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# Understanding Shrinkage in European Regions

MARCO BONTJE and SAKO MUSTERD

In both urban and regional studies and policies, urgent issues and fashionable labels come and go. Often, such issues are categorized either as problematic or as desirable. In the 'problematic' category, we can think of the series of labels given to strategies used to tackle the multiple problems of disadvantaged or segregated neighbourhoods. In the 'desirable' category, recent years have seen an upsurge of academic and political attention for what would make cities more innovative, creative and competitive. Shrinkage has now claimed a prominent place among such academic and political hypotheses. Starting in Germany during the late 1990s and early 2000s, and then slowly but surely spreading across most of Europe, academics have put shrinkage firmly on the research agenda of the social sciences and made policy-makers aware that they may have to re-think their growth-oriented strategies. Although there are considerable variations across Europe in the extent to which cities and regions face shrinkage and the timing of the process (e.g. already started, soon to start or still far away), it will definitely become a more common phenomenon in the next decades in an increasing number of European cities and regions. However, even though shrinkage has recently been presented as a new challenge for researchers and policy-makers, in fact there have always been shrinking and stagnating cities and regions. As Turok and Mykhnenko (2007) remind us, just a few decades ago, many cities in Europe and North America faced massive population losses and many urban studies scholars studied cities from a perspective of crisis and decline.

Apparently these darker years for cities – similar to what had occurred centuries or even millennia ago – have been quickly forgotten, looking at the shock and disbelief with which many policy-makers (and maybe many academics too) have reacted to a new wave of urban shrinkage. What may be new about the recent upsurge of shrinkage in Europe, though, is its geographical scope (i.e. an increasing number of cities and regions across Europe) and its seemingly structural nature (i.e. in many cities and regions it is expected to last for several decades). In a new demographic reality of slower population growth and a greying population, possibly reinforced further by migration restrictions becoming ever tighter, Europe may have to get used to shrinkage as a structural feature of its development instead of a short-lived phase soon followed by renewed growth. Moreover, structural changes in the global economy, characterized by ongoing de-industrialization in the 'old world' that coincides with new economic opportunities in the service sectors and in creative and knowledge intensive industries, will give new stimuli to the most urbanized places and put pressure on smaller cities and more peripheral locations. The shrinkage in peripheral cities and communities will, therefore, probably be aggravated. Under current societal conditions, the gap between the most urban and best-connected places and those with a moderate urban character and less well-connected places must be expected to increase instead of decrease.

In this introductory article to the special issue, the focus will be on understanding the shrinkage process and to consider its

effects. We will first reflect on the current state of research on shrinkage in Europe, starting by defining the concept of shrinkage and its main causes and effects. Then, we will address the many variations in which shrinkage occurs and can be understood, even within a relatively small continent as Europe. Shrinkage can have different causes and different consequences, and it can take place at different geographical scales. Furthermore, the classic geographic terms 'site' and 'situation' as well as the historic development path of a location, and the institutional contexts shrinkage is occurring in, play a crucial role in understanding causes and consequences of shrinkage. After thus setting the stage, we will introduce the key issues addressed in the contributions to this special issue.

### What is Shrinkage?

The term shrinkage as it is currently applied in social science research points at a complex interplay of factors. Although population decline is most often used as its key indicator, shrinkage involves much more than just a decline of the number of inhabitants of a settlement, municipality or region. In demographic terms, we should also take the population composition and the number of households into account. A decrease in the local or regional labour force and an increase of older age groups often precedes the decline of local or regional population as a whole; and a decline in the number of inhabitants may or may not be combined with a decline in the number of households. Most often, population decline starts before the number of households declines. These demographic trends are often closely intertwined with economic stagnation or decline, which can contribute to population decline: when employment opportunities are lost or no longer match well with the skills and qualifications of the population, people may decide to move elsewhere. However, it may also go the other way round: companies may close or relocate

if they are no longer able to find sufficient workers with the skills and qualifications they need.

