

LABOUR FORCE RESILIENCE IN METROPOLITAN AREAS: DECLINE OR ACCELERATION?

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Abstract: In the European Union (EU), metropolitan areas are often defined as “metropolitan regions” (Eurostat) or “functional urban areas”, including the central city and its commuting zone. Metropolitan areas represent some of the most dynamic spatial structures at the global level, characterized by a high level of development and widely regarded as engines of socio-economic growth.

An important role in ensuring the competitiveness of metropolitan areas is played by the employed population engaged in various economic activities. In fact, metropolitan areas provide significantly better employment opportunities and are therefore highly attractive for individuals seeking jobs. They typically offer higher wages compared with other areas, as well as better living conditions. Overall, metropolitan areas function as engines of the European labour market, concentrating the majority of jobs in advanced services, competitive industries, and public administration.

This article aims to analyse the level of labour force resilience in the 244 metropolitan areas of the European Union. The resilience of metropolitan areas has become a topic of global and European interest, given that these territories host more than 60% of the world’s population.

Keywords: metropolitan area, territorial resilience, workforce

1. INTRODUCTION

In the current context of the global economy, the metropolitan areas have become some of the most influential territorial structures in terms of the concentration of population, economic activities, and employment. At the global level, these territories host a significant share of the population and generate a large part of economic output, being regarded as genuine centres of development and innovation. In the European Union, metropolitan areas represent complex economic spaces, characterized by a high concentration of human capital and productive activities.

In this context, the analysis of labour market resilience in metropolitan areas becomes particularly relevant, as these territories concentrate a large share of the labour force and employment opportunities. The capacity of metropolitan labour markets to adapt to economic changes and to maintain high levels of employment represents an essential element of sustainable territorial development.

Starting from these considerations, the present study investigates how labour resources and employment dynamics contribute to shaping the level of labour market resilience in the metropolitan areas of the European Union. The analysis focuses on the main demographic and economic indicators of the labour market, aiming to highlight the existing differences between metropolitan areas and to identify the main trends in the evolution of employment.

2. METHODOLOGY

The analysis of labour force resilience in the metropolitan areas of the European Union is carried out based on socio-demographic and economic indicators relevant for assessing labour market dynamics. The study covers the 244 metropolitan areas of the European Union, defined in European statistics as functional urban areas, which include the central city and its commuting zone.

The data used in the analysis are mainly derived from the statistical databases of Eurostat, as well as from reports published by the European Commission and the OECD. These sources provide comparable information at the European level regarding population structure, employment, and labour market developments in metropolitan areas.

In order to assess the labour resources, indicators related to the total population and its demographic structure were used. The population analysis was conducted for the year 2023, taking into account the role of the resident population in determining the development potential of the labour market. In this context, the demographic dependency ratio was also analysed, an indicator that reflects the relationship between the dependent population (0–14 years and 65 years and over) and the working-age population (15–64 years), providing an overview of the pressure exerted on the labour force.

With regard to the dynamics of employees, the analysis was carried out for the period 2017–2021, a time frame that allows the observation of employment developments before and during recent disturbances in the labour market. This indicator highlights the capacity of metropolitan areas to maintain or recover jobs and is therefore relevant for assessing the level of labour market resilience.

In addition, the analysis of the employed population was conducted for the period 2018–2021, considering active individuals aged between 20 and 64 years. The evolution of this indicator makes it possible to highlight the differences between metropolitan areas in terms of their capacity to absorb labour and the ability of labour markets to adapt to economic changes.

Within the research, a descriptive statistical analysis of the selected indicators was used, focusing on their evolution, the differences between metropolitan areas, and the distribution of values at the European level. The interpretation of the results allows the identification of development patterns of metropolitan labour markets and highlights their level of resilience.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

The concept of economic resilience has become, over the last two decades, one of the most important theoretical frameworks used in the analysis of territorial development and the dynamics of regional economies. In the scientific literature, resilience is generally defined as the ability of an economic or social system to withstand shocks, adapt to structural changes, and return to a development trajectory after periods of disturbance [1], [2]. In the regional context, resilience refers particularly to the capacity of territorial economies to maintain stable levels of economic activity and employment, as well as their ability to generate new economic opportunities following structural transformations [3], [4].

