

RC21 Berlin 2013

Stream “Urbanism beyond the West: Comparing Accelerated Urban Change in Eastern Europe and the Global South”

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*This is a preliminary version of our paper.
The full version will be provided during the conference at the end of August 2013.*

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Shrinking cities in postsocialist Europe – what can we learn from their analysis for urban theory-making?

A rising challenge for the urban debate – postsocialist shrinking cities

When looking at the map of population development of Europe’s large cities within the 1990s and 2000s, one sees diverging trends. Apart from a number of continuously growing cities, there is a considerable number of cities that lose population that is shrinking cities. Additionally, there are many cities that stabilized or regrow after a phase of shrinkage – reurbanizing cities when one focuses on their trend reversal or shrunk cities when one looks at their history or legacies. Altogether, shrinking cities and shrunk cities form a large share of Europe’s large cities at the moment. So, shrinkage represents a quite frequent trajectory in Europe’s newer urban history; the latest phase of postindustrial shrinkage started in the 1930s and has lasted until today. Looking at the geographies of shrinkage in Europe in more detail, it becomes obvious that currently the “pole of shrinkage” is situated in Eastern Europe. In other words: The majority of large cities in the former state socialist countries have been affected by population loss – either in a moderate but constant way or in the form of dramatic, rapid losses as it was e.g. the case in eastern Germany in the 1990s (Figure 1, see also Kabisch et al. 2012, Mykhnenko and Turok 2008, Haase et al. 2013).

Shrinkage represents a real challenge for a city, its inhabitants and decision makers. If a city loses population, some dynamics of urban development start to follow different triggers. For a lot of urban functions, demand declines. The demand for public transport declines, the net needs to be adapted in response. As population loss often comes along with aging, service infrastructures for the elderly might be overburdened whereas schools and kindergartens close down. Declining demand on the housing market affects prizes, this affects choice and it affects the investment decisions of companies, owners and developers. Urban governance actors have fewer resources at hand and might have to change their mode of steering urban development.

In the post-socialist realm, the urban structure shows compositions that differ from western Europe most prominent feature are mass housing estates of a scope unknown to western European cities. In many countries, rather neoliberal governance arrangements are in place resulting out of a deep mistrust in state regulations as a legacy of the socialist past. Public

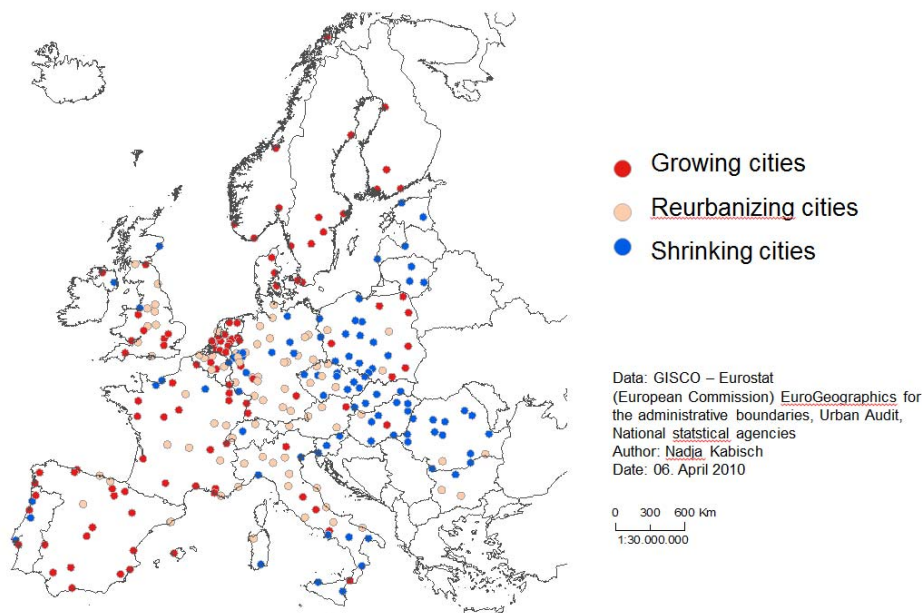
institutions are hollowed out; planning is of lower importance than in many western European countries, urban development by and large driven by developers' investment decision. A public and rental housing sector is missing in most postsocialist countries, with Poland, Czech Republic, and eastern Germany being an exception here.

