mechanisms to develop a metropolitan spatial imaginary.

Ample evidence from scholarship and practice demonstrates the difficulties of governing from the metropolitan scale (for an overview, see Kübler, 2012). Fragmented governance structures, it is suggested, impede productivity growth (Ahrend et al., 2014) but addressing and enabling effective metropolitan governance requires high levels of civic capacity. How this is generated or evolves is less clear. Much of the international literature on processes of metropolitanization advocates for a structures- or institutional-based approach. For instance, this can be achieved through the establishment and importance of new institutions led by a metropolitan mayor. But where there is limited political culture, strong subnational institutions, or fear of a disruption to the political status quo, new institutions become a least preferred option (Aguilar & Lopez, 2018). The delivery and statutory adoption of the NPF in Ireland demonstrates that a plan-based approach, rather than a structures- or institutions-based approach, has been adopted. Through the analysis of this process, we explore the consequences for the formation and deployment of civic capacity in this context where there is limited evidence of strong civic capital. While there is evidence of an accumulation of metropolitan civic capacity in certain Irish cities at certain periods, by and large, it is hard to find. Furthermore, the underlying networks and interpersonal relationships or agency (Nelles & Wolfe, 2022) necessary to ignite and sustain partnerships has been lacking.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. It continues with an overview of the governance rescaling processes associated with metropolitanization. This is followed by a brief introduction to historic and contemporary spatial planning in Ireland to contextualize the Irish case. In our methodological section we detail the way in which we forensically document the development and implementation of the new spatial strategies. In the final sections, we outline the challenges and obstacles to implementation and the development of metropolitan capacity and examine what the Irish case might suggest about civic capital and its potential limits.

2. CONCEPTUALIZING METROPOLITAN GOVERNANCE

Metropolitan governance as a concept is situated at the intersection of three key bodies of literature. The first is on the creation of new state spaces. The decentralization of the state and the political economy of scales have been an object of inquiry for decades (e.g., Jessop, 2002; Brenner et al., 2003; Brenner, 2004, 2009). Scholars seeking to make sense of globalization countered arguments of state withdrawal or disappearance and proposed instead a competitive state model replete with the emergence of new state spaces that would increase competition and enable accumulation strategies (Jessop, 2002; Jones, 1997). Within this framework, relations of production, social (re)production and consumption are rescaled to support the capitalist organization of economic and social life (Marston, 2000; Storper, 1997, 1995). In Western countries, the state moved away from a Keynesian central government-led welfare model, which led to regions and cities (Brenner, 2004b), but also corporations, industries and organizations, emerging as new actors in statecraft (Curtis, 2016).

Our focus in this paper is on the city-region. As part of this broader evolution, dominant cities and city-regions grew in prominence due in large part to their ability to engage directly beyond the nation-state. In both the academic and the policy realms, cities and city-regions became conceptualized and deployed as dynamic and essential nodes in a globalized economy because of the scale and density of economic activity within their agglomerations (Scott et al., 2001; Waite & Morgan, 2019). Some argued that the city-regional scale began to displace certain functions of the central state and subsequently positioned these regions as national champions

(Crouch & Galès, 2012), posing possible threats to the ultimate sovereignty of the nation-state and its leaders. This is a point we return to below as one possible explanatory factor for why civic capital is a challenge within small states.

Recognizing that city-regions function as actors and not just spaces (Christopherson, 2010), it is critical to emphasize the institutional dimension and the role, behaviours and impact of city actors within the larger metropolitan area. The success of descaled state spatial strategies is contingent on metropolitan actors consistently collaborating at the city-regional scale for more effective governance and enhancing 'civic capital' (Nelles, 2013). This is defined as the interpersonal networks and solidarity within a community based on a shared identity, expectations or goals tied to a specific region or locality (Nelles, 2009). This can comprise formal or informal networks between individual community members, between communities, or between communities and the state. Arguably, the greater the degree of civic capital, the higher the degree of governance capacity at the metropolitan scale (Nelles, 2013, p. 1360). Furthermore, a high degree of civic capital should elicit intermunicipal cooperation regardless of institutional and structural contexts (Nelles, 2009). Civic capital draws attention to the critical role of local leaders in intensifying and formalizing inter- and intra-municipal collaborative networks within and between communities. Civic capital, in Nelles' telling, exists before agency but can be harnessed and intensified for meaningful metropolitan governance by civic entrepreneurs. The *enablement and deployment* of civic capital at the metropolitan scale – whether voluntary, institutionalized or through competitively induced collaboration – can be conceived as 'civic capacity' and is a core concern of this paper.

