

Challenges in Building More Liveable Cities in Post-socialist European Countries: From “*Cities4all*” to “*Cities4everyone*”



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1 Introduction

In the post-second global war period, the urban development in the former socialist bloc of Eastern and Central European countries did not follow a fundamentally different macroeconomic and functional dynamic from that of Western Europe countries (Enyedi, 1992; Sailer-Fliege, 1999). In both cases, Eastern and Western, urbanisation relates to the industrialisation processes promoted through growth policies following the same evolution stages: urbanisation, suburbanisation, desurbanisation and re-urbanisation (Berg et al., 1982), though on different social models: market economy versus centrally planned economy, with specific institutional systems. Nevertheless, capital cities became the core of both systems' main administrative, social and economic functions. Central authorities intensified urbanisation by developing a dense network of small and medium cities. The growth of cities was achieved mainly through rural-urban migration, agglomeration and industrial clustering (Musil, 1993), generated by free markets in the capitalist system, through centralised planning in the socialist system, respectively. As growth poles, cities have played a key role not only in balanced territorial development but mainly in ensuring economic dynamics, promoting innovation and technological progress, human capital development and in increasing welfare. Moreover, both systems witnessed specific social segregation and subordination of environmental and social

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issues to economic objectives specific to the so-called “30 glorious years” (Fourastié, 1979).

However, at the end of the 1980s, the urbanisation level in Central and Eastern Europe was lower (63% in Central Europe and 55% in South-Eastern Europe) compared to that in Western Europe (80%) (Tosics, 2005). Moreover, the particularities that resulted from one economic model and institutional system or the other generated significant structural differences (economic, social, spatial, governance) between the two and seriously influenced the post-socialist cities’ dynamic and capacity to transform within the post-1990 evolutionary context.

In a transition process subject to European policies’ implementation, on the one hand, and to the adoption of the open market economy system, on the other (which was most often uncontrolled and only fragmentarily included in the urban development strategies and policies, and which proved rather reactive than proactive), CEE cities had to adapt to two fundamental changes: of the economic system and the institutional system. The defining axes of post-socialist transformations were: economic restructuring, labour market transformation and migration, spatial reorganisation, housing market transformation, institutional and social transformation and environmental changes. However, we acknowledge that the heterogeneity of post-communist cities is rather high and the differences between them must be considered (Hirt, 2013). Nevertheless, all Central and Eastern Europe cities depend on economic, spatial, environmental, cultural and institutional conditions which defined their development in the socialist period and which generated a particular “path dependency” (Tosics, 2005), in the sense that the new urban development models would imply high opportunity costs. Consequently, the critical question which arises is related to the evolving perspectives of post-socialist cities, more specifically, to the perspectives they have for building a more urban liveable context in terms not only of objects but also of subjective happiness and well-being, which are the “path dependency” driving forces and constraints (the economic, social, cultural and institutional marks left by the four decades of socialism) in the transition process towards the new and sometimes overlapping and conflicting European urban paradigms (sustainable, smart, green, resilient).

It is well documented that the decades of socialism imposed a specific meaning on the concept of liveability as progress and economic prosperity. However, the former communist countries valued “collective values at the expense of individualism”. At the same time, cities were regarded as the focal point for applying the desiderate of a classless society (Gentile et al., 2012, p. 291). One could identify an explicit path dependency in the evolution of post-socialist cities, but also drivers of transformation towards new urban paradigms emerging from the convergence of central concepts such as sustainability, smartness and resilience. However, the new perspective still lacks a comprehensive inclusion of individuals’ quality of life as the last goal of growth and development. The current approach aims to analyse the patterns of CEE urban transition and the present state from the viewpoint of the liveability concept. We focus on what could make a post-socialist city a ‘real’ and attractive city from individual citizens’ perspectives.

There is a critical perspective on the multitude of concepts and utopias that shaped urban management and planning in CEE countries, highlighting the need for a novel perspective that should enhance not only population welfare but rather individual capabilities and happiness as the purpose of urban development. Therefore, there are four main objectives of the current assessment: (a) To critically assess the urban evolution after 1990 by taking into account the changing patterns and the multiple challenges faced by CEE cities that resulted in convergences or divergences when compared to cities from other EU countries; (b) To emphasise the outcomes of adopting new approaches that are accepted worldwide such as sustainability, resilience and smartness as main paradigms in urban development in post-socialist cities; (c) To highlight the gap between CEE urban area and other EU cities by taking into account both objective and subjective indicators; (d) To discuss the critical points of the urban development rethinking in the CEE countries, based on a “city4me”/ “city4everyone” paradigm, instead of a “city4all”, thus reflecting the necessity for a more individual approach instead of a collective one; a development pattern based on the balance between individual interests, the interests of the community and the interests of the environment, focussed on the individual happiness. In essence, our approach is intended to be seen not only as a critical analysis of the development of cities in post-socialist countries but also as a plea for placing human beings at the centre of urban development and planning policies for a more individualised approach focussed on well-being conditionalities and peoples’ happiness.

