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Metropolitan Administration after Corona: The Case of Porto*

Administracja metropolitalna po pandemii koronawirusa. Przykład Obszaru Metropolitalnego Porto

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ABSTRACT

The article presents the main results of a follow-up research on the administration and service provision system in the Porto Metropolitan Area. The research group conducted an empirical study in Porto just before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. The impact of the polycrisis, which started in 2020, is analysed in this paper. The regulatory and organisational framework has not been significantly transformed as the result of the multiple crises and shocks, but the practice, and especially the planning activities in the field of the services of general economic interest, have become more concentrated. The cooperation in the field of the services of general interests (human services) has remained relatively limited. Thus, the polycrisis is not just a temporary "excited state", but it has permanent impact on these systems.

Keywords: Área Metropolitana do Porto; service provision; inter-municipal cooperation; concentration; COVID-19; polycrisis

INTRODUCTION

The research group based on the senior and junior academics and MA in Law Students of the ELTE Eötvös Loránd University, Faculty of Law conducted a comparative urban administration research project in Porto and Budapest in 2019 and 2020. The project was a comparative one, and its main task was to identify the different methods and regulatory elements of the different urban administration models. The two urban area follows different administration patterns. The Budapest urban area could be described as a partially merged one, because in 1950, by the establishment of "Greater Budapest", the majority of the municipalities of the then-metropolitan area of Budapest was merged into one administrative unit, which has a two-tier system. However, the urban area of Budapest has expanded during the last decades, the structure has just partially transformed, only an urban development council was established during the late 1990s, and different consultation fora have been evolved.[1] The Porto Metropolitan Area (AMP – Área Metropolitana do Porto) was established in 1991, and originally it covered 9 municipalities, now it has 17 municipalities, and – as it can be seen later – it can be considered as a mandatory inter-municipal cooperation.[2] The main results of this comparative research were published in 2020 and 2021, and they showed mainly the differences and similarities between these two urban areas.[3]

[1] See P. Szegvári, *Divat-e még a „retro" a hazai területpolitikában?*, "Comitatus – Önkormányzati Szemle" 2023 vol. 33(246), pp. 184–185.

[2] See K. Zimmermann, P. Feiertag, *Governance and City Regions: Policy and Planning in Europe*, London–New York 2022, pp. 279–280.

[3] The most important publications of the project are as follows: I. Hoffman, J. Fazekas, A. Bencsik, B.I. Bodó, K. Budai, T. Dancs, B. Dombrovszky, P. Ferge, G. Kári, D. Lukács, M. Kárász, L. Gönczi, Zs.R. Vasas, K.B. Cseh, D. Papp, Cs. Molnár, *Comparative Research on the Metropoli-*

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The original empirical research was conducted in Porto, between 4 and 8 February 2020, shortly before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, the service provision and administrative solutions of the pre-COVID era are shown by it. The new follow-up research – whose results are published in this paper – was conducted between 22 and 25 February 2023, after the COVID-19 pandemic and after the outbreak of the Russian-Ukrainian war. Thus, the results of this research show the impact of the polycrisis on two different urban areas.

The original and the follow-up research have applied a multidisciplinary method. However, they are fundamentally based on the approach of legal and administrative sciences, they are even partially built on the instruments of economics, political science and administrative sciences. Because it is follow-up research[4] of our 2020 examination, it is based on qualitative, empirical, comparative, semi-structured interviews and investigations. Because of the empirical part of the research, the article is based on a larger research group. The members of the research group have been the Professors, Associate Professors with habilitation, Assistant Professors, PhD Students and Student Assistants (MA Students) of the Department of Administrative Law of the ELTE Eötvös Loránd University (Budapest), Faculty of Law. Therefore, the number of authors of this article is relatively large.

The researchers tried to follow the patterns of the 2020 empirical research, therefore, they have conducted empirical research in Porto, at the Administrative and Tax Court of Porto, and in the largest municipality of the AMP, in Vila Nova de Gaia.

This article summarises the main results of our examination in the AMP, and it shows the differences after the "excited state" of the polycrisis[5] in an urban area, and the impact of these multiple shocks on the public service provision system and on the local administration.

tan Administration and Service in Porto, "Studia Iuridica Lublinensia" 2020, vol. 29(4); K. Budai, T. Dancs, B. Dombrovszky, P. Ferge, M. Kárász, G. Kári, D. Lukács, Zs.R. Vasas, K.B. Cseh, Cs. Molnár, D. Papp, A. Bencsik, I. Hoffman, J. Fazekas, *Összehasonlító igazgatási és szolgáltatási kutatás Portoban*, "Jegyző és Közigazgatás" 2020, vol. 22(1), pp. 18–24.