Part of the tension that emerges from a city-centric approach to policy development and planning is what happens beyond the city limits. No city-region, however powerful or successful, is entirely disconnected from its wider context. Debates about regional inequality often correlate the growth of metropolitanization with the emergence of 'left-behind' places (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018; De Ruyter et al., 2021; Dijkstra et al., 2020). Territorial inequalities (whether perceived or real) have significant impact on people – in place and discursively – as they create the context and frame for particular forms of territorial politics (Díaz-Lanchas et al., 2021). Place-based understandings of local and regional development recognize the importance of embedded cultures and identities as enabling or limiting factors. The opportunity for, and likelihood of, actors being enabled to act and think at a new spatial scale is thus dependent on these broader territorial and relational politics.

3. SPATIAL PLANNING IN IRELAND

Amongst Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries, Ireland represents one of the most centralized government systems with local authorities having extremely limited power (Hunter, 2020; Breathnach et al., 2021; Ladner et al., 2019). While local government has existed since before the foundation of the state, it was not constitutionally recognized until 1999. This indicates its relative invisibility, weak powers, under-resourcing and lack of decision-making capacity.[2] The first attempts at decentralization and devolution of planning power and authority, at least discursively, date back to the 1968 Buchanan Report (Colin Buchanan & Partners, 1968). The report proposed nine growth centres for targeted inward investment. However, by 1972, central government had dismissed the plan. Later, the National Development Plan 2000–2006 (Government of Ireland, 1999) and the National Spatial Strategy 2002–2020 (Government of Ireland, 2002) both aspired to balanced regional development through the promotion of gateway towns for strategic investment and growth. The National Spatial Strategy proposed 20 gateway cities and hubs and brought forth a new dimension to spatial planning by incorporating settlement patterns and population growth caps in the strategic distribution of employment opportunities across key nodes (Meredith & Van Egeraat, 2013). For

a variety of reasons, including the global financial crisis, the spatial ambitions of the National Spatial Strategy were unimplemented and the policy was formally abandoned in 2013 (Moore-Cherry, 2019).

In 2018, the Irish government introduced the NPF. The current approach embodied in the NPF differs radically from previous plans in that it is a statutory document intended to shape spatial development until 2040. Capital investments through the National Development Plan support NPF priorities and include a €2 billion urban regeneration and development fund (URDF) and €1 billion allocation for rural renewal of towns and villages with populations under 10,000. Rural tourism has a dedicated €100 million fund for new greenways, €500 million for climate action and €500 million for disruptive technology innovation. The NPF works in tandem with the Local Government Reform Act of 2014. This Act devolved community and economic development planning to the local scale and abolished urban district councils with implications for the wider structures within which metropolitan governance is set. Importantly, the Act radically rewrote territorial governance by merging 114 local councils into 31 local governments and merging eight regional authorities into three regional assemblies: the Eastern and Midland Region (EMRA), the Southern Region (SRA), and the Northern and Western Region (NWRA) (Figure 1). Each assembly is made up of elected members nominated by the constituent local authorities within the respective region and a number of de facto members of the European Committee of the Regions. In addition, each assembly has an executive that manage the day-to-day operations.

The NPF required the production of regional spatial and economic strategies (RSES) and metropolitan area strategic plans (MASPs) to give more detailed expression to the principles of the NPF. The RSES is prepared by each regional assembly and provides high-level objectives that frame more local planning and development projects. The RSES identifies a hierarchy of settlement types (i.e., regional growth centres and key towns), but tasks local authorities to identify their own settlement hierarchy within their local development plans.