The paper is structured as follows: After the first introductory part, the second part is a theoretical framework of liveable cities in the context of the numerous approaches regarding urban design and development. The third part provides a critical perspective on the post-communist transition of Central and Eastern European cities through the lens of liveability and the fourth part is an operationalisation of the liveability concept based on a comparative analysis between CEE cities and urban areas from other European regions by using statistical and survey data. Finally, the fifth part proposes a theoretical framework that would bridge the new urban concepts to liveability, i.e. the concepts of individual capabilities (*apud* A. Sen) and happiness. In the last part, the conclusions represent a plea for a more individualised approach to the transformation and development of post-communist cities, within an integrated approach to liveability, reflected by the “theory of capabilities”.

2 Some Highlights Regarding the Liveable Cities Concept

Cities are highly complex evolving systems that concentrate population and human activities and put increasingly higher pressure on rural areas and the natural environment. They are considered the most important vector of human development/ progress. However, they are not always the best place to live in as agglomeration, discomfort, insecurity, pollution, noise and stress are a part of urban life worldwide (Whelan, 2012). All these have made urban scientists and practitioners look for better ways to manage cities embedded in an extraordinary abundance of new

emerging concepts. Each approach focusses on specific issues and solutions for shaping future cities that could improve the urban environment, society, economy, governance systems and institutions (Table 1).

A dominant concept in the scientific literature and policies, the “liveable city”, focusses on urban development, individual welfare and social equity. It mostly overlaps concepts such as (objective) quality of life, standard of living, level of living, habitability or well-being, measuring the suitability of urban environment for human living (Burton, 2014; Okulicz-Kozaryn & Valente, 2019; Veenhoven, 2008).

It imagines a city at the centre of human life, aiming to transform the city into a place where it is worth living. Soja (2000) links liveability to urban crisis and the need to promote urban regeneration and renewal in cities threatened by growth-centred policies. However, it is a relatively new concept. The fundamentals can be found in a variety of urban studies. For example, in “The Image of the City” (1960), Kevin Lynch highlights the importance of quality places in cities which are closely connected to human behaviour. He argues that there are several dimensions of a liveable city, among which vitality is the most relevant. In Lynch’s view, three aspects of vitality should be considered: sustenance (assuring the basic needs of the population sustainably: adequate food, energy, water and air, while efficiently disposing of waste and diminishing pollution), safety (managing hazards, pollution, criminality and disease in a city) and consonance (which refers to making cities function as organisms that could self-regulate/control their functions in similar ways as human bodies). Besides vitality, Lynch adds two other dimensions of urban life: access (or accessibility to services and places of interest) and fit (between human behaviour and places).

Lynch’s perspective considers liveability in cities based on vital functions, physical requirements and human capabilities. Stating that freedom to achieve well-being is of primary moral importance (Robeyns & Byskov, 2021), the capability theory was developed in the late 1970s by Amartya Sen and significantly influenced social justice and human development. Individual capabilities represent the effective freedoms of individuals to do and become things of value (Sen, 1999). It is not a sum of abilities but rather a combination of various functionings that a human being can achieve (Sen,

Table 1 Emerging concepts regarding four dimensions of cities

Environmental	Social	Economic	Governance/institutions
Garden cities	Participative cities	Entrepreneurial cities	Managed cities
Sustainable cities	Walkable cities	Competitive cities	Intelligent cities
Eco-cities	Integrated cities	Productive cities	Productive cities
Green cities	Inclusive cities	Innovative cities	Efficient cities
Compact cities	Just cities	Business-friendly cities	Well-run, well-led cities
Smart cities	Open cities	Global cities	Smart cities
Resilient cities	Liveable cities	Resilient cities	Future cities

Source Moir et al. (2014)

1993). They include basic but also more complex needs: food and shelter, mobility, health and education/knowledgeability, social interaction, a decent standard of living, subjective life satisfaction, security, etc. However, the theory differentiates between the actual assets and achievements of a person or a group (“well-being achievement”) and the set of real opportunities each individual has (“well-being freedom”) (Gaertner, 1993). Although Sen’s theory was designed to be mostly applied to developing nations, we argue that it can be adapted and transferred towards liveability of higher income countries that are confronted with relatively high social, economic or environmental inequalities and injustice.

From the urban governance perspective, liveability deepens and humanises sustainability, smartness and resilience. It focusses on basic goods, services and experiences essential for human life (Caves & Wagner, 2018). One can include here a great variety of elements: strong connections with nature (e.g. proximity to green areas), water and air, clean, effective sanitation services, transport and mobility opportunities, accessible and clean forms of energy, health and educational services, public safety, inclusive neighbourhoods, responsible and trustworthy local authorities, a balance of top-down and bottom-up approaches to ensure citizens’ participation in the decision-making process (Kotus & Rzeszewski, 2013). Consequently, liveability reflects the institutional arrangements’ ability to address human needs and capacities (Veenhoven, 2014).

