

The Reurbanization That Never Was: Governance Challenges in Poland's Suburbanizing Cities

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Abstract

The article examines the paradox of urban governance in Poland's five largest cities (excluding Warsaw)—Kraków, Łódź, Wrocław, Poznań, and Gdańsk—where municipal authorities articulate policies aimed at population retention and growth while simultaneously experiencing persistent suburbanization and demographic decline. Drawing on 13 semi-structured interviews with high-ranking city officials, transcribed and coded according to a semi-standardized protocol, the article analyzes how local authorities in these cities approach the challenge and aspiration of population retention and reurbanization within increasingly challenging demographic contexts. The findings reveal a significant implementation gap between aspirational policy goals and actual governance capacities. City authorities recognize population retention as vital for maintaining tax revenues and urban vitality, yet their policy toolkit remains severely limited by several interrelated factors (insufficient regulatory authority within the fragmented planning system; contentious relationships with suburban municipalities; weak leverage over real estate developers, and ambiguous national policies incentivizing suburbanization). The study contributes to debates on shrinking cities by highlighting how governance limitations transform reurbanization from a potentially transformative policy framework into merely aspirational rhetoric. This governance gap illuminates why potential “spaces of possibility” remain unrealized despite awareness of demographic challenges and knowledge of possible interventions. By analyzing the interplay between institutional constraints, market forces, and municipal responses, this research advances understanding of the specific governance challenges facing post-socialist cities and their metropolitan areas attempting to navigate demographic decline in contexts of planning deregulation and weak metropolitan governance.

Keywords

demographic decline; post-socialist cities; reurbanization; suburbanization; urban governance

1. Introduction

Cities across Europe face complex governance challenges as they navigate shifting population dynamics, with many post-socialist cities experiencing particularly acute demographic pressures through both population decline and suburbanization (Haase et al., 2021; Hesse & Siedentop, 2018; Korczyński & Kajdanek, 2025; Śleszyński et al., 2018; Stanilov & Sýkora, 2014). The largest Polish cities exemplify this tension, as municipal authorities attempt to implement policies aimed at population retention and growth (Couch & Fowles, 2019; Glatter & Siedhoff, 2008; Kajdanek & Radzimski, 2025; Krzysztofik et al., 2017; Kurek & Gałka, 2017; Lever, 1993; Spórna & Krzysztofik, 2020; Zasina, 2015) while simultaneously experiencing persistent suburbanization and, in some cases, absolute demographic decline (Figure 1). This article examines this governance paradox through an analysis of how Poland's five largest cities (excluding Warsaw)—Kraków, Łódź, Wrocław, Poznań, and Gdańsk—approach population challenges within their institutional, market, and civic contexts.