[4] Similar COVID-19 follow-up research in the field of public administration: S. Kuhlmann, J. Franzke, *Multi-Level Responses to COVID-19: Crisis Coordination in Germany from an Intergovernmental Perspective*, "Local Government Studies" 2022, vol. 48(2).

[5] See M. Karpiuk, J. Kostrubiec, *Provincial Governor as a Body Responsible for Combating State Security Threats*, "Studia Iuridica Lublinensia" 2024, vol. 33(1), pp. 108–110.

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RESEARCH, RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. The organisation framework of urban governance in Porto – decentralization in the Portuguese public administration framework

Multilevel governance in Portugal is based on the Napoleonic model of public administration. However, the Portuguese system is traditionally more centralized institutionally and financially,[6] to the extent that literature calls it the most centralized country in Europe.[7] The three-level municipal system is based on the regions (*regiões administrativas*), the municipal units (*municípios*) and the sub-municipal units (*districts*, *freguesias*). Additionally, the *regiões autónomas* Madeira and the Azores hold a special status. Moreover, Act No. 75 of 2013 established inter-municipal entities, so-called metropolitan areas (*áreas metropolitanas*).[8]

The assignments of municipalities are defined by statutory law.[9] The general responsibility of municipalities is to promote and safeguard the interests of its people, in articulation with the parishes. This general definition is followed by a list of assignment that include: a) rural and urban equipment; b) energy; c) transports and communications; d) education, teaching and vocational training; e) heritage, culture and science; f) leisure and sports; g) health; h) social assistance; i) housing; j) civil protection; k) environment and basic sanitation; l) consumer protection; m) fostering development; n) spatial planning and urban planning; o) municipal police; p) external cooperation. According to the principle of devolution, the government can delegate competences to the municipalities or inter-municipal entities.

One key focus of the 21st Government of the Republic of Portugal was to strengthen the competences of local authorities and thus the promotion of equity in access to appropriate public services.[10] However, the decentralization process in Portugal can be described as cynical, for the government devolved certain responsibilities without the necessary financial transfers from the central government. This makes the decentralization only administrative, and not political, because the government still controls how municipalities carry out their tasks.[11] The decentralization

[6] See OECD, *Decentralisation and Regionalisation in Portugal: What Reform Scenarios?*, Paris 2020, p. 92.

[7] See R. Duarte Abrantes, *Decentralization and (De)Politization in Portugal*, "Perspectivas – Journal of Political Science" 2019, vol. 20, p. 38.

[8] F. Teles, *Decentralization and Local Politics*, [in:] *The Oxford Handbook of Portuguese Politics*, eds. J.M. Fernandes, P.C. Magelhães, A. Costa Pinto, Oxford 2023.

[9] Article 236 of the Constitution of the Portuguese Republic 1976.

[10] Portugal, *Programa do XXI Governo Constitucional 2015–2019*, https://www.portugal.gov.pt/ficheiros-geral/programa-do-governo-pdf.aspx (access: 31.3.2025).

[11] L. de Sousa, N.F. da Cruz, D. Fernandes, *The Quality of Local Democracy: An Institutional Analysis*, "Local Government Studies" 2021, vol. 49(1), pp. 7–12.

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process has aimed to transfer a wide range of new competences to municipalities. These competences include education and healthcare, social action, culture, heritage, housing, civil protection, forest management, transportation, animal protection, food safety, fire safety and public parking. Municipalities are generally in favour of effective decentralization but oppose it without proper funding.[12]

The Act on the framework on the transfer of powers to local authorities[13] stipulated that the transfer of powers to local authorities shall be carried out in 2019 unless a municipal entity rejects the transfer of powers. However, they can reject the transfer only until 1 January 2021, at which time the powers shall be deemed to be transferred. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the new date for the mandatory transfer of new competences was postponed from 1 January 2021 to 31 March 2022.[14] The financing of these new transferred responsibilities is unclear in the Act which raised concerns.[15]

In the field of education, the Act No. 50/2018 provides that it is the responsibility of municipal bodies to participate in the planning, management and implementation of investments relating to public education. Municipal bodies are responsible, e.g., for providing school meals and managing school refectories; supporting children and students in the field of school social action; participate in the management of educational resources; participating in the purchase of goods and services related to the running of establishments and educational, teaching and sporting activities at school.[16]

The re-regulation of primary healthcare in Portugal began in 2014, and the implementation of the regulation began in 2019, when Decree Law No. 23/2019[17] transferred certain powers related to primary healthcare to municipalities. This focused mainly on infrastructural and logistical decentralization. It is important to set out the framework of Portuguese public health administration. A decentralization in the field of healthcare happened in 1993, when the National Health Service was reorganized into five Regional Health Agencies with responsibilities of overseeing and controlling public hospitals and managing and organizing primary healthcare. The Minister of Health is responsible for the planning and organization of the sector of health.[18] The decentralization hasn't brought a revolutionary change but only

[12] A. Grifo, J.L. Marques, *O discurso europeu na governação local da educação em Portugal*, "Revista Lusófona de Educação" 2021, vol. 59, pp. 133–136.