As such, liveability results from the quality of the built and natural environment, economic prosperity, social balance and equity, educational opportunities and cultural and recreational possibilities (PLC, 2017) (Fig. 1).

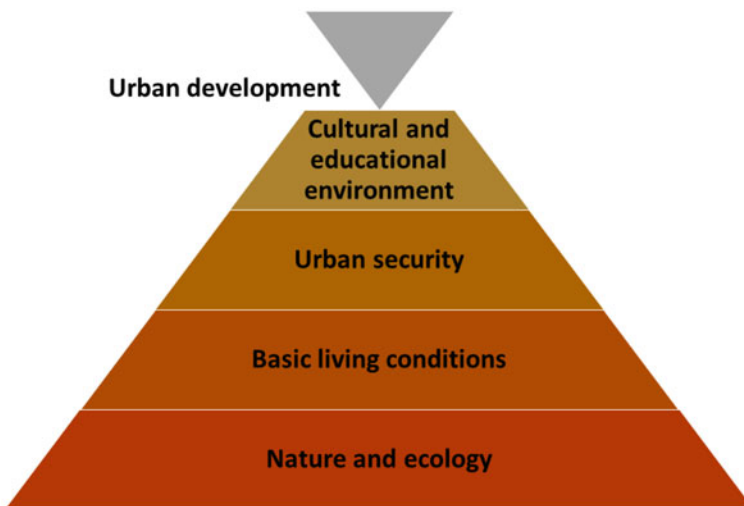


Fig. 1 The concept of liveability. *Source* Own representation, ideas from Wang (2012), Evans (2002) and Lennard (1997)

Thus, on the one hand, liveability includes interconnected social, economic and spatial components; on the other hand, it is linked to the human experience of place. From this second perspective, liveability integrates the quality of human interrelations, social environment and civic participation in the decision-making process. It also involves belonging to one place, which shapes every individual's experience (Gunn, 2007; Kaal, 2011). However, this is also the main limit of the liveability concept: it fails to include intangible qualities of place such as authenticity, vibrancy or distinctiveness (Okulicz-Kozaryn & Valente, 2019). Moreover, it does not include the subjective well-being as such and has to be integrated with complementary approaches that evaluate not just the favourability of urban places but also the level of individual happiness they bring. It can be measured through "Satisfaction with life in this city" which is related to experiencing everything included in urban life (Moeinaddini et al., 2020).

Just like the quality of life, liveability cannot be separated from the subjective component of collective and individual perceptions, feelings and values. It means that the objective dimensions and indicators mentioned above have different degrees of importance from one culture to another, from one country to another and from one city to another (Senlier et al., 2009). Therefore, one should acknowledge that each municipality is unique and that there is no one-fits-all suitable approach to shaping liveable cities (Caves & Wagner, 2018).

3 The Post-Communist Transition of Central and Eastern European Cities Through the Lens of Liveability

The socialist city was embedded in a development pattern that made the transition to the market economy and the Europeanisation process difficult. The first is homogeneity: the typical industrial profile and the reduced urban difference. Secondly: the equal development and equalisation of living conditions. One can add as fundamentals: public property of land and buildings (the private rental market has been eliminated or reduced), limited opportunities in the housing sector (small standardised apartment blocks), while in some cases, the historical buildings and city centres were partially demolished and replaced by a new, more neutral architecture. It was followed by limiting citizens' participation in public life and introducing a strict and rigid order in which decisions were made hierarchically and top-down. Also, from an economic point of view, post-socialist cities are seen as "anomalies" (Robinson, 2004), lagging entities that should return to "normal" economic relations that are specific to the capitalist system (Diener & Hagen, 2013).

Under communist regimes, all "deviations from socialism" were forbidden, while socialist principles were the only criteria for a good public life. Striving for personal financial gain was not encouraged; instead, the focus was on individual contributions to building the communist society (Herschel, 2007). From the viewpoint of life quality, "socialism is not a moral theory that offers a particular vision of the good

life. Instead, it is a theory about how the good life is possible” (Luntley, 1989, p. 15). This understanding views socialism as an instrument, a means of getting to a “better” form of society shaped by “good” moral values. The new political and bureaucratic elite controlled every aspect of social life (which had a privileged lifestyle and a relatively better quality of life). At the same time, the rest of the people were valued only as parts of the productive economic system, not as individuals that should strive for a good quality of life (Herrschel, 2007).

Post-communism brought big changes and significant challenges in the last 30 years. The urban environment, shaped for more than 40 years under the previous system, was adapted and remodelled to match the new conditions of the political, economic, social and cultural transition towards a capitalist society (Cudny & Kunc, 2021). The Europeanisation of post-socialist countries was a process of institutional changes (formal and informal) and structural convergence (economic, socio-cultural, political), which led to profound changes in morphological and functional urban structures. First, the shrinkage: the process of change of property rights (from public to private) and reshaping of the political and institutional framework. There was a stagnation of development and even a decade of urban decline, which resulted in rural and external migration. The consequent negative balance of population (Haase et al., 2016) induced economic decline, increasing social inequalities and individual alienation in cities.