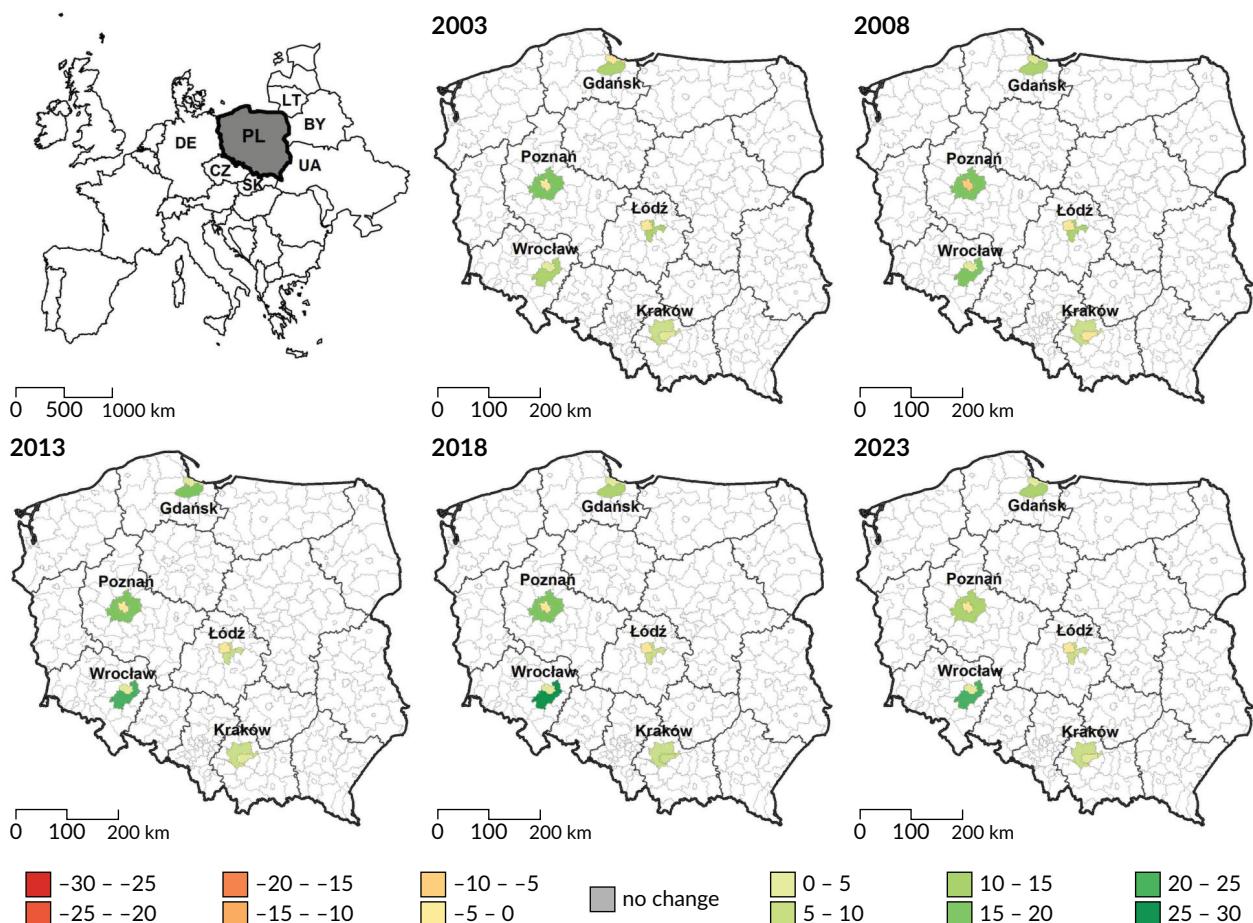


Figure 1. Gmina * migration for permanent residence by migrants' direction (urban area, rural area)—net migration per 1,000 inhabitants. Source: Bank Danych Lokalnych (n.d.). Note: * Unit of basic, the lowest level of fundamental three-tier territorial division of the country; a self-government community (gmina inhabitants) and the relevant territory, i.e., a unit as uniform as possible in terms of settlement and spatial layout as well as social and economic ties, ensuring the capability of performing public tasks. The current number of territorial division units: http://www.stat.gov.pl/bip/36_PLK_HTML.htm

Suburbanization has been the dominant trend within urban development in Poland for the last two decades (Gałka & Warych-Juras, 2018; Kajdanek, 2014, 2020; Kryczka et al., 2025; Lisowski et al., 2014; Mantey & Pokojski, 2020; Stanilov & Sýkora, 2014; Trojanek et al., 2016; Wagner, 2017) and continues to reshape metropolitan regions, frequently outpacing any countervailing reurbanization trends. From the local planning point of view, suburbanization is often explained by an inefficient planning system in Poland (Kryczka & Szmytkie, 2025; Nowak et al., 2023). But also, Polish government housing policies inadvertently promote suburbanization through mortgage subsidy programs that prioritize homeownership over alternative housing forms. Successive governments have implemented credit support schemes (such as "Rodzina na swoim" 2007–2012 and "Mieszkanie dla młodych" 2014–2018) providing down payment and interest subsidies to buyers, which inflate urban housing prices and push middle-class families toward cheaper suburban locations. The focus on addressing housing shortage through ownership-oriented solutions, rather than diversified rental options, effectively channels demand toward peripheral areas where homeownership remains financially accessible, thereby reinforcing suburban sprawl patterns. According to the National Census of Population and Housing (Statistics Poland, 2021), housing stock in Poland increased by 1.7 million units (12.8%) compared to 2011, with the highest growth occurring in municipalities immediately surrounding large urban centers. This outward migration creates significant fiscal challenges as city authorities lose tax revenue while continuing to bear service provision costs for suburban commuters.

The governance of reurbanization extends beyond traditional demographic processes to encompass what Ouředníček et al. (2015) identify as a policy approach, an urban vision, or a town planning policy of municipal governments dealing with the impacts of demographic change in urban space. In the Polish context, this governance landscape is particularly complex due to the fragmented planning system established during post-socialist transformation, where municipalities gained complete planning authority within their respective territories yet were unprepared for these responsibilities (Wagner, 2017). The reurbanization process demands deeper involvement of local government in town planning, stemming from the increasing popularity of public-private partnerships (Barke & Clarke, 2016). This shift brings new actors—particularly investors and developers who shape the housing market in cities and thus also reurbanization *per se* (Rérat, 2012)—into the policy arena. Understanding how these multi-actor governance arrangements function in practice, and why they often fail to produce effective reurbanization despite official commitments, forms the central inquiry of this article.

In this context, reurbanization has emerged as both a conceptual framework and a potential policy response. As a demographic process, reurbanization describes population growth in inner cities after periods of decline (Haase et al., 2017). However, as this article emphasizes, reurbanization can also function as a policy approach—an urban vision or town planning policy of municipal governments dealing with the impacts of urban change (Glatter & Siedhoff, 2008; Ouředníček et al., 2015). This dual understanding allows us to analyze not only demographic trends but also the governance mechanisms that cities employ to influence these trends.

The governance dimension is particularly significant in post-socialist contexts where institutional structures, market dynamics, and planning cultures underwent radical transformation after 1989. Unlike Western European cities that developed metropolitan governance mechanisms gradually over decades, Polish cities face these challenges with relatively new institutional arrangements within a decentralized governance system established in the 1990s. As Wagner (2017) observes, the transfer of legislative power in spatial

planning to gminas occurred when these entities had little experience or competence to do planning—so their main pattern became uncontrolled development. This historical legacy directly shapes contemporary governance capabilities. The challenges of urban governance are further complicated by the underdeveloped nature of urban–rural coordination in Poland. Unlike many Western European countries with established traditions of metropolitan governance, Poland has struggled to develop effective institutional arrangements at the city-regional scale (Lackowska & Zimmermann, 2011; Mikuła, 2023, 2024; Mikuła & Kaczmarek, 2017). Attempts to create formalized metropolitan structures have largely failed, with the Metropolis GZM (Górnośląsko-Zagłębiowska Metropolia) being the only statutorily recognized metropolitan body in Poland (Mikuła et al., 2024). This institutional void significantly constrains cities' ability to address suburbanization, as core cities lack formal mechanisms to coordinate planning and development policies across municipal boundaries. While this analysis focuses on the post-socialist context, similar governance challenges arising from municipal fragmentation have been documented in other decentralized systems, particularly in the United States, where competition between suburban municipalities and weak coordination create comparable constraints on central cities' capacity to address population decline (Beghelli et al., 2020). However, the post-socialist context presents distinct characteristics—including the relatively recent nature of decentralized planning authority and the rapid pace of institutional transformation—that warrant separate analytical attention (Bučaitė-Vilke & Krukowska, 2020).