The MASPs are a particular innovation and represent the first strategic approach within the Irish context to enable the metropolitan scale. Each regional assembly is statutorily required to publish an MASP for the cities that fall within their region (EMRA – Dublin; SRA – Cork, Limerick and Waterford; and NWRA – Galway). The MASPs are specifically focused on supporting the NPF key principles of compact growth, promoting sustainable land management and positioning Ireland's five key cities as economic drivers for their respective regions. These plans are statutory and long-term to counter the previous perceived weaknesses of the National Spatial Strategy (Breathnach, 2014) and attempt to 'depoliticize' the process by decoupling the document from electoral cycles, party politics and political whim.

At the local scale, the potential for politicization through clientelism, which has previously resulted in poor planning outcomes, has been reduced through the new oversight role provided by the regional assemblies and the new institution of the Office of Planning Regulator, a central government agency. All county development plans were mandatorily reviewed to align with the regional strategies and proposed development requires justification with regard to projected population growth. While this might leave local authority executives feeling increasingly constrained, it also provides 'cover' in rejecting some of the demands of elected local councillors. However, this can also limit public input and representation. Storper (2014) has argued that metropolitan governance requires bricolage and tinkering, but recognizes that this comes with complications, such as removing the opportunity for democratic voice (see also Savitch & Adhikari, 2017). In the Irish context, this is particularly contentious given the traditionally strong 'rural' voice in Irish politics. This more aligned and regulated approach to planning is interpreted by some as another power grab by a governing metropolitan elite.

In analysing the NPF and the new processes in the context of previous spatial planning attempts in Ireland, there is a strong recognition that Ireland's strong county identity is a key

Figure 1. The three regional assemblies of Ireland: Eastern and Midland Region (EMRA), Southern Region (SRA) and Northern and Western Region (NWRA).
Note: MASP, metropolitan area strategic plan.

barrier to radical reform of local government structures (Callanan, 2018; Moore-Cherry & Tomaney, 2019). The NPF challenges deeply rooted territorial identities by minimizing the importance of traditional county boundaries and instead pushing towards the development of a metropolitan focus.

4. METHODS

This paper is based on a two-year research project investigating the development and rollout of the RSES and MASPs in two of Ireland's three regions: EMRA and SRA. The former is Ireland's primate city-region. Dublin is located here and, as a result, the EMRA is the focus of much national 'anti-urban' sentiment. The latter contains three city-regions, thus raising complex scalar issues and revealing tensions in relation to territorial cooperation/competition. We use these

two cases to develop an overall understanding of the challenges to metropolitan civic capacity building in Ireland.

While the Eastern and Midland region makes up the smallest landmass, it accounts for the majority of the population with Dublin as the main settlement, containing the greatest proportion of jobs, including high-wage jobs. In contrast, the Southern Region accounts for 42% of the Irish state territory (Table 1). Despite the presence of three MASPs in the Southern Region, it is largely a rural region with strong rural representation at the regional assembly.

The study adopted an exploratory research design using critical discourse analysis of key documents, participant observation and semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders. A thorough content analysis of the NPF, RSES and MASP documents formed the first phase of research. This included reviewing preliminary drafts, as well as the hundreds of public submissions to each draft iteration and revised versions. Content analysis also included minutes of regional assembly meetings and *Dáil* (parliamentary) debates. The purpose of this analysis was to determine the nature of debate and uncover key tensions including a traditional urban–rural divide.

The time frame for the fieldwork aligned with the publication of the RSES and MASP documents and the onset of implementation. Where allowable, participant observations at regional assembly meetings and MASP implementation group meetings were undertaken to observe the process as it unfolded. In some respects, this research project was ahead of the process, particularly when implementation fell behind schedule for a variety of reasons. The COVID pandemic and subsequent lockdowns further delayed the process. However, participant observations resumed once regional assembly and MASP implementation meetings were moved to an online format.

The second phase of the analysis included undertaking 23 semi-structured interviews and an online survey of Ireland's elected councillors. Interviews began with key stakeholders involved in the implementation of the EMRA, RSES and Dublin MASP because this process was ahead of

Table 1. Regional profiles for Ireland's Eastern and Midland Region and the Southern Region.

