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Planning Culture and Local Agents of Change: Shaping Urban Transition in a Shrinking Polish City

Przemysław Ciesiółka

Faculty of Human Geography and Planning, Adam Mickiewicz University, Poland

Correspondence: Przemysław Ciesiółka (przemko@amu.edu.pl)

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Abstract

The article analyses regeneration processes in a medium-sized city in Central and Eastern Europe, using Leszno (Poland) as an example. Particular emphasis is placed on investment conflicts, policy learning, and the challenges associated with urban decline. The case study is based on a triangulation of sources: analysis of (a) strategic documents and (b) press materials, as well as (c) in-depth interviews with actors of change, such as representatives of NGOs, entrepreneurs, property managers, residents, and municipal officials. The construction of shopping centres was the subject of a major dispute, which was interpreted as a critical juncture, revealing a clash between different planning culture models: (a) modernisation and market-oriented, focused on attracting large investments; and (b) local and community-oriented, emphasising the protection of traditional trade and social ties. Regeneration, initially developed as a response to this conflict, served as a laboratory for institutional learning. A salient context is depopulation: Since 2012, the population of Leszno has fallen by more than 8%, a phenomenon that has particularly affected the city centre and limited the effectiveness of regeneration measures. Leszno's experiences indicate a broader phenomenon observed in post-socialist cities: a hybrid planning culture, strong dependence on external programmes, and deficits in social trust and participation. The study's findings suggest that urban transformation in shrinking cities can be a platform for institutional learning. However, its transformative potential remains limited by the lack of long-term vision and project-by-project logic.

Keywords

agents of change; institutional learning; planning culture; shrinking cities; urban regeneration

1. Introduction

Central and Eastern European cities have faced challenges in recent decades related to socio-economic transformation, globalisation, and depopulation processes (Mykhnenko & Turok, 2008). These challenges are particularly evident in medium-sized cities—understood here as those with roughly 50,000–200,000 inhabitants—that have lost their industrial functions or have not found their place in the new, post-1989 economic order (Liebmann & Kuder, 2012). The literature indicates that regeneration is becoming one of the key tools for counteracting social, economic, and spatial degradation (Roberts, 2000; Tallon, 2020). However, its effectiveness is limited by urban shrinkage, capital flight, and planning culture (Haase, Bernt, et al., 2016; Knieling & Othengrafen, 2009; Pallagst et al., 2021). In this context, the perspective of policy learning—i.e., learning within the framework of public policy processes—takes on particular importance. It concerns the capacity of institutions and agents of change to learn from previous experiences, adapt tools, and introduce innovations in urban policy (Argyris, 1977; Rae, 2011). In shrinking cities, policy learning has a dual dimension: On the one hand, it enables the correction of technocratic practices, while on the other, it prompts reflections on the assumptions of development policy itself. Urban regeneration is therefore an area in which processes related to planning, culture, and policy learning intertwine. The dynamics of these processes and the strategies employed depend on local institutional and social conditions.

The article aims to analyse urban regeneration processes in the context of planning culture, policy learning, and the challenges associated with shrinking cities in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). Particular emphasis is placed on how local conflicts and participatory practices become an impetus for institutional learning and how they influence the evolution of planning culture in conditions of depopulation. The research focuses on the city of Leszno, located in western Poland, analysing urban regeneration processes from the early 2000s (when the conflict surrounding the construction of the Manhattan and Galeria Leszno shopping centres took place) to the implementation of the Municipal Regeneration Programme in 2016–2023. From a broader perspective, this study is embedded in discussing the challenges facing medium-sized cities in CEE, which share a common experience of urban transition. To achieve this goal, the following research questions were formulated:

1. How do conflicts surrounding investments and regeneration processes reveal the clash of different planning culture patterns?
2. How can the urban regeneration process be interpreted in terms of policy learning?
3. How do urban shrinkage processes influence regeneration strategies and the evolution of local planning cultures among various agents of change?
4. How do the experiences of Leszno fit into the broader processes of urban transition of shrinking cities in CEE?

The article is divided into seven parts. After the introduction, a theoretical framework is presented, covering the concept of planning culture, institutional learning, and the issue of urban shrinkage. This is followed by a description of the research methodology, including qualitative interviews and document analysis. Section 4 presents the local context of Leszno, while the fifth section contains an analysis of the results, which is further explored in the discussion section, where the results are compared with the literature on the subject. The article concludes with a summary.

To frame the subsequent analysis, urban shrinkage is treated as a structuring context that reshapes local planning culture and necessitates policy learning. Depopulation reconfigures actor coalitions, objectives, and time horizons, calling for mechanisms that move beyond routine adaptation (Eraydin & Özatağan, 2021; Pallagst & Fleschurz, 2022). Haase, Rink, and Grossmann (2016) point out that in post-socialist cities, urban regeneration becomes an arena for negotiation between interest groups, and the effects depend on the capacity for policy learning. Großmann et al. (2013) analyse regeneration as a process of adaptation in conditions of structural demographic crisis. In turn, Stryjakiewicz et al. (2012) show that urban shrinkage in Poland is closely linked to the legacy of post-socialist transformation, while Stryjakiewicz and Jaroszewska (2016) argue that the process of shrinkage poses a significant challenge for local governance and requires the inclusion of policy learning mechanisms.