The absence of statutory metropolitan governance in Poland represents what Mikuła (2023) terms “fragmented post-socialist city-regions,” where voluntary bottom-up approaches remain the primary avenue for inter-municipal cooperation. These arrangements, exemplified by associations like the Poznań Metropolis Association, rely on consensus and persuasion rather than formal authority. As he demonstrates in his analysis of the Poznań city-region, even when metropolitan planning visions are developed through collaborative processes, their implementation at the municipal level remains problematic. The “soft spaces” of metropolitan planning created through these voluntary associations lack enforcement mechanisms, resulting in what he calls “passive city-regionalism”—where municipal authorities express support for metropolitan coordination but fail to translate this into concrete planning decisions (Mikuła, 2023, p. 680).

The metropolitan governance gap is particularly significant for reurbanization policies, as it limits cities' ability to control development patterns at the urban fringe. While urban authorities frequently express frustration with the “unfair” land-use policies of suburban municipalities that create “massive oversupply of land available for development with no infrastructure and poor transport access” (Mikuła, 2024, p. 158), they possess few instruments to influence these decisions. This territorial mismatch between functional urban areas and institutional boundaries creates incompatibility between the functional and political spaces of the metropolitan area due to intensifying suburbanization. These governance limitations directly impact cities' capacity to implement effective reurbanization strategies that extend beyond their administrative boundaries.

Urban governance in this context refers to what Couch et al. (2011) describe as “the process of governing an area or field” which includes “institutions and actors involved, structural conditions, and normative conditions” (p. 16). Expanding on this definition, urban governance is understood as the coordination of horizontal and vertical actions between interrelated actors and institutions (Hamel & Keil, 2015), and their capacities for socio-spatial transformation. This coordination happens within a specific institutional environment characterized by what we term a “governance gap”—the space between policy aspirations and implementation capacity.

This governance gap becomes evident in how urban authorities conceptualize and respond to population dynamics. While many city officials recognize population retention as essential for maintaining fiscal health and urban vitality, their ability to implement effective policies is constrained by multiple factors: insufficient regulatory authority within a fragmented planning system; contentious relationships with suburban municipalities; weak leverage over real estate developers (Antczak-Stępnik, 2022); and national policies that often incentivize suburbanization rather than urban consolidation.

Previous research on post-socialist urban development has extensively documented suburbanization patterns (Brade et al., 2009; Hirt & Kovachev, 2018; Kajdanek, 2014; Leetmaa et al., 2012; Leetmaa & Tammaru, 2007) but less attention has been paid to how city governments attempt to develop and implement reurbanization policies within these constraints. Studies that examine reurbanization in post-socialist Europe (Haase et al., 2017) note that while this phenomenon has emerged in urban debates, no distinct focus has evolved so far. Similarly, Barke and Clarke (2016) question the concept of re-urbanisation as some kind of “natural” phase in an urban development cycle, emphasizing instead the “strategic role of the local authority” as “central to the process” (p. 1).

In exploring this governance dimension, the article examines what institutional and structural factors determine the gap between declared reurbanization policy goals and actual implementation capacities in Poland’s largest cities, and how municipal officials understand and respond to demographic challenges from multiple angles: their relationships with state-level policies, neighboring municipalities, market actors (especially real estate developers), and citizens. These relationships reveal not only formal governance structures but also informal power dynamics and policy norms. As Pacione (2009) argues, urban policy is the product of power relations between the different interest groups that constitute a particular social formation. The most influential actors are the state, operating at both local and national levels, and capital—whether financial, property, or industrial. This analysis contributes to debates on urban governance in post-socialist contexts by highlighting how institutional constraints transform reurbanization from a potentially transformative policy approach into merely aspirational rhetoric. It is demonstrated that municipal authorities possess significant awareness of demographic challenges and theoretical knowledge of possible interventions, yet face severe limitations in their ability to implement comprehensive strategies. This implementation gap explains why potential “spaces of possibility” for reurbanization remain largely unrealized despite official policy commitments.

The article proceeds with an analysis of 13 semi-structured interviews with high-ranking city officials, transcribed and coded according to a semi-standardized protocol. These interviews reveal how cities approach three key dimensions of urban governance: vertical relationships with national government, horizontal relationships with suburban municipalities, and public-private relationships with market actors. Through this analysis, we illuminate not only the governance challenges that post-socialist cities face but also the specific mechanisms through which institutional arrangements either enable or constrain policy implementation in demographically challenged urban environments.

2. Methods and Data

This study employed a qualitative research design to examine how urban governance structures and practices in Poland’s major cities influence approaches to reurbanization. The research was conducted as part of a

preliminary investigation designed to understand the role of city authorities and developers in shaping inter-municipal migration patterns, with a particular focus on return migration from suburbs to city centers.

The research design followed an exploratory approach, appropriate for investigating an emerging phenomenon that remains largely undocumented in official statistics (Śleszyński, 2011) and understudied in the academic literature. This qualitative approach allowed us to capture the perspectives of key stakeholders who shape urban policy and development, revealing both explicit strategies and implicit assumptions that influence governance approaches to population dynamics.

The study focused on Poland's five largest cities excluding Warsaw: Kraków, Łódź, Wrocław, Poznań, and Gdańsk. These cities were selected because they represent the most significant urban centers in Poland after the capital city, have experienced substantial suburbanization in recent decades, are actively developing policies to address population challenges, and offer comparative value as they operate within the same national institutional framework but with varying local contexts.

