

DESCRIPTION FOR THE GENERAL PUBLIC

The SimDiff-project aims to empirically study the impacts of divergent institutional contexts on the dynamics and patterns of neighbourhood change in the two postsocialist cities of Halle (Saale) and Łódź. The project focuses on a comparative analysis of processes of suburbanization, gentrification and the development of “socialist” housing estates.

The core research questions of SimDiff are the following:

- How far do the particular patterns and dynamics of neighbourhood change in Germany and Poland follow the predictions made by theorists of postsocialist change in the 1990s? What similarities and differences can be found?
- Which institutional factors and contexts account for these similarities and differences? How do these affect housing-related actions of the residents in different ways?

These questions will be addressed through case studies in four neighbourhoods in each of the two cities.

Methodological triangulation is actively applied in the project. It rests on a mix of expert interviews, document analysis, in-depth interviews with residents and analysis of statistical data.

The reason for such research topic were three important empirical and conceptual gaps in the state-of-the-art on residential differentiation after socialism: First, the importance of differences pathways of institutional transformation for the trajectories of neighbourhood change has not yet been systematically studied. Second, the majority of studies are now more than ten years old, i.e. they were made in the first decade of the postsocialist transformation. As the tempo of urban change accelerated significantly after 2004 when CEE countries joined the EU, it is questionable how far these studies are still valid for the contemporary situation. Moreover, the geographical scope of available studies is limited and the great majority of research has revolved around a small number of capital cities (most notably Budapest, Prague, Warsaw, Tallinn and East-Berlin), while second- and third-tier cities have largely been sidelined. With few exceptions, most studies on the socio-spatial change in CEE cities in the first decade of the 21st century still rely on secondary data and relate to capital regions. Third, it is rare to find thorough and methodologically sound studies with an in-depth comparative research design. Put differently, what is often presented as comparative analysis is often simply a juxtaposition of cases drawn together under some unifying themes. Although such works provide invaluable information on different facets of neighbourhood change in CEE cities, they do not allow for a more nuanced understanding of post-1989 residential redifferentiation.

Overall, whereas the state-of-the-art of research on postsocialist cities has progressed swiftly in the last two decades, and we know more than ever before about the varying patterns and dynamics of urban development within the broad field of postsocialist cities, research is still mostly based on single-case studies of a small range of mostly capital cities. As such, comparison between different urban developments is rather unsystematic and there is virtually no research that engages a nuanced discussion of different trajectories of institutional transformation with a study of neighbourhood change in different contexts.