	Eastern and Midland Region Assembly (EMRA)	Southern Region Assembly (SRA)
Local authorities	12	10
Regional spatial and economic strategy (RSES) oversight group	Pending	Pending
Metropolitan area strategic plan (MASP) implementation group	1 (Dublin)	1 pending (Waterford), 2 not started
Metropolitan areas	1 (Dublin)	3 (Cork, Limerick, Waterford)
Land area (km^2)	14,500	29,590
Population (millions)	2.3	1.6
Population growth projections	490,000–540,000	340,000–380,000
Employment growth projections	320,000	225,000
Regional assembly elected members	42 (35 nominated + 7 members of the European Committee of the Regions)	33 (27 nominated + 6 members of the European Committee of the Regions)
RSES publication	28 June 2019 (with Ministerial Directive issued 14 January 2020)	31 January 2020
Assembly executive	16 staff members	27 staff members

the Southern Region. Interviewees included local authority executives and councillors, as well as central government representatives and key infrastructure providers. Interviews were then conducted with local councillors and others involved with the SRA. The last round of interviews was reserved for the executive directors of the regional assemblies. The interview guide used for all stakeholders enquired into three themes: the planning process, metropolitan governance and civic capacity, and spatial and economic development.

To ensure a wider understanding of perceptions and experiences of the new planning architecture, within which the RSES and MASPs are embedded, a survey was conducted with all of Ireland's local councillors (n = 949, response rate 12%). The councillor survey served as a form of triangulation confirming our findings from the content analysis, observations and interviews. The data were analysed qualitatively and quantitatively, producing key insights to complement the more detailed qualitative interviews and inform our discussion. Open ended responses validated our analysis that the regional scale in Ireland is unrecognized and generated the evidence to support the view that, despite their statutory role in relation to planning, few councillors are aware of the spatial strategies (NPF, RSES, MASPs) discussed in this paper.

5. METROPOLITAN GOVERNANCE AND CIVIC CAPACITY IN IRELAND

5.1. History/culture of metropolitanization

In Ireland, there is a limited history of thinking about the 'urban' as an identity or policy domain and even less recognition of the metropolitan as a political or lived scale. One exception is perhaps in the transport sector where the Dublin Transportation Office (DTO), which operated from 1996 to 2009, attempted to foster integrated transport and land-use planning at this scale. The DTO was disbanded in January 2009 and was due to be replaced by a Dublin Transportation Authority. However, central government instead established the National Transportation Authority in December 2009, again empowering the national scale as opposed to the metropolitan or regional scale. Infrastructure providers and key agencies who would be central to operationalizing the metropolitan scale in other contexts are all under central government control in Ireland, and despite good intentions, the regional assemblies have limited capacity to drive metropolitan agendas or resource them. As one local authority member explains: 'They're [regional assemblies] not the same as a powerful local government situation in the hierarchy. They [regional assemblies] are absolute minnows organisationally' (local councillor, authors' interview, 2021).

There is some evidence that the political classes are beginning to recognize the potential of operationalizing the metropolitan scale in order to deliver on the principles of the NPF. For example, in 2019 plebiscites on proposals for a directly elected metropolitan mayor passed in Limerick City and County Council, a success arguably linked to the earlier merging of the separate city and county councils. Similarly, Cork's initiative in the early noughties to implement a Cork Area Strategic Plan (CASP) had brought Cork City Council and Cork County Council together to envision a single Cork City-Region. These examples illustrate the desire among local authority professionals to 'activate' this scale and to use legislation to shape/renew senior management thinking. As one local authority planner expressed:

> It makes buy-in easier for me corporately when I'm talking to my senior management team. We're saying this [the new spatial strategy] is a good thing. And the government thinks it's a good thing because they have it in this circular. And that's all it is, but it just helps create buy-in and it helps people realise this is something that's going to happen. (authors' interview, 2021)

However, notwithstanding these exceptions, the potential value of a metropolitan approach is not understood, much less appreciated in Ireland. Arguments that the city-region as a meso-scale can

simultaneously enhance the urban sphere – while also protecting and creating opportunities for a wide scale of settlement types outside of the metropolitan areas – are generally unheeded. A winner-takes-all mentality among key stakeholders means that policies focusing on enhancing cities and metropolitan areas are automatically assumed to be negative for rural areas and thus should be resisted.