The first systematic approaches to the concept of regional resilience highlighted that the economic performance of regions during periods of instability depends on a series of structural factors, such as sectoral diversification, the level of human capital, and the institutional capacity for adaptation. Regions characterized by a diversified economic structure tend to display a higher capacity to adapt to economic

shocks, as their dependence on a limited number of economic sectors is lower [3]. In the same way, research shows that the economic evolution of regions is influenced by evolutionary processes and by their capacity to capitalize on local resources and human capital in order to generate new economic activities [5].

Another important aspect analysed in the scientific literature concerns the relationship between economic resilience and labour market dynamics. Employment developments are considered one of the most relevant indicators of a territory's capacity to cope with economic changes, as they reflect both the adaptation of firms to new economic conditions and the flexibility of the labour force. In the recent scientific literature on labour market resilience in Europe, it is emphasized that the impact of economic shocks on employment differs significantly between metropolitan areas, depending on economic structure, productivity levels, and territorial characteristics. Analyses conducted at the level of European metropolitan areas show that territorial economies characterized by high productivity and a diversified economic structure lose proportionally fewer jobs during recessions and recover more rapidly to previous employment levels [6]. At the same time, research on urban and rural metropolitan areas of the European Union highlights the existence of significant differences in economic resilience determined by structural and demographic factors [7]. Studies dedicated to urban and metropolitan areas also confirm that economic development, innovation, and urban infrastructure contribute to strengthening labour market resilience in these territories [8].

Numerous studies emphasize the role of institutions and public policies in strengthening regional economic resilience. The capacity of metropolitan areas to respond to economic shocks depends not only on economic structure but also on the level of institutional coordination and the effectiveness of regional development policies [3]. At the same time, research shows that regional resilience should not be interpreted solely as a return to the situation prior to a crisis, but also as a process of structural transformation that can lead to the emergence of new models of economic development [2]. It is also possible to observe the importance of coordination between local actors and strategic planning in strengthening territorial resilience [9]. In this regard, proactive regional policies can reduce the negative effects of economic shocks and support long-term development [10].

Within the scientific literature dedicated to urban economics, particular attention is given to the role of metropolitan areas in generating economic growth and shaping labour market dynamics. Metropolitan areas are characterized by a high concentration of population, human capital, and economic infrastructure, which encourages the emergence of agglomeration economies and stimulates firms' productivity. According to research, large cities represent centres of innovation and economic development, as the geographical proximity between firms and workers facilitates knowledge exchange and the generation of new ideas [11]. Similarly, studies highlight that urban agglomerations contribute to increasing economic productivity and to the development of labour markets [12]. Analyses conducted on European metropolitan areas show that these territories represent the main engines of economic growth, due to agglomeration economies that foster economic interaction, knowledge transfer, and labour specialization. The results indicate that larger metropolitan areas tend to record higher levels of productivity compared with smaller urban agglomerations, confirming the role of urban size and structure in regional economic performance [13].

The importance of human capital and innovation in the development of metropolitan areas is demonstrated by highlighting the role of the creative class in stimulating

urban economic growth [14]. According to this perspective, metropolitan areas that succeed in attracting highly skilled workers and knowledge-based economic activities tend to record superior economic performance and a higher capacity to adapt to economic changes.

The scientific literature also emphasizes that the sectoral structure of the urban economy plays an essential role in determining labour market resilience. The study conducted highlights that cities in which knowledge- and technology-based sectors predominate tend to generate economic multiplier effects, creating new jobs both in advanced sectors and in related economic activities, while the economic dynamics of cities are influenced by the interaction between economic structure, human capital, and local institutions [15].

