Phase changing and the nature of bonding. A look inside the Gdańsk Metropolitan Lab.

Many of the major city-region governance problems results from singular key incoherence: we live in the 21st century society and economy, using most advanced technologies and communications, but we are governed by and within 20th or even 19th century administrative boundaries and structures. This gap sometimes becomes a sinkhole, absorbing money, social energy and infrastructure developments. Many urban regions realise the vulnerability of the gap and initiate or accelerate process of phase changing to meet the development challenges and enhance the global and regional competitiveness and attractiveness.

The challenging and multithreaded process of Gdańsk Metropolitan Region governance might be an interesting example of local and regional power discourses and negotiations. Gdańsk, with its 460,000 population is Poland’s 6th largest city, while the city region is the third largest metropolitan region, inhabited by ca. 1.2 million people. The second leading urban centre – Gdynia (ca. 240,000 inhabitants) is the major rival and competitor within the emerging metropolis. The process of metropolisation of Gdańsk area is being facilitated by vivid public discourse, involving local and regional politicians, media, businesses and inhabitants. The discussion is often based upon historical narrations, but also local ambitions, hopes and emotions, as well as infrastructure projects and investment attractiveness. Foucault suggests that modern power is a dispersed set of micro-practices, many of which operate through the normalising gaze of surveillance regimes. Gdańsk metropolitan region is functionally comprehensive region in almost all social, economic and cultural aspects, and as such representing many aspects of the metropolitan character. Gdańsk metropolitan area seems to partly meet the other elementary metropolitan feature: the gateways function and external linkages. The port functions help to facilitate its opening and entry roles, but Gdańsk seems to me more open to national and international linking – not only economic, but also cultural and political. It looks like Gdynia is much more focused on its internal, inclusive growth, which can be hardly seen as metropolitan, while Gdańsk activities can be perceived as more focused on its external linkages, international and national relations and metropolitan growth. Basic disagreements are built upon local identities, enhanced by ambitions and fears of local politicians and municipal institutions and initiatives. The Gdańsk metropolitan cooperation, competition and encounters make the core of process, where local and regional unifying initiatives are accompanied by exemplifications of separatism, identity conflicts and political disagreements.

The troublesome process of metropolitan governance and cooperation has been accelerated during last five years. The indirect, initial impulse had been resulting from implements of the EU territorial policy. The Cohesion Policy for the financial perspective of 2014-2020 provides various tools designed for specific types of territories, including those directly aimed for cities or Functional Urban Areas. The area-based approach, which assumes moving from perceiving the area through its administrative borders, takes into account internal potentiality, challenges and barriers to development. Poland belongs to the group of countries that have decided to implement sustainable urban area development programmes entirely through Integrated Territorial Investments (ITI). The clear statement of the Ministry of Infrastructure and Development that the Gdańsk area has to create a single Integrated Territorial Investment unit left no hopes for two separated zones. It was one of the
major, but only reason which lead to the creation of Gdansk-Gdynia-Sopot Metropolitan Area Association in 2015.

The association unites 55 local municipalities and counties, and can be seen as a dynamic, interactive lab, where interactive processes between social, medial, economic and governmental ‘atoms’, ‘molecules’, and ‘particles’ change the structure of the metropolitan region. The city ‘laboratory’ of polities, policies, and politics is a space where composition, structure, properties and change of the matter can be observed and analysed. Local stakeholders can be seen as acids and/or alkali blending or interacting together, buzzing, sometimes exploding, something creating something new. Positive, extra energy is generated, but sometimes the energy disappears and products vapourise, leaving the void or just mess. The phase changing is the most interesting and challenging part of the laboratory work. The phase of matter is defined by the phase transition, which is when energy put into or taken out of the system goes into rearranging the structure of the system, instead of changing the bulk conditions. The main metropolitan question has always been the opposition between two possible results of ‘metropolitan chemistry’: metropolitan substance as a matter with a definite composition and set of properties, or shall we aim towards metropolitan mixture as collection of substances. For many local researchers, the ‘network’ space, of actor-network theory, especially in discussions of well-orchestrated, tightly knit networks, composed from the heterogeneous relations normally assembled within actor-networks represented the Gdańsk Metropolitan processes. In my opinion the ‘fluid’ space seems to be more appropriate and refers to spatial relations that are constantly ‘becoming’, constantly shifting, constantly moving. This spatial type fits well with the notion of spaces of multiplicity which is so central to post-structuralist geography (Mol and Law 1994).

The result of this socio-chemical or rather socio-bio-physical process of mingling the ‘metropolitan matter’, has not been finished. Sometimes, and it looks like this is the case of Gdańsk Metropolitan Region, the distinction between phases can be continuous instead of having a discrete boundary, in this case the matter is considered to be in a supercritical state. Metropolitan growth is based on compromises, coalitions and negotiations, to take the best of the joined connections and mobility; cooperation and competition; flexibility and dynamism, while keeping the identities and internal diversity. Gdańsk Metropolis can be seen as an flux of integrative and disintegrative processes and powers. There is a certain evolution of the inter-regional cooperation, facilitated by various local and regional actions. Different conditions, goals, expectations and ambitions of various lab manipulators create distinctive social, cultural, political and economic milieux, where the metropolitan plasma evolves. Legal, technological, social and financial changes are incremental, inexorable, gradual and often spontaneous (Ridley 2015). They follow a narrative, going from one state to the next; they creep rather than jump and they largely happen by trial and error – a version of natural selection, the change emerges from interactions of thousands or millions, not from the plan of few, but often the thousands listen, trust and follow the few.