Based on the documentary analysis, one way in which this played out in practice during the drafting stages of the RSES and the MASPs was the assumption that heightened urban status would translate to increased resources. Therefore, what became defined as 'urban' became high stakes. Assembly members continuously fought for more representation for their jurisdiction, including moving it up the 'settlement-type hierarchy'. These stratagems were also evident in the public submissions to the various drafts with individuals challenging decisions to redesignate a neighbouring community from 'town and village' status to 'key town' status, or including a particular part of a community within the MASP boundary while leaving others out. Public submissions also raised concerns with the rankings of settlement types, seeking definitional clarity between cities, key towns, and rural areas and requesting changing national smart city strategies to be inclusive of the regions. This fear of being left-behind was tangible and closely linked to the degree of urbanity.

Equally apparent in public submissions were demands for a clearer definition of the rural and how the rural is operationalized. The public submissions demonstrate evidence of the idealization of the rural and the failure to recognize its economic vitality and potential to innovate. By developing a hierarchy of settlement types with limited recognition of diverse place-based livelihoods, a zero-sum political debate was generated. Rather than positioning the metropolitan as the scale through which a win–win for different settlement types could be managed, the debate reverted into traditional urban–rural binaries. While professional planners and bureaucrats may see the value in a metropolitan approach, getting recognition from a wider audience is an uphill challenge, particularly when powers and resources are severely limited and there is little institutional desire or few mechanisms to make it happen. This challenge is summarized by one local councillor from Dublin and a member of the Committee of the Regions, who stated at a parliamentary debate:

> members of the press do not come to regional assembly meetings. I do not know if the press sees that there is not much power at regional assembly level and for that reason does not participate. Perhaps that is telling us something. (Government of Ireland, 2018a)

5.2. Temporality

The new planning architecture introduced with the NPF is radically different to the previous trajectory of Irish government policy. The international literature suggests that capacity of any kind is built incrementally over time. This introduces a temporal dimension to the development of metropolitan identity and governance capacity. Cultural and institutional change takes time and must be built in a phased way to overcome intrinsic fear of the unknown and generate buy-in. Critical to the construction of civic capacity is adopting a phased/layered approach. An initial step needs to be discursive, facilitating the development of a common language and mindset around the potentials and benefits of shifting scalar thinking in order to progress towards what Nelles (2012) describes as the 'metropolitan idea'. This civic capital would then underpin collective sharing, updating, and trust-building generating additional capacity and achieving buy-in. As one respondent expresses:

> like what is a MASP? We haven't done that before. What's that actually going to mean? We worked on without it, but it would have been useful for us to have it, or to be flagging it for our members for when it

> comes round. Now that it's adopted, they have to buy in to it. Whereas there was probably an opportunity for us to be getting them familiar with the language of it had we been aware of it in advance of it becoming a statutory instrument. (local authority planner, authors' interview, 2021)

Getting the timing and sequencing of activity right with specific stakeholders is key. Among interview respondents, a perception existed that opportunities for buy-in were lost in the initial stages of MASP development when key actors could have been better empowered to shape the agenda and build trust along the way. Central government set rigid and rapid timelines for the regional assemblies to develop their RSESs and MASPs, but only one of the assemblies (EMRA) met the original target. The other assemblies identified a need for more time to build consensus, relationships and support emergent civic capital. Although starting from the same point and with the same target publication date, the publication of the EMRA RSES came almost six months before the publication of the NWRA and SRA RSESs. Rather than conceived as a 'failure' or delay, arguably this development over a slightly longer timeframe helped to build stronger relationships critical for the long run: 'I don't think people realise the time that can be spent chatting to people and making them aware. And actually it's well worth the time because when people understand they generally buy into it' (local authority planner, authors' interview, 2021).