Social science research and theorizing on shrinkage in recent years has focused on cities rather than on regions. In the European Union's Seventh Framework project 'Shrink Smart', urban shrinkage is conceptualized as:

an event resulting from the interplay of different macro-processes at the local scale... Such macro-processes may be related to the economic, demographic or settlement system development, as well as to environmental issues or changes in the political or administrative system. Urban shrinkage occurs when the specific interplay of the mentioned macro-processes leads to population decline... (Rink *et al.*, 2009, p. 5)

While population decline in this research project is seen as the main indicator for shrinkage, Rink *et al.* (2009, p. 5) stress that 'it is not the same as the phenomenon of urban shrinkage itself'. In a similar vein, the Shrinking Cities International Research Network (SCIRN) propose the following definition of a shrinking city:

The term shrinking city usually describes a densely populated urban area that has on the one hand faced a population loss in large parts and is on the other hand undergoing economic transformation with some symptoms of a structural crisis. (Hollander *et al.*, 2009, p. 224)

The clear advantage of this definition is its flexibility, which is desirable when studying shrinking cities in very diverse settings across the globe as this network does. On the other hand, this definition's flexibility is also its weakness, because it is difficult to apply it in empirical research based on quantitative data or to make a proper case study selection that enables inter-regional and international case comparison. It leaves open several issues such as population size and density (e.g. when do you call a settlement a city?), the extent of population loss, which part of a city should be shrinking (e.g. how large are 'large parts?') and duration of population loss. In the COST Action 'Cities Regrowing Smaller' (CIRES), in which Europe rather

than the entire world is the study area, this shrinking city definition was therefore partly reconsidered and changed into

a functional urban area with a minimum population of 5,000 residents in its core city (or a certain district in it) that has faced a remarkable population loss at least for 5 years (in recent years or in some former period) and/or is undergoing a long-term or episodic economic, social or cultural transformation that cause symptoms of a structural crisis. (CIRES, 2011, p. 14)

### Causes of Shrinkage in Europe

It is not always straightforward to disentangle causes and effects in a complex process like shrinkage. It is a demanding task to find out 'what came first' and 'what caused what'. In their *Shrinking Cities Atlas*, probably one of the most comprehensive overviews of shrinking cities worldwide, Oswalt and Rieniets (2006) mention four categories of causes for shrinkage: 'destruction', 'loss', 'shifting' and 'change'. In the 'destruction' category, the causes for shrinkage they mention are wars, natural disasters such as earthquakes or flooding, epidemic diseases and environmental pollution. Recent examples in Europe include several war-torn cities in former Yugoslavia in the 1990s and cities hit by earthquakes such as L'Aquila in Italy in 2009. 'Loss' includes scarcity of resources and a massive loss of jobs. While scarcity of resources like water is a returning concern in some parts of Europe, running out of fossil energy is a major issue for the whole of Europe and beyond. Massive job loss is a common phenomenon in recent European history as well. This applies mostly to what Bontje and Musterd (2008) call 'single-layered cities', including cities and regions heavily specialized in labour-intensive manufacturing or mining industries (e.g. 'one company towns'), cities with a dominant large employer that disappears because of bankruptcy or moving to a low-cost country. This type of loss partly overlaps with the two other categories of causes of shrinkage distinguished by Oswalt and Rieniets (2006):

'shifting' and 'change'. These two categories include the causes of shrinkage most common for present-day Europe: suburbanization, selective migration, demographic change and economic transformation, amongst others.