[13] Act No. 50/2018 of 16 August 2018.

[14] See Decree-Law No. 56/2020 of 20 August 2020.

[15] See A.M. Nunes, D.C. Ferreira, *A Critical Analysis of Decentralizing the Portuguese Public Healthcare Provision Services*, "International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health" 2022, vol. 19(20).

[16] See Article 11 of the Act No. 50/2018.

[17] See Decree Law No. 23/2019 of 30 January 2019.

[18] See J. de Almeida Simões, G. Figueiredo Augusto, I. Fronteira, C. Hernández-Quevedo, *Portugal: Health System Review*, 2017, https://iris.who.int/bitstream/handle/10665/330211/HiT-19-2-2017-eng.pdf?sequence=7&isAllowed=y (access: 31.3.2025).

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transferred infrastructural tasks to local government bodies, while everything in the clinical field remains in the government's competency.[19]

As for the derived education assignments, only 161 out of the 278 mainland municipalities had implemented these in 2021.[20] One can conclude that municipalities were reluctant to adapt the decentralization process because of the pandemic and financial uncertainties.

2. Promoting resilience of the area – regional development in the time of polycrisis

Following Portugal's accession to the EU, five NUTS II regions were created on the mainland and became the basis for territorial development. The five regions are: Northern, Central, Lisbon, Alentejo and Algarve. Porto is located in the Northern (Portuguese: Norte) region. Until the beginning of the 21st century, regional development followed a fairly centralised model, but then it was significantly restructured, with a greater role for local authorities alongside central administration, and the emergence of smaller units, the metropolitan development zones, "Área Metropolitana", in Porto and Lisbon, alongside the undisputed priority of regional development. In each area, Regional Development Agencies control development, with the overriding objectives of attracting foreign capital and strengthening information and communications technologies in the regions, in addition to the general territorial development objectives.[21]

The most important development event of the recent period was the "Europe 2020 – Portugal 2020" development partnership between Portugal and the European Commission. Portugal received a total of EUR 25 billion in development aid. Of this amount, the Norte region was eligible for EUR 3.4 billion. The Norte is a less developed region (where the GDP per capita of the region is less than 75% of the average GDP per capita of the European Union), which means that the main aim of the programmes was eliminating and reducing regional disparities between the Norte region and other regions. During the running of the programme, it was of the utmost importance that the local municipalities that can be found in the region

[19] See A.M. Nunes, D.C. Ferreira, *op. cit*.

[20] See Direção-Geral das Autarquias Locais, *Relatório de Acompanhamento do Processo de Descentralização – Execução do 4.º trimestre de 2021*, 2022, https://portalautarquico.dgal.gov.pt/ficheiros/?schema=f7664ca7-3a1a-4b25-9f46-2056eef44c33&channel=d5d3aa35-90ca-4458-819b-964bb657a22e&content_id=337FBFE2-1229-4442-86A6-AEFC8395BF9A&field=storage_image&lang=pt&ver=1&filetype=pdf&dtestate=2022-03-28174120 (access: 31.3.2025).

[21] See C.J.L. Balsas, *A Study of Porto's Polycentric Metropolitan Development and Governance at the Turn of the Millennium*, "International Journal of Regional and Local History" 2020, vol. 15(2), pp. 136–139.

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cooperate. The programmes here in the region focused mainly on the special characteristics a unique cultural heritage of the Porto Area, e.g. wine making or tourism.[22]

At the time of our empirical research and at the time of writing this article, the evaluation of the detailed results of the programme has not yet been completed.

The new financial period 2021–2027 of the European Union, the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), started after the programme ended. The MFF 2021–2027 has a total budget of EUR 1,216 billion, plus EUR 807 billion under the extraordinary recovery instrument, Next Generation EU. The importance of this is that it determines the cohesion funds that eligible Member States can access during the period to achieve their development objectives. For Portugal, the cohesion funds themselves amount to more than EUR 17,570 billion in the 2021–2027 financial cycle, compared to a total of EUR 16,900 billion in the previous seven years.[23]

The Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) is a temporary instrument that may be granted to the Member States to make their economies and societies more sustainable, resilient and prepared for the green and digital transitions, in line with the EU's priorities and address the challenges identified in country-specific recommendations under the European Semester framework of economic and social policy coordination. It is not part of the European Structural and Investment Funds, it can be considered as the most important tool for the NextGenerationEU (NGEU) funds.[24] Portugal received EUR 22.2 billion of the total, EUR 16.3 billion in grants and EUR 5.9 billion in loans. The RRF grants, however, are not earmarked for regional development in the Norte region, but for local transport and student housing. This is basically the case for the country as a whole, with RRF grants being allocated much more to climate protection and social problems.