Within each city, participants were identified and recruited based on their institutional roles and expertise related to urban development policies (Table 1). The participant selection followed a purposive sampling approach (Creswell, 2013), targeting high-ranking municipal officials with direct responsibility for or insight into urban development policies, spatial planning, housing policies, strategic planning and development, relations with suburban municipalities and urban coordination, and interactions with real estate developers.

The primary data collection method consisted of 13 semi-structured interviews conducted with municipal officials across the five cities. In each city, interviews with 2–3 representatives were conducted, typically including a deputy mayor or equivalent high-ranking official responsible for urban development, the director of spatial planning, urban development, or similar department, and where applicable, an official responsible for urban-suburban coordination.

Table 1. Characteristics of the interviewees.

Interview number	City	Function (descriptive)
1	Poznań	Department of City Development and International Cooperation
2	Poznań	Deputy Mayor
3	Kraków	Department of City Development and Strategy
4	Kraków	Deputy Mayor
5	Kraków	City council representative
6	Gdańsk	Department of Social Development
7	Gdańsk	Department of City Development
8	Gdańsk	City council representative
9	Gdańsk	Deputy Mayor
10	Wrocław	Deputy Mayor
11	Łódź	Deputy Mayor
12	Łódź	Urban Renewal Office representative
13	Poznań	Deputy Mayor

Note: Author's own elaboration.

The interview protocol was designed as a semi-standardized guide with open-ended questions organized around several key themes: the significance of suburbanization as an urban challenge, awareness and importance of return migration for urban development, implementation of policies aimed at retaining and attracting residents, significance of cooperation with developers, and developers' relationships with the city. The semi-structured format allowed for both consistency across interviews and flexibility to explore city-specific contexts and unexpected insights. Interviews typically lasted 60–90 minutes and were conducted in Polish. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and later transcribed verbatim for analysis.

In addition to addressing the informational aspects of these topics, the interviews were designed to assess the extent to which these issues were consciously recognized and addressed by the respondents, versus being relatively new and unexplored concerns. This meta-analytical approach helped illuminate the maturity of policy thinking around reurbanization across the different cities.

The analysis of interview data followed a qualitative thematic approach as outlined by Gibbs (2018), involving both descriptive and analytical coding procedures. The analysis process began with thorough familiarization with the transcripts through multiple readings. Initial coding used descriptive codes that closely followed the interview themes, identifying key statements related to governance approaches, policy tools, challenges, and relationships with other (state, market, and civic) actors. These initial descriptive codes were then developed into more interpretive analytical codes that identified underlying patterns, assumptions, and frameworks guiding officials' approaches to urban governance and reurbanization. Codes were subsequently grouped into broader themes reflecting key dimensions of urban governance: vertical relationships with national government, horizontal relationships with suburban municipalities, public-private relationships with developers, and understandings of reurbanization. Finally, themes were compared across cities to identify both commonalities in governance approaches and city-specific variations. The coding and analysis process utilized a semi-standardized protocol to ensure consistency while allowing for the emergence of unexpected themes. This approach enabled us to move from descriptive accounts of policy approaches to a more analytical understanding of the governance gap between policy aspirations and implementation capacity.

Several limitations of the methodology should be acknowledged. While the study captured the perspectives of municipal officials, it did not directly incorporate the views of other stakeholders such as developers, suburban municipalities, or residents. This limitation is partly addressed through officials' accounts of their interactions with these groups, but future research would benefit from including these additional perspectives. Additionally, the research focuses on officials' accounts of governance approaches rather than direct observation of policy implementation. This creates the potential for discrepancies between described and actual practices. However, the semi-structured approach allowed for probing questions about concrete examples and outcomes, providing some verification of officials' claims. Despite these limitations, the methodology provides valuable insights into how urban governance structures and practices shape municipal approaches to reurbanization in post-socialist cities, illuminating the constraints on policy implementation that contribute to the governance gap identified in this study.

3. Results

The analysis of interviews with high-ranking officials in Poland's five largest cities (excluding Warsaw) revealed consistent patterns in how municipal authorities perceive suburbanization challenges and approach reurbanization efforts. Despite variations in specific strategies, the cities share common constraints in implementing effective population retention policies. The findings presented below are organized around four key themes that emerged in the process of thematic data analysis, culminating in an examination of the fundamental implementation gap that characterizes Polish urban governance approaches to demographic challenges.

3.1. Framing Suburbanization: Problem, Definition, and Perception

Municipal officials across all five cities consistently identified suburbanization as a significant challenge, though their framing of the issue revealed subtle but important differences in perception that would later influence policy approaches. The dominant perspective positioned suburbanization primarily as a fiscal problem related to tax base erosion. Officials in Poznań, Wrocław, and Kraków explicitly quantified this impact, with one Wrocław official noting that: "From tax return about 3,200 PLN flows to the city treasury, and people are 'networks of expenditures'—if they have one expenditure category in the city, this category drives other expenditures in the city" (Int. 10). This understanding of residents as economic assets whose departure represented direct financial loss permeated official discourse across all study cities.

Despite recognizing suburbanization's negative fiscal impacts, many officials simultaneously characterized it as a "natural process" reflecting consumer preferences rather than policy failures. This framing sometimes included attributing suburbanization to residents' affluence, particularly in Poznań where officials (Int. 2) described suburbanization as explained by the wealth of the local community. The language of inevitability that accompanied this framing, characterizing suburbanization as a natural market response, revealed how deeply officials had internalized market-oriented explanations for spatial development patterns, even when these patterns undermined their cities' fiscal sustainability.