The second demographic transition as described by Van de Kaa (1987) has already affected Europe for some decades and will probably continue. This involves a combination of low birth rates, stable or rising death rates and a rising life expectancy, resulting in a greying population across Europe, although this process is running at different speeds in different parts of the continent. In recent decades, especially in the post-socialist era, in most Western European countries the second demographic transition has been partly compensated by immigration, while in most of Central and Eastern Europe, the process has been accelerated by emigration. The recent EU expansion and opening up of West European labour markets to the Central and Eastern European labour force has further encouraged migration from East to West. An exception should be made for the capital cities of Central and Eastern European countries that have managed to attract many migrants from elsewhere in their countries and from other Central and Eastern European countries. The extent to which Western European city-regions, especially those with the largest cities, will keep attracting foreign migrants not only from elsewhere in Europe but also from other continents will also depend on developments in national and European migration laws and regulations. Several Western European countries have recently restricted access for foreign migrants, especially for those from outside Europe. However, even if European countries or the EU as a whole decided to become more 'migration-friendly', it would take a very large number of migrants to counter the greying of Europe's population (Keely, 2001; Meyerson, 2001), a number that is likely to be far beyond the political and societal acceptance level for foreign migration.

Selective migration of young and higher educated people, those seeking higher education, and those seeking improved career opportunities elsewhere can also cause or add to population decline. This can become part of a chain reaction: if the most talented and skilled people leave a shrinking region because they expect better future prospects elsewhere, that shrinking region may become less attractive for companies and investors, which may cause even more people to leave. This chain reaction can only be interrupted by creating or attracting new employment and education opportunities. Offering a more attractive residential environment may also help, but only if it is combined with sufficient employment in or close to the region. However, recent and expected tendencies across Europe tend to point to increasing polarization between growing and shrinking regions and continuing selective migration flows contributing to this polarization. We have already mentioned the contrasts between capital regions and non-capital regions in some Central and East European countries. In Western Europe, similar long-standing examples are the South East vs. the rest of England and Paris vs. the rest of France. In a more polycentric country like the Netherlands, recent and expected tendencies also point to increasing polarization between a growing Randstad region and a gradually increasing number of declining regions in the north, east and south of the country. In between are still growing provincial cities that increasingly function as stepping stones for those who did not go to the highly urbanized Randstad area immediately: young people from the surrounding regions go there to study but then often move on to the Randstad, where they see better career opportunities (Latten and Musterd, 2009).

Shrinkage may also be partly caused by a mismatch between supply and demand in the housing market. This, however, will occur more frequently at the local rather than the regional scale. Suburbanization was one of the most influential causes of population

decline in West European cities between the 1950s and 1980s. In most of post-socialist Central and Eastern Europe, suburbanization became an influential phenomenon only after the demise of socialist regimes in the early 1990s. At the same time, cities in Western Europe had already started a comeback as an attractive living environment, albeit with significant variations between countries and city types (Cheshire, 2006; Turok and Mykhnenko, 2008). Suburbanization most often takes place within city-regional boundaries; however, in regions lacking residential environments that meet typical suburban demands (e.g. spacious houses and plots in quiet, green settings), such as heavily industrialized regions, suburbanization may cross the regional boundaries and contribute to population loss on a city-regional scale. In the late 1980s, this inter-regional version of suburbanization was labelled 'counter-urbanization', then part of a broader trend in the UK and US in which the least urban places grew fastest (Champion, 1989).

Finally, the institutional context and institutional changes can also have a large impact on the fortunes of cities and regions. In Europe, we can witness this impact of institutional factors at multiple administrative scales. The shift from socialism to post-socialism in Central and Eastern Europe, and the subsequent EU expansion eastwards had mixed effects on cities and regions. On the one hand, overly one-sided urban and regional economies that had been sustained artificially by socialist governments for too long collapsed; on the other hand, cities and regions that had been cut off from a large part of European markets found new opportunities to grow. Also, while national-level funding of local and regional economies may have decreased after trading socialist for capitalist regimes, EU regional funds may have partly compensated some regions for this loss of national funds. At the national level, border regions are probably particularly disadvantaged in situations where differences in taxes and other state



regulations between countries are significant. In the Parkstad Limburg region in the south of the Netherlands, for example, shrinkage is partly caused by inhabitants moving just across the border to Germany where they not only find much cheaper housing and land prices, but can also still profit from Dutch tax rebates on mortgage interest (Latten and Musterd, 2009).