It can be concluded, that Portugal is currently in a period of transition in terms of regional development, the previous big wave of development is over but cannot be assessed in a reliable way, while the new period has just started and it is also not possible to say how successful it will be in a few years, but it is certain that the strong foundations and resources are there.[25]

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[22] See I. Hoffman, J. Fazekas, A. Bencsik, B.I. Bodó, K. Budai, T. Dancs, B. Dombrovszky, P. Ferge, G. Kári, D. Lukács, M. Kárász, L. Gönczi, Zs.R. Vasas, K.B. Cseh, D. Papp, Cs. Molnár, *op. cit.*, pp. 22–23.

[23] See European Commission, *2021–2027 Cohesion Policy Overview*, https://cohesiondata.ec.europa.eu/cohesion_overview/21-27 (access: 15.12.2023).

[24] See S. Pazos-Vidal, *A Legal Perspective on the Origins and Evolution of the EU Cohesion Policy*, [in:] *EU Cohesion Policy: A Multidisciplinary Approach*, eds. N.F. Dotti, I. Musiałkowska, S. de Gregorio Hurtado, J. Walczyk, Cheltenham–Northampton 2024, pp. 50–52.

[25] See J. Ferrão, H. Pinto, J.M. Castro Caldas, R.M. do Carmo, *Vulnerabilidades territoriais, pandemia e emprego: Uma análise exploratória sobre perfis socioeconómicos municipais e impactos da COVID-19 em Portugal*, "Revista Portuguesa de Estudos Regionais" 2023, no. 63, pp. 173–176.

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3. Impact of the polycrisis on the public transport system of the AMP

On 22 October 2020, the Prime Minister of Portugal announced an investment scheme on public infrastructure of EUR 43.0 billion. The project primarily affected the transportation and energy sectors, with EUR 21.7 billion directed at the former.[26] The plan involved sources from the national budget, European structural funds, recovery funds and private investments. The project was based on the co-funding of the RRF, a total of EUR 16,644 million was provided by the RRF in the form of grants and loans.[27] The Portuguese Recovery and Resilience Plan addressed the transportation sector within its "Infrastructure Component". The core of the component included the challenges of a sustainable, intermodal transportation system, and to terminate the low territorial cohesion and low competitiveness of firms due to inadequate road network links.[28] The above-mentioned funds facilitated a significant enhancement of the transportation system of the AMP, the main players of which are Metro do Porto, the Sociedade de Transportes Colectivos do Porto (STCP) and Comboios de Portugal (CP).[29]

For Metro do Porto the significant increase of funding meant the deployment of a new line (Pink line) as well as the extension of the already existing Yellow line, which will connect Porto with the municipality of Vila Nova de Gaia. The signing of the public procurement contracts was delayed, due to actions filed against the international tender process, however, the Administrative and Fiscal Court of Porto ruled in favour of the transport operator.[30] Furthermore, public procurements in Portugal are required to be sent to the Court of Auditors for *a priori* approval.[31] Constructions of the Ruby line, that include a new bridge over the River Douro, are scheduled to start at the end of 2023.[32] In October 2023, Metro do Porto announced the deployment of four new lines, which include the construction of 38 new stations

[26] See European Commission, *ECSO Country Fact Sheet – Portugal*, October 2021, pp. 29–31.

[27] See Ministério do Planeamento, *Recuperar Portugal, Construindo o futuro*, Plano de Recuperação e a Resiliência, 22.8.2021.

[28] See Commission Staff Working Document, Analysis of the recovery and resilience plan of Portugal, SWD(2021) 146 final, Brussels, 16.6.2021, 3.1, Component 7.

[29] See I. Hoffman, J. Fazekas, A. Bencsik, B.I. Bodó, K. Budai, T. Dancs, B. Dombrovszky, P. Ferge, G. Kári, D. Lukács, M. Kárász, L. Gönczi, Zs.R. Vasas, K.B. Cseh, D. Papp, Cs. Molnár, *op. cit.*, pp.16–24.