2. Theoretical Framework

Research on CEE cities often stresses that urban regeneration processes cannot be analysed in isolation from the broader cultural and institutional context. Three concepts are particularly relevant here: planning culture, policy learning, and urban shrinkage. Together, they provide a framework to capture local conflicts and urban transition better. This section offers an integrative, shrinkage-aware reading that brings together established strands on planning culture, policy learning, and urban shrinkage, making their connections explicit through an outcome-oriented lens applied to medium-sized, post-socialist cities (as illustrated by Leszno).

Planning culture is not only regulations or planning documents, but also a particular set of values, norms, and practices that influence the daily actions of planners, city authorities, and local communities (Knieling & Othengrafen, 2009). In CEE, a technocratic model of centralised planning, based on top-down decisions, prevailed for many decades. After 1989, the situation changed. New patterns, often taken from Western European countries, began to overlap with the legacy of the socialist system (Sagan & Grabkowska, 2012; Scott & Kühn, 2012). In practice, this means that we are dealing with a hybrid system in which, on the one hand, solutions in line with European standards, such as integrated approaches or participation, have been introduced (Pallagst & Mercier, 2007). On the other hand, elements of hierarchical decision-making and low levels of public trust are still strongly present (Maier, 2012; Sanyal, 2005). Jaššo et al. (2025) aptly point out the characteristics of planning culture in CEE:

- Long-time horizons for planning and decision-making: The planning culture is adaptive, evolutionary, and highly bureaucratic, based on multi-step processes that are difficult to accelerate. Although this slows things down, it ensures the system's rationality, predictability, and stability.
- The important role of social aspects and social cohesion: Planning has always had a stabilising function for society and was egalitarian. The transformation of the 1990s introduced neoliberal models that increased inequality and spatial polarisation.
- Increasing vulnerability of spatial and social systems: Market pressures, unfavourable demographic trends, and the geopolitical situation have exacerbated social instability and the erosion of cohesion. Declining trust and alienation undermine planning effectiveness and public participation.
- Great methodological depth but lack of interdisciplinarity: Planning in CEE is mainly based on data, classifications, and regulations, marginalising public participation and dialogue. Although participatory elements have been introduced, the system remains closed and is hardly open to innovation, including in the area of digital planning tools (Hasler et al., 2017).

- Sceptical public attitudes towards planning: Public trust in planners is low, and smaller stakeholder groups are often marginalised. The legacy of socialism, the politicisation of processes, and local arrangements mean that planning is sometimes reduced to the technical implementation of political decisions.

Conflicts around significant investments clearly demonstrate the above characteristics—a modernisation and market logic approach clashes with a local, community-based one. Such conflicts do not always lead to simple solutions, but can become a turning point in the development of urban policies. These are referred to in the literature as critical junctures, which open the way to institutional change (Mahoney & Thelen, 2010). These changes do not happen automatically—they require a learning process that can follow two paths: single-loop learning, which involves adjusting actions within existing rules, and double-loop learning, which allows the rules of the game themselves to be questioned and changed (Argyris, 1977; Stam et al., 2023). Examples from CEE show both levels: Minor adjustments in consultation procedures are the first option, and the creation of formal deliberation and co-decision mechanisms is the second (Innes & Booher, 2010). It is worth noting that learning processes in the region are often accelerated and heterogeneous. They arise from local disputes and external pressures, especially EU requirements. It is also impossible to ignore the discourses shaping urban policy's role. In Poland and other countries in the region, two main ways of thinking have been clashing for years: the modernising one, focused on economic growth, investment attractiveness, and integration into the global economy, and the local one, which emphasises the protection of social ties, jobs, and the identity of space (Havel, 2022). Planning conflicts are therefore not merely technical. However, they carry deeper meanings, and analysing narratives lets us grasp why some decisions are accepted and others are opposed.

Regeneration takes on particular significance in this context. It is a tool for the renewal of degraded spaces and a platform for institutional learning. Shaped by post-socialist legacies, funding-dependent governance, and uneven municipal capacities across CEE, regeneration practice often oscillates between technocratic routines and emerging participatory approaches. Poland, thanks to the support of EU funds and national development programmes, has become a space for testing new forms of cooperation between the administration, residents, and the private sector (Ciesiółka & Burov, 2021). Additionally, the 2015 Regeneration Act provided the legal framework, defining regeneration as a territorially focused, comprehensive process to lift degraded areas from crisis through integrated social, spatial, and economic actions led by local stakeholders under a municipal regeneration programme (Republic of Poland, 2015). In practice, this framework has taken on a concrete institutional form: Regeneration committees and dialogue forums introduced under the Act now serve in many cities as testing grounds for deliberative planning (Masierek, 2021). Over time, they may influence the broader evolution of planning culture, from a technocratic model towards a more participatory one. At the same time, these processes are taking place in the context of shrinking cities. Depopulation, ageing populations, and migration outflows particularly affect CEE (Haase, Rink, & Grossmann, 2016). Based on the assumption of continuous growth, traditional planning strategies are proving insufficient in this context. Therefore, learning new ways of urban transition is necessary: reusing empty buildings, adapting infrastructure, and redefining development priorities into smart solutions (Mykhnenko, 2023). Shrinkage can be seen as a challenge, but also as an opportunity. This forces greater flexibility and the creation of solutions that respond to the real needs of city residents. As Pallagst et al. (2021) note, how local authorities and communities perceive the process of decline has a significant impact on the choice of strategy. A more defensive approach often predominates, focusing on preventing population and investment outflows. In contrast, in other local authorities, an adaptive

perspective is adopted, treating the decline in population as the new norm and an opportunity for innovative solutions. These differences lead to different development trajectories, which influence the evolution of planning culture.

