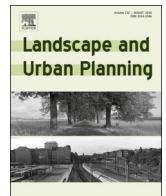




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Rural–urban peripheries under socioeconomic transitions: Changing planning contexts, lasting legacies, and growing pressure

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H I G H L I G H T S

- Socialist planning institutions play a role in peripheral land-use dynamics in Belarus and Russia.
- In Belarus (Mahilioŭ) the role of socialist legacies is stronger and urban sprawl is less prominent.
- In Pskov the most important limits to urban sprawl are set by budget/investment limitations.
- Due to centralised budget allocation, strategic development decisions are taken at national level.
- Regulations are often misused to cover rent-seeking disguised as “progressive intentions”.

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A B S T R A C T

The status of urban forests and other green open spaces has always been ambiguous within the context of rural–urban peripheries. On one hand, most European countries have introduced protected green zones around cities to contain their sprawl and to provide urban dwellers recreational space and sanitation services since the early days of city planning policies. On the other hand, the ecosystems of green open areas remain under high pressure due to high demand for suburban land, causing issues ranging from illegal dumping to ecosystem fragmentation and forest loss. In Eastern Europe, in particular in the former USSR, rural–urban peripheries went through series of socio-economic transitions that resulted in complex interplays of socialist and post-socialist institutions. In this paper we explore these interplays in the context of land-use dynamics of rural–urban peripheries of two middle-sized cities in Belarus (Mahilioŭ) and Russia (Pskov), with particular attention to open green spaces and environmental status of their ecosystems. We describe the properties of the rural–urban peripheries of Mahilioŭ and Pskov, offer an overview of legal frameworks and actor networks involved in the planning policies, and describe land-use pressure on ecosystems. Then, we discuss dilemmas of spatial planning in rural–urban, including spatial investment, regulation, and spatial intervention dilemmas. Planning process in the two cities demonstrates a search for compromise between a compact city cherished by the socialist planning tradition (and supported by planners' backgrounds and existing regulatory frameworks), and the increasingly noticeable tendency toward urban sprawl.

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1. Introduction

The rural–urban periphery has always been a very special area where rural communities suffered or benefited from cities they surrounded while the urban areas reciprocally suffered or benefited from the nearby countryside. Even within the continent of Europe,

there remains a great deal of diversity in rural–urban interactions, creating a large number of land-use situations (Gallent, Andersson, & Bianconi, 2006; Teaford, 2011). No single definition convincingly encompasses all of this diversity. It is generally recognised that the city advances upon the country, either by direct expansion or by moving some of its functions there in a process known as urban sprawl. The European Environment Agency defines urban sprawl as the physical pattern of large urban areas' low-density expansion, mainly into surrounding agricultural areas, under certain market conditions (European Environment Agency, 2006).

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The spatial extent may vary considerably, subject to the geographical context or school of thought. In the Netherlands (Nabielek, Kronberger-Nabielek, & Hamers, 2013) or the UK (Pryor, 1968), it can be just a few kilometres. In their zonal model of a city Park et al. (1925) viewed peripheries as “commuter zones”. With an outer limit of 1 h’s travel from the city centre, these areas are dominated by open country, with villages being or becoming dormitory settlements. In this model, the actual spatial extent depends on commuting speed, with average distances of around 50 km. Urban sprawl is usually perceived as a negative process to be addressed by containment policies (Hoggart, 2005). However, the peripheries have proven resistant to regulation and continue to suffer from pervasive rent-seeking behaviour (Thomas, 1990).

Within the context of urban peripheries, the status of urban forests and other green open spaces has always been somewhat ambiguous. Most European countries have introduced protected green zones around cities to contain their sprawl and to provide urban dwellers recreational space since the early days of city planning policies. The land-use restrictions and spatial configurations of such zones can differ significantly, as can be seen in the famous examples of the Copenhagen finger plan (1948) (Knowles, 2012), British green belts (proposed in 1935, institutionalised in 1947) (Whitehand, 1988), and Dutch buffer zones [1960] (Nabielek et al., 2013). Despite such initiatives, the ecosystems of green open areas remain under high pressure due to high demand for suburban land, causing issues ranging from illegal dumping to ecosystem fragmentation and forest loss (Gallent et al., 2006; Kasanko et al., 2006).