A key challenge to civic capacity – this ability to act and think at the metropolitan scale – is the timeframes under which success is measured. While winners and losers may emerge in the short term, the overall objective is to deliver a win–win for everyone in the longer term. One regional assembly director put it this way:

> there is only a limited pot, but long-term this is the big, long, moving ship; it's going to take time to get there, so you kind of have to buy into the process and you have to give it time. (regional official, authors' interview, 2021)

This is critically important in understanding the different approaches to the metropolitan at the regional and the local authority scales. Infrastructure will play a key role in rebalancing economic development in Ireland for more equitable outcomes, and local authorities see securing financial resources to build infrastructure as a way to demonstrate a 'win'. In this way of thinking, the 'metropolitan idea' becomes tightly tied to infrastructure provision, whereas the regional assembly executives recognize infrastructure provision as only one part of the longer term vision for change. An executive from EMRA remarked: 'An interesting finding for us was that it wasn't necessarily the formalisation of metropolitan structures, but the effectiveness of the collaboration processes that were a critical success factor' (authors' interview, 2021). For this respondent, an important part of developing a metropolitan mindset was to support stakeholders with the experience of working together at this scale, sustaining pre-existing civic capital and strengthening it through relationship-building.

Finally, the passing of time between the approval of the spatial plans and contemporary events can also thwart efforts. Ireland is currently experiencing a housing crisis and it is the single-most significant political issue at present for central government – in both the professional and political domains. Housing at any cost appears to be an emergent mantra and has the potential to derail the roll out of the RSES and the implementation of the MASPs, in much the same way that decentralization in 2003 completely undermined the 2002 National Spatial Strategy. This is a significant concern for the stakeholders charged with implementation and highlights an important limitation of the plan- rather than institutional-based approach to metropolitanization.

5.3. Enablers

For civic capital to be sustained and translated into strong civic capacity, certain attributes – ambition, confidence, collegiality and champions – channelled appropriately must be present.

Scope of ambition matters more than the technocratic exercise of implementation. As one respondent stated in relation to infrastructure:

> I don't think it's delivering on infrastructure, I think it's ensuring infrastructure is delivered. … And I think that's probably what the metropolitan needs to do and needs to do a bit better. Rather than focusing on delivering [*sic*] of piecemeal infrastructure, to bring together the players that can deliver key infrastructure that can provide – obviously growth for the metropolitan – but can also support the wider area. (local authority planner, authors' interview, 2021)

Confidence is important in terms of moving from a point of fearing the plans as change-agents to trusting and championing that the system in place will deliver, albeit over time. Confidence building generates a positive feedback loop which can enhance capacity. One local authority planner highlights the importance of having confidence in the long-term approach and power of more strategic thinking in the face of challenge from both elected officials and the public:

> It's one thing creating these documents and the wonderful ideas; it's another implementing them. And the view on the ground from local representatives and local people is, 'Well, these documents are dictating to us.' That's it. So therefore, they are bad. (local authority planner, authors' interview, 2021)

Confidence works in tandem with trust. In other words, the public needs to trust that a focus at the metropolitan scale will generate benefits that are tangible at a range of scales and lead to enhanced quality of life, wellbeing, higher quality infrastructure, appropriate housing and other specific measures.

A sense of collegiality is important in developing a common purpose and vision. Based on our participant observation and interviews, there is an emerging sense of this among the professional stakeholders:

> In the implementation group for our MASPs there is a definite collegiality about how everybody wants to get on with the job. Everybody understands why we're doing it. Everybody believes in the vision. … If you went back 15 years ago, you would have had a very different set of people in that room. Not all of them would have agreed with even the concept of what we were trying to do. (local councillor, authors' interview, 2021)

The existence of this kind of civic capital supports champions who want to operationalize and unlock the potential of the metropolitan scale and resonates with Nelles and Wolfe's (2022) assertion that civic capacity is fluid and changes over time. However, it can also be constrained and limited by the wider context. What makes Ireland stand out in this process is the imbalance of territorial representation. Particularly in the Southern Region, successful implementation of the MASPs lies within the control of rural representatives given their dominance in the assembly membership and struggle to acknowledge the purported benefits of strengthening the metropolitan spaces. The ensuing battle for representation (and perceived resources) requires champions willing to push against resistances grounded in territorial politics to continue building capacity at the new state scale. One of the biggest challenges is figuring out a balance of representation across settlement types in the regional assemblies, while ensuring there are champions who value the metropolitan scale and can harness civic capital effectively. These champions do not necessarily have to derive from urban constituencies, but elevating the metropolitan scale requires leaving parochial representation at the door and serving the best interests of the region and its metropolitan areas. This is particularly challenging in Ireland given the appointment of assembly members through nomination by constituent local authorities.