3. Source Materials and Research Methods

This article uses a qualitative approach, combining desk research and in-depth interviews. It is a case study in nature, allowing for a detailed understanding of the dynamics of local urban policy processes and their embedding in a wider socio-economic context (Stake, 1995). This case study approach is beneficial in researching regeneration processes that are complex, multidimensional, and embedded in local institutional contexts (Flyvbjerg, 2006).

Several categories of material were collected and analysed as part of the desk study:

- Archival press materials documenting the conflict around the construction of the Manhattan and Galeria Leszno shopping centres, which became the starting point for subsequent regeneration activities;
- Contemporary press materials on the regeneration of the city centre, including articles in the local media containing statements by local authorities, experts, and entrepreneurs, as well as anonymous residents (included in the comments to the articles);
- Strategic and planning documents, such as the Local Regeneration Programme (2007), the Municipal Regeneration Programme (2016–2023), the regulations of the Regeneration Committee, and related municipal documents on development policy and promotion.

Press materials and policy documents were analysed using a public policy discourse analysis approach (Fischer, 2003), paying attention to the language used to describe problems and proposed solutions.

The second key data source was in-depth interviews conducted with local agents of change (Kostourou, 2022) involved in regeneration processes. Their commitment to effecting change is manifest in their active participation in the advisory body to the mayor of Leszno—the Regeneration Committee. The respondents were:

- Two representatives of an NGO active in promoting economic activity in the regeneration area;
- Two entrepreneurs operating in the city centre;
- A property manager (owner and administrator of a multi-family building) active in the process of renovation of tenements;
- Two residents who are tenants of private flats in the regeneration area;
- Two officials from Leszno City Hall: one from the Regeneration Department and another from the Promotion and Development Department.

The interviews were conducted in September 2023. They were semi-structured, which allowed for a balance between data comparability and freedom of narration for the respondents (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Each interview lasted between 30 and 60 minutes and was recorded with the consent of the participants and then transcribed.

Data analysis took place in multiple stages and included:

1. Open coding: In the first stage, the interview transcriptions and documents were subjected to an exploratory reading. Main thematic threads were identified, following grounded theory procedures (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).
2. Axial coding: The analysis was then deepened by combining codes into broader analytical categories, such as planning culture, policy learning (single-loop vs. double-loop), modernisation and localisation narratives, and adaptation strategies to urban shrinkage.
3. Narrative analysis: Elements of narrative policy analysis (Roe, 1994) were applied, focusing on identifying competing narratives about town centre development and urban regeneration processes. These narratives were interpreted as expressions of differing patterns of planning culture (Knieling & Othengrafen, 2009).
4. Triangulation of sources: Data from the interviews were juxtaposed with press releases and policy documents to enhance the credibility of the qualitative research.

To increase the reliability of the analysis, the coding results were internally validated by re-reading selected transcripts and documents and comparing the interpretations with the literature. However, it should be emphasised that the case study results have limited generalisability (Stake, 1995). The aim of the study was not to create a universal model of urban regeneration: The intention was to analyse local dynamics that could serve as a reference point for comparative studies on planning culture and institutional learning in Central and Eastern European cities.

4. Local Context: Leszno in Transition

Leszno, a medium-sized city in western Poland, is an example of the development trajectory followed by many urban centres in CEE during the post-socialist transition. During the era of centralised planning, the city developed based on light industry, construction, and municipal services. However, 1989 brought radical changes: rapid deindustrialisation, privatisation, and restructuring of the economy, which led to the closure of numerous workplaces, rising unemployment, and increased migration. Some residents left for larger regional centres, such as Poznań or Wrocław and abroad, especially to Western Europe. At the same time, the process of suburbanisation intensified. These dynamics are part of a broader pattern of urban shrinkage in CEE, where population decline is driven by population ageing and migration outflow (Haase, Rink, & Grossmann, 2016). In Leszno, shrinkage manifested not only in population loss but also in related indicators: intensified suburban sprawl, weakening local labour demand and business base, rising commercial/ residential vacancies in the historic core, and a decline in births (lower fertility). Since 2012, Leszno has lost over 8% of its population (Figure 1), particularly in the historic centre. In doing so, the population decline has been faster than in other parts of Poland.

