

# 1 Introduction

## Urban shrinkage in the postsocialist realm

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### Objectives and origin of the book

Shrinking cities, in general, have received increasing scholarly attention since the early 2000s, but the geographic focus of case studies and theory building has remained predominantly restricted to the Global North (Pallagst et al., 2014; Haase et al., 2014; Hollander, 2018). Shrinking cities in the so-called postsocialist “Global East” (Chan et al., 2018; Müller and Trubina, 2020) are in danger of “double exclusion”, positioned outside both mainstream urban studies and postcolonial debates (Tuvikene, 2016). Moreover, there is a lack of in-depth comparisons between shrinking cities within this vast, contested, and diverse region.

In one of the first studies of its kind, Kubes (2013) identified the lopsided coverage of postsocialist shrinking cities. Even though the criterion he used excluded studies of Chinese cities and the Asian part of Russia, he identified over 180 articles published on Leipzig, which at the time was far more than any other postsocialist shrinking city (Kubes, 2013). More recently, Doringer and others examined 100 case studies of shrinking cities in the European Union (EU) and Japan, with about 30 percent of the case studies covering postsocialist Europe (Doringer et al., 2019). They noted a paucity of comparative studies. Bajerski (2020), investigating which countries and institutions have been contributing to the study of postsocialist cities, found a dominance of research from countries in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), but his coverage identified an increasing number of articles on China and a notable absence of Russian institutions among the top 20 research institutions publishing on the topic (Bajerski, 2020). The above is indicative that there is a need for comparative studies of shrinking cities that include a broad range of postsocialist countries to identify commonalities, differences, and policy experiences. This book is an attempt to remedy this situation through contributions from researchers based in 15 institutions of the postsocialist “Global East” to offer a view from the inside and help to decolonize knowledge. Specifically, we have organized the book to include chapters on shrinking cities in China, Russia, and postsocialist Europe, offering a comparative discussion within countries and cross-national cases on the theoretical aspects

and policy implications. With this, we believe that the book partly responds to Hollander's call: "if there were more, better, and especially cross-national research on shrinkage, the on-the-ground truth might turn out to be more complex and interesting" (Hollander et al., 2009, p. 230).

The idea for this book originated from two sessions on shrinking cities organized as part of the 2018 04–06 June International Geographic Union (IGU) thematic conference dedicated to the centennial of the Institute of Geography, Russian Academy of Sciences, *Practical Geography and 21st Century Challenges* held in Moscow. The roster of authors has been expanded to ensure the book has an adequate geographic and thematic coverage. Thus, the authors are situated in diverse institutions but have relevant backgrounds.

### **The postsocialist label**

Early discussions of urban changes within the researched region tend to use the terms "postsocialist" (Andrusz et al., 1996) or "postcommunist" (Pickles and Smith, 1998; Sykora and Bouzarovski, 2012) to group countries together either for the sake of convenience or based on a set of ideas about the specific nature of a socialist city that ultimately predefined the specific nature of the postsocialist one (this assumption is currently debated by some scholars (see, for example, Hirt et al., 2016)). Referring to cities in eastern Europe, Szelenyi (1996: 294) asserts that there are qualitative differences between socialist cities and capitalist cities. He posits socialist countries tend to have low urbanization and less spatial concentration, a lack of functional diversity and are uneconomical in the use of space. However, even in the mid-1990s, there was recognition of vast diversity among the former socialist states. In a book with much broader geographic coverage, including CEE, Russia, China, Vietnam, and others, Pickles and Smith emphasized the need to take into account the historic context and regionally uneven development when examining the impacts of the postsocialist transformations (Pickles and Smith, 1998). Pickles and Smith were the few researchers who included China and Russia in their coverage of postsocialist transformations and its impacts on urban development.

Until the early 2000s, there were few studies of postsocialist shrinking cities, while the few available tended to focus on the European cases (Stanilov, 2007). An analysis of publications on postsocialist shrinking cities noted the lopsided interest, even within Europe, with one city in former East Germany receiving the most attention, although the author of this study was careful to note that his criteria excluded China and the Eastern part of Russia (Kubes, 2013). Further research on postsocialist shrinking cities has also had a strong geographical bias focusing on Europe; though its comparative nature drawing on various cases from this region and the strive toward enhancing the concept of "urban shrinkage" with the postsocialist perspective, should be acknowledged (Haase et al., 2016).

The recent discussion on postsocialist cities, including shrinking ones produced within different disciplines, tends to focus on the stricture that the “postsocialist” label places on theory-building, at the same time recognizing that it is unhelpful to examine them with the use of models based on “western” experience (Humphrey, 2001; Tuvikene, 2016). Stenning and Horschelmann (2008) argue that there are multiple postsocialisms. Framing the application of the term postsocialism in the discourse of postcolonialism has raised issues on how and if the term may be used purely for marking a time period, a spatial area (second world in development studies), or is more divisive in terms of knowledge production (Cervinkova, 2012). Numerous scholars have voiced their objections to marginalizing the postsocialist cities as either “cases unto themselves” or “deviations” from the universalistic western “grand models” of urban development (Roy and Ong, 2011; Robinson, 2011; Gentile, 2018; Peck, 2015; Sjoberg, 2014). They argue for “multipolar, cosmopolitan, and comparative modes of urban theory making” (Peck, 2015: 160). Furthermore, Müller has declared “goodbye postsocialism” as a way to say that it is no longer relevant as a reference point since issues such as neoliberalism, globalization, and mass migrations are much more important for shaping the current urban form (Müller, 2019). Though we do see the debates on abandoning the “postsocialist” label as having a point, since the early scholars did tend to use postsocialism as a predefining condition; however, it would be remiss to altogether deny the importance of various socialist legacies and path-dependencies that still explicitly or implicitly play a role in contemporary urban development within China, Russia, the postsocialist European countries and other countries that experience state socialism.