Shrinking postsocialist cities represent a challenge not only for those who live in them and those who steer and govern their development. They also need to be analyzed and understood by urban research. Up to present, however, shrinking cities are not in the focus of most urban discourses in the postsocialist countries. Internationally, there is an evolving debate on urban shrinkage as a phenomenon and shrinking cities around the globe; however, the postsocialist realm is hitherto also dwarfed by studies on US and UK cities as well as the extreme developments in eastern Germany. Theorizing on shrinking cities, subsequently, mostly builds on experiences and cases analyzed in these contexts.

Set against this background, this paper addresses the following question: Do urban theories developed in the western European and especially dominant in the US context sufficiently explain the trajectories occurring in shrinking postsocialist cities? Or, the other way round: What can we learn from the analysis of postsocialist shrinking cities for urban theory making?

The paper builds on analyses which have been carried out within the framework of recently finished cross-European research (7 FP project Shrink Smart).¹ Using this evidence, we reflect on why postsocialist shrinking cities are up to present neglected in theory making and what we can learn for urban theory from their analysis.

Figure 1: Population development in Europe's large cities 1990-2008



¹ The 7 EU FP project “Shrink Smart – The Governance of Shrinkage within a European Context” (2009-2012; no. 225193; www.shrinksmart.eu) comparatively analysed urban shrinkage across several regions of Europe including western, southern and Eastern Europe. Particular attention was given local trajectories of shrinkage as well as policy and governance responses. The sample included seven urban regions with a focus on postsocialist Europe – Liverpool (UK), Genoa (Italy), Leipzig and Halle (eastern Germany), Ostrava (Czech Republic), Bytom and Sosnowiec (Poland), Timisoara (Romania), Donetsk and Makiivka (Ukraine).

Shrinking cities in postsocialist Europe: empirical evidence

Before turning to the implication for theorizing urban development, this section summarizes the most important results of our research on postsocialist shrinking cities within the framework of the mentioned cross-European research.

1. Postsocialist transformation worked as a cause and as a catalyst for urban shrinkage. Shrinkage in some cases was a direct consequence of transition (and related economic decline and evolving suburbanization etc.); in some cases, however, it worked as a catalyst within the framework of postsocialist transformation in a way that already existing processes such as decline in birth rates or outmigration from economically stagnating regions were accelerated, increased in speed and scope. Examples for this are e.g. Upper Silesian cities such as Bytom and Zabrze as well as Lodz in Poland, Makiivka in Ukraine, or Halle in eastern Germany.
2. Postsocialist cities, seemingly equipped with similar structures, show (as one could expect) some similar but surprisingly also many different impacts of shrinkage and follow different trajectories in terms of scope, speed and temporality of shrinkage. Differences are related to specifics of local conditions (e.g. Upper Silesian Bytom and Sosnowiec where the first mentioned has suffered from heavy economic decline only from the 2000s onwards while Sosnowiec underwent this period already during the 1990s) as well as national political, legal and institutional frameworks (which considerably differ among countries such as Poland, Czech Republic, Ukraine or Romania). Both locally and nationally, policies and decision-making after the beginning of transition have proved to be crucial for the cities' trajectories
3. Policy responses to shrinkage have been in postsocialist cities in most cases neoliberal. An exception represents eastern Germany due to its immediate integration into the western German welfare system in 1990 (Rink et al. 2012). Policies in all other countries followed mainly the primacy of market rules, the attraction of new investment including FDI and pro-growth strategies. The achievements resulting from these policies are mixed: While some cities could re-develop their economic basis quite successfully, e.g. Ostrava, Sosnowiec and Timisoara, others kept locked in the decline trap, e.g. Bytom or Makiivka (Bernt et al. 2012).
4. Shrinkage and neoliberal policy responses have led to increasing social problems in most postsocialist shrinking cities: concentrations of poverty, unemployment, and rising socio-spatial difference including the exclusion of marginalized groups. The ignorance or non-observance of social issues or their treatment as a "secondary issue" (Cortese et al. in press) have deepened many of these problems. The cities see themselves in a situation where rising problems go hand in hand with decreasing capacities (financial, personnel) to resolve them (Maes et al. 2012).
5. Shrinkage as an issue/problem/challenge is still widely ignored, sometimes even tabooed in postsocialist Europe. There is a seeming contradiction between the scale and scope of the problem (i.e. the large number/share of shrinking cities in this region) and the far-reaching ignorance or non-addressing of it within policymaking and public discourse (Bernt et al. 2013, in press). The predominance of pro-growth policies is closely related to this. Local decision-makers often are evaluated concerning their capability to create new growth. Moreover, public administrations in many cases face a lack of resources and knowledge to tackle problems related to shrinkage and therefore ignore it, even in very dramatic situations like e.g. in Polish Bytom where a large percentage of inner-city housing faces dilapidation and vacancy but no action is really taken to change this situation (Krzysztofik et al. 2011).
6. Resulting from these findings, we conclude that there is no "one model" of a postsocialist shrinking city but there is a number of patterns and mechanisms that can be compared and that report on the relation between fundamental socio-economic transformation and urban change as well as their interplay.