[30] See River Plaza, *Metro do Porto Has Signed a 98.9 Million Contract to Extend the Yellow Line*, 12.1.2021, https://www.riverplaza.pt/en/metro-do-porto-has-signed-a-98-9-million-contract-to-extend-the-yellow-line (access: 18.12.2023).

[31] See Article 5 (1) (c) of the Act No. 98/1997 of 26 August 1997.

[32] RTP, *Metro do Porto lança concurso para novo projeto*, 13.10.2023, https://www.rtp.pt/noticias/pais/metro-do-porto-lanca-concurso-para-novo-projeto_n1521002 (access: 28.4.2025).

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and route length of 37 kilometres.[33] The new lines will increase the citizens' public transport options, encouraging commuters to switch from using cars, therefore, it is even part of the fight against climate catastrophe, because the more developed public transport could decrease the CO_2 emissions.

As one of the main objectives of the enhancement of the public transport system are green transition and intermodality, a hydrogen-fuelled bus line is being deployed by the Commission's REPower EU Plan. The plan is being funded by Portugal's RRF and serves as a tool against the hardships and energy disruption caused by the invasion of Ukraine, introducing new measures to save energy and to diversify energy supplies.[34] The Bus Rapid Transit System (BRT) is being built in the last quarter of 2023, linking the roundabouts to the city centre.[35] The number of eco-friendly buses increased within the STCP system as well, in the last few years, substantially reducing CO_2 emissions of the area.[36] Because the STCP system can be considered as a joint, urban system, therefore, the role of the inter-municipal cooperation has been strengthened in this area.

As for CP, a high-speed rail line worth EUR 4.5 billion is being built connecting Lisbon and Porto. The deployment of the line, which will be implemented through a Public-Private Partnership (PPP) scheme, is considered to be one of the most relevant transport projects of Portugal. The program aims to reduce travel time and CO_2 emissions, create additional capacity on the rail network, boost the economy and promote the model shift towards railways. Furthermore, a new cross-border high-speed line connecting Porto, Valença and Vigo (Spain) is being built, which is planned to be integrated with the Porto–Lisbon line after 2030. These projects are linked to the strengthening of the connectivity between the different urban areas.[37]

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[33] Metro do Porto, *Quatro novas linhas no projeto Metro 3.0*, 17.10.2023, https://www.metrodoporto.pt/pages/771?news_id=488 (access: 28.4.2025).

[34] After the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the regulatory framework of the RRF was amended, and the tools of the RePower EU for promoting the use and application of alternative energy sources was added to the Facility. Based on this amendment, the Portuguese RRF has been amended and the focus of it has slightly changed, thus, energy saving and diversification issues have been added to the Portuguese framework, as well. See S. Baroncelli, *Recovery and Resilience Facility*, [in:] *Research Handbook on Post-Pandemic EU Economic Governance and NGEU Law*, eds. F. Fabbrini, C.A. Petit, Cheltenham–Northampton 2024, pp. 111–113.

[35] See Porto, *Bus Rapid Transit System tender launched to link Boavista to Foz in 2023*, http://dev.porto.pt/en/news/bus-rapid-transit-system-tender-launched-to-link-boavista-to-foz-in-2023 (access: 28.4.2025).

[36] See Porto, *There Are 21 New STCP Buses Running on CNG in Porto*, http://dev.porto.pt/en/news/there-are-21-new-stcp-buses-running-on-cng-in-porto (access: 28.4.2025).

[37] See P. Szobi, T. Nigrin, J. Oravec, *Political Will and Economic Necessity? The Construction of High-Speed Rail Networks in Portugal and East Germany*, "Review of Economic Perspectives" 2023, vol. 23(1), pp. 28–29.

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In addition to the significant increase in resources, the beneficial alteration of the legislative framework also played a role in the implementation of the above-mentioned projects. Both the Public Contracts Code and Decree Law No. 30/2021,[38] which covers the special measures with regards to contracts financed or co-financed by European funds, were amended in November 2022. Decree Law No. 78/2022 introduced new rules for design-build contracts and created the possibility to accept bids without documents digitally signed.[39] Formerly, driven by the constraints of the COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine and the energy crisis, Decree Law No. 36/2022 established an exceptional and temporary regime for price adjustments applicable to public contracts.[40] The primary aim of the amendments was to facilitate public procurements utilizing EU funds.

The explosive growth of the transport sector in the past few years underlines the ongoing relevance of inter-municipal cooperation in the public transport field, which is being recognised not only on national, but on EU level as well. The establishment of an extensive public transport system not only increases the AMP's relevance within the region but supports Portugal's sustainability objectives as well.

4. Rationalising water management in the urban area of Porto (?)

In our research, we focused on the water management in Porto, a sector that has undergone significant changes in the Portuguese administration in recent times.