Another important area of the scientific literature concerns the analysis of territorial differences in terms of the capacity of regions to cope with economic changes. Research shows that economic development is often concentrated in certain territories, particularly in urban and metropolitan areas, while other metropolitan areas lag behind economically [16]. These territorial disparities can significantly influence labour market dynamics and may generate important differences in employment levels and income.

In the context of the European Union, numerous studies have analysed the impact of economic crises on regional development and on the labour market. Research findings indicate that the effects of economic crises differ significantly between metropolitan areas, depending on their economic structure and their capacity to attract investments and innovative activities [17]. At the same time, studies show that the economic resilience of European metropolitan areas is influenced by factors such as human capital, infrastructure, and the level of economic integration [18].

Metropolitan areas are better able to maintain labour market dynamics and to record sustainable economic growth due to their developed infrastructure and international connectivity [19]. At the same time, metropolitan areas that are less economically integrated or that have poorly developed infrastructure tend to experience slower recoveries [20].

In addition to these contributions, recent scientific literature pays increasing attention to the role of cities and metropolitan areas in strengthening labour market resilience. Analyses presented in reports published by international organizations highlight that large urban areas represent major centres for the concentration of economic activities and employment, making a significant contribution to economic growth and labour market development [21], [22].

Overall, the scientific literature highlights that labour market resilience is influenced by a complex combination of economic, social, and institutional factors. Metropolitan areas, due to the concentration of human capital, economic infrastructure, and innovative activities, tend to display a greater capacity to adapt to economic changes compared with other territories. The analysis of labour force resilience in these spaces therefore becomes essential for understanding how urban labour markets evolve and respond to contemporary economic transformations.

4. METHODOLOGICAL ASPECTS

For evaluating the resilience of metropolitan areas in EU from workforce perspective, the following evaluation instruments were used:

1. Documentary research – the data banks and official statistical information sources (NIS, Eurostat, etc.), and at metropolitan level were analysed the relevant documents (procedural handbooks, guides),
2. Case studies and good practice – for obtaining additional qualitative information (in-point issues, specific conditions of resilience, determinant factors for the success of the metropolitan areas, etc.), and which ensured the workforce indicators on types of metropolitan areas.

5. RESULTS

LABOUR RESOURCES

At the level of the European Union, in 2023, 267.930 million inhabitants lived in metropolitan areas, representing a positive dynamic of +4.6% compared with 2014. In practical terms, the population of metropolitan areas increased by 10.441 million inhabitants (from 257.4 million). The total population of the EU-27 in 2023 was 448.38 million inhabitants. The population living in metropolitan areas represented around 60% of the total population. In 2023, the metropolitan areas of Romania had a population of 7.4 million inhabitants, representing a decrease of –2.48% compared with 2018. The largest metropolitan area in terms of population is the capital, Bucharest, with 2.290 million inhabitants, while the smallest is Galați, with 494,323 inhabitants. The most densely populated metropolitan areas in the EU-27 are The Hague (2,786 inhabitants/km²), followed by Naples (2,539 inhabitants/km²), Wrocław (2,347 inhabitants/km²), and Wuppertal (2,136 inhabitants/km²). In terms of dynamics, the largest population decrease was recorded in Timișoara (–6.12%), followed by Craiova (–4.99%) and Ploiești (–4.74%). The capital also recorded a slight decline (–0.53%). The only metropolitan area that recorded population growth was Brașov (+0.29%).

The demographic dependency ratio is a socio-demographic indicator that measures the proportion of the young population (0–14 years) and the elderly population (65 years and over) in relation to the working-age population (15–64 years), representing an indicator of the social and economic pressure placed on the labour force. A high dependency ratio indicates an ageing population, with a large number of individuals dependent on the younger generation, which may generate economic and social pressures. This indicator helps assess the sustainability of pension and healthcare systems, as well as the planning of social policies. On the labour market, a high dependency ratio may influence labour demand and supply, as well as pressure on social insurance systems. In essence, the demographic dependency ratio provides an overview of the age structure of a population and of the challenges it poses for society.