Meanwhile, the excessive commercialisation and densification of the inner-city areas were followed by an unprecedented expansion of build-up space (Sýkora & Bouzarovski, 2012), i.e. office and public buildings in city centres and around, with residential areas in peripheries. However, urban structure/morphology was much more inertial, while socio-demographic, cultural and economic subsystems were the first to need adaptation. The transition was from a compact urban development to suburbanisation and dispersed urban areas (Janos et al., 2016; Stanilov & Sykora, 2014), which led to “sprawl without growth pattern” (Schmidt, 2011) and significant changes in urban land-use patterns. The result was the “perforated city” (Florentin, 2010; Janos et al., 2016) and gradual urbanisation of the proximal rural areas, similar to a percolation process (Diappi, 2004). Both processes describe urban areas as simultaneously subject to urban shrinkage and sprawl, profoundly impacting urban life.

All types of disparities emerged, starting with an increasing contrast between capital cities and other major cities, major cities-small cities, intra-urban disparities and centre versus suburban, which are highly visible in the form of increasing social disparities and segregation (Sailer-Fliege, 1999).

Urban policies were oriented towards competitiveness and growth, focussing on the city’s attractiveness for business and capital, while social and environmental issues were considered secondary. Meanwhile, numerous scholars clearly state that quality-of-life investments have economic benefits (attraction of skilled workforce and innovative firms) and social and environmental benefits. The need for more commitment towards general well-being and individual citizens’ quality of life can also be linked to the low level of governance, transparency and civic engagement. Therefore, they should be prioritised (Ionescu-Heroiu et al., 2013).

At least three essential concepts marked the post-socialist urban transition with different impacts on the liveability of cities, i.e. sustainable, resilient and intelligent, as defining paradigms of current cities.

The question is whether different ways and patterns of urban transformations lead to convergence or divergence with the Western style and features or whether it is preferable to design a more specific and different model of urban development that will creatively include the three paradigms in the actual context of CEE countries.

4 Bridging the Gap—A Comparison Between Post-Socialist Cities and Other Types of European Cities

Our analysis considered the East-West and North-South divide, summarising the specific patterns of cities in these four European regions. We have chosen a limited number of indicators available for European cities and tried to look at spatial differences and specificities of cities from each region. Looking at six selected indicators that cover the economic, social, environmental and cultural dimensions of urban liveability, one can envisage the clear-cut differences that are still present 30 years after the collapse of the communist bloc.

All EU's low-income lagging regions (and cities) are in former communist countries (EC, 2017). A clear West-East divide within Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) is influenced not by city size but rather by the geographical distance to the Western European frontier (Zdanowska et al., 2020). However, notable events have affected either certain regions of Europe or the continent as a whole. They have left their mark on the evolution of urban space and socio-economic change. For example, the economic crisis that began in 2008 marked a decline in GDP in Southern Europe (low-growth lagging regions) to a greater extent than in CEE countries (low-income regions).

Although it started from a low base level, in relative terms, the CEE city experienced noticeable economic growth to “catch up” with cities from older member states. Many cities succeeded during the economic crisis and, especially after that, in overcoming, at least partially, the historical gap.

4.1 The Catching-Up—An Overview of Recent Trends in Liveability

There are apparent differences between economic convergence and the maintenance of visible gaps in the quality of housing between European regions. However, in terms of many of the indicators of housing quality, these gaps remained as pronounced, which can be seen in the average living accommodation area between the European cities and the Eastern EU urban areas considered.

One can also observe the gap between post-socialist cities and other European regions regarding culture-related indicators. However, if considering the number of cinema seats here, the fact that Nordic countries have low values is mainly related to the different behaviour of the population in these countries (less inclined to go to the movies).

As an indicator of high-quality human capital, the share of the population aged 25–64 qualified at level 5 to 8 ISCED from 2014 onwards shows a more diverse landscape of European cities. The difference between different cities in the same region or country can be big while the inter-regional difference could be less pronounced. However, cities from Eastern and Southern EU countries have slightly lower values when compared to the others, while Nordic countries remain the best performers.

Post-socialist countries are once more less advantaged regarding one of the leading environmental issues, air pollution. The traffic problem is not tackled efficiently in most cities in former socialist countries. Moreover, cities that maintained their industrial profile currently face even higher pollution levels (e.g. cities from Silesian Basin), especially regarding particulate matter and Sulphur dioxide. In contrast, other indicators such as ozone have a specific pattern of spatial occurrence (Southern Europe is more exposed to this pollutant due to more solar radiation that creates the condition for the ozone-chemical processes that form the ozone) (Figs. 2 and 3).

In order to look into the similarities between cities and the profile of each class compared to the average values of each indicator, we have included in cluster analysis all six indicators mentioned above. The Analytical Hierarchy Clustering (AHC) method was applied using Philcarto software, and the five-class resulted in typology demonstrates the resemblance between the CEE cities within the European context (Fig. 4).

