

Chapter 8

Functional Urban Regions and Larger Urban Zones in Europe and Greece: The Deficient and Fuzzy Definition of an Essential Spatial Unit

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ABSTRACT

In the European Union, Functional Urban Regions are important to economic and spatial planning; so is the existence of statistical data at this spatial level, both for the European and the national policies. Still, most European countries, like Greece, have no official delimitations for these zones - and, consecutively, no socio-economic data produced at this level. “Larger Urban Zones”, created by Eurostat’s Urban Audit represent the only proxy to FURs that could be used for comparable studies, but this would demand an effort for a better harmonization and for consequent statistical series.

INTRODUCTION

Functional Urban Regions in the European Union, either formally defined (by the national Statistical Services) or informally (in academic works), are statistical spatial units defined primarily on the criterion of daily travel-to-work flows (commuting).

The concept of ‘Functional Urban Areas’ (FUAs) is the one that prevailed in Europe and was introduced as the equivalent of the *Metropolitan* – and *Micropolitan* – Areas of the American territorial statistical nomenclature, or to that of ‘Functional Urban Region’ (FUR) in the United Kingdom. In terms of urban geography, the Functional Urban Regions correspond to wider, city-centered “employment areas”. Functional Urban Regions not hardly ever coincide with the city limits in the morphological sense, though they are sometimes arbitrarily confused with the ‘urban archipelagos’ ie multi-nuclear

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structures of the urban-rural mix (urban-rural compound) that shapes modern urban sprawl in the periphery of the larger cities.

As defined in the E.S.D.P, the European Spatial Development Perspective, (CEC, 1997), the Functional Urban Areas are formed by two distinct and opposite components, which are:

- The core which consists of the city in its morphological definition, based on a threshold referring to either the population size or the number of jobs within its limits. (The core may, in its spatial structure, be mono-nuclear or multi-nuclear - ie composed by clearly distinct sub-cores).
- The surrounding zone, which is usually determined on the basis of a minimum percentage threshold of daily travel-to-work movements to the core. Based on international experience, the statistical threshold is most usually set to 15 or 20% of the employed population residing in the respective spatial area.

THE NEED FOR COMPARABLE URBAN DATA IN EUROPE AND THE THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL PROBLEMS FOR THE DELIMITATION OF THE FUNCTIONAL URBAN REGIONS

In a theoretical frame, the questions that concern the criteria of delimitation of Functional Urban Regions are open to discussion, regarding the choice of variables that will determine the core (such as the population size, the density of jobs, or the morphological criteria of urban tissue) – but also regarding the nature of commuting taken into consideration (work, consumption of goods and services etc). Also, open field of discussion is the one concerning the eligible size of the core but also the pertinent thresholds for the determination of the surrounding, commuting zone.

However, in the case of many modern Functional Urban Regions, the spatial patterns tend to be more complex, since:

- On the one hand, appears the simultaneous trend of an increase of new jobs in the periphery, as it often happens linearly, along motorways, or even in new emerging poles (the *edge cities* of the big metropolitan centres or smaller scale urban spots¹⁾), and
- On the other hand, in many cases of European cities - especially in medium-sized cities with an historical character – there is an increase of the attractiveness of city-centers. Thus, the core and the surrounding zone form a functional coupling, with bidirectional flows.

Another problem in statistical methodology and nomenclature for FURs is that in most European countries, at this stage, the Functional Urban Regions are characterized by an extreme volatility of their boundaries, since they are determined by functional correlations which vary continuously (unlike physical delimitations of the cities, who know a much lower change in time).

In particular, the rapid changes in the functional structure within many European urban areas, have to do with the two major factors that shape them, ie both, the rapidly changing “landscape” in the spatial distribution of jobs, and that of the housing market.

However, the determination of Functional Urban Regions for statistical purposes, does not only face the problem of continuous change of their limits but also that of the lack of comparability and interoperability of the statistical data between the different countries of the European Union.

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