5.4. Governance structures

The embedding of metropolitanization and city-regional thinking in Ireland faces a series of challenges from multiple directions. On the one hand, central government set hard deadlines to produce ambitious regional strategies in the form of the RSES. This forced the (limited capacity) regional assemblies into the position of demanding outputs from local authorities and elected officials that meet the strategic ambitions of the NPF. However, with waning interest in implementation from central government and no rescaling of resources or powers to drive this agenda, the limits of a plan-led approach to metropolitan governance are beginning to become evident. Pushing such an ambitious agenda under these circumstances would benefit from some clear figurehead/leader, a redistribution of power, and more collaborative approach that moves beyond just accountability and box-ticking to become embedded in the psyche, mindset, and operations of all players as a meaningful scale. Given the squeezing of the metropolitan into existing hierarchical structures of central–regional–local government, carving out and operationalizing something new is incredibly challenging. The civic capital required to generate trust, partnership and capacity to effect positive outcomes is heavily constrained by historical trajectories and this rigid and top-down system.

The translation of what limited civic capital might be in place to generate into strong civic capacity is also challenged by a consistent questioning of whose responsibility it is to drive the metropolitan agenda forward and who represents the metropolitan scale. These representational and accountability questions are important because they inhibit the strengthening of the metropolitan idea:

> There's no one in charge of the MASP. If there was [someone in charge] for our metropolitan area that figurehead may be seen as a lightning-rod, the focus. People say, 'If I want to speak to Dublin, who do I ring? (central state agent, authors' interview, 2021)

While the central state formally recognizes the value of the city-regional scale in policy, none of the supporting mechanisms have been discussed nor put in place. There is no devolved funding to support the metropolitan nor meaningful power to compel action. The regional assemblies have a degree of 'power', but this is limited in large part to persuasion. Significant oversight power, which could and should have strengthened regional assemblies, has been invested in the new Office of the Planning Regulator, a central stage agency. Along with *An Bord Pleanála* (the planning appeals board), these agencies could theoretically enhance metropolitan civic capacity but through their actions end up exasperating the individuals they are meant to be working with because they can override any decisions made at the regional level. The frustration with funding, and the plethora of other arm's length central state agencies that play a key role in planning and development outcomes, also leads to the difficulty within the regional assembly of knowing 'who owns us' (authors' interview, 2021). This persistent centralization results in regional executives feeling that their remit is to comply with the demands of their 'bosses' (central government) or their paymaster (local government) thus complicating the ability to be territorially judicious. Partly this may be a function of the comparative small scale of the Irish state and the perception of and/or need for limited distance between different scales of government. As alluded to earlier, many of the regional executives are experiencing great difficulty in engaging with central government on implementation. Given the lack of devolved power, this jagged relationship jeopardizes the whole project: 'We've been trying to meet with the Department for quite some time in terms of, I suppose, getting the forward structure in place around the MASPs, in particular, and that has been proving difficult' (regional official, authors' interview, 2021).

Ambitious policies, plans and strategies that essentially reconfigure the national planning, economic and spatial development architecture require constant negotiation, determination

and authority to push through. This requires a more agonistic and robust approach that recognizes disagreement and tries to work through, rather than shutting down, the politics to effect real and meaningful political–cultural change (McAuliffe & Rogers, 2019; Mouffe, 1993). The historic approach to planning and policy-making in general has equated 'capacity', achievement and accountability with box-ticking and tinkering rather than the transformational change that is required. A local authority planner expresses this annoyance well:

> There was just too much conflict and everybody wanted something different. And then, instead of it sort of working through the conflict and the suggestions and coming to an end point, we'd come back to a second workshop only to be told, 'Ah, the government's taken over this issue now, it's no longer for you anymore. We've got this new guideline, or this new document, and that matter is gone from the agenda.' (authors' interview, 2021)

6. CONCLUSIONS

Although general recognition exists in the literature and in policy that the metropolitan scale is key to economic development, Ireland is an anomaly. Recent attempts at policy and plan level to move beyond metrophobia (Moore-Cherry & Tomaney, 2019) lack the supporting civic capital (Nelles, 2013) needed for transformational change. Through careful observation of the implementation process of Ireland's National Planning Framework (NPF), the Regional and Spatial Economic Strategy (RSES) and the Metropolitan Area Strategic Plans (MASPs), this research has charted in real-time emergent metropolitanization processes to inform a more nuanced understanding and questioning in a context where there has traditionally been a strong rural identity, a distinct urban–rural binary and a staunchly centralized government system.