### Effects of Shrinkage in Europe

As a logical consequence of the dominant growth paradigm among national, regional and local policy-makers, shrinkage is usually seen as a negative tendency to be stopped, avoided or at least diminished. What first comes to mind is a series of expected losses, including the loss of services, the loss of spending power, the loss of tax and other municipal sources of income, the loss of labour force, and the loss of investments. Although a more nuanced approach to shrinkage seems to have emerged recently among social scientists and policy-makers, possible negative effects still dominate when the potential impact of shrinkage is explored. What the exact effects will be depends very much on the local specificities of the process. One of the most frequently mentioned effects of shrinkage, for example, is an increase in vacant and derelict dwellings. This is not always the case, though: if it is only the number of inhabitants that is declining and not the number of households, all dwellings in a shrinking community may still be occupied. Something similar can be said about the possible loss of spending power: this depends on who is leaving and who is staying. When population loss through out-migration has the selective nature described before, a significant loss in spending power may indeed occur. But as long as sufficient higher- and middle-income residents stay, the impact may not be dramatic. Looking at services and social infrastructure, it can be expected that facilities designed for the youngest age groups in particular will decline or be

closed. At the same time, however, other services aimed at older age groups may replace them or services may be able to adapt to a changing audience. Shrinkage can also affect the technical infrastructure of a place or area: Koziol (2004) describes the extreme context of East Germany, where, due to a shrinking population, basic infrastructure such as water and energy provision, sewerage and traffic infrastructure became unaffordable for many communities.

Possible positive effects of shrinkage have hardly been mentioned in the academic debate so far. Several authors have nuanced the negative view on shrinkage, but their comments have implied that the effects would be spread out across a longer time and be easy to cope with or that the effects might not be as negative as feared (e.g. Van Dam *et al.*, 2006). On the possibly positive side of shrinkage, one could imagine a relaxed housing market with lots of choice for those who stay, space becoming available for functions less able to compete on the land market (e.g. nature, culture, playgrounds) or for spontaneous initiatives, less traffic congestion, or less pollution. These possibly positive effects have not been studied much yet. Surprising contributions to the debate, however, recently came from Delken (2008) and Hollander (2011), reporting that inhabitants of shrinking cities in Germany and the US were not always less satisfied with their quality of life than those in growing cities. Hollander (2011) also refers to a research tradition that has so far found most support in the US and Germany: proposing strategies for 'smart decline', 'planning for less', or 'rightsizing cities', which in many cases may be a more appropriate development strategy than trying to return to a growth path (Popper and Popper, 2002; Schilling and Logan, 2008; Wiechmann, 2008). New perspectives for shrinking regions may be encouraged by initiatives like the German International Building Exhibitions (IBAs). The most well known example of this was the IBA Emscher Park in the Ruhr region

(Shaw, 2002; Danielzyk and Wood, 2004), but more recently an IBA was also organized in the East German state of Saxony-Anhalt (IBA-Büro and Bauhaus Dessau, 2010).

### Variations of Shrinkage in Europe

Having presented the most common causes and effects of shrinkage in a nutshell, we should stress that each shrinking location has its own unique features. Shrinkage is never exactly the same process in two different places. Most often, shrinkage is the result of more than one cause and has multiple effects and the combination of causes and effects are without doubt different in each case. In Europe, a small but highly diverse continent, a considerable variety of shrinkage experiences can be shown, as the contributions to this special issue demonstrate. Among the many factors and dimensions that matter in analysing and explaining the variety of shrinkage experiences, we have already mentioned a few: the location-specific economic structure (e.g. a mono-structure depending on one or more sectors, or a broad and diversified economic base, dominated by one company or not) and the institutional context (i.e. the specific situations of post-socialist countries and border regions). Turok and Mykhnenko (2007) have compared population growth and decline trajectories of European cities with more than 200,000 inhabitants between 1960 and 2005 and grouped them in nine categories. The most common trajectories were continuous growth (ninety-four out of 310 cities), medium-term decline (seventy-five cities) and recent decline (forty-one cities). The categories distinguished appeared to be distributed quite unevenly across the continent. National contexts seemed to matter, such as the national economic situation and the level of urbanization, as well as the contrasting political-economic histories of Western and Eastern Europe, while there was also evidence of city size as a differentiating factor. Beauregard (2009)