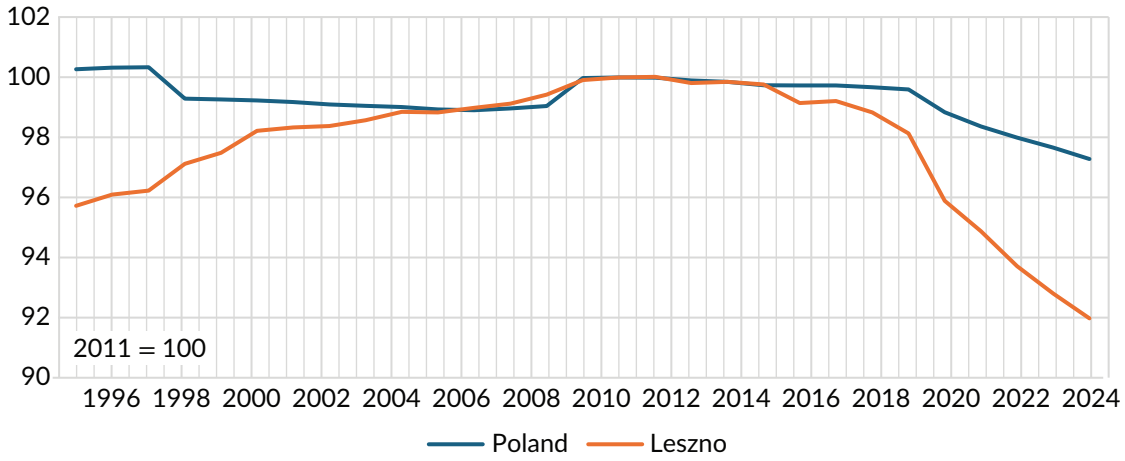

Figure 1. Population change in Leszno and Poland between 1996 and 2024. Notes: 2011 = 100 (base year set at Leszno's population peak in the series); indices show annual values relative to 2011 for Leszno and Poland. Source: Own compilation based on Statistics Poland (2024).

A timeline of key events in Leszno's regeneration process is presented in Figure 2.

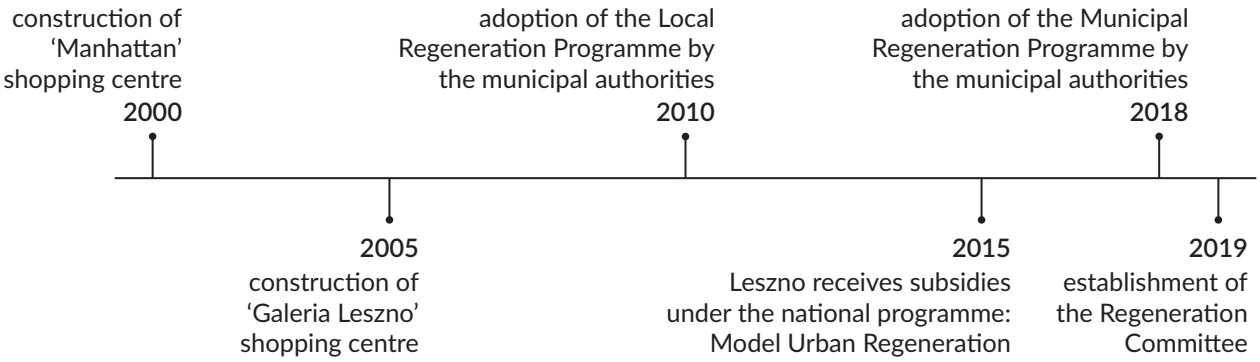

Figure 2. Key milestones in Leszno's regeneration planning (2000–2019).

One of the key moments was the conflict related to the construction of shopping centres: Manhattan in 2000 and Galeria Leszno in 2005. These investments, part of a broader expansion trend of large shopping centres in Central and Eastern European cities, generated strong reactions and protests from local entrepreneurs. In their view, the facilities, located outside the centre (1,100 m and 2,500 m from the Market Square) and on the city's ring road, threatened traditional downtown trade, based on small, family-run shops that had performed an important economic and social function in the city's structure for generations. Numerous comments in the local press pointed to the risk of social life being "washed out" of Leszno's historic centre. These concerns aligned with the experience of many medium-sized cities in Poland, where the opening of large shopping centres resulted in an exodus of customers from the city centre and exacerbated the suburbanisation of commercial functions. The conflict surrounding new shopping centres can be interpreted as a critical juncture at which the two logics of planning culture collided: modernisation, promoting development by attracting significant investment and external capital, and localism, focused on protecting traditional forms of urban economy and spatial identity. In response to the planned investment, local associations and entrepreneurs began to look for alternative solutions. Among other things, a concept was developed for the Goplana shopping centre, located closer to the city centre, which was to bring

together local merchants and compete with large shopping centres. However, due to a lack of sufficient funds and the inability to agree on a common concept for the investment, the project was abandoned. Ultimately, another shopping centre, Starówka, was built on this site, which did not fulfil the original vision of including small businesses (Figure 3).