At the level of metropolitan areas, the male demographic dependency ratio was 51.13% in 2023.

Some metropolitan areas have a higher dependency ratio, which will affect their labour markets and healthcare systems. The most ageing metropolitan areas include Nice, Le Mans, Saint-Étienne, Les Abymes, Zwickau, Limoges, Fort-de-France, Nîmes, Görlitz, and Perpignan. At the opposite end are metropolitan areas characterized by predominantly younger populations, such as Las Palmas, Oslo, Valletta, Luxembourg, Vienna, Graz, Innsbruck, and Madrid.

EMPLOYEES

At the level of the metropolitan areas of the EU-27, 115,952 thousand employees were registered, showing an increasing trend of 3.9% compared with 2017. A slight level of resilience can also be observed compared with the year preceding the beginning of the sanitary crisis (Fig. 1). During the crisis, as a result of the restrictions imposed, the number of employees decreased by –1.37%.

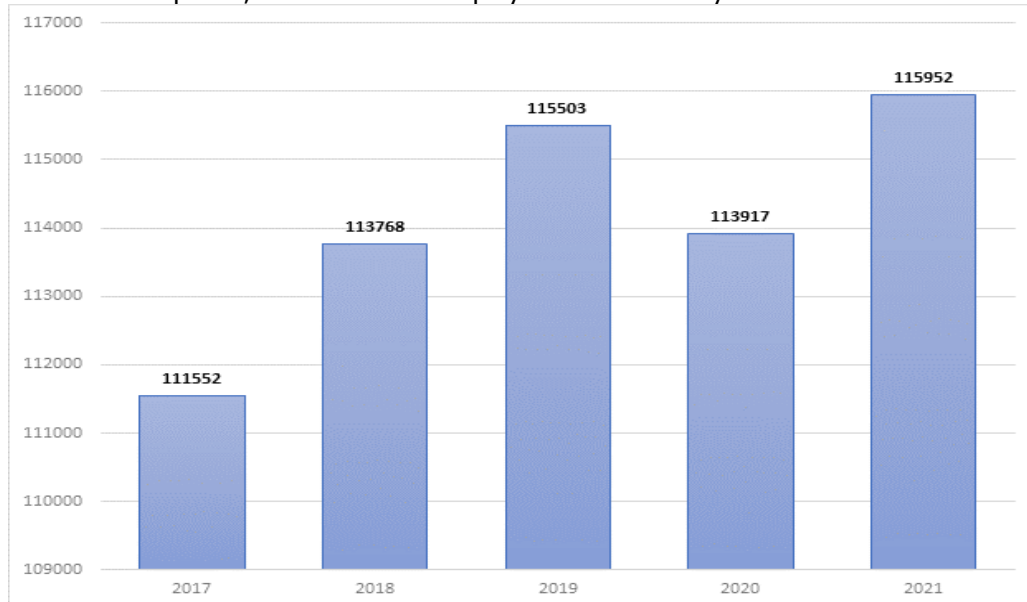


Fig. 1: Evolution of the number of employees in the metropolitan areas of the EU-27

Source: [23], [24]

EMPLOYED POPULATION

The employment rate (for the active population aged 20–64) in the EU-27 reached 75.3% in 2023, increasing by 0.7 percentage points compared with 2022. The highest regional rates were recorded in the capital metropolitan area of Poland (Warsaw) – 86.5%. Other examples of high employment rates include Bratislava (Slovakia) – 85.8% and Trier (Germany) – 85.4%. At the opposite end, in southern Italy (Calabria, Campania, Sicily), the employment rate was below 50% (between 48.4% and 48.7%).

