



OPEN ACCESS

EDITED BY

Nikos Papadakis,
University of Crete, Greece

REVIEWED BY

Sifis Plimakis,
University of Peloponnese, Greece
Manos Spyridakis,
University of Athens, Greece

*CORRESPONDENCE

Jorge Gonçalves
✉ jorgemgoncalves@tecnico.ulisboa.pt

RECEIVED 06 September 2025

ACCEPTED 30 September 2025

PUBLISHED 15 October 2025

CITATION

Gonçalves J, Spolaor S and Lebedeva L (2025)
Institutional resilience and crisis governance in
the EU: insights from the Lisbon Metropolitan
Experience. *Front. Polit. Sci.* 7:1700468.
doi: 10.3389/fpos.2025.1700468

COPYRIGHT

© 2025 Gonçalves, Spolaor and Lebedeva.
This is an open-access article distributed
under the terms of the [Creative Commons
Attribution License \(CC BY\)](#). The use,
distribution or reproduction in other forums is
permitted, provided the original author(s) and
the copyright owner(s) are credited and that
the original publication in this journal is cited,
in accordance with accepted academic
practice. No use, distribution or reproduction
is permitted which does not comply with
these terms.

Institutional resilience and crisis governance in the EU: insights from the Lisbon Metropolitan Experience

Jorge Gonçalves^{1*}, Silvia Spolaor² and Larysa Lebedeva³

¹CiTUA, Instituto Superior Técnico, University of Lisbon, Lisbon, Portugal, ²CITTA, Faculty of Engineering, University of Oporto, Porto, Portugal, ³Department of Economics and Competition Policy, State University of Trade and Economics, Kyiv, Ukraine

This article explores the role of metropolitan institutions in crisis governance, drawing on the case of the Lisbon Metropolitan Area (LMA) during the COVID-19 pandemic. While formal decision-making in Portugal remained centralized, local institutions were critical in implementing emergency responses, sustaining services, and supporting vulnerable populations. Based on survey data from 90 public and associative entities, the analysis reveals high levels of institutional adaptability and lateral cooperation, despite the absence of coordinated metropolitan governance. However, responses were primarily adaptive rather than transformational, and structural challenges, including digital inequality, fragmented coordination, and lack of institutional learning, persisted. The findings highlight the need to integrate metropolitan actors more fully into EU crisis governance frameworks, not merely as implementers but as co-designers of inclusive and resilient responses. The Lisbon experience underscores both the potential and limitations of emergent, bottom-up resilience and calls for the institutionalization of metropolitan governance as a key dimension of future EU crisis preparedness.

KEYWORDS

metropolitan governance, institutional resilience, crisis management, multilevel governance, COVID-19, Lisbon metropolitan area, EU crisis response

Introduction

The European Union has faced a succession of crises in recent decades, just think of the 2008 financial crisis, the influx of refugees, Brexit and, most recently, the COVID-19 pandemic. Each crisis has tested the EU's multi-level governance structures and exposed gaps in institutional preparedness and coordination that have yet to be fully addressed (Rhinar, 2025). While supranational mechanisms and national governments have been the focus of most crisis governance research (Wolff and Ladi, 2020), recent studies emphasize the need to examine how sub-national institutions, such as those in metropolitan areas, contribute to EU crisis management (Kuhlmann et al., 2024).

This research draws on empirical data collected in the Lisbon Metropolitan Area (LMA) during the COVID-19 pandemic to discuss institutional resilience as a critical component of EU governance. It positions metropolitan institutions as key players, albeit often underappreciated, in implementing adaptive strategies, ensuring the mission of services and activities is maintained and innovating under pressure of time and demand. This perspective aligns with findings from the ESPON METRO project, which highlights the role of metropolitan areas in responding to the pandemic and fostering resilience through collaborative governance practices (Cotella and Berisha, 2022).

The case of LMA highlights the complexity of local responses in a highly centralized national context like Portugal and the capacity of institutions to adapt and reorganize in a context of high uncertainty.

Institutional resilience and multilevel governance

Institutional resilience refers to the ability of organizations to absorb shocks, adapt to new conditions and maintain their essential functions during crises. In the context of multilevel governance (MLG), resilience is not only a property of institutions *per se*, but also of the networks and coordination mechanisms that connect them. The EU's governance architecture hinders this dynamic, as competences are distributed across supranational, national and subnational levels, often without clear boundaries of responsibility during emergencies. This complexity can lead to delays in decision-making and hinder effective responses, as seen during the COVID-19 pandemic when coordination among member states was initially problematic (Paschina and Benammi, 2024).