Given these findings, there comes up a contradiction: If postsocialist shrinking cities have so many important things to tell, why aren't they in the focus of theoretical debates? Why don't urban scholars take up this "wealth of experience" and check which lessons could be learnt from the postsocialist condition in general for current and future pathways of cities undergoing and being faced with deep and rapid transformations? The recent real estate, financial and currency crises in many regions of the globe have had enormous consequences for many cities and led to austerity policies, considerable cuts in public services, increasing poverty rates and displacements and evictions on local real estate and housing markets (mentioning the US and Spain real estate bubbles just as two examples out of many). Given this context, we ask for lessons that could be learned for future theorizing on urban sustainability and robustness from postsocialist shrinking cities and their ways of coping with complex transformation and extreme problems.

Postsocialist shrinkage and urban theory: double exclusion and new perspectives

Postsocialist shrinking cities are "excluded" from hegemonic discourses on current and future urbanization and urban theory in a twofold way: on the one hand, because they are postsocialist, and on the other, because they are shrinking.

Within theoretical debates on general trends of urbanization and urban modernity, the postsocialist realm does not play a role. In most of the literature, firstly, empirical studies are rather descriptive, often data driven. When theory does play a role, Postsocialist cities are treated as yet another case where western-based concepts and theories are applied to. Thus, research on postsocialist cities has, secondly, taken place often with a "catching-up" perspective. Assumptions were made up to knowledge gathered in western contexts, western-context models and frameworks served as the basis of research. Conclusions often have been made based on the convergence assumptions – postsocialist transition would end in western-style capitalism and market economy. Postsocialist urban change was looked at "through the lens" of western theory-building. Only recently, scholars have started to criticize this practice and got more critical to the use of terms, logics and concepts which were developed under different conditions (Sykora 2009, Standl and Krupickaite 2004, Haase et al. 2011, 2012). This situation has brought about severe implications for theory making: Firstly, postsocialist transition and its impact on urban trajectories were dwarfed to be just an empirical phenomenon that could not irritate general assumptions or conceptual approaches. Thirdly, , any lessons about the rapid, fundamental urban change that could be learned from postsocialist transition cities for theory making were, if not ignored, not adequately discussed with respect to their theoretical and methodological value.

The same is true for shrinking cities. General urban development debates draw on the paradigm of growth when describing future trends etc. Shrinking cities are mostly looked at as "abnormal" or "temporarily diverging" cases, population loss is seen as a minor phenomenon which – given the general fast urbanization – does not play an important role in world wide urbanization. . The dominating theories are based on metropolitan development, especially the U.S. and western European metropolises. Still, most policies in shrinking cities are directed to (re)growth and future visions as well. Only recently, scholars started to discuss also advantages of "becoming less" (Kil 2004, Hondrich 2007, Hager and Schenkel 2003) and deal with deliberate or alternative planning for shrinkage and shrinking cities and regions (Faber and Oswalt 2012, Schilling and Logan 2008).

