THE PROBLEMS OF DEVELOPING DEPOPULATING CITIES. DOES THE CZECH DEBATE ON URBAN SHRINKAGE HAVE ANY CONCRETE CONSEQUENCES?

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ABSTRACT: The paper briefly presents the course and basic conclusions of the local branch of the global debate on shrinking cities and then verifies whether any of them have turned into concrete projects or policies. The paper analyses the strategic plans and spatial planning documentation of several dozen Czech cities that can be described as shrinking. While the naming of the problem in terms of strategy is no longer an exception, the debate has so far only rarely made its way onto the subject of specific rules.

KEY WORDS: Shrinking cities, depopulation, urban decay, urban policy, deindustrialisation, regional development

Introduction

The global debate on the phenomenon known as "shrinking cities" has its deepest roots in the 1960s, and gained momentum in the 1990s and after 2000 when it became an important issue, especially in Europe. It was particularly relevant in the new federal states of Germany after its reunification, and in the industrial areas of England and northern France. In the Czech Republic, the debate really only started after 2000 following a slight delay for quite logical reasons: with a few exceptions, the problem of shrinking cities passed the Czech Republic by or manifested itself very slightly. In one of the first popularisation texts on this topic, "Depopulated Cities", Karel Maier described what the world's cities were facing and pointed out the initial signs of similar developments

in some Czech cities. He also pointed out that if we do not strictly stick to the administrative boundaries of cities, but focus on specific parts of the city, this is a widespread problem in our country as well (Maier 2008). Other authors have also attributed the initial slowness of the Czech debate on shrinkage to the fact that the first wave of decline, between 1990 and 2010, did not affect urban structure in the country much; on the contrary, at that time some shrinking cities were de facto rather flourishing in terms of their public space and were declining by very moderate numbers in the international context (Rumpel et al. 2013). Urban shrinkage in the Czech Republic has a selective character, affecting only a certain part of the city and a certain part of society - the more mobile, younger, and better educated. The trend has been exacerbated in the Czech Republic by a combination of several social phenomena since the 1990s: the second demographic transition, emigration for studies, suburbanisation, and the transformation of the industrial structure (Rumpel and Slach 2012). Other authors have attributed the rise of shrinkage to other factors, such as the increase in automobilisation, which has enabled more distant commuting and thus reduced the need to live close to work, i.e. in the city. Thus, urban living has increasingly become a lifestyle issue rather than a necessity. Cities were thus divided into 'winners' and 'losers', depending on how attractive they were according to the new standards (Schmeidler 2014).

The typical shrinking city is then described as being located in a structurally affected region (mining areas, borderlands), from which the younger generation is leaving to pursue education and job opportunities elsewhere and the wealthier part of the population is moving to nearby villages to live in detached houses (Šerý et al. 2018). The literature also often mentions the fact that although the number of permanent residents is decreasing in some cities, this does not necessarily mean that the actual number of people using the city is also decreasing: apartments were transformed into offices or service providing units in the 1990s as the economy changed (Krejčí et al. 2011). Jan Binek and his colleagues have provided a suggestive classification of how depopulating cities can be sorted and distinguished. They identify as important observation of the mode of depopulation, whether it is caused by migration or natural change, whether the hinterland is depopulating along with the city, and whether the city belongs to one of the structurally affected regions (mining areas, borderlands, inner peripheries, etc.) (Binek et al. 2015). Analyses show that while initially cities depopulated mainly through migration, natural change has gradually become dominant (Peltan et al 2022). Beyond the obvious social and spatial issues, the economic aspect of shrinkage is also important: while the number of people paying taxes is declining, the area that needs to be maintained is expanding (Slach et al. 2019, Rumpel et al. 2013).

Ostrava is the largest Czech city affected by the problem of shrinkage. However, even here it is important to mention that compared to foreign examples it is a slow pro-

cess. The reasons for the shrinkage are a combination of global and local factors: the second demographic transition, lack of employment opportunities, suburbanisation, the 1997 floods, and local political decisions from the 1940s and 1950s, which began the latest phase of Ostrava's rapid development. It is estimated that the shrinkage in Ostrava will mainly affect the housing estates, while the districts containing detached houses and inner villages will be the winners. Local drivers of shrinkage are low investment in historic buildings during the communist period, deindustrialisation after 1989, low attractiveness of some areas of the city, social problems, the number of brownfields, and air pollution (Rumpel et al. 2010b).