Theoretical discussions on resilience clearly highlight its multidimensional and complex nature (Barasa et al., 2018; Nisioti et al., 2023). Resilience involves not only robustness and recovery capacity, but also adaptability and transformability. These capacities are particularly relevant in contexts of uncertainty and complexity, such as those produced by cascading crises. Walker et al. (2004) and Folke et al. (2010) emphasize that institutional resilience is a dynamic process shaped by learning, innovation and feedback mechanisms. In the EU context, these processes are mediated by the principles of subsidiarity and solidarity, two forces that are often competing but necessary for coordinated action.

Effective crisis governance in the European Union requires the creation of a comprehensive framework that not only facilitates adaptable and responsive action at the local level but also ensures a sense of coherence and mutual support between the various levels of governance within the Union. This need has led to a resurgence of academic and practical interest in the potential and possible drawbacks associated with multilevel governance (MLG) systems, which are characterized by their complexity and interdependence. The unprecedented challenges posed by the COVID-19 crisis have starkly revealed the reality that, in many cases, MLG mechanisms often lack the necessary agility to respond effectively and quickly to emerging crises, unless they are reinforced by a solid foundation of interinstitutional trust, well-defined and established coordination channels, and sufficient resources distributed across all relevant levels of governance.

Resilience scholarship has increasingly recognized that effective crisis governance requires more than technical capacity; it depends on the adaptability, trust, and collaborative potential of institutional actors (Barasa et al., 2018; Boin and van Eeten, 2013; Nolte and Lindenmeier, 2024). Resilient governance systems are those that can balance subsidiarity and solidarity, integrating bottom-up innovations with top-down coordination. The EU's response to COVID-19 illustrates both the promise and the pitfalls of such an approach. While the Recovery and Resilience Facility represent a landmark in EU-level crisis support (Cotella and Berisha, 2022),

implementation ultimately depends on subnational institutional capacity, particularly in urban regions.

Metropolitan institutions under pressure: lessons from Lisbon

The COVID-19 pandemic offered a profound stress test for metropolitan governance structures, particularly in settings marked by high institutional centralization. In the case of the Lisbon Metropolitan Area (LMA), the crisis exposed both long-standing fragilities and surprising adaptive capacities within local institutional ecosystems. Although metropolitan-level governance in Portugal remains institutionally weak, due to the absence of regional decentralization and limited metropolitan authority, LMA's local institutions revealed an unexpected ability to reorganize and coordinate responses under pressure.

Survey data collected from 90 public and associative organizations in the LMA during the second state of emergency (January to March 2021) underscores the scale of disruption. Approximately two-thirds of respondents reported substantial internal impacts related to operational continuity and financial constraints. Notably, 76% identified strong effects on their target groups, especially in domains like social isolation, family tensions, and job insecurity. These disruptions were not evenly distributed but reflected the structural vulnerabilities of specific territories and populations served by the institutions.

Despite these adverse conditions, institutional responses were characterized by high levels of agility and adaptability, particularly during the early stages of the crisis. Entities demonstrated the capacity to rapidly reorganize service delivery, often leveraging informal networks and inter-organizational cooperation in the absence of clear metropolitan coordination. For instance, while formal hierarchical links between municipalities and central government were often insufficient, horizontal collaboration between parish councils, NGOs, and other local actors helped sustain basic services and adapt to shifting needs. This lateral coordination points to what can be described as emergent metropolitan governance, a resilience mechanism built from below, enabled by local proximity, shared missions, and accumulated social capital.

Institutional innovation, however, proved more uneven. While over 75% of respondents described their preventive and response strategies as agile and adaptable, fewer (around 63%) characterized them as innovative. In many cases, digitalization became the default adaptation mechanism, expanding remote services and communication channels—but often without sufficient attention to digital inclusion. Vulnerable populations, such as the elderly and immigrants, were disproportionately affected by technological barriers, revealing a persistent digital divide and questioning the equity of these resilience strategies.

The LMA case thus illustrates the double-edged nature of metropolitan responses. On one hand, local institutions demonstrated a remarkable capacity to reorganize and deliver under duress, partially compensating for the institutional void at the metropolitan level. On the other, the lack of institutionalized inter-municipal cooperation and the minimal role of metropolitan authorities hindered coordinated planning and long-term

resilience-building. These findings challenge assumptions that effective resilience must be engineered top-down, highlighting instead the role of embedded local networks, tacit knowledge, and frontline adaptability (Robin et al., 2019).