Independently from this double neglect of postsocialist shrinking cities in urban theory discussions, today, "western" perspectives and existing hegemonies/paradigms in urban theory-making are increasingly challenged by scholars who demand the integration of other

perspectives. On the one hand, there are scholars such as A. Roy and J. Robinson who plead for a stronger integration of urbanization experiences from other regions of the world, Roy (2009) calls it “the global South”. Robinson (2006, 2008) addressed the importance to look at any city in its complexity, not just focussing on one characteristics – be it “global”, “Mega”, “African”, “postsocialist” or “shrinking”. Both scholars demand to take contributions of the analysis of all cities seriously since they are all “ordinary cities” (Robinson). They criticise the one-way travelling of theories between “the west” and the global south: “While much of urban theory has managed a traffic of ideas that routes concepts from EuroAmerica to the global South, there is an urgency and necessity to chart more intricate roots and routes.” (Roy 2009, 828) Given this context, we think that also postsocialist cities, and, for this paper, shrinking cities in the postsocialist realm, belong to those cities that are largely underestimated in their importance and relevance for current theory building. In contrast to prevailing trends, we see postsocialist shrinking cities as valuable examples to strengthen the debate on “ordinary cities” and “new geographies of space” – in the sense that the analysis of urban decline under the condition of fundamental and rapid transformation can tell something about “blind spots” of complex urban change for all cities, or in the sense that the consequences of neoliberal or “catch-up” responses towards shrinkage in postsocialist cities can tell some lessons for the relevance of comprehensive planning and sustainable policymaking in all cities (see also Roy 2009, 828). The following section addresses some issues that should be considered here.

What can we learn from the analysis of postsocialist shrinking cities for urban theory-making?

This section summarizes what we think the analysis of postsocialist shrinking cities can contribute to urban theory making “beyond the western and US perspective”. To do so, we summarize what we learned (theoretically) when researching postsocialist shrinking cities (empirically) in a cross-European perspective. The reflections that are listed below represent “work in progress”; the authors hope for a vibrant discussion and many good inputs at the conference.

Generally, postsocialist urban development and modernization are discussed set against a western-lens context. State socialist urban development was coined to be “under-urbanized”, i.e. the share of urban population was assessed as very low. Socialist urban urbanization was, moreover, coined as “artificial” or predominantly politically steered. By contrast to those views, we think that state socialist urban development represents just a different trajectory or model of urbanization in contrast to western cities but also to cities in Asia, Africa or Latin America what e.g. Roy states in her paper for the Global South. Their post-1990 development is (and their future development will be) to a large extent impacted by their state socialist past and the period of postsocialist transition. As far as the modernization after 1990 is concerned, postsocialist cities see – as we already mentioned above – something else than just “catch-up” with western patterns and structures which is, however, the predominant way of looking at the directions and processes happening there within the context of transition. Shrinkage, in this vein, is seen as a (temporary) process in the course of convergence to western structures. For a fair debate, these two issues should be acknowledged and considered when talking about ways and forms of urban development or the “21st century metropolis” (Roy). The development of eastern European cities should be explored as a development *sui generis* and not just set against the background of western experiences of urbanization and modernization.

We came across some difficulties when applying western-based concepts in order to explain what is going on in postsocialist shrinking cities. Two examples may illustrate this in more detail: We tried to identify local modes of governance according to western-based typologies

(Di Gaetano & Strom 2003). We failed applying these concepts successfully to postsocialist cities since governance arrangements there are different from what we could offer with the typology – instead, we learnt much about informal arrangements, decision-making due to the four-eye-principles, hybrid arrangements and “empty institutions” – issues that might happen in other, non-postsocialist and non-shrinking contexts and could enrich the governance debate in other cities, including western cities, too.