A third framing emerged in several cities, particularly Poznań, where officials expressed frustration that suburbanization continued despite their municipal investments: "We do a lot as city authorities, but people still leave" (Int. 13). This perspective revealed an underlying expectation that infrastructure improvements and urban amenities should naturally reverse suburbanization trends, without accounting for other structural factors affecting residential location decisions.

The way officials understood suburbanization's causes directly influenced their policy responses and their assessment of municipal capacity to address demographic challenges. Those who framed suburbanization primarily in fiscal terms tended to emphasize retention-oriented policies focused on tax incentives and service improvements. Officials who characterized it as a natural market process were more likely to express fatalism about municipal capacity to influence residential patterns, while those frustrated by the persistence of outmigration despite infrastructure investments showed greater willingness to consider more interventionist approaches, though they often lacked the institutional tools to implement such strategies. Notably, officials in Kraków emphasized that official statistics underestimate the city's actual population, claiming "about 400,000 people live in Kraków without being registered, so population statistics are actually

more favorable for the city than public statistics show" (Int. 5). This perception potentially diminishes the perceived urgency of addressing suburbanization.

3.2. Policy Responses: Aspirations and Limitations

3.2.1. Retention-Oriented Policies

All five cities have implemented loyalty programs (city cards) offering residents discounts and benefits, explicitly designed to incentivize tax registration within city boundaries. However, officials acknowledged these programs' limitations, as they incentivize tax payment rather than actual residence in the city. As one Poznań official explained, "Poznań Card is good for everyone; it encourages paying taxes in Poznań, but does not encourage registration" (Int. 1). Another official from Gdańsk showed a connection between local taxes and using public services: "We say officially: we invite you to preschool, but attach the first page of your PIT [tax return]. If you use roads, transportation, education, then we ask you to contribute to this, because you will use [these services] more than in your own municipality" (Int. 6).

Beyond fiscal incentives, cities have also invested in public space improvements, with officials across all cities emphasizing the importance of "a multifunctional public space" (Poznań) and "cool courtyards" (Kraków) for resident retention. Environmental policies featured prominently, especially air quality initiatives in Kraków, Łódź, and Wrocław. Transport policies included expanded parking zones, improvements to public transportation, and bicycle infrastructure.

Housing policies showed greater variation between cities. Poznań officials highlighted urban villas (small-scale multi-family developments) as a way to retain residents seeking single-family-like housing. This approach represents an attempt to provide suburban-style amenities within urban boundaries, though officials acknowledged limited municipal capacity to influence the broader housing market through such targeted interventions. Wrocław, Gdańsk, and Kraków emphasized affordable housing investments, with Gdańsk notably maintaining a non-privatization policy for its municipal housing stock since 1992. However, officials across all cities acknowledged their limited capacity to influence the broader housing market.

3.2.2. Implementation Constraints

Despite these diverse policy initiatives, officials identified numerous constraints limiting policy effectiveness that created what many described as a governance deadlock. Cities consistently reported their inability to sell land to developers below market price to encourage affordable housing development, reflecting legal constraints on municipal discretion in land transactions. This limitation undermines cities' capacity to use land policy as a tool for influencing development patterns and housing affordability.

The absence of legal tools requiring developers to cover infrastructure maintenance costs emerged as a particularly significant constraint across all cities. Officials repeatedly emphasized their frustration with bearing ongoing infrastructure costs for developments that primarily benefit private developers and suburban residents. This cost burden represents a direct fiscal impact of the governance gap, where cities provide infrastructure that enables suburbanization while lacking mechanisms to recover associated costs. Cities also reported their inability to modify existing land-use designations without providing financial

compensation to landowners, reflecting property rights protections that limit municipal planning authority. These constraints create significant barriers to implementing more sustainable development patterns, as they prevent cities from redirecting development toward more suitable locations or higher-density configurations.

The limited scale of municipal housing stock, typically around 10% of the total housing supply but often in poor technical condition, fundamentally constrains cities' ability to influence overall housing market dynamics. This limitation reflects the post-socialist transformation's emphasis on housing privatization, which reduced municipal housing stocks while failing to develop alternative mechanisms for public influence over housing development patterns. High land prices in city centers further limit affordable housing development, creating a market-driven cycle where urban housing becomes increasingly unaffordable relative to suburban alternatives. Officials across all cities acknowledged their limited capacity to address these market dynamics through municipal policy interventions, reflecting broader constraints on public sector influence over private market outcomes in post-socialist planning systems.

3.3. *Inter-Municipal Relations: Cooperation Amid Competition*

3.3.1. City-Suburb Relations

Relations between core cities and suburban municipalities revealed tensions between competition and cooperation that illuminate broader challenges in metropolitan governance. In Poznań and Wrocław, officials described these relationships as "investment" rather than "cost," emphasizing long-term benefits of urban-suburban coordination. This perspective reflects a strategic approach to regional development that recognizes interdependencies between core cities and suburban areas, though it also acknowledges the financial costs of maintaining these relationships. However, Kraków officials characterized their approach more transactionally, focusing on specific arrangements around public transportation and education.

All five cities provided services to suburban residents without full cost recovery, creating what might be termed a "service provision paradox" where cities subsidize suburbanization through their own service delivery. Educational services emerged as particularly significant, with Wrocław officials noting that: "Secondary schools in Wrocław have about 50% of students from outside Wrocław, and the city bears 100% of the costs of their education" (Int. 10). Similar patterns existed for transportation services, though with varying cost-sharing arrangements. The persistence of these arrangements reflects the absence of effective mechanisms for urban-suburban cost-sharing and the political difficulties of modifying established service provision patterns.

3.3.2. Metropolitan Coordination

Officials across all cities expressed frustration with the lack of a metropolitan governance framework. As one Poznań official stated, "there is no metropolitan legislation, as a result each local government unit manages on its own" (Int. 13). Multiple interviewees identified the absence of a metropolitan law as a critical barrier to addressing suburbanization effectively.