From a theoretical standpoint, the Lisbon experience supports the idea that resilience in metropolitan governance is not solely a matter of robustness or recovery, but also of transformability and learning. As argued by Folke et al. (2010), institutions facing systemic shocks must not only absorb disturbances but also reorganize and evolve. While Lisbon's local actors demonstrated adaptive capabilities, the pandemic response also revealed critical limitations in governance design, particularly the inability to scale effective practices across the metropolitan region due to institutional fragmentation.

In sum, the pandemic acted as both a revealer and a catalyst, laying bare the structural weaknesses of metropolitan governance in Portugal, while also provoking institutional learning and improvisation at the local level. If these lessons are to be embedded in future policy, they call for stronger frameworks for metropolitan coordination, investment in digital and social infrastructure, and the institutionalization of the lateral collaboration that proved essential during the crisis.

Challenges and opportunities for EU crisis governance

The Lisbon case underscores a broader set of structural challenges that affect the EU's capacity to implement effective and equitable crisis governance across multiple levels. While the European Union has made strides in recent years, particularly through the Recovery and Resilience Facility and increased emphasis on solidarity mechanisms, practical implementation still hinges on subnational capacities that are often under-resourced, fragmented, or institutionally sidelined.

A first major challenge relates to the persistent tension between centralization and local autonomy. In Portugal, pandemic-related decision-making remained firmly centralised, with metropolitan and regional institutions largely excluded from formal governance processes (de Sousa et al., 2022; Gonçalves, 2020). Local governments were tasked with implementing national directives, often without the resources, coordination, or discretionary power needed to adapt them to local realities. The Lisbon Metropolitan Area, despite its demographic and economic weight, lacked a coordinated metropolitan crisis governance mechanism. This fragmentation hindered strategic planning and contributed to inconsistent service provision across the territory. Similar patterns have been observed in other European metropolises where inter-municipal cooperation remains *ad hoc* or reliant on personal networks rather than institutionalized frameworks (Forero and Sietchiping, 2022).

Second, the accelerated digitalization of public services, while necessary for maintaining continuity during lockdowns, has brought to the fore issues of digital exclusion. As demonstrated in Lisbon, many institutions adopted online service models as a form of adaptive innovation, but these shifts disproportionately affected vulnerable populations. Elderly residents, migrants, and low-income groups often lacked the digital literacy, access, or trust

required to navigate new systems. This raises a critical equity issue: resilience strategies that rely heavily on technological solutions may inadvertently entrench existing inequalities unless accompanied by inclusive digital infrastructures and outreach mechanisms.

Third, the pandemic has exposed the limits of informal coordination. In Lisbon, much of the institutional adaptability observed was rooted in spontaneous collaboration among local actors (parish councils, NGOs, and public entities), rather than formalized crisis protocols. While this "resilience from below" was vital, it also revealed the fragility of local networks operating without broader strategic alignment or sustained investment. In the absence of metropolitan-level leadership or coordination bodies, these efforts risk remaining atomised and unsustainable in the long term.

These challenges point toward important opportunities for future EU crisis governance reforms. First, reinforcing metropolitan institutions with dedicated mandates and resources could help bridge the implementation gap between national strategies and local realities. Second, promoting institutionalized inter-municipal cooperation mechanisms, not just during emergencies, but as a permanent layer of governance, would support more equitable and coordinated responses. Third, digital transition policies should explicitly integrate inclusion goals, ensuring that technological innovation does not become a vehicle for exclusion.

Finally, Lisbon's experience suggests that adaptive governance must be understood as a dynamic process, requiring not only technical capacity but also trust, collaboration, and institutional learning. This calls for EU frameworks that go beyond formal subsidiarity principles to actively foster vertical and horizontal governance linkages, recognising the political, not just administrative, nature of resilience. As crises become increasingly complex and interlinked, from pandemics to climate disruptions, the capacity to govern adaptively across levels will be one of the EU's most critical institutional tests.

Discussion

The Lisbon Metropolitan Area's experience during the COVID-19 pandemic offers a compelling illustration of how resilience in crisis governance is co-produced through formal structures and informal practices, often under conditions of institutional ambiguity. While the national response in Portugal followed a highly centralized logic, the practical burden of implementation fell largely on subnational actors, particularly municipal governments, parish councils, and civil society organizations, whose coordination was facilitated not by formal metropolitan frameworks, but through *ad hoc* and lateral interactions.