We came across similar constraints with respect to explaining inner-city physical dilapidation and social decline (e.g. in Polish Bytom) with the well-known rent gap theory. Rent gap theory that explains investment into declining or least attractive residential areas does not work in many contexts of shrinkage, and also in many cases of postsocialist cities where inner-city areas are still less attractive for people and investors, even if there is a (potential, theoretical) rent gap.

Current debates on drivers build on growth-related contexts and western contexts – our analysis showed that those drivers cannot fully/satisfactorily explain what happens in postsocialist shrinking cities. In shrinking cities, we have to look at vacancies or oversupply of housing as a driver, in postsocialist cities to tenure and ownership changes through privatization after 1990. Local path dependencies explain why certain parts or neighbourhoods of a given city follow different ways, “return” to their pre-state socialist status (which applies e.g. to bourgeois neighbourhoods undergoing new upgrading and gentrification) or continue the path they got during state socialism (which applies e.g. to run-down inner-city areas who lost a higher status after 1945). According to our analysis of residential segregation of both postsocialist and non-postsocialist shrinking cities (Großmann et al. 2012), we unveiled not only that shrinkage has specific impacts on the scope, speed and dynamics of socio-spatial differentiation. Moreover, it evolves in a spatially selective manner in a way that we found small- and smallest scale fragmentation that are not or not accordingly visible at larger scales, e.g. at the neighbourhood and district scale – related to the specific ways of housing privatization during postsocialism. Upgrading and gentrification takes frequently place also in large housing estates whereas it is completely absent in some inner cities.

We need to rely more on evidence-based (and in this sense “grounded”) theorizing again, seeking to abstract from what we find one ground rather than deductive applications of existing heuristics which were elaborated set against a different background of experience which lacks the experience of rapid changes of political systems as well as it lacks the experience of declining populations in cities that are not segregated to the extent that western cities are. Following this thinking, we developed a heuristic model of shrinkage (Haase et al. 2013) which offers a context-sensitive but case-open model that may help urban scholars but also decision-makers to develop their own conclusions and ideas. Such ways of model-building might help for crossing very different contexts and go beyond logics that are based on western, postsocialist, global South and whatever experiences only.

There are some scholars that plead for a stronger consideration of local and national contexts when looking at segregation (e.g. Maloutas and Fujita 2012). In line with those pledges we think that today’s development of postsocialist segregation, in shrinking but also non-shrinking cities, can only be well understood when including contextual factors.

As we showed above, postsocialist shrinking cities show – apart from analogies – also surprising differences with respect to their trajectories and local developments but also in their policy responses and governance models. This taught us that a seemingly similar background (here: postsocialist) might hide case-specific differences and might lead to wrong conclusions when summarizing or cross-referencing results from comparative research.

Last but not least, the analysis of postsocialist shrinking cities offers also knowledge on how cities coped with fundamental transformations, or crises. In many postsocialist cities, the systemic transformation accelerated or speeded up existing trends (decline in birth rates, out-migration, or economic decline) and, in many cases, aggravated critical developments (ageing, impoverishment, brain drain). The simultaneousness of postsocialist transition and shrinkage thus set a “double” challenge for the affected cities. This could become relevant for many European cities in times of crisis – maybe the crisis speeds only up existing dangers or unveils blind spots or hidden problems of the current development?

Postsocialist shrinking cities represent, last but not least, a meaningful example to show the limits and problems of neoliberal “solutions” or responses to decline – often, the response did not lead to an improvement of the situation, and almost always, social problems and inequalities were aggravated by market-driven responses. This might be a good lesson to be learnt in relation to current austerity policies and their long-term consequences for the stability and sustainability of urban regions – and an argument in favour of keeping reached standards of welfare and social cohesion as an achievement which should not be “sacrificed” even in times of scarce budgets.

We offer these reflections to the scholarly community and hope for a vibrant debate. Maybe they allow unveiling aspects that were previously not or only poorly visible, or seemingly unimportant; or they lead to a better understanding of developments in other cities. If the knowledge presented here generates new ideas, new thinking, perhaps even new debate, the purpose of our endeavour will be more than met.

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