Despite these limitations, cities have developed various coordination mechanisms, ranging from informal (Poznań Agglomeration Council) to more structured arrangements (Metropolitan Associations in Gdańsk and

Kraków). Integrated Territorial Investments have provided financial incentives for cooperation, though officials noted these arrangements focus more on project implementation than strategic planning. The governance vacuum at the metropolitan scale particularly limits reurbanization efforts, as effective population retention strategies require coordination across municipal boundaries to address regional development patterns. Without metropolitan institutions capable of coordinating land use planning, transportation systems, and fiscal arrangements, individual cities find themselves competing with their suburban neighbors rather than developing comprehensive regional approaches to demographic challenges.

3.4. Public-Private Relations: The Developer Dimension

3.4.1. Characterizing Developer Relations

Municipal officials described complex relationships with real estate developers. In Poznań, officials characterized this relationship as “dialogue but not cooperation” (Int. 13), noting an “unspoken thread of understanding.” Łódź presented the most constrained relationship, with one official asserting that “institutional frameworks make dialogue with developers impossible” and that “relations between the public and private sectors are a myth” (Int. 11). This assessment suggests a deliberate municipal strategy of maintaining arm’s-length relationships with developers, framed as institutional limitations rather than policy choices, allowing officials to avoid both direct confrontation with development interests and public criticism of being overly accommodating to private sector priorities.

In contrast, Gdańsk officials described more formalized arrangements where developers contribute to infrastructure development in exchange for favorable land-use designations. Wrocław officials highlighted “meetings and conversations” that create “positive competition” between developers. Kraków mentioned structured mechanisms like the Housing Dialogue Commission, representing the most institutionalized approach to developer relations among the study cities. However, even these structured approaches operate within broader legal and institutional constraints that limit municipal capacity to significantly influence development outcomes or extract public benefits from private development activities.

3.4.2. Governance Limitations

Despite these variations, officials across all cities identified similar constraints in their ability to influence developer behavior. These included:

- Inability to impose infrastructure maintenance costs on developers—this constraint represents a fundamental governance failure that subsidizes private development while imposing fiscal burdens on public authorities.
- Absence of “marked money” from investments that could be directed to infrastructure, which prevents cities from capturing value created by public investments and redirecting it toward additional public improvements, limiting the capacity for strategic public investment in urban development.
- Developers’ market power due to limited competition—officials across cities noted that concentrated ownership of development-ready land (as a result of broader patterns of post-socialist privatisation) reduces municipal leverage in negotiations, as developers face limited competitive pressure to accommodate public sector priorities.

- Lack of legal instruments for effective negotiation as Polish planning law provides limited tools for extracting public benefits or modifying private development proposals to better serve public objectives.

These limitations created an asymmetrical power relationship that officials believed favored developers. As one Gdańsk official explained, “the city sold off its land and real estate because it once needed input for investments” (Int. 8). This historical context has reduced cities’ leverage in current negotiations with development interests.

3.5. Reurbanization Potential? The Implementation Gap

Despite recognizing suburbanization challenges and implementing various policy responses, officials’ accounts revealed a profound implementation gap between aspirations and capabilities that fundamentally limits reurbanization potential in Polish cities. Most cities have developed aspirational policies to promote urban living, but they consistently lack effective tools to implement comprehensive reurbanization strategies that could meaningfully counteract suburbanization pressures. This implementation gap stems from multiple interconnected factors that create systematic barriers to effective policy implementation. Fragmented planning authority limits cities’ ability to coordinate development across municipal boundaries, preventing the regional-scale interventions necessary for effective reurbanization. Since suburbanization operates at metropolitan scales while municipal authority remains constrained within administrative boundaries, cities find themselves unable to address the spatial dynamics that drive demographic challenges.

Market-dominated housing development processes operate with minimal municipal direction, reflecting the post-socialist emphasis on market mechanisms over public planning authority. Cities consistently reported their limited capacity to influence housing market outcomes through policy interventions, as private developers maintain primary control over housing production while facing few requirements to accommodate public priorities or provide affordable housing options. National policies often incentivize suburbanization rather than compact development, creating policy conflicts that undermine municipal reurbanization efforts. Tax policies, infrastructure investments, and housing finance mechanisms frequently favor suburban development patterns while providing limited support for urban consolidation, forcing cities to work against rather than with national policy frameworks.

Fiscal arrangements fail to adequately compensate cities for services provided to suburban residents, creating perverse incentives that subsidize suburbanization while imposing costs on urban governments. These arrangements represent a fundamental flaw in metropolitan governance that enables suburban free-riding on urban services while undermining urban fiscal sustainability.

These constraints create a situation where municipal officials can articulate the benefits of reurbanization and demonstrate awareness of policy approaches that might promote urban living, but they possess limited capacity to translate this vision into reality. Rather than implementing comprehensive reurbanization strategies, cities instead rely on incremental interventions such as loyalty programs, public space improvements, and targeted housing initiatives that have modest impacts on overall population patterns.

The implementation gap was particularly pronounced in housing policy, where officials across all cities acknowledged their limited ability to shape market-driven development. As one Kraków official candidly

noted, “the city is not a significant player in this process and has no impact on housing prices” (Int. 5). This assessment highlighted the fundamental limitations of municipal governance in addressing suburbanization through reurbanization policies, revealing how market-oriented development patterns operate largely independent of municipal policy interventions. The persistence of this implementation gap three decades after the post-socialist transition suggests that current governance constraints reflect institutionalized limitations rather than temporary transition effects. The internalization of market-oriented approaches to spatial development by municipal officials, combined with legal and fiscal constraints on public intervention, has created a governance system that recognizes the benefits of reurbanization while lacking the institutional capacity to implement effective policies. This situation transforms reurbanization from a potentially transformative policy approach into primarily aspirational rhetoric that serves symbolic rather than instrumental functions in municipal governance.