This adaptive dynamic suggests that effective resilience does not necessarily emerge from top-down preparedness but can rather be built through bottom-up improvisation and collaboration. In the absence of robust metropolitan governance, institutions relied on trust-based networks, pre-existing relationships, and shared normative commitments to sustain service delivery and respond to emerging vulnerabilities. Such informal governance practices, while effective in the short term, raise concerns about sustainability and scalability. Without institutionalization, they remain dependent

on personal relationships and local goodwill, leaving metropolitan areas exposed in future crises.

Moreover, the LMA case calls attention to the uneven geography of resilience. While some local actors were able to innovate and reorganize rapidly, others—especially those serving more marginalized communities, faced greater constraints in resources, digital access, and staff capacity. This disparity underscores the importance of embedding equity into resilience frameworks. Institutional flexibility alone is not sufficient; there must also be a redistribution of means, authority, and technical support across governance levels and between territories.

At the level of the European Union, these findings contest the prevailing conceptualization of resilience as predominantly a national or supranational issue. They instead emphasize the strategic significance of enhancing the governance capacities of metropolitan areas, not solely as implementers of EU policy, but also as collaborative creators of adaptive knowledge and local legitimacy. The existing crisis management frameworks within the EU frequently neglect the operational significance of metropolitan stakeholders, particularly in polycentric urban regions where interdependence is pronounced and administrative boundaries become indistinct.

The discussion must also consider the role of learning and institutional memory. While many LMA institutions successfully adapted to pandemic conditions, it remains unclear whether these changes have been retained or translated into long-term reform. The Lisbon case reveals limited evidence of formalized institutional learning, such as after-action reviews, codified procedures, or revised governance protocols. Without mechanisms to capture and scale emergent practices, there is a risk that resilience remains episodic and reactive, rather than embedded and anticipatory.

Additionally, the LMA experience raises concerns about the persistence of emergency measures that were never critically evaluated. The continued requirement for advance appointments in public services, for example, has implications for accessibility and user rights, particularly among the elderly and less digitally literate, highlighting the risks of normalising restrictive practices introduced during exceptional circumstances.

The LMA case also illustrates the limits of adaptive responses when they do not evolve into transformational change. While local institutions adapted quickly, many of these adjustments did not translate into structural reforms or new governance models. As highlighted in the literature on resilience, the distinction between adaptive and transformational resilience is critical: the former enables short-term survival, while the latter reconfigures systems to better face future disruptions (Asadzadeh et al., 2022).

Finally, the Lisbon experience invites a broader reflection on what kind of resilience EU governance should promote. The tendency to equate resilience with system stability may obscure deeper questions about transformation, justice, and democratic participation. As metropolitan areas face overlapping crises (climate, housing, migration, and public health) the ability to reorganize governance systems in inclusive, transparent, and strategic ways becomes central. The LMA case illustrates both the possibilities and the limits of improvisational resilience and highlights the urgent need to reconfigure metropolitan

governance not as an afterthought, but as a cornerstone of EU crisis preparedness.

Conclusion

The Lisbon Metropolitan Area's experience during the COVID-19 pandemic offers a valuable lens through which to understand the strengths and weaknesses of metropolitan governance under pressure. While national and supranational frameworks dominated the formal response, local institutions were the true operational frontline, improvising, adapting, and coordinating in the absence of robust metropolitan leadership. Their capacity to respond reveals an underexplored dimension of EU crisis governance: the critical, yet often informal and under-resourced, role of metropolitan actors.

However, this resilience was largely adaptive rather than transformational. Although many institutions adjusted rapidly to evolving conditions, few structural reforms or governance innovations were institutionalized beyond the emergency. Persistent inequalities in digital access, fragmented coordination mechanisms, and the absence of long-term strategic planning highlight the limitations of resilience strategies grounded in improvisation alone.

This case study suggests that future efforts to strengthen EU crisis governance must invest in metropolitan governance as a central pillar, not merely as implementers, but as full partners in designing inclusive, context-sensitive, and forward-looking crisis strategies. Embedding equity, institutional learning, and territorial cooperation into resilience frameworks will be essential if metropolitan areas are to not only recover from disruption but build transformative capacity to navigate the complex crises of the future.

In this context, Lisbon functions as both a didactic narrative and a reservoir of practical motivation: an instance that elucidates the critical necessity of urban empowerment, as well as the capacity of established institutional networks to catalyze innovation, assuming they are acknowledged, adequately funded, and effectively assimilated into multilevel governance frameworks.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Author contributions

JG: Conceptualization, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Supervision, Validation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. SS: Formal analysis, Investigation, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. LL: Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – original draft.