In Eastern Europe, particularly the former USSR, rural-urban peripheries underwent a series of socio-economic transitions, with pre-socialist, socialist and post-socialist institutions coexisting and interplaying. In this context, “old” planning and land-use arrangements are not necessarily “regressive”, and the “new” ones are not necessarily more sustainable (Golubchikov & Phelps, 2011). This research seeks to understand the socio-economic drivers of land-use pressures in rural-urban fringes in the former USSR following the collapse of socialism [1991–2015] and the implications for forests and other forest-like ecosystems. In order to do so, we have selected two middle-sized regional centres: the cities of Mahilioŭ (Belarus) and Pskov (Russia). The cities are relatively close to each other, with similar size and administrative ranks; however, since the dissolution of the USSR, Belarus and Russia have taken different paths of political and socio-economic development.

In order to identify and implement sustainable and socially-acceptable planning solutions, it is of critical importance that governance systems are able to foresee and mitigate conflicts and prepare for surprises while adapting and learning from them. To structure our understanding of land-use governance within the peripheries of Mahilioŭ and Pskov, we looked at dilemmas facing the relevant urban planners and decision-makers in Belarus and Russia, particularly in these two cities. This focus on the governmental authority is due to the non-inclusive and top-down nature of the planning process, with many planning decisions initiated by municipalities on an ad-hoc basis.

The research was guided by the following questions:

- What are the institutions (including legislation, implementation practices and land-use policies) and actors involved in land-use and ecosystem governance in the peripheries?
- How are spatial planning policy dilemmas recognised and resolved in Mahilioŭ and Pskov, given the institutional and biophysical legacies with which policy-makers and spatial planners are confronted?
- How are the Soviet institutional legacies and their interplays with post-socialist institutions dealt with in Belarus and Russia, and what are the implications for land-use dynamics in the peripheries of Mahilioŭ and Pskov?

2. Urban peripheries of the socialist city and the socio-economic transition

2.1. Rural-urban peripheries by the early 1990s: planning contexts and legacies of the USSR

The urban and physical planning of the USSR has been well-discussed in the international literature. For decades, it was in the spotlight not only for sovietologists and historians, but also for planners and urban geographers who could not help but become fascinated (not necessarily in a positive sense) by developments fuelled by the giant planning machine of communist ideology (e.g., Bater, 1980; French, 1995; French & Hamilton, 1979; Hamm, 1976; Pallot & Shaw, 1981; White, 1980). Much of this research focused on Moscow or Saint Petersburg.

The task of urban planners in the USSR was a rather technical one: it involved linking economic development plans to local contexts, and allocating resources based on per capita norms and standards (Gentile & Sjöberg, 2009). In fact, until the late 1980s, the USSR lacked any planning legislation (Ishkova, 1999), as the planning process had very little to do with public policy and politics. On the other hand, economic agendas and their implementation were heavily mixed with non-public politics. In order to explain the implications for urban development under the central planning economy of the USSR, Hunter (1964) put forward the landscape of priority concept. Its underlying assumption is that more highly positioned companies and other organisations with formal and informal hierarchies had more flexibility in pursuing their planning agenda; in essence, more “important” industrial companies enjoyed greater discretion when locating production sites or apartment blocks for their employees). Kornai (1986) and Ericson (1988) revisited the concept and enhanced it with discussions of differentiated financial support.

The most important urban planning tools were “functional zones” and “general master plans”. Functional zones prescribed the permitted economic functions and land-use characteristics to a given area, while general master plans positioned future functional zones within existing urban borders and beyond (Bater, 1980). City administrative borders represented another important institution: urban-like forms normally were not allowed to develop beyond the city limits; however, these borders were subject to regular revisions to accommodate city growth (Shaw, 1985). Although drivers of urban development were economic in nature, they occurred within a “socialist economy”, where land markets did not exist (Szelényi, 1996). All land was owned by the state, and there were no economic incentives to recycle land (Bertaud & Renaud, 1997). As a result, it was (and still often is) very common for (post-) Soviet cities that large industrial zones and low-density country-like residential areas coexist next to downtown areas (Shkaruba, 2005). Meanwhile, large multi-storey residential areas were (and are) common for city outskirts, directly facing the open country or forests (French & Hamilton, 1979).

As described for Western Europe or the USA, urban sprawl was not typical for the USSR, and rural-urban peripheries have never been a subject of special concern. As an outcome of long-term development planning, most cities were surrounded by open spaces with sanitary or recreational functions, and by collective farms specialising in milk, poultry and vegetable production. By and large, city growth adhered to “general master plans”: subject to an administrative decision, city administrative borders were extended to the open country followed by massive greenfield developments (French, 1995; Shaw, 1985). Some land parcels, particularly highly-productive croplands, were not allowed for greenfield development. As a result, large croplands surrounded by multi-storey housing blocks can be found in virtually any large city in the former USSR (Ioffe & Nefedova, 1998; Pallot & Shaw, 1981).

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