

## **ERSA Summer School Research Summary**

### **Working paper: Interplaces and Metropolisation in the Metropolitan Core Area of Belgium**

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Ongoing developments in urban and regional constellations increasingly require us to think beyond the city as a clearly identifiable and self-contained object of analysis (Brenner, 2013; Soja, 2016). This is certainly the case in Europe, where dispersed metropolitan regions have become the norm rather than the exception (Indovina, 2016). There, multiple processes of regional urbanisation, which have collectively been termed ‘metropolisation’ (Cardoso & Meijers, 2021), imply that formerly independent city-regions emerge as connected systems at a higher spatial scale. The processes through which integration of this metropolitan region is achieved are commonly grouped into three dimensions: a spatial-functional dimension, a political-institutional dimension, and a cultural-symbolic dimension. In this threefold process, formerly rural areas and suburbs situated in between city-regions are increasingly embedded in larger, integrated wholes. Because these places are situated in between multiple city-regions, they have been referred to as ‘interplaces’ (Phelps, 2017). Interplaces fulfil a crucial role in the process of metropolisation. They are the places that become increasingly oriented towards multiple centres at once and, in doing so, function as the social and economic glue that binds together formerly independent city-regions and materialises the existence of a metropolitan region at a higher spatial scale. With this research, we aim to shift the focus from the city centres to the oft-overlooked interplaces as seen through the analytical lens of metropolisation.

We investigate interplaces in the Metropolitan Core Area of Belgium, a region of ca. 6 million inhabitants comprising the cities of Brussels, Ghent, Antwerp and Leuven, by operationalising the three dimensions along which metropolisation is achieved. In terms of spatial-functional integration, interplaces are identified as municipalities with multiple significant outgoing commuting flows that simultaneously strengthen the labor markets of several cities in the overarching metropolitan region (Halleux et al., 2021). In terms of political-institutional integration, we identify interplaces as municipalities that do not neatly fit within one coherent governance region but are instead part of different coexisting and partially overlapping constellations of regional cooperation (Terlouw & van Gorp, 2014). For cultural-symbolic integration, we examine the particular municipality of Zele – an interplace as evidenced by the former two perspectives – and assess whether its local identity has become increasingly outward oriented towards surrounding city-regions by means of a longitudinal toponym co-occurrence analysis of local newspaper articles. Through our threefold analysis, we gain insight into the places that function as the imbrication between singular cities’ overlapping spheres of spatial, political and cultural influence.

Apart from assessing the quantitative and qualitative significance of interplaces, of particular interest is whether interplaces are able to exploit their function as consolidators of the metropolitan region and boost their own performance by borrowing size from the multiple city-regions which they tie together (Meijers & Burger, 2017). Indeed, an increasing amount of economic activity takes places in-between the traditional containers of the city and the nation state (Phelps, 2017). On the other hand, interplaces may stand to lose from further integration as they are collapsed into the mass of the metropolitan region and it becomes increasingly difficult to step out of the agglomeration shadow cast by the primary cities on which they depend (MacKinnon et al., 2024). In other words, the question arises whether interplaces are able to leverage their in-between position in the metropolitan region or whether they are ‘left behind’ in the agglomeration shadow. Questions as these remain to be settled, but utilising spatial-econometric techniques to explore such intra-regional inequalities provides a promising avenue for further research.

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