In 2022, almost 90% of NUTS 2 metropolitan areas recorded employment rates above pre-COVID-19 levels, while more than 40% of metropolitan areas had employment rates above 78% – the EU target for 2030 [25]. Among the first ten metropolitan areas with the highest employment rates, six were capital metropolitan areas, which also recorded the fastest employment growth between 2019 and 2022 [25].

In capital metropolitan areas, one in four employees works in knowledge-oriented private services, compared with only one in ten in predominantly rural metropolitan areas. These characteristics supported job resilience in capital metropolitan areas during the COVID period, as many of these activities were largely compatible with working from home [25].

The total number of employed persons in 2021 was 133,172.48 thousand, increasing from 130,895.88 thousand in 2018. The increase amounted to 1.74%. In the EU-27,

in 2024 there were approximately 97.6 million employed persons aged between 20 and 64. Metropolitan areas account for 14.14% of the total employed population in the EU. Compared with the year preceding the sanitary crisis, a slight degree of resilience can be observed.

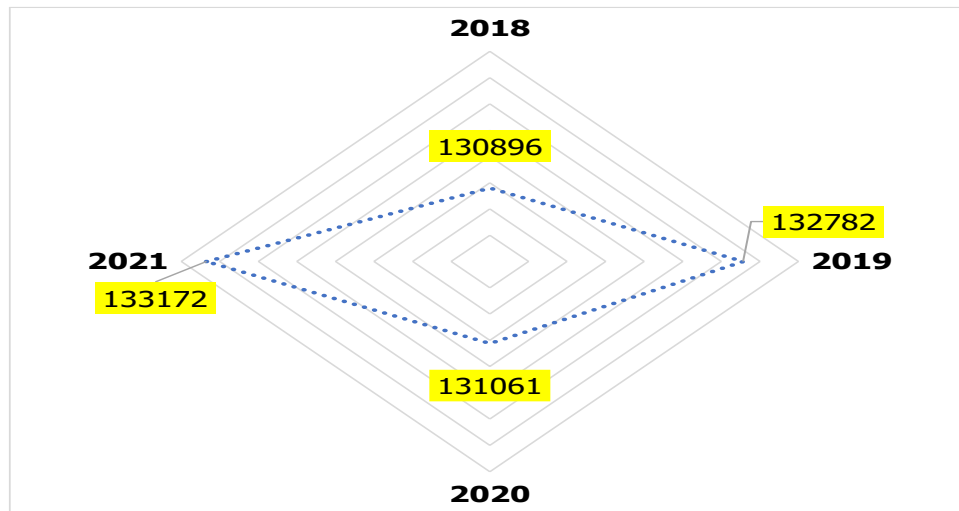


Fig. 2: Evolution of employed persons in metropolitan areas

Source: [25]

In 2021, the largest employed population recorded in a metropolitan area was 6,661.1 thousand persons, while the minimum value was 114 thousand persons. There is a tendency for the maximum employed population to increase and the minimum value to decrease at the level of metropolitan areas. The maximum value was recorded in Paris, while the minimum value was recorded in Görlitz (Germany). The most important metropolitan areas in terms of employed population are Paris, Madrid, Berlin, Barcelona, Ruhr, Milan, Rome, Budapest, Amsterdam, and Munich. It can be observed that seven of these are capital metropolitan areas of European states.

Influence of conditions in metropolitan areas on local employment

- In metropolitan areas, the majority of well-paid jobs are concentrated, especially in IT, financial services, industry, and construction.
- Employees from surrounding municipalities frequently commute to the central city, generating the phenomenon of metropolitan commuting.
- Often, salaries in the central urban area are higher than in peri-urban municipalities, but transport costs and commuting time reduce the real benefits for commuters.
- Metropolitan areas attract investments, which leads to an increase in the number of employees and, in some cases, to pressure on the labour market, as employers are required to offer more attractive employment packages (Table 1).