Some early studies of postsocialist cities in Europe assert these cities have similar spatial restructuring issues in spite of variations in the national context (Stanilov, 2007; Ferencuhova, 2016, Sykora and Bouzarovski, 2012). However, neither all postsocialist cities change in the same way nor do they necessarily have a similar approach toward urban shrinkage within the country or compared to other postsocialist countries. For instance, abandoned housing and large tracks of brownfield sites are not necessarily common in shrinking cities if we draw our attention to China and Russia. Furthermore, as demonstrated by the cases from postsocialist European countries and Russia, what may appear to be the same urban transformation process has very different actors, causes, and outcomes—the pro-growth orientation in Russian cities, which appears at first glance to be led by an entrepreneurial pro-growth “coalition”, may instead be a group of state agencies appointed by the government to implement development projects (Kinossian, 2012; Müller, 2011). At the same time, the diversity in postsocialist outcomes does not erase their past shared experience of state-owned means of production, residential control, and planned economies — all elements that contribute to the way their urban systems evolved and still evolve today.

So, does the postsocialist label help or obscure? It is a convenient way for a geographical grouping of countries that shared a similar politico-economic

history, though it is always important to note that within these few aspects, there was a wide range of experiences which some scholars have characterized as “hard” socialism (Marcinczak et al., 2013). But most importantly, for our current discussion, we highlight the pace and extent of transformation from state socialism to varieties of capitalism that ultimately impacted on urban development, causing or reinforcing the tendencies of urban shrinkage. If the diversity is recognized and the label is not used as a simplistic way to make group comparison as per postsocialist vs capitalist, it could indeed be helpful for developing theories that are more grounded and engaged with the experiences of societies that have encountered great transformations over the last three to four decades. Thus, we acknowledge that there was neither a single socialist experience nor a single trope of transformation. Postsocialist shrinking cities possess qualities that often puzzle urban scholars since they can neither be measured against the perceived “normality” of the urban in the Global North (Gentile, 2018) nor thoroughly scrutinized from a postcolonial perspective of urban experience from the Global South.

This book is an attempt to generate knowledge based on case studies and observations on the ground with references but without unnecessary universalizations of models developed in other economic, social, and cultural settings. We take on a pragmatic approach to examine postsocialist shrinking cities with reference to their past and its “stubborn urban structures” (Drummond and Young, 2020), but most importantly to the forces that shape their present and future.

### **Organization of the book**

We have organized the book according to geographic principle because the three main groups/countries have significant differences due to a combination of socialist experience, the starting point of their transition, their history, their institutional legacies, and their experiences since transition. China, although still calling itself “socialism with Chinese characteristics” embarked on its transition a decade or more before postsocialist European countries and Russia. The Central Eastern European (CEE) countries in our case studies became members of the EU in 2004, which enabled massive international migration with significant impacts on urban development, whereas some countries of South-Eastern Europe (SEE) still remain in a political and economic “vacuum”. Russia has had the longest experience of a state socialist regime within the studied region. Here the tangible and intangible legacies of state socialism remain particularly strong—the state dominates in shaping strategic priorities, creating specific incentives for cities, and intervening directly in urban development, effectively substituting markets and market actors (Orttung and Zhemukhov, 2017; Gunko et al., 2021).

Political, social, and economic transformations in the postsocialist context are sometimes portrayed as the “Eastern branch” of the global neoliberalization project (Golubchikov, 2016). However, despite the influence of

neoliberal ideology and the proliferation of urban entrepreneurialism and competitiveness, the universal application of these trends across geographical space and scales needs to be viewed critically. Several scholars, including Myant and Drahokoupil (2011), Mykhnenko (2007), Hall and Soskice (2001), and Knell and Srholec (2007) have all elaborated on the variety of capitalisms that have emerged in the postsocialist countries. The latter characterized these variations as “state capitalism” in China, “patrimonial capitalism” in Russia, and “imported capitalism” in some CEE countries. We argue that such divergent economic transformations and associated political and social processes have specific impacts on urban changes within each group. Thus, we need to first understand shrinking cities in their own settings to make comparisons. Given the relatively sparse literature on shrinking cities in China, Russia, and parts of postsocialist Europe, keeping the regional organization of the book sections contributes to a deeper understanding of urban shrinkage in each of these geographical areas. With that knowledge, comparative themes become more meaningful.

There is also a practical issue of specific nomenclatures that are used in China and Russia that may be confusing to the reader unfamiliar with the context. Each section’s introduction explains these terminologies to minimize the repetition of the same in each chapter. Furthermore, each section’s introduction contains a map identifying the case studies so that readers can gain a sense of the geographic coverage.

In keeping with our aim to highlight research from each geographic region, we are including the original language of references so that local researchers’ work can be given the prominence they deserve and to make it easier for readers who wish to follow up on the relevant reference have less difficulties in precisely identifying the specific reference. This is specially the case for Chinese language references.

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