In this paper we further examine what practical implications have been drawn from existing research. We briefly summarise what recommendations for Czech cities emerge from the literature and methodologies and then try to find examples of their application. We analyse the strategic plans of 10 cities with more than 5 thousand inhabitants in which the highest percentage of population decline was measured, and we supplement this with all the cities with more than 50 thousand inhabitants that have seen at least 10 % population decline. The analysis of the strategic plans is complemented by a search for other projects and programmes in the surveyed cities, that can be classified as corresponding to the conclusions of the Czech debate on shrinkage. However, the list and description of these projects cannot, of course, be exhaustive. The following discussion addresses the extent to which research findings result in practical results.

Results

It should be mentioned that there are many ways in which shrinking cities deal with their problems. These could be divided into several categories, as described by G. J. Hospers, i.e., denying the fact of shrinkage and marginalising the problems arising from it (A), trying to reverse shrinkage (B), accepting the fact of shrinkage (C), and finally trying to use some aspects of shrinkage in the ultimate qualitative growth of a city even under conditions of quantitative decline (D) (Hospers 2014). This paper focuses on the last two categories of approaches, since, while efforts to reverse shrinkage are certainly a legitimate strategy, they are practically indistinguishable from standard urban development tools and thus are not specific to shrinkage, and marginalising shrinkage logically provides no solution. For example, the New Industrial Zones project in Ostrava has significantly promoted the transformation of industry in the region and created around 8,000 jobs, but it cannot be said to be a shrinking-only strategy (Rumpel and Slach 2014). The concept of "flagship projects" is also important to mention; these are pilot projects of high symbolic importance, influencing the external image of a city, which turns out to be also essential for its development. In

the Czech context, these include Dolní Vítkovice in Ostrava and the Marian bridge in Ústí nad Labem (Rumpel et al. 2010a), but even this is not a strategy specifically exploiting the situation of shrinking cities. The promotion of creative industries or brownfield conversion is often mentioned in the context of shrinking cities, as it creates new opportunities and industries, and specifically in shrinking cities the conditions for its existence are suitable, as there are typically lower input and operating costs associated with it due to it being possible to use and transform brownfields or other unused capacities (Rumpel et al. 2010a, Schmeidler 2014). In general, however, the use of brownfields and the promotion of the creative class is a strategy generally associated with industrial transformation rather than shrinkage per se.

Strategies

1. Build an information base on shrinkage

An information base is necessary to determine the causes and "drivers of shrinkage", to determine the extent of shrinkage, and is essential for choosing an appropriate strategy (Svobodová et al. 2015a, Svobodová et al. 2015b). Especially if the causes of shrinkage are identified as purely local based on the information base, strategies aiming at reversing shrinkage may be more appropriate.

2. Housing market equilibrium

It seems key to assess the future oversupply of housing based on demographic projections. If it increases significantly, it may be appropriate to reduce housing capacity through various means, including demolition. If the housing overhang is not imminent, it is appropriate to seek to address the causes of the shrinkage rather than moderating its progress (Peltan et al. 2022).

3. Prioritisation of sites in the land use plan and efficient development

Within population decline, it is necessary to direct new development in a city in such a way that it does not increase the maintenance demands on technical and transport infrastructure and thus place an inadequate burden on the city's shrinking budget (Peltan et al 2022).

4. Temporary solutions and micro-projects

When it is not possible to target the final state of an area, it is advisable to support at least a temporary or interim informal use of the freed-up capacities, either for the application of urban concepts or for local micro-projects by local residents. Even unused capacities should be spatially articulated, as they significantly affect the surrounding parts of the city (Mika and Káňová 2022, Mika 2023).

City	Population decline 1990-2019	Strategy by G. J. Hospers	Strategy by author	Other
Frýdek-Místek	11,90 %	B	-	-
Havířov	17,74 %	A	-	Employee Mobility Program
Jablunkov	17,17 %	A	-	-
Karlovy Vary	13,89 %	A	-	-
Karviná	25,48 %	B	1, 2	Employee Mobility Program
Ledeč nad Sázavou	21,51 %	B	-	-
Litvínov	19,81 %	A	-	-
Mariánské Lázně	16,82 %	B	-	-
Orlová	18,42 %	B	1, 2	Employee Mobility Program
Ostrava	11,76 %	B, D	1, 4	Refill, urban acupuncture
Přerov	16,56 %	A	-	-
Slavičín	17,45 %	A	-	-
Vrbno pod Pradědem	24,47 %	A	-	-

