Cities have central functions which are important for their closer or wider hinterlands. The availability of international functions can increase the importance of a city; metropolitan areas concentrate several functions of international importance and therefore have a significant role in the development of the European territory. Most studies dealing with metropolitan regions have a traditional approach by setting up a population-based hierarchy of cities, and then investigate the functions of cities in the upper part of this hierarchy. The study the Federal Institute for Research on Building, Urban Affairs and Spatial Development, Germany turned the question around and analysed, where in Europe are the most significant concentrations of metropolitan functions and how do they constitute a European pattern of „metropolitan areas”. A group of international functions in politics, economy, science, transport and culture were investigated. Based on the concentration of international functions and their proximity, functional metropolitan areas were delimitated, not influenced by administrative regional borders.

In current research the analytical approach is linked to current policy goals. The role of metropolitan areas in the implementation of the EU2020 Strategy and the Territorial Agenda 2020 is investigated based on the delimitation of metropolitan areas on a functional basis. The analysis reveals information on the importance of metropolitan areas in the development of the EU territory, differentiating between metropolitan areas and peripheries, highlighting the role of capital city regions and distinguishing between old and new member states of the EU.