4. Discussion

The findings on the governance gap addressing suburbanization and population decline in Poland’s major cities contribute to several streams of literature on post-socialist urban governance, metropolitan coordination, and reurbanization processes. The empirical material reveals a significant disconnect between aspirational policy rhetoric and implementation capacities in addressing demographic challenges. This discussion is organized around three key dimensions: the paradoxes of post-socialist urban governance, the institutional constraints on reurbanization, and the implications for theoretical debates on city-regional planning and governance.

4.1. Post-Socialist Urban Governance Paradoxes

The findings illuminate several paradoxes in how post-socialist cities approach population challenges. First is what might be termed the “naturalization paradox,” wherein officials simultaneously recognize suburbanization as problematic while framing it as a natural, market-driven process. This contradictory framing echoes Stanilov and Sýkora’s (2014) observation that post-socialist urban development has been driven by a set of free-market practices centered around the right to private property and a highly decentralized, regionally uncoordinated system of land-use controls favoring urban sprawl. Our findings suggest that three decades after the transition, municipal officials have internalized this market orientation to such an extent that they struggle to imagine more interventionist approaches to spatial management, even when recognizing its negative fiscal implications. Municipal officials across our study cities repeatedly cited property rights protections as a primary constraint on their ability to modify existing land-use designations or implement more sustainable development patterns. This reveals a form of path dependency in post-socialist planning, where the initial rejection of centralized planning in the early 1990s continues to constrain policy options decades later, even as the negative externalities of uncoordinated development have become increasingly apparent (Dąbrowski & Piskorek, 2018; Sýkora & Bouzarovski, 2012).

The conceptualization of suburbanization as a “natural process” by municipal authorities reveals a deeper governance paradox. As Barke and Clarke (2016, p. 1) argue, this “calls into question the concept of re-urbanisation as some kind of ‘natural’ phase in an urban development cycle,” emphasizing instead the strategic role that local authorities should play. The interviews revealed this contradiction explicitly—while Poznań officials described suburbanization as “explained by the wealth of the local community,” they simultaneously expressed frustration that “we do a lot as city authorities, but people still leave.” This

naturalization of market-driven development reflects what Wagner (2017) identifies as an uncritical social perception of suburbanization in Poland, where society has internalized market logic to such an extent that alternative approaches seem unimaginable.

A second paradox emerges in what can be termed the “capacity-expectation gap,” where officials simultaneously acknowledge limited governance capacities while expressing frustration that their efforts have not yielded better results. This finding aligns with Wagner’s (2017) argument that Polish municipalities were unprepared for planning responsibilities transferred to them during decentralization in the 1990s. While officials have developed a sophisticated understanding of how suburbanization threatens municipal fiscal health, they have not developed correspondingly sophisticated governance tools to address these challenges. As Haase et al. (2017) observe regarding Polish metropolitan areas, “new growth is discussed more in a sense of a potential development” (p. 356) rather than being concretely managed through coordinated governance arrangements.

4.2. Institutional Constraints on Reurbanization-as-Policy

Our findings contribute to the emerging literature on reurbanization in post-socialist contexts by highlighting the institutional constraints that limit its effectiveness as a policy approach. While Ouředníček et al. (2015) argue that “reurbanization demands deeper involvement of local government in town planning” (p. 29), our study reveals the significant barriers to such involvement in the Polish context. As one official candidly acknowledged, “the city is not a significant player in this process,” highlighting the limited leverage of municipal authorities in shaping development patterns.

This limited capacity for municipal intervention aligns with Couch et al.’s (2011) observation that governance arrangements are place-specific and subject to structural and normative conditions. In the Polish context, these conditions include fragmented planning authority, limited fiscal resources, and a cultural orientation toward market-based solutions. These conditions create what Hytönen et al. (2016) have termed “defensive routines” in land use governance, where authorities avoid confrontation with established development interests even when recognizing the need for more sustainable patterns.

The evolving role of public-private partnerships in Polish reurbanization efforts deserves particular attention. While Stoker (2019, p. 3) notes that “private investment is considered a key component of revitalization efforts,” our findings reveal significant limitations in how these partnerships function. The Łódź case is particularly telling—despite Antczak-Stępnia (2022) arguing that to initiate the reurbanization process, the overarching goal should be a sustainable compact city, officials acknowledged that “institutional frameworks make dialogue with developers impossible.” This represents what Pacione (2009) describes as the tension between capital seeking accumulation and the state seeking legitimization—a dynamic that in the Polish context consistently favors market actors over public planning goals.

The difficulties in establishing metropolitan coordination further constrain reurbanization potential. As Mikuła (2023) observes in his study of the Poznań city-region, even when metropolitan planning visions are developed through collaborative processes, their implementation at the municipal level remains problematic. Our findings corroborate his identification of “passive city-regionalism,” where municipal authorities express support for urban-suburban coordination but fail to translate this into concrete planning decisions. The officials in our

study cities consistently cited the absence of a metropolitan governance framework as a critical barrier, yet most had only made limited progress in developing voluntary cooperation mechanisms.