The majority of CEE cities are included in the first two classes that have some of the most dynamic economies (high growth but coming from a low baseline), also the lowest GDP per capita, the poorest living conditions and some of the highest pollution levels (especially cities from southern Poland and Bulgaria) or average pollution levels (most of the other cities). The exceptions are the Hungarian cities included in a different class with average values for most indicators and a lower economic dynamism but which have valuable human capital (highest share of people with tertiary education).

The indicators used in these assessments cover all the dimensions included in the liveability framework (see Fig. 1) except for security. This specific domain can refer either to economic security or physical safety. The sense of safety and place attachment are predictors of people's and communities' happiness (Mouratidis & Yiannakou, 2022).

The global financial crisis from 2009 to the COVID-19 pandemic significantly influenced people's economic security. Economically vulnerable groups can be highlighted, for example, by looking at the cities' highest share of the population unable to face unexpected financial expenses where some of the former socialist countries have the highest values—Croatia (52%), Latvia, Lithuania, Romania (all, over 40%).

Concerning physical violence, except for Bulgaria, there are no perceived issues in the former communist countries compared to the rest of the European countries.

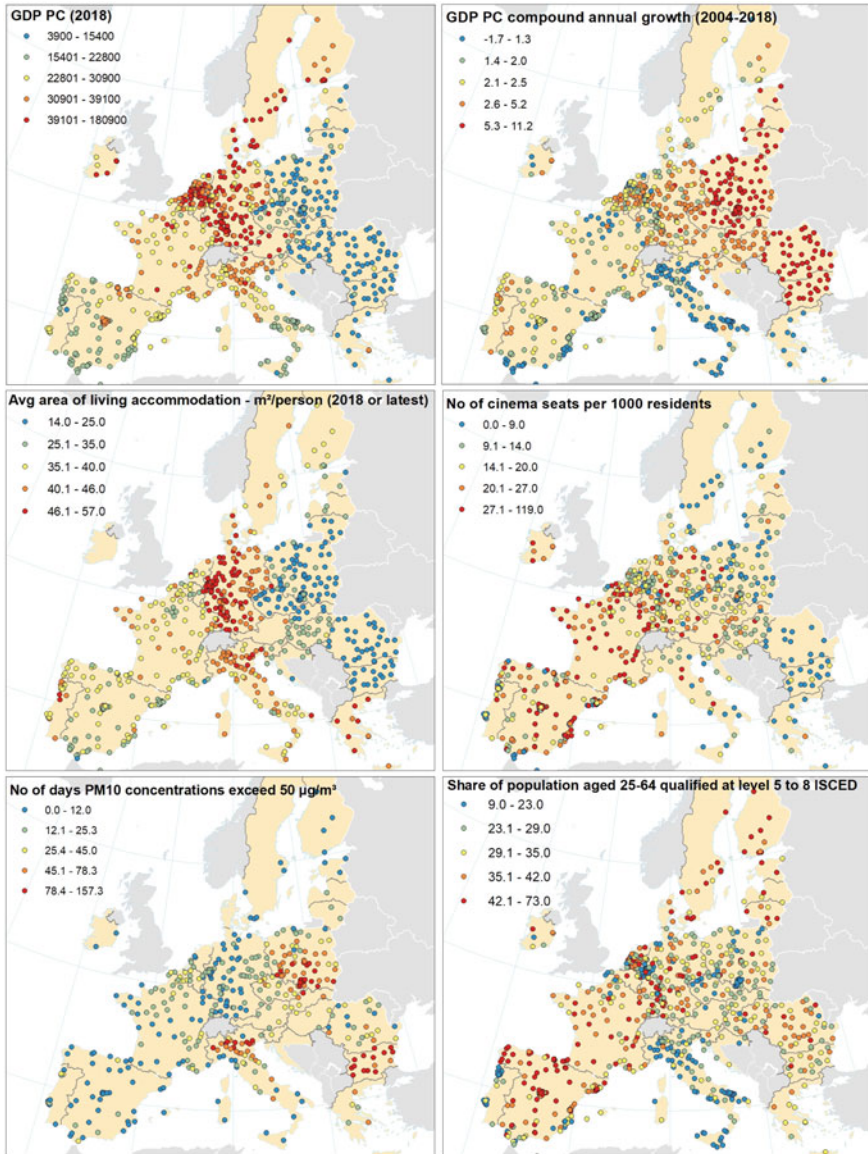


Fig. 2 Selected indicators of liveability by city. Source Data source Eurostat, maps made by M. Eva