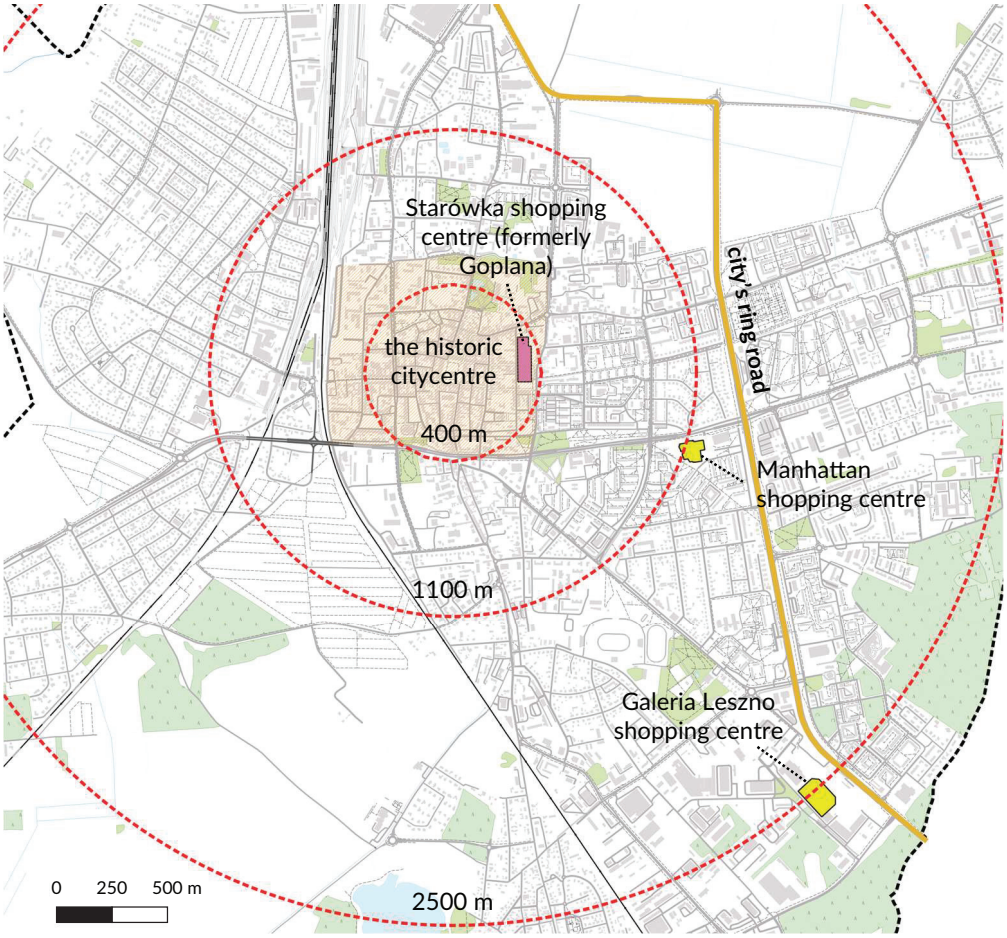

Figure 3. The centre of Leszno and facilities influencing the city's transition. Source: Own compilation based on Head Office of Geodesy and Cartography (2025).

Nevertheless, the conflict around shopping centres contributed to creating a cooperation network between local actors, which in the long term resulted in the authorities' interest in revitalising the inner city. The invitation of regeneration experts by local NGOs reinforced this process, inspiring the search for a broader strategic framework. Meetings with experts encouraged the city authorities to start work on a Local Regeneration Programme, which was the first step towards institutionalising a regeneration approach in Leszno. The launch of European regeneration funds was also significant because it brought about organisational and legal changes in the field of renewal of degraded areas in Poland (Ciesiółka, 2018). In its initial iteration, the Local Regeneration Programme focused mainly on technical measures and renovations—street and sidewalk upgrades—prioritising quick, visible outputs. By contrast, "soft" components (social and economic regeneration, community capacity-building, activation of local actors, governance reforms) remained marginal, and participation was largely procedural.

The subsequent strategic document, Municipal Regeneration Programme for Leszno, prepared under the implementation of Poland's 2015 Regeneration Act and adopted in 2018, broadened the approach to include infrastructure renewal and social and economic activation of the inner city. As a result of the programme, projects combining infrastructure and social activities are being implemented. The aesthetics and functionality of the town centre have been partly improved thanks to the renovation of the main pedestrian zone: Słowiańska Street and the Market Square. Some of the tenement houses in the town centre have been renovated, which has raised the standard of living of residents. The programme also supported local entrepreneurs by modernising commercial spaces and creating conditions for the development of services. At the same time, social projects were implemented: senior clubs, initiatives for young people, and integration activities strengthening the bonds of the local community. In this regard, it is worth emphasising Leszno's participation in the Model Urban Regeneration and Regeneration Regions programmes. The former was a national initiative in which 20 Polish cities developed model solutions to implement the Regeneration Act. The latter continued this effort at the voivodeship level—run by Marshal's Offices—covering a larger pool of municipalities and offering training courses and study visits.

Building on all the above experiences, in 2019 the mayor of Leszno—following publicly consulted regulations—established a 10-member Regeneration Committee as an advisory body. Bringing together NGO representatives, entrepreneurs, property managers, and residents previously active in downtown renewal, the Committee reviews all municipal actions in the field of regeneration (including ongoing projects) and may table its own initiatives. Its statute—aligned with the 2015 Regeneration Act—assigns further tasks: issuing opinions on Municipal Regeneration Programme preparation and updates (delimitation, project selection, phasing, budget shifts); monitoring implementation and outcomes (e.g., vacancy, service mix, footfall) and recommending corrective measures; facilitating stakeholder dialogue and co-design through consultations and mediation; and submitting an annual report to the mayor and city council.

5. Research Results

Research has shown that urban transformation in Leszno, although it has led to some improvement in both the spatial and social spheres, is not proceeding uniformly and consistently. Discussions with various agents of change—representatives of NGOs, local entrepreneurs, property managers, residents, and officials—reveal diverse expectations and numerous disappointments. These interview findings are consistent with the press discourse identified in the content analysis of local newspapers and portals, which alternated between growth-oriented narratives around retail investments and scepticism about everyday liveability in the historic core.

5.1. Representatives of NGOs

The activities of NGOs in Leszno began with loud opposition to the construction of the Manhattan and Galeria Leszno shopping centres. Members spoke primarily about the need to protect traditional trade and local identity. An important element of their activities was inviting a regeneration expert, whose proposals for commercialising the Old Town influenced the authorities' further thinking on regeneration. Their activities could be seen as an attempt to initiate an alternative development model based on local merchants and smaller initiatives. Press coverage from the period frequently highlighted NGO petitions and open letters, framing the conflict as a clash between big-box retail and traditional downtown commerce.