The ability to harness and sustain civic capital and generate enhanced metropolitan civic capacity is shown to be affected by a set of four interacting factors in the Irish case. These comprise: (1) the lack of historical frameworks to guide political action and policy development; (2) discordant temporalities, notably the mismatch between political cycles, the time needed to build effective relationships and planning horizons; (3) limited civic capital and the absence of enabling conditions such as confidence, collegiality and the presence of political or institutional champions; and (4) the lack of appropriate governance structures and institutional mechanisms that provide meaningful modes of representation and accountability.

The history and culture of previous rounds of metropolitanization has limited the development of civic capital and partnerships necessary for effective capacity-building and deployment to realize the potential of the NPF and its attendant policies. A longer term perspective is needed to establish effective metropolitan planning and governance. For many politicians, time is a commodity in short supply, meaning that long-term cultural change and trust-building becomes challenged. The discursive construction of the metropolitan as a meaningful scale for policy and political action typically proceeds incrementally. Given the small size of the Irish state and the lack of distinct competencies at the central–regional–local scales, the value of another scale is not understood or recognized in practice. Without meaningful governance reform to open new possibilities – including institutional and financial change – civic capital is constrained. The emergence of the types of collaborative partnerships that Nelles (2009, 2012) identifies as underpinning meaningful metropolitan action is challenged in a context where territorial politics is fraught and government highly centralized. It is in this context that some regional public actors in Ireland have used the MASP process to try to generate inter-agency collaboration and build capacity.

The Irish case presents an opportunity to analyse and challenge the plan-led approach to metropolitanization. Implementing ambitious spatial plans that forefront the metropolitan

scale requires high levels of pre-existing civic capital and the freedom and resources to fully implement them. Considering Ireland's historic trajectory, institutional structures and resourcing models, the online survey of councillors demonstrates the existence of limited civic capital, particularly outside the Dublin region. It also revealed little desire to engage with new ways of governing and planning. As one survey respondent commented: 'An interesting question left out of the survey: Have you read the NPF, RSES, MASPs? You'll probably find a very low reading rate.' While enough capacity existed to develop the RSES and the MASPs, the wider context has limited the accumulation of civic capital that would drive implementation and sustain progress against goals.

Across much of Europe and North America, metrophilia remains the dominant paradigm. In policy terms, Ireland has moved from a place of metrophobia (Moore-Cherry & Tomaney, 2019) to embracing the idea of the metropolitan in policy terms. However, the experience of implementation demonstrates the challenges of any approach that attempts to rescale decision-making and enhance citizen outcomes without meaningful institutional reforms, commitment from all stakeholders and dedicated resources particularly where civic capital is limited. The Irish case is a distinctive experiment in trying a new approach – one that is plan-led rather than structures-led – but the experience to date suggests that the lack of political authority, power and resources is a critical crunch point. Our case study has demonstrated the limits of civic capital – both its emergence and efficacy – in a highly centralized political system with weak multilevel governance. We argue that understanding the nature of the state is a critical, and sometimes missing component, in understanding the accumulation of civic capital and the development of metropolitan civic capacity.

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NOTES

1. City-regions, metropolitan regions and metropolitan are all used interchangeably to signify urban spaces and their wider hinterlands. What constitutes the city-region in the Irish case is directly adopted from the Irish spatial strategies analysed in this paper. For an in-depth discussion on the complications of defining city-regions, see Parr (2005, 2008) and Rodríguez-Pose (2008).
2. Local government power in Ireland is highly complicated due to the colonial rule established by the UK. The 1898 Local Government (Ireland) Act established by the UK Parliament replicated the system of local government for England, Wales and Scotland. This created Irish county councils and an election process. However, the 1937 Irish Constitution does not reference local government. Constitutionally recognized local government with mandates on the schedule of local elections occurred for the first time in 1999 through the Twentieth Amendments of the Constitution Act, 1999, Article 28A (Bunreacht na hEireann, 1999).

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