Funding

The author(s) declare that financial support was received for the research and/or publication of this article. This research was funded by the Foundation for Science and Technology, grant number UIDB/05703/2020.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Generative AI statement

The author(s) declare that no Gen AI was used in the creation of this manuscript.

References

- Asadzadeh, A., Khavarian-Garmsir, A. R., Sharifi, A., Salehi, P., and Kötter, T. (2022). Transformative resilience: an overview of its structure, evolution, and trends. *Sustainability* 14:15267. doi: 10.3390/su142215267
- Barasa, E., Mbau, R., and Gilson, L. (2018). What is resilience and how can it be nurtured? A systematic review of empirical literature on organizational resilience. *Int. J. Health Policy Manage.* 7, 491–503. doi: 10.15171/ijhpm.2018.06
- Boin, A., and van Eeten, M. J. G. (2013). The resilient organization. *Public Manage. Rev.* 15, 429–445. doi: 10.1080/14719037.2013.769856
- Cotella, G., and Berisha, E. (2022). “Tackling the COVID-19 pandemic at the metropolitan level. Evidence from Europe.” in *New Metropolitan Perspectives*, Vol. 482, NMP 2022. Lecture Notes in Networks and Systems eds F. Calabrò, L. Della Spina, and M. J. Piñeira Mantiñán (Cham: Springer), 999–1008. doi: 10.1007/978-3-031-06825-6_95
- de Sousa, L., Costa, C. S., and Grilo, F. (2022). COVID-19 pandemic and local executive-opposition institutional relations: a survey analysis. *Local Govern. Stud.* 49, 1157–1177. doi: 10.1080/03003930.2022.2158818
- Folke, C., Carpenter, S. R., Walker, B., Scheffer, M., Chapin, T., and Rockström, J. (2010). Resilience thinking: integrating resilience, adaptability and transformability. *Ecol. Soc.* 15:20. doi: 10.5751/ES-03610-150420
- Forero, R. H., and Sietchiping, R. (2022). “Metropolises overcoming the COVID-19 pandemic: an urgent call for territorializing global agendas at subnational levels.” in *Local Government and the COVID-19 Pandemic*, ed. C. N. Silva (Gewerbestrasse: Springer), 59–84. doi: 10.1007/978-3-030-91112-6_4
- Gonçalves, J. M. (2020). A ferida exposta. A Governança metropolitana em Lisboa em tempo de COVID-19. *Finisterra* 55, 229–235. doi: 10.18055/Finis20169
- Kuhlmann, S., Franzke, J., Peters, N., and Dumas, B. P. (2024). Institutional designs and dynamics of crisis governance at the local level: European governments facing the polycrisis. *Policy Des. Pract.* 7, 409–429. doi: 10.1080/25741292.2024.2344784
- Nisioti, E., Clark, C., Das, K. K., Ernst, E., Friedenberg, N. A., Gates, E., et al. (2023). Resilience-towards an interdisciplinary definition using information theory. *Front. Complex Syst.* 1:1236406. doi: 10.3389/fcpys.2023.1236406
- Nolte, I. M., and Lindenmeier, J. (2024). Creeping crises and public administration: a time for adaptive governance strategies and cross-sectoral collaboration? *Public Manage. Rev.* 26, 3104–3125. doi: 10.1080/14719037.2023.2200459
- Paschina, S., and Benammi, M. H. (2024). Resilience and innovation: the European Governance System's Response to COVID-19. *Rev Manage Comp Int.* 25, 717–731.
- Rhinard, M. (2025). “Permanent crisis governance in the European Union.” in *Handbook of European Union Governance*, eds S. Lucarelli, and J. Sperling (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing), 199–215. doi: 10.4337/9781803925189.00025
- Robin, E., Chazal, C., Acuto, M., and Carrero, R. (2019). (Un) learning the city through crisis: lessons from Cape Town. *Oxford Rev. Educ.* 45, 242–257. doi: 10.1080/03054985.2018.1551197
- Walker, B., Holling, C. S., Carpenter, S. R., and Kinzig, A. (2004). Resilience, adaptability and transformability in social-ecological systems. *Ecol. Soc.* 9:5. doi: 10.5751/ES-00650-090205
- Wolff, S., and Ladi, S. (2020). European Union Responses to the Covid-19 pandemic: adaptability in times of permanent emergency. *J. Eur. Integr.* 42, 1025–1040. doi: 10.1080/07036337.2020.1853120