Although these ideas were not fully implemented, the NGOs' activity led to greater interest among the municipal authorities. Their role was therefore to introduce a grassroots voice into the debate, which, although weaker in organisational terms, forced the administration to adjust how it thought about the city centre. A significant milestone in the involvement of NGOs was the inclusion of some of their representatives on the Regeneration Committee. For many activists, this presented an opportunity to formally influence urban policy and continue their previous activities defending traditional trade in the city centre. However, the presence of NGO representatives on the Committee had a dual nature. On the one hand, they contributed their experience of grassroots mobilisation, their knowledge of local issues, and their contacts with residents. On the other hand, the Committee's limited decision-making power, coupled with the authorities' failure to implement its recommendations, led to frustration. Nevertheless, NGOs' participation in this body enabled the regeneration debate to continue and ensured that the social dimension of the entire process was maintained.

5.2. Entrepreneurs

Interviews with entrepreneurs showed that they were primarily motivated by a pragmatic attitude towards regeneration. They were interested in renovating buildings, improving business conditions, and receiving support from the city. One respondent mentioned that he ultimately renovated his building on his own, but became interested in the Regeneration Committee as a forum that, at least initially, offered hope of influencing decisions. Other owners of shops and service outlets in the city centre also joined the Committee's activities motivated in part by a willingness to cooperate in countering the competitive pressures of new shopping centres. Over time, however, disappointment set in. The interviews revealed frustration with the lengthy procedures and limited decision-making power of the Committee. Although the meetings initially generated some enthusiasm, they gradually lost their significance as several participants noted that "nothing can be changed anyway." The entrepreneurs' proposals rarely translated into concrete actions, and the meetings were mainly consultative in nature. This experience shows that the formal presence of economic entities in participatory structures does not automatically translate into real influence on urban policy.

5.3. Property Manager

The results of the interview with a property manager reveal a slightly different perspective. The interviewee recounted renovating inner-city tenements and keeping rents low to avoid replacing residents—a (perhaps unwitting) response to the city's shrinkage, aimed at stabilising the existing tenant base rather than inducing gentrification. While modest, this practice can be seen as an attempt to combine economic goals with a concern for social cohesion. However, this type of action operates on the margins of official policy. There are insufficient mechanisms to support similar initiatives. The manager also complained about the closed attitude of the authorities and the lack of developed public–private partnerships. Such experiences align with broader observations about post-socialist cities, where individual initiatives are rarely incorporated into systemic solutions.

5.4. Residents

The residents were the most critical. They believed that no visible changes could be seen in the centre and that there was no coherent action plan. Some residents of the regeneration area were also involved in the

work of the Regeneration Committee. For some, it was an opportunity to report everyday problems, such as the condition of courtyards, the lack of meeting places, or insufficient support for social activities. However, a sense of powerlessness often recurred in the interviewees' accounts—their demands did not translate into real decisions by the authorities. Sometimes, officials viewed residents' initiatives with reserve, suspecting that there was a "hidden agenda" behind them. Nevertheless, the participation of residents allowed for the preservation of the authentic voice of the community and served as a reminder that regeneration is not only about infrastructure but also about everyday life in the city centre. Residents participating in consultations with the city authorities stated that attendance at meetings was low because "nothing came of it anyway." The lack of leaders and scattered social activity meant that the potential of grassroots initiatives remained limited.

At the same time, it is worth noting the examples that stood out positively. Respondents pointed to a community centre organised by an NGO and events promoting shops in the city centre. These examples show that the potential exists, but there remains a lack of support and a sustainable institutional framework.

5.5. Officials

The officials' perspective suggests a gradual learning process unfolding under severe constraints. As noted, the local debate on regeneration was sparked when city-centre entrepreneurs—responding to plans for new shopping centres—invited an external expert. Contemporaneous press articles framed this moment as a turning point, after which the city moved toward more formal programming. Although both regeneration programmes (the Local Regeneration Programme and the Municipal Regeneration Programme) can be read as addressing aspects of shrinkage, this was largely incidental; their immediate drafting was driven by broader policy and funding considerations. The first Local Regeneration Programme focused almost exclusively on renovations, and it was only the Municipal Regeneration Programme whose scope resulted from new legal regulations (the 2015 Regeneration Act), which broadened the approach to include social aspects. Participation in the Model Urban Regeneration Programme run by the national authorities played an important role. Such participation in the programme meant the opportunity to obtain additional funding, conduct workshops with residents and entrepreneurs, and access training and networking with other local governments. Officials emphasised that participating in the Model Urban Regeneration Programme allowed them to compare their own experiences with the practices of other cities and assess which solutions could be adapted locally. The Regeneration Regions programme played a similar but slightly smaller role. At the same time, however, there was a lack of funds to implement many of the ideas developed, which limited the lasting effect of the programmes. As a result, though the programmes constituted an important step towards expanding institutional knowledge and awareness, it did not translate into a complete change in the city's operating logic, remaining more of an impulse for selective innovations than the foundation of a long-term strategy.

In practice, according to officials, regeneration was heavily dependent on the availability of external funds, and activities were carried out on a project-by-project basis (grant application cycles and ex-post reporting). The lack of a strategic vision of local authority and limited staff meant that the effects of regeneration were not very spectacular, and the administration lacked people who could act as leaders of this process. Officials who dealt with regeneration on a daily basis often emphasised that they felt needed and appreciated in their work, but at the same time they recognised that for the rest of the municipal authorities, regeneration was

not a priority area of urban policy. In this context, external consultants frequently filled capability gaps—supporting diagnosis, delimitation, and project packaging—but their involvement also reinforced an approach that was funding-led rather than strategy-led. This situation hindered the development of a coherent, long-term vision and left implementation largely driven by funding windows rather than by clearly articulated development goals.