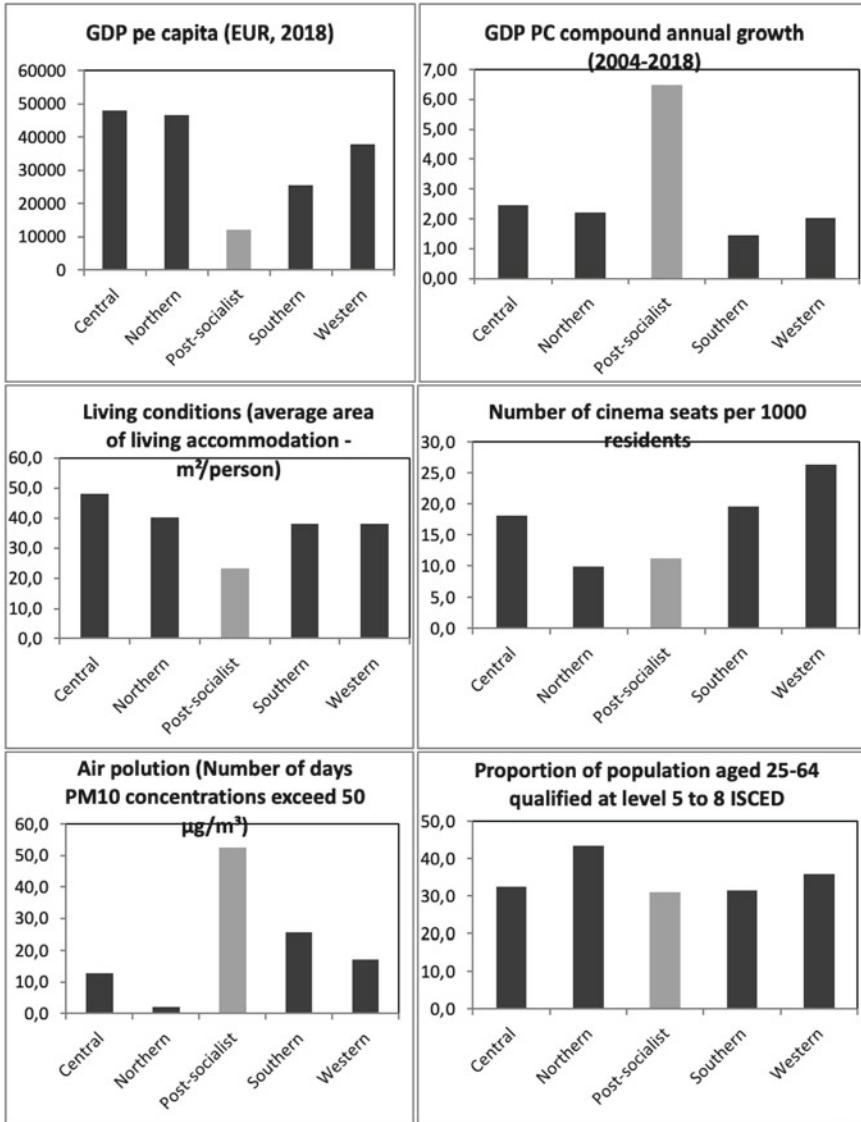


Fig. 3 Selected indicators of liveability by European region. *Source* Data source Eurostat, graphics made by M. Eva 2022

Figure 5 shows the gap in perceived insecurity as vulnerability to crime, violence or vandalism among people living in cities (17.0%) compared to people living in either towns and suburbs (9.1%) or rural areas (5.6%) (Eurostat, 2022). However, according to Eurostat database (2022), in former communist countries, the share of the population of cities that perceive their cities as insecure decreased significantly

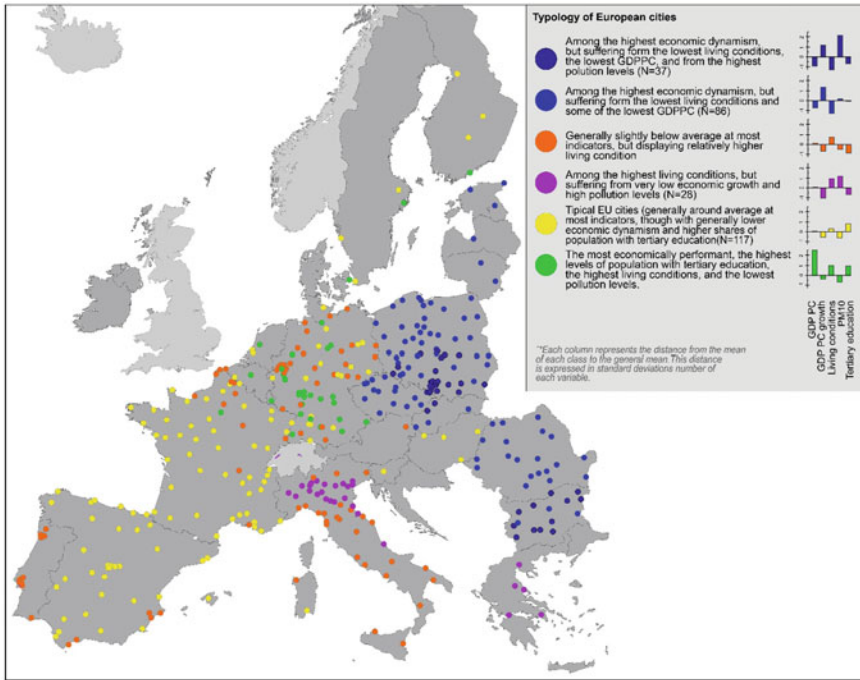


Fig. 4 Cluster analysis using selected indicators. *Source* Data source Eurostat, graphics made by M. Eva 2022

in the last ten years. Even Bulgaria’s highest values decreased from 28% in 2010 to 20% in 2019. Meanwhile, in terms of homicides, the highest values are still recorded in the Baltic countries (around 5 per 100,000 inhabitants) and also in Montenegro.

