

Re-urbanisation in Eastern-Germany: a controversial debate inbetween emphatic theories and rigged up data?

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After more than a decade of distinctive “shrinkage”, some Eastern-German Cities seem to show a tendency towards reurbanisation, as the loss of inhabitants has stopped and even town-bound migration from the suburban fringes can be seen. All over Germany, a urban renaissance, seems to be proved by interviews with inhabitants in major German cities such as Munich, Leipzig or Hamburg. Widely noticed publications based on questionnaire surveys state that the demise of German cities seems to be stopped. The “renaissance of the city” is a new trend. Urban live is rated higher than ever before within the last decades. These findings coincide quite well with current migration data, as already mentioned. Especially in Eastern Germany, where most cities suffered enormous demographic problems since reunification, the idea of an urban renaissance which could finally stop suburbanisation and attract citizens, created a lot of hope amongst planners and politicians as well as the real estate and banking sector.

But is there really a reason to believe, that in contrast to previous ideas of continuous shrinkage, a new – unexpected - period of significant re-urbanization in Eastern-Germany should be expected?

One first, and basic, problem of the current discourse is the absence of a common and clear definition on what “re-urbanisation” or “urban renaissance” are.

Whilst most researchers prefer a more or less qualitative approach which puts emphasis on the relative weight of urban living after decades of suburbanization, the discourse of planners, policy-makers and investors is dominated by a quantitative approach which is focused on a increasing urban population. Surprisingly, until now current positive migration balances for East German cities were only seldom put under closer examination. The sheer fact of some cities with positive migration balances and the results of isolated questionnaire campaigns seem to be sufficient as a poof for the new trend of reurbanisation.

This is astounding as even very simple analysis of migration statistics for the last years show very clearly that the current reurbanisation seems – until now – not to be a general trend, yet, but is strongly linked to the age cohort of the 18 to 30 years old. Members of this group are

likely to set up first own households rather in the city than in suburban or rural areas, anyway. Such a behavior corresponds to well known and simple models of housing preferences and stages of age. What is striking is that due to special demographic patterns of the GDR and Post-GDR society, especially the mentioned cohort is currently very strong and will be followed by very weak birth cohorts. If reurbanisation in Eastern Germany stays depending on in-migration of young people, the end of that trend can be foreseen for the next few years. On the other hand, none of the other age cohorts do show any significant migratory behavior which would support the idea of a urban renaissance, supported by all members of society regardless their social status or age.

Currently it seems that urban renaissance might be a likely trend for Eastern German cities, but it hasn't really started, yet. Despite euphoric media reports and research papers. And due to generally devaforable demographic structure it is not sure if a nameable, durable reurbanisation with demographic stabilization or even population increase might really be the future trend for East German cities. If reurbanisation is more than a "hype" in media and uncritical research still needs to be proved. It is to early to really judge, as empirical findings and a critical analysis of statistical data do not fit so smooth together as it might occur at first glimpse.