6. Discussion

6.1. Planning Culture Patterns Among Various Agents of Change

The conflict surrounding the construction of the shopping centres in Leszno highlighted the limitations of the local planning culture and its characteristics typical of CEE. This dispute represented more than just a clash over the commercial function of the city; it also marked a critical juncture, where two logics collided: modernisation and market logic, which promote development by attracting capital and significant investments, and local and community logic, which are based on the protection of traditional trade and social ties in the city centre (Sanyal, 2005). At the same time, this conflict reflected broader characteristics of the planning culture in the region (cf. Jaššo et al., 2025). Firstly, the processes involved in the investment demonstrated the importance of long-term horizons and the bureaucratic nature of planning—the procedures were multi-stage and difficult to expedite, which ensured formal predictability but caused frustration among local actors (cf. Maier, 2012). Discussions concerning the Manhattan and Galeria Leszno shopping centres also highlighted the significance of social aspects and community cohesion. NGOs and local merchants contended that the new shopping centres would erode the traditional egalitarian character of the city centre. This observation underscores the role of planning as a mechanism for social stability (Healey, 2020). The conflict revealed the growing vulnerability of spatial and social systems: Investment pressure coincided with unfavourable demographic trends and an outflow of residents, which weakened the potential of the city centre, deepening the sense of alienation and distrust of institutions (Jaroszewska & Stryjakiewicz, 2020). Although regeneration programmes, analyses, and regulations were prepared, their methodical nature was not accompanied by interdisciplinarity—the process remained closed, and social knowledge and dialogue were treated as marginal (Hlaváček et al., 2016). Finally, the conflict confirmed residents' sceptical attitudes towards planning: In their opinion, it was a political process, in which real decisions were made outside the public forum, and public participation was mainly symbolic. Kotus (2013) wrote about this in the context of Poznań. The case of Leszno shows that regeneration—initially developed as a response to an investment dispute—was firmly rooted in the hybrid planning culture typical of CEE, where new participatory tools and modernisation strategies coexisted with a legacy of bureaucratic procedures, technocratic methods, and deficits of public trust.

6.2. Regeneration as a Process of Institutional Learning

The first Local Regeneration Programme focused mainly on technical measures and renovations, which corresponds to the logic of single-loop learning, in which the administration adapts its actions to the existing rules without questioning their basis (Argyris, 1977). It was only the Municipal Regeneration Programme, developed after the adoption of the 2015 Regeneration Act and thanks to participation in the Model Urban Regeneration programme, that introduced a social component and attempted to involve residents, which can be interpreted as a step towards double-loop learning (Innes & Booher, 2010; Robinson, 2001). Throughout

these stages, external consultants played a substantial role in diagnosis, delimitation, and project packaging—reflecting broader trends of consultant influence over urban agendas and participatory processes (Linovski, 2019). However, even these innovations were partial and did not change the fundamental logic of local government action. As per the interviews and document analysis, the learning process was incremental, procedural, and funding-led, with feedback loops formed around (a) grant application cycles and ex-post reporting, (b) template-based diagnostics for the Municipal Regeneration Programme, and (c) the Regeneration Committee's opinions. Officials learned how to translate legal/financial requirements into compliant projects (e.g., coupling public-space upgrades with "soft" modules), consultants refined problem-framing and indicator design aligned with calls, while NGO leaders and property managers learned how to access small grants and co-produce micro-projects in specific streets. This was possible because three enabling conditions emerged in 2016–2023: a clear legal framework (Regeneration Act), capacity-building programmes (Model Urban Regeneration; Regeneration Regions), and a formal venue for dialogue (the Committee). Yet, as interviewees stressed, learning remained narrow: Indicators prioritised outputs (m^2 refurbished, number of events) rather than outcomes (vacancy, footfall, service mix), and project sequencing followed grant calendars more than locally defined priorities.

The learning process unfolded within bureaucratic procedures that were lengthy and inflexible; their adaptive nature, while ensuring predictability, slowed the uptake of new solutions (Maier, 2012). A further brake was low public trust: Residents and NGO representatives reported that their initiatives were often met with scepticism by officials, which complicated partnerships (Curry, 2012). The limited interdisciplinarity of planning teams and the outsized role of consultants narrowed the scope for double-loop adjustments to core assumptions. Despite successive documents and analyses, social knowledge and qualitative aspects of everyday life received scant attention; similar patterns are noted elsewhere (Sielker et al., 2021). Consequently, participation frequently remained formalistic, reinforcing public scepticism (Innes & Booher, 2010). In sum, regeneration in Leszno was an arena of gradual, rule-conforming (single-loop) learning with selective double-loop moments (e.g., adding social components, experimenting with co-design on specific micro-areas), but fundamental assumptions about goals and success metrics largely persisted.