has done a similar type of analysis in the US for a much longer time period (1820–2000), refining the analysis by looking at prevalence (i.e. the number of times cities have experienced population decline for a decade), persistence (i.e. how often cities have experienced population decline for more than one decade) and severity (i.e. the number of inhabitants involved). This resulted in an even more varied set of shrinkage trajectories. While both these analyses focused on the city level, more variation would probably have been found when combining this with the regional context. There can be growing cities in shrinking regions, shrinking cities in growing regions, and shrinking places right next to growing places. When trying to explain such variations between growth and decline trajectories of cities, the concept of path dependence of urban and regional development could be helpful. A path dependence and context-sensitive analysis of urban and regional development may involve a historical analysis of the evolution of the local and regional socio-economic structures and dynamics, the historic development of the institutional context of a city or region, and the impact of events, choices and decisions in the past on local or regional development opportunities in the present and future (Musterd and Murie, 2010; Bontje *et al.*, 2011).

### Contributions to this Special Issue

The contributions to this special issue originate from papers presented at two recent conferences in Amsterdam:

- ◆ The conference ‘Shrinkage in Europe’, co-organized by the Centre for Urban Studies of the University of Amsterdam, the EU COST Action ‘Cities Regrowing Smaller’ (CIRES) and the Local Employment and Economic Development Programme (LEED) of the OECD, in February 2011.
- ◆ The workshop ‘Changing Urban Geo-

ographies of Growth and Decline', part of the RC21 Conference 'The Struggle to Belong', in July 2011. RC21 is the Research Committee on Sociology of Urban and Regional Development of the International Sociological Association.

We have structured this special issue in three parts. Part One contains three papers, including this introductory article, contributing to theoretical and conceptual debates on shrinkage. The two articles following this introduction link the theoretical and conceptual issues to in-depth case studies. Rink, Haase, Grossmann, Couch and Cocks look at a specific type of shrinking city: cities that have recently made a turnaround from long-term shrinkage to re-growth. Comparing the cases of Leipzig and Liverpool, they first explore the reasons for their shrinkage for many decades, and then the reasons for their recent turnaround from shrinkage to re-growth. Looking at the expected future trends in these cities, though, the authors doubt whether growth will remain in the long run, since the foundations of their recent re-growth are rather vulnerable and uncertain. Hoekveld looks at shrinkage from a time-space perspective. On the one hand, she highlights the importance of geographic scale, studying possible causes for shrinkage at both the regional and the local scale; on the other hand, she explores the timing and sequence of events, finding different orders of causality in shrinkage trajectories in three case-study regions in the Netherlands.

Part Two contains four articles based on case studies in post-socialist countries in Central and Eastern Europe: Poland, Czech Republic, Romania and Macedonia. Three of these papers describe case studies in comparable circumstances: cities in which shrinkage was mainly caused by a combination of de-industrialization and post-socialist transformation. Stryjakiewicz, Ciesiolka and Jaroszewska analyse the former mining city of Walbrzych. The closure of most of the mining and other industries during the early