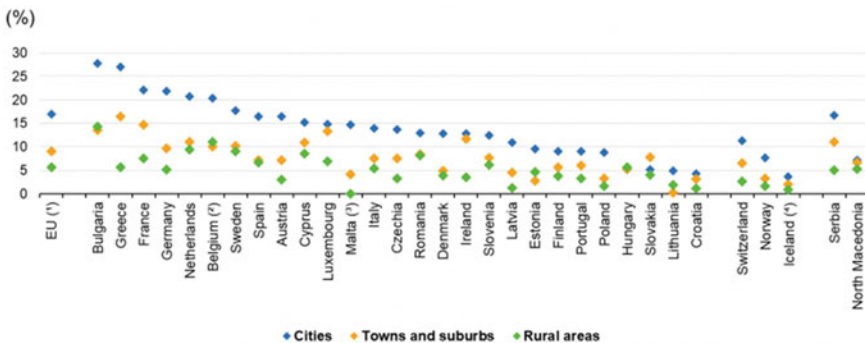


Fig. 5 Crime, violence or vandalism in the area by the degree of urbanisation in 2019. *Source* Eurostat (2022)

4.2 A Subjective Perspective on Living in the City

Analysing the statistical data that describe well-being is insufficient, as liveability is reflected in the subjective experience. Tracing positive and negative perceptions of liveability is essential (Nikolova, 2016). It includes satisfaction with both material and non-material aspects of life and is complementary information to the already described objective indicators.

World Values Survey shows that, in the case of former communist countries, there has been a fall in life satisfaction during the transition. Guriev and Zhuravskaya (2009) demonstrate that satisfaction was lower than the real economic growth for the selected countries. One can notice that transition economies are below the best-fit line in both periods. It fits into the “happiness gap” concept. This gap is higher for the ageing population because of the perception-related psychological factors but also due to objective factors: increasing inequality and subsequent sense of unfairness, decrease in quality and quantity of public goods (in some cases), high volatility or uncertainty of earnings, increase in personal standards and aspirations and depreciation of human capital as new skills become necessary for the new labour market during the transition and afterwards.

Looking at Gallup data and also at the quality of life in European cities survey (2019), and integrating the scores by using the sum-of-ranks method by our categories of cities (Post-socialist, Western, Northern and Southern), one can see exciting evolutions. The most performing in most of the subjective as well as objective evaluations are Nordic cities. Nevertheless, although in 2012 they were at the same level of satisfaction as the Southern ones, the post-communist cities improved significantly in this subjective indicator and are now very close to the Western European cities.

This fact shows a more rapid convergence process than the actual (objective) convergence regarding social, economic, natural and built environment indicators. Even more interestingly, the post-communist countries are at the same level as Nordic countries regarding perceived stress, well below Western and, especially, Southern countries’ urban areas (Figs. 6 and 7).

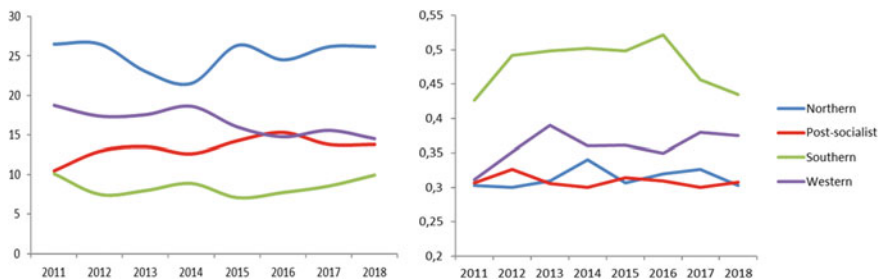


Fig. 6 (a) City satisfaction and (b) Stress experiences assessment in cities from the four European regions (Gallup, 2019).

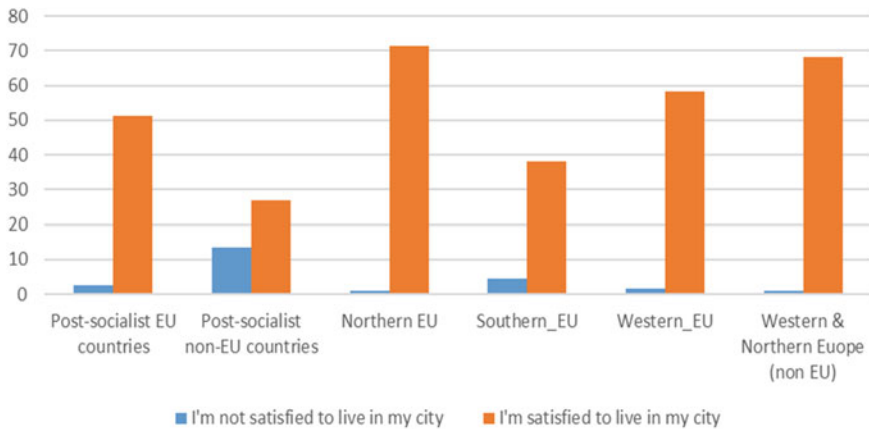


Fig. 7 Satisfaction with living in the city. *Source* EC/DG REGIO, Perception Survey on the Quality of Life (QoL) in European Cities 2019