6.3. The Decline of Cities as a Context for Urban Transition

The decline of Leszno, like many medium-sized cities in CEE, was an important factor in the urban transition and significantly limited its effectiveness. Depopulation and ageing undermined traditional growth strategies based on attracting investors and consumers, while simultaneously creating pressure to develop new models of spatial management. As the literature indicates, the perception of decline is crucial. If it is considered temporary, cosmetic measures are taken; if it is considered permanent, however, there is room for adaptive innovation (Pallagst et al., 2021). In Leszno, a defensive approach prevailed: Regeneration was intended to restore the former function of the city centre, rather than redefine its role in the context of permanent demographic change. From today's perspective, the Manhattan and Galeria Leszno shopping centres yielded short-term commercial gains but reinforced the shift of everyday retail away from the historic core and contributed to an increase in vacancies in the centre. Later, small-scale projects—public-space upgrades coupled with social programmes—delivered localised benefits, yet were too limited to reorient citywide trajectories. Bureaucratic procedures hindered rapid response, low levels of public trust blocked the development of partnerships, and scepticism about planning deepened residents' alienation (Sýkora & Bouzarovski, 2012). Nevertheless, there were examples of micro-innovations, such as the activities of

property managers maintaining a social mix or NGOs running community centres and social projects, which point to the potential for grassroots adaptation. Taken together, these observations reveal a persistent gap in shrinkage-aware planning strategies—goals, indicators, and instruments remain only loosely aligned with long-term demographic change. To address this gap, further research should more explicitly develop outcome-oriented metrics (e.g., vacancy, service mix, footfall) and examine governance arrangements that enable double-loop learning. Ultimately, however, the city's decline remained the backdrop against which regeneration was a partial learning process, but did not translate into a complete transformation of planning logic and urban strategies (Haase, Bernt, et al., 2016).

6.4. Leszno and the Broader Experiences of Cities in CEE

Leszno's experiences are part of broader regeneration processes in shrinking cities in CEE, which, since the early 1990s, have been operating under political transformation, globalisation, and demographic pressure. As in other centres in the region, regeneration was a response to tensions resulting from deindustrialisation, the suburbanisation of commercial functions, and the outflow of residents (Ciesiółka & Burov, 2021; Hlaváček et al., 2016; Sýkora & Bouzarovski, 2012). Its course was hybrid in nature. On the one hand, Western standards such as participation and an integrated territorial approach were adopted. On the other hand, however, established technocratic and hierarchical practices continued to dominate the decision-making process (Jaššo et al., 2025). In many cities, as in Leszno, a lack of stable financial and human resources mechanisms resulted in a strong dependence on external programmes and a project-by-project logic (see Sielker et al., 2021). Conflicts over significant investments, such as shopping centres in Leszno, found their counterparts in other cities in the region and revealed the same tensions: between modernisation aspirations and the defence of local interests and traditional social ties. Regeneration in Leszno, as in many cities in the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and eastern Germany, served as a planning laboratory in which new cooperation mechanisms were tested, but the results were often fragmentary and limited (Pallagst & Mercier, 2007). The common features of the planning culture in the region—lengthy procedures, a lack of trust, a lack of interdisciplinarity, and scepticism towards participation—meant that institutional learning processes rarely translated into lasting systemic change (Maier, 2012). The case of Leszno is therefore representative: It shows both the potential of regeneration as a tool for adapting to city centre decline and the barriers resulting from the institutional conditions.

7. Summary

An analysis of the regeneration process in Leszno provides a better understanding of the complexity of changes undergone by medium-sized cities in CEE in the context of institutional transformation, and depopulation. This study has shown that regeneration is not only a tool for the technical modernisation of space but also a field of negotiation where different logics of action are met—modernisation, market, and community. The conflict surrounding the construction of the Manhattan shopping centre marked a turning point, revealing the clash of different planning culture models and triggering the process of searching for alternative development narratives. Although this process was mainly single-loop learning, it also showed limited double-loop shifts, notably, the explicit elevation of the social dimension in the 2018 Municipal Regeneration Programme (beyond façade-first logics), the formal acceptance of stakeholder input through the Regeneration Committee as part of decision-making, and pilots with NGO-run community spaces and shop-promotion events that reframed the centre's role beyond large-scale retail. Officials, NGOs, and

entrepreneurs gained new experience. However, the weak position of participatory structures, the lack of a coherent strategic vision, and the dominance of a project-by-project logic proved to be barriers.

An important research context was depopulation, which has particularly affected the centre of Leszno in the last decade. The shrinking of the city limited the social and economic base for revitalisation efforts, while at the same time raising questions about the validity of traditional growth strategies. Leszno took a predominantly defensive approach, focusing on restoring the former function of the city centre, with little reflection on the need to adapt to permanent demographic change. From a theoretical perspective, this confirms the observations of Pallagst et al. (2021) that the perception of decline is crucial for the choice of urban strategies between defensive and adaptive ones. As in other regional centres, this process combines the adaptation of Western planning models with the legacy of a technocratic and hierarchical decision-making culture. Regeneration remains an arena for testing new forms of cooperation between different agents of change: the administration, residents, and the private sector. However, institutional barriers and the lack of a long-term vision sometimes limit its transformative potential.

Drawing on the Leszno case and wider Polish experience, regeneration in medium-sized, shrinking cities should shift from grant-led, project-by-project fixes toward an adaptive, outcome-oriented approach that acknowledges demographic decline and prioritises everyday urban functions. This implies stronger strategic coordination and institutional learning across local actors—linking spatial, social, and economic measures within a coherent, long-term framework rather than isolated interventions.

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Conflict of Interests

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About the Author

Przemysław Ciesiółka has a PhD in geography, an MSc in planning, and is based at the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznan (Poland). He is a specialist in the planning and management of development of local government units, with particular emphasis on regeneration and urban planning, and is a National Representative in the Association of European Schools of Planning.