Table 1. Specific Strategies Applications (Source: demographical data by CZSO, the rest by the author)

As shown in Table 1, in most city strategic development plans, only type A and B strategies can be found, which are not very interesting approaches from the point of view of "smart shrinkage". Trying to reverse shrinkage (B) may of course be legitimate, but it always depends on the specific situation. A different approach can be found only in Ostrava, where several projects have been or are still underway that correspond to the recommended strategies. In Karviná and Orlová, a number of demolitions of apartment buildings are underway (Figure 1), but this is not a coordinated municipal strategy, but an initiative of the owner(s). Secondarily, however, this reduces housing capacity, which helps to maintain a balanced housing market.

Figure 1. Demolitions in Orlová (Source: Web-1).

The Refill project is part of the URBACT action, co-funded by the European Union. It aims to reuse vacant spaces as a driving force for innovation at the local level. They use the principles of interim reuse and so on. In the Czech Republic, the city of Ostrava is participating in this network (Web-2).

Urban acupuncture (Figure 2) is a theoretical concept that suggests that with the right locations and types of projects, relatively large changes can be made at low cost. Projects do not have to target a definitive use of space but can choose one problem to address or highlight. Low upfront costs also allow for a greater tolerance for error in these projects (Enia & Martella 2019). It can also manifest itself in the temporary use of vacant lots and buildings.

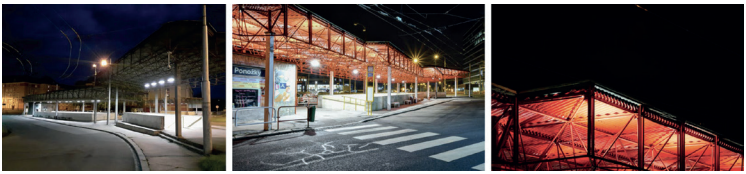

Figure 2. Example of urban acupuncture on Republic Square in Ostrava (Source: author's archive).

Employee Mobility is a free public transport commuting scheme. It operates in Havířov, Karviná and Orlová. Although it does not directly fall under the conclusions of the Czech debate on shrinkage, it can be included in the Polarised Regional City concept that appears in foreign literature, which consists of support for viable urban cores and promotion of their interconnection, as opposed to the blanket development of everything, which is an economically unsustainable approach in shrinking cities (Oswalt 2006).

There is the possibility of applying for subsidies to demolish buildings in socially excluded areas. They are advertised for these purposes by the Ministry of Regional Development. This is a programme that can be used to fulfil some of the recommendations towards shrinking cities and is being used in them (Web-3).

Discussion

Examination of the strategy documents of other shrinking city programmes shows that the theoretical principles derived from the research are applied relatively sparsely. Some of the possible reasons, such as the relatively slow depopulation process in contrast to foreign examples, have already been mentioned in the article. Another obvious reason may be that a substantial part of the strategies for the use of shrinkage

have only recently been formulated and need to wait some time for their adaptation by individual cities. Earlier research by the author of this paper and interviews with urban planning actors show that it is politically unrewarding to enforce a quantitatively non-development form of any planning document, and thus there is a tendency to avoid it (Mika 2021). According to research by Tomáš Peltan's team, a significant proportion of cities do not have a demographic forecast (Peltan et al. 2020) and may therefore be unaware of the long-term consequences of demographic decline. In cities there are often so-called "pro-growth coalitions" that seek to reverse shrinkage, as quantitative stagnation is not economically viable in the short term (Rink et al. 2014).

Conclusions

Urban shrinkage is less pronounced in the Czech Republic than in some other European or American countries. For this reason, research on urban shrinkage began somewhat later here, but it now provides a comprehensive basis for addressing this issue. The recommendations that have emerged from the current research could be summarised in 4 approaches: 1) Build an information base on shrinkage, 2) Keep housing market equilibrium, 3) Prioritise sites in the land use plan and keep development efficient, 4) Endorse temporary solutions and micro-projects. Some specific manifestations of these recommended strategies are still barely traceable, but especially in the cities in Ostrava region at least some of them have been applied. The reasons for this are debatable, it probably is a combination of inertia of thinking, lack of anticipation of problems, the relative newness of the situation and its only gradually increasing urgency.

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