1990s resulted in demographic change, job losses, increasing poverty and a degrading physical environment. The city could not cope with these problems alone and relied on national and EU funds. While the Special Economic Zone has brought some new economic vitality to the city, the losses of the early 1990s have been far from compensated. A fairly similar story can be told about Vallea Jiului in Romania, though this is still partly an active mining region. Paun Constantinescu questions the sustainability of the cities in Vallea Jiului, mostly planned in the socialist era in a mono-industrial fashion. Several years of national government programmes have not improved living circumstances in the region much. Maes, Loopmans and Kesteloot take us to the social effects of shrinkage in a larger and less mono-industrial city: Ostrava in the Czech Republic. Within the context of a slowly shrinking city, they focus on the neighbourhood of Hrusov that has undergone swift shrinkage. After the closure of several large factories, Hrusov transformed from a neighbourhood of Czech working-class families into an ethnic enclave of Roma immigrants from Slovakia. Since the 1990s, Ostrava has become a more polarized city in socio-economic and ethnic terms, with Hrusov becoming one of the most deprived parts of the city. Siljanovska, Korobar and Stefanovska elaborate on the problematic situation of small cities in Macedonia, located in Southeast Europe. Similar to most other countries in this part of Europe, the national capital is very dominant and acts as a magnet for young migrants from the smaller cities. Especially small cities in the rather isolated northeast of the country face long-term shrinkage. Here too, EU funds are regarded as providing a potential way out of the decline.

Finally, in Part Three, three contributions focus on Western European countries. Each has a different perspective as a point of departure, but all relate to possible strategies to deal with shrinkage. While such strategies are also discussed in some of the other



contributions, they take centre stage in these three articles. Fol discusses the social dimension of shrinkage and policy responses in France. Two main patterns of urban decline in France are the decline of industrial cities and the decline of small towns, illustrated in this article with examples from Roubaix, Saint-Denis and Vierzon. The local and national policy responses mainly aim at creating or restoring competitiveness and attractiveness, which may result in growing socio-spatial disparities at national, regional and local levels. Barreira and Panagopoulos analyse the local strategies to deal with shrinkage in Portugal. These local strategies can be grouped in four categories: promotion of marriage (i.e. indirectly aiming at attracting younger inhabitants and a higher birth rate); attracting students for secondary education; maintenance of health care services; and employment-oriented policies. The strategies are also categorized in another way: the extent to which municipalities either develop 'smart growth' or 'smart shrinkage' strategies or rely on a growth strategy against all odds. Galjaard, Van Dam and Van Wissen close this special issue with a comparison of regional population decline and policy responses in Brandenburg (Germany), Nord-Pas de Calais (France) and Northeast Scotland (UK). They conclude that involvement of national government increases the chances for a successful regional strategy, that regional strategies tend to focus mostly on physical upgrading while more integral approaches are often more effective, and that, while the strategies analysed may have improved liveability in the regions, they hardly affected population change.

### **Multi-Dimensional, Multi-Scalar, Multi-Temporal**

The study of shrinkage in European regions is a challenging one. This is not because it is a new phenomenon. Shrinkage transcends time and is related to a wide range of natural and cultural processes underlying population

development and economic prosperity. It is a challenge because the multidimensionality of shrinkage (i.e. the factors involved), and its multi-scalar (i.e. the different scales involved) and multi-temporal character (i.e. the different time-scales involved) make it an extremely complicated phenomenon of which the causes and effects are only partially understood. Knowledge of long-wave economic and demographic cycles and slowly shifting centres of political power might just as well be required for understanding current population and economic dynamics as the relatively recent economic, cultural, demographic and political shifts that are more visible today. Processes at the global scale that determine economic, cultural, political and social restructuring worldwide, seem to be just as relevant as national, regional and local level structures and processes. An awareness of the longer historical trajectories and pathways, together with awareness of the current conditions with which cities and urban regions are confronted, will help to understand the mutual circular relations between the causes and effects of shrinkage, at various scales. In this special issue, the authors have dealt with these multi-dimensional, multi-scalar, and multi-temporal phenomena, and, in so doing, have laid the foundations for adequate responses and possible intervention strategies.

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