Metropolitan area	Estimated average gross annual salary (EUR)	Observations
Luxembourg	€81,000 (very high annual average)	Highest average level in the EU
Dublin	~ €55,000– 59,000	Ireland ranked 3rd in the EU
Paris	~ €50,000–54,000	Estimates from INSEE / relocation reports; salaries exceed the national average in France
Amsterdam	~€48,000–55,000	Benelux countries among the highest in the EU
Stockholm	~€45,000–52,000	Sweden has high hourly wages
Berlin (zona metro)	~€45,000–55,000	Estimates from PayScale and local reports; varies by industry
Madrid (zona metro)	~€30,000–36,000	Spain below north-western European averages; the capital exceeds the national level
Rome (zona metro)	~€28,000–34,000	Italy shows large regional variations, with higher levels in the north
Warsaw	~€18,000–26,000	Poland has significantly lower salaries than western EU countries
Prague	~€16,000–24,000	Czech Republic: Rapid wage growth in recent years, but still below western levels
Bucharest	~€12,000–18,000	Romania remains among the lowest in nominal terms in the EU, although the capital is above the national average
Sofia	~€9,000–13,000	Bulgaria records the lowest average values in the EU

Table 1: Estimated average gross annual salary in selected metropolitan areas
Source: [26]

There are clear income differences between eastern and western metropolitan areas of Europe. Metropolitan areas located in Eastern European countries record significantly lower nominal average wages than those in Western Europe (for example Bulgaria, Romania, and Poland compared with France, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg). However, differences are partially reduced when measured in purchasing power standards, as local prices are generally lower in Eastern Europe. The metropolitan areas that record the highest salary levels are Luxembourg, Dublin, Paris, and Amsterdam. These high incomes are largely explained by the strong presence of the financial sector, the IT sector, and multinational companies within the economies of these metropolitan areas.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The concept of a resilient metropolitan area becomes conceptually relevant when chronic stress or sudden shocks threaten to cause large-scale disruptions or the collapse of physical or social systems. The conceptual limitation of resilience does not necessarily take into account the power dynamics that are inherent in the way cities function and respond to disturbances. In this context, resilience has

contributed to narrowing the gap between disaster risk and climate change adaptation. It moves away from traditional disaster risk management, which relies on risk assessments referring to specific hazards. Instead, it accepts the possibility that a wide range of disruptive events – both stresses and shocks – may occur, even though they are not necessarily predictable. Resilience therefore focuses on improving the performance of a system in the face of multiple hazards, rather than on preventing or mitigating the loss of assets caused by specific events.

At the level of the European Union, in 2023, 267.930 million inhabitants lived in metropolitan areas, representing a positive dynamic of +4.6% compared with 2014. In practical terms, the population of metropolitan areas increased by 10.441 million inhabitants (from 257.4 million). The total population of the EU-27 in 2023 was 448.38 million inhabitants. The population living in metropolitan areas represented approximately 60% of the total population reported by Eurostat.

The most densely populated metropolitan areas in the EU-27 are The Hague (2,786 inhabitants/km²), followed by Naples (2,539 inhabitants/km²), Wrocław (2,347 inhabitants/km²), and Wuppertal (2,136 inhabitants/km²). The male population in metropolitan areas was 130,481,234 inhabitants, of which 20,732,235 were in the age group under 15 years, 86,298,821 were in the age group 15–64 years, and 23,450,178 were aged over 65 years.

At the level of metropolitan areas, the male demographic dependency ratio was 51.13% in 2023. Some metropolitan areas record higher dependency ratios, which may affect their labour markets and healthcare systems. Metropolitan areas with an ageing population include Nice, Le Mans, Saint-Étienne, Les Abymes, Zwickau, Limoges, Fort-de-France, Nîmes, Görlitz, and Perpignan (Figure 20). At the opposite end are metropolitan areas characterized by predominantly young populations, such as Las Palmas, Oslo, Valletta, Luxembourg, Vienna, Graz, Innsbruck, and Madrid.

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