Significantly, Polish authorities' concerns differ from typical "shrinking cities" discourse. As interview material revealed, it is not about shrinking cities per se but about the shrinking tax base—a distinction that shapes policy responses. Haase et al. (2021) emphasize that urban population regrowth requires more control over suburbanization through consistent and coordinated planning policies. However, the lack of consistent policies for the support of cities both at the national and local level in Poland and the Czech Republic is clearly one of the factors hindering core city growth (Haase et al., 2017). This is exemplified by the case of Poznań, where bottom-up integration demonstrates how diverse ideological orientations and practical attitudes intermingle, enforcing uneasy coalitions (Mikuła, 2023).

This implementation gap relates directly to what Lackowska and Zimmermann (2011) observed in their Polish-German comparison of metropolitan governance arrangements. They noted that in Polish metropolitan areas, "among the aims of the arrangements the economic argument of the new regionalism still lags behind the problems of the inner functioning of the areas" (p. 166). The findings confirm this observation, as cities focus primarily on practical issues like transportation coordination and educational services rather than developing comprehensive economic development strategies at the metropolitan scale.

4.3. Theoretical Implications for City-Regional Planning and Governance

Our findings have several implications for theoretical debates on city-regional governance and planning. First, they challenge the applicability of Western European models of metropolitan governance to post-socialist contexts. While much of the literature on metropolitan governance emphasizes the shift from government to governance (Kübler & Heinelt, 2004; Savitch & Vogel, 2009), our findings suggest that in post-socialist contexts, this shift has often resulted in governance vacuums rather than innovative governance forms. The absence of effective metropolitan institutions, combined with weak regulatory authority at the municipal level, creates what Mikuła (2024) identifies as "incompatibility between the functional and political spaces of the metropolitan area due to intensifying suburbanization" (p. 3).

Second, our findings contribute to debates about the nature of reurbanization as a policy approach versus a demographic process. Haase et al. (2021) argue that any regrowth needs, subsequently, a multiple policy approach to be stabilized or continued. The results suggest that in Polish cities, reurbanization remains primarily rhetorical, with limited policy integration or implementation capacity. This contradicts Barke and Clarke's (2016) assertion that the strategic role of the local authority has been central to the process of reurbanization, as the study reveals municipal authorities with significant awareness but limited leverage to influence development patterns.

The concept of "soft spaces" in planning provides a useful framework for understanding the emerging metropolitan arrangements in our study cities. Mikuła (2023) applies this concept to post-socialist city-regions, arguing that these arrangements operate as "soft spaces of planning visions, intermediary spaces of delivery" (p. 683). The findings support this characterization, as municipal officials described various voluntary coordination mechanisms that generate planning visions but lack implementation authority. However, our research suggests an important qualification to Mikuła's framework: in many cases,

these soft spaces function primarily as discursive arenas rather than vehicles for policy coordination, with limited impact on actual development patterns.

The governance gap identified in the study also illuminates what Mikuła et al. (2024) describe as the process of co-creation of new territorialities through institutional dialogue and soft planning. While studied cities have established various forms of dialogue with suburban municipalities, these dialogues have primarily focused on practical coordination issues rather than the creation of new territorial imaginaries or governance capacities. This suggests that the “soft planning” approach may have significant limitations in contexts with weak institutional foundations and market-oriented development pressures.

5. Conclusion

This study advances urban governance literature by providing empirical basis for the concept of a “governance gap”—the systematic disconnect between reurbanization aspirations and implementation capacity in post-socialist cities. Through access to high-ranking officials in Poland’s five largest cities, it reveals a paradox: municipal authorities possess understanding of demographic challenges and knowledge of interventions, yet remain institutionally unable to fully translate this awareness into effective action. This finding challenges prevailing assumptions that policy failure stems from lack of awareness or innovation, demonstrating instead how structural constraints embedded in fragmented planning systems transform reurbanization from potentially transformative policy into an aspirational rhetoric.

The empirical contribution lies in documenting how post-socialist legacies continue shaping urban governance three decades after transition. It reveals how municipal officials have internalized market-oriented explanations for suburbanization as “natural processes” while simultaneously expressing frustration at their powerlessness. This extends beyond documenting suburbanization patterns to expose the governance mechanisms that perpetuate them, filling a critical gap in post-socialist urban studies. While Western literature emphasizes the strategic role of local authorities in reurbanization, our findings reveal cities with awareness but without leverage, operating within institutional architectures that systematically constrain their ability to realize “spaces of possibility.” The persistence of voluntary coordination mechanisms and “soft planning” approaches proves inadequate for contexts characterized by weak institutional foundations and market-dominated development.

These findings suggest that addressing demographic challenges requires fundamental reforms beyond municipal-level innovations. National planning frameworks must provide cities with stronger regulatory tools, while metropolitan governance arrangements need statutory foundations rather than voluntary coordination. As demographic pressures intensify and governance constraints prove counterproductive for entire metropolitan regions, understanding these gaps becomes an urgent practical challenge for ensuring the long-term viability of post-socialist urban systems.

Looking forward, the trajectories described in this study raise important questions about the sustainability of current urban development patterns in post-socialist contexts. As demographic pressures intensify and suburban municipalities face their own fiscal and infrastructure challenges, the governance constraints identified here may ultimately prove counterproductive not only for core cities but for metropolitan regions as a whole. Understanding and addressing these governance gaps thus becomes not merely an academic exercise but an urgent practical challenge for ensuring the long-term viability of Poland’s urban systems.

Future research should examine how these governance challenges play out in practice through detailed case studies of specific policy initiatives, while also incorporating the perspectives of suburban municipalities, developers, and residents to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the complex stakeholder dynamics that shape urban development outcomes. While the governance constraints identified here reflect broader patterns of post-socialist urban transformation, comparative analysis across CEE contexts would illuminate how these common mechanisms interact with specific national institutional legacies to produce varied governance outcomes and policy responses.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, upon reasonable request.

LLMs Disclosure

Claude was used for grammar check.

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