Water management is typically a local government task, but in many countries the state also plays a significant role. In Portugal, on the other hand, water management is the exclusive responsibility of the municipalities,[41] with the state providing the only guidelines. Portuguese cities therefore manage water supply through companies, but this can take several forms: some municipalities contract with private companies, others entrust the task to municipal-owned companies, such as the municipality of Porto. Since 2006, the entire water supply for the city and its surroundings has been provided by a single large company, Águas e Energia do Porto. According to its articles of association, this company is responsible for water distribution in the region, wastewater disposal, wastewater treatment, stormwater drainage and the management of water pipelines. The company serves 160,476 customers and provides water to more than 500,000 inhabitants. On average, it supplies 45,130 m^3 of drinking water to the people of Porto every day.[42] It

[38] See Decree Law No. 30/2021 of 7 May 2021.

[39] See Decree Law No. 78/2022 of 7 November 2022.

[40] See Decree Law No. 36/2022 of 20 May 2022.

[41] Act 9.433 of 8 January 1997.

[42] See International Water Association, https://iwa-network.org/aguas-do-porto (access: 27.8.2023).

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is worth noting that, as of November 2020, Porto's energy management will also be managed by Águas e Energia do Porto.

In recent decades, Porto's water supply has faced serious problems: due to rapid urban growth, more than 75% of the streams running through the area have been piped and buried to allow further construction on the surface, threatening the quality of life of the city's inhabitants. Firstly, it has banned the piping and filling of additional water and, secondly, it has developed a detailed strategy (Water Sensitive Urban Design) to restore part of the ecosystem and biodiversity. The Water Sensitive Urban Design is about: 1. Stabilization of streams bed and banks to facilitate and promote natural development of the geomorphological processes (reducing erosion and flow control). 2. Retention of (storm)water in the landscape and minimize flooding situations. 3. Plant new trees in the streams banks and create new riparian zones with native species. 4. Turn the riparian corridors accessible to the public through the adjoining public open space. It should be highlighted that in 2016, Águas e Energia do Porto launched the H2PORTO project, a real-time management platform aimed at providing: (i) integration of all information from the different systems (water supply, wastewater, stormwater, natural channels and coastal areas); (ii) uniformization of all data acquired through remote sensors; (iii) real-time display of all data in user-friendly dashboards; (iv) integration of online and offline numerical models for all systems; (v) modules for automatic alerts and warnings (based on data acquisition and numerical models); (vi) reporting and data mining; (vii) publishing selected information for the general public.[43]

So, this platform essentially collects all available data on water management, organizes it and makes it available to public authorities and citizens. Over the last few years, the company has been working to make H2OPORTO even more accessible to the public and has therefore made the platform available on smartphones.

5. "Back to the future" – housing crisis reloaded after the COVID-19 pandemic and the attempts to solve it

In interviews in 2020 and 2023, members of the AMP expressed their aim to improve the housing situation in their municipalities. Different municipalities are affected differently by housing poverty: affordability, quality issues or homelessness.

Housing poverty issues have been present in different forms throughout the decades in the metropolitan areas of Portugal, including the area of the AMP as well. One indicator is the housing cost overburden rate, which shows the percent-

[43] Bentley Systems, *Oporto Water Utility Develops Technology Platform for Integrated Management of Urban Water Cycle: Fully-Integrated Water Management Efficiently Uses Existing Resources*, 2019, https://www.bentley.com/wp-content/uploads/CS-H2Porto-LTR-EN-LR.pdf (access: 28.4.2025).

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age of households that spend more than 30% of their income on housing costs. In 2019, the year before the COVID-19 pandemic the housing cost overburden rate in Portugal was 5.9%, and 18.9% of the population lived "without the economic capacity to keep [their] home adequately warm".[44] In the same year, the housing cost overburden rate was 6.2% for the predominantly urban areas in the Norte region,[45] which overlaps with the AMP in this period. During the pandemic, the housing cost overburden slightly decreased in the predominantly urban areas but increased in the medium urban areas of the Norte region. These rates are at or above the national average between 2019 and 2022.

The AMP has been among the most expensive real-estate and rental markets of Portugal, especially since the recovery from the great financial crisis of 2008. The Portuguese housing market has been characterized by a shortage of adequate housing for decades, however, since the middle of the 2010s, a new set of challenges has occurred. As the economic development after the crisis has been "driven by a significant touristic boom", the real-estate prices have "skyrocketed" in the areas most popular with tourists, Algarve, Metropolitan Area of Lisbon or the AMP.[46] The intensification of tourism came with the emergence of short-term rentals (e.g. Airbnb) and a demand for housing by "non-habitual residents" creating a competition for the traditional long-term use of the housing stock and drive up demand – leading to increases in the real-estate and rental prices.[47] In 2017 the issues around affordable housing brought about a visit from UN Special Rapporteur on Adequate Housing, who found the followings on touristification on housing affordability: "Some property owners, particularly in the historic centres of Lisbon and Porto, are choosing either to renovate their properties or to convert them to luxury rental units for short-term rental, or are selling their properties to foreign investors, who often do the same. Since nightly rates are, on average, more affordable than those for a hotel room but more lucrative than long-term rental prices, it creates an incentive for property owners to convert their homes or buildings accordingly, which in turn reduces the stock of available units and causes the price of housing in those neighbourhoods to rise".

At the same time, similarly to the national average for most AMP members, the share of publicly owned dwellings is rather low, therefore their options to offer

[44] See INE Statistics Portugal, *As Pessoas 2019*, Lisboa 2020, pp. 33–34.

[45] Housing cost overburden rate (%) by place of residence (NUTS – 2013) and urban areas typology.

[46] See M. Allegra, S. Tulumello, A. Colombo, J. Ferrão, *The (Hidden) Role of the EU in Housing Policy: The Portuguese Case in Multi-Scalar Perspective*, "European Planning Studies" 2020, vol. 28(12), pp. 2309–2312.

[47] See S. Guinand, *Packaging Oporto: Hypercommodification of Its City Centre?*, [in:] *A Research Agenda for Heritage Tourism*, ed. M. Gravari-Barbas, Cheltenham–Northampton 2020, pp. 107–110.

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municipal or social housing is also limited. However, there are significant differences within the AMP, in Porto 13% of housing units are municipally owned, well above the national or regional average.[48]

The COVID-19 pandemic paradoxically further contributed to the touristification of the AMP housing and rental market. In 2020 and 2021, when pandemic lockdowns occurred around the world, Portugal became a popular destination among non-habitual residents. "Digital nomads" and remote workers (especially from wealthier EU Member States) migrated to the scenic and relatively affordable Portugal and the AMP. While some hotels have adapted to receive the non-habitual residents as guests,[49] interviewees agree that during the pandemic the demand for rentals from this group contributed to the shortage and the rising prices in the housing market of some AMP members.

This issue also showed how individual policies of AMP members can interfere with other members' agendas and create negative externalities. In July 2019, not long before the pandemic, the Municipal Council of Porto had adopted resolution no. NUD/254724/2019/CMP proposing a regulation on short-time rentals. The proposal created different zones based on the existing presence of short-term rentals, with licenses being issued according to the zone. The Council also adopted a six--month suspension on the issuing of new licenses in the most affected zones. This ban and the proposed regulation were suspended by resolution no. NUD/151652/2020/CMP of the Municipal Council acknowledging the pandemic-related economic hardships of the tourism sector. In October 2022, the temporary ban on new short-term rental licenses was reinstated in the Porto city center.[50] Meanwhile, Porto issued restrictions on the short-term rental sectors, but the demand did not dwindle, just shifted to other AMP members, especially Vila Nova de Gaia. As Porto was cracking down on touristification and short-term rentals, neighbouring Vila Nova de Gaia experienced a surge in non-habitual residents and short-term rentals, and the corresponding housing affordability issues according to our interviewees.

Despite these experiences, the AMP members continue to treat the housing affordability and touristification crisis on a municipal level. In 2023, Porto finally adopted Regulation No. 495-A/2023 on the Sustainable Growth of Local Accommodation in Porto, following the proposal of 2019. Vila Nova de Gaia, on the other hand, opted to expand its municipal housing stock by building and acquiring new

[48] See M. Allegra, S. Tulumello, G. Allegretti, *Housing Policy in the Political Agenda: The Trajectory of Portugal*, [in:] *Identifying Models of National Urban Agendas: Comparative Studies of Political Agendas*, eds. F. Gelli, M. Basso, Cham 2022, pp. 321–326.

[49] See I. Borges, S. Brás, A. Machado, S. Leite, E. Costa, S. Mota, *Digital Nomads: A Growing Trend in Hospitality in Portugal*, [in:] *Smart Innovation, Systems and Technologies*, vol. 284: *Advances in Tourism, Technology and Systems*, eds. J.V. de Carvalho, P. Liberato, A. Peña, Singapore 2022, pp. 542–545.

[50] NUD/568523/2022/CMP.

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dwellings, and rehabilitating the older units and buildings. The municipality is currently executing the "Investment no. Re-Co2-i01 programme to support access to housing", a development financed mostly by the EU Recovery and Resilience Facility funds. This project aims to expand the municipal housing stock by more than 500 units.[51]

CONCLUSIONS

It is an interesting question, how urban administrations and services provision systems have been influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic, and by the following polycrisis. Our research group had the opportunity to do comparative research. We have conducted empirical research on the service provision and administration of the AMP directly before the European outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, in February 2020. Thus, we had a quite exact picture shortly before the "excited state" of the COVID-19 pandemic and the later polycrysis. It became clear, that the COVID-19 pandemic can be interpreted as an engine for the concentration. It is obvious that the joint public transport projects require the cooperation of the municipalities of the AMP and even the cooperation of the Portuguese central government, especially the development projects which are based on the Portuguese railway system. These projects were similarly related to the energy crisis after the Russian invasion against Ukraine. The public transport development projects have been focused on the preference of the rail transport (development of the Metro do Porto) and on the procurement of climate-friendly and fuel-efficient coaches. These reforms required an even more concentrated public transport planning system, because these projects influence several municipalities of the AMP, which should re-define their local transport and road strategies. Because of the multiple shocks, the energy crisis and in 2023 and 2024 even the climate catastrophe, this approach has now become permanent. Similarly, the water management system has been more concentrated, and as we have mentioned it earlier, it has been strongly related to the challenges of the climate catastrophe, especially to the treatment of extreme climate events.

It is interesting, however, that in the literature crises can be interpreted as an accelerator factor for centralisation reforms,[52] the Portuguese education has been reformed, and the over-centralised system has been significantly decentralised.

[51] Estratégia Local de Habitação, https://www.gaiurb.pt/pages/936?news_id=570 (access: 21.12.2023).

[52] See G. Bouckaert, S. Kuhlmann, *Introduction. Comparing Local Public Sector Reforms: Institutional Policies in Context*, [in:] *Local Public Sector Reforms in Times of Crisis: Governance and Public Management*, eds. S. Kuhlmann, G. Bouckaert, London 2016, pp. 5–10.

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The apparent contradiction can be resolved by the fact that the reform contains extensive elements of fiscal austerity and can therefore be seen as a kind of cynical decentralisation.[53]

The COVID-19 as a temporary "excited state" could be observed in the field of housing. In 2020, we could observe a housing crisis, which were related to the urban living, the very intensive increase of the tourism in the AMP and partially to the gentrification. During the traveling restrictions of the COVID-19 pandemic, the role of the (over)tourism has been weakened in the AMP. However, it affected negatively the economy of the area, but the housing crisis was "softened" that time. After the "excited state" of the COVID-related travelling restrictions, after 2021 and 2022 the housing crisis returned to the area. However, the "resting period" of the COVID offered the opportunity to prepare projects on the treatment of the crisis, and the municipal housing became an important issue of the municipalities of the AMP, and they started projects co-funded by the RRF, as well.

If we examine the administration of the AMP, it can be seen that it has not changed significantly, the legal framework remained the same, but the challenges resulted in a concentration in the practice of service provision and an intensifying cooperation in planning activities, especially in the field of public transport.

Based on these results, our research group will continue the follow-up research, in 2024 and 2025 we are conducting a similar study in Budapest, to observe the impact of the polycrisis on a different administrative environment.

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[53] See S. Kuhlmann, B.P. Dumas, M. Heuberger, *Reform Trends*, [in:] *The Capacity of Local Governments in Europe: Governance and Public Management*, eds. S. Kuhlmann, B.P. Dumas, M. Heuberger, Cham 2022, pp. 92–100.

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ABSTRAKT

W artykule przedstawiono główne wyniki kolejnych badań dotyczących administracji i systemu świadczenia usług w Obszarze Metropolitalnym Porto (AMP). Grupa badawcza przeprowadziła badania empiryczne w Porto tuż przed wybuchem pandemii COVID-19. Analizie poddano wpływ polikryzysu rozpoczętego w 2020 r. Ramy regulacyjne i organizacyjne nie zostały znacząco zmienione w wyniku wielu kryzysów i wstrząsów, ale praktyka, a zwłaszcza działania planistyczne w dziedzinie usług świadczonych w ogólnym interesie gospodarczym, stała się bardziej skoncentrowana. Współpraca w dziedzinie usług świadczonych w interesie ogólnym (usługi dla ludności) pozostała stosunkowo ograniczona. Polikryzys nie jest zatem tylko tymczasowym „stanem podwyższonego napięcia", tylko ma trwały wpływ na te systemy.

Słowa kluczowe: Obszar Metropolitalny Porto; świadczenie usług; współpraca międzygminna; koncentracja; COVID-19; polikryzys