On the other hand, subjective indicators show a clear “happiness gap” between post-communist EU cities and Southern EU cities, on the one side, and Western and Northern Europe, on the other. This observation is consistent with many other assessments in the literature arguing that especially the North-Western part of Europe and, more specifically, Germany, the Netherlands, the UK and the Scandinavian countries (plus Denmark) are a large cluster of a high level of happiness (Okulicz-Kozaryn, 2011; Okulicz-Kozaryn & Valente, 2019). The assessment of satisfaction relies on multiple indicators, among which two are the main determinants: amenities (public transport, healthcare services, cultural facilities, green spaces, public spaces and air quality/cleanliness) and safety (safety perception, trust and crime victimisation (EC, 2020). Of all these, perceived safety is the stronger predictor of city satisfaction (EC, 2020; Moeinaddini et al., 2020). The values vary significantly among cities included in the survey and are lower in capital cities than in other cities. Meanwhile, the share of people not satisfied with life in the cities and the lowest per cent of people satisfied with life in the cities are in the post-socialist non-EU countries (Fig. 8). These results confirm other scholars’ observations and analyses, arguing that post-socialist societies are among the unhappiest countries in the world, even when controlling for income. The Easterlin Paradox applies in their case: the income increase does not appear to increase people’s happiness (Nikolova, 2016). Meanwhile, the level of satisfaction, even though low, was increasing before 2020 in most cities.

A liveable city is not only a city for all people but also a city for everyone, a city that is favourable and attractive for different categories of people. The inclusivity of cities was also measured, and the main determinants were the extent to which people think the city is favourable for immigrants and gay and lesbian people, which was also positively associated with quality of life (EC, 2020). It sustains previous studies arguing that tolerance and openness are positive factors of people’s satisfaction (EC, 2020; Zenker et al., 2013).

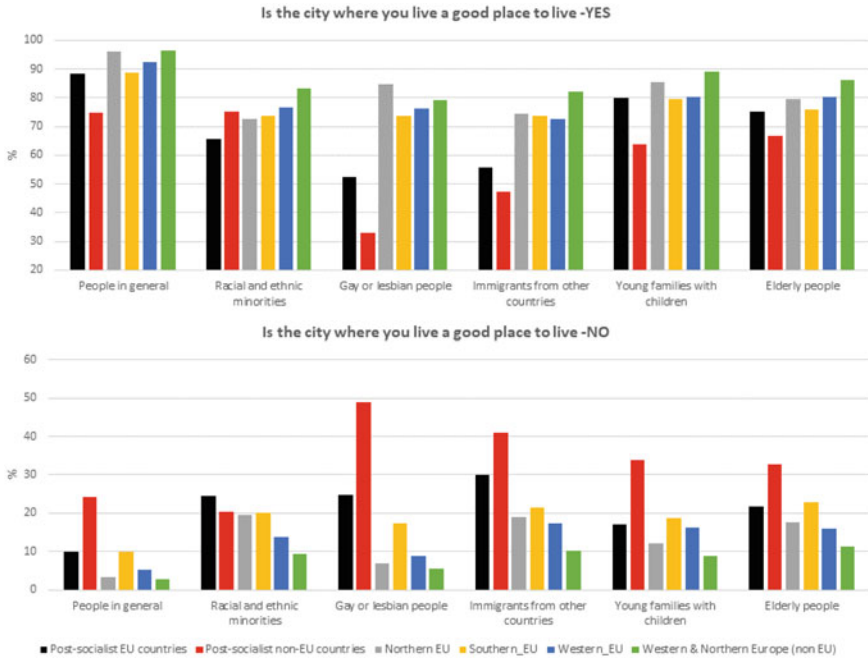


Fig. 8 “Is the city where you live a good place to live?” *Source* EC/DG REGIO, Perception Survey on the Quality of Life (QoL) in European Cities 2019

Post-communist cities are generally places where fewer people are happy to live in. The highest negative difference when compared to cities from other European regions emerges when it comes to sexual minorities and immigrants, while in the case of racial and ethnic minorities, but also young or older people, these differences are less pronounced. Another differentiation can be made between EU and non-EU post-socialist cities, the last category being the least attractive for these more vulnerable categories. An interesting exception is the case of racial and ethnic minorities, as cities from non-EU former communist countries are more likely to be open and favourable.

As far as differences between cities are concerned, one can identify them in terms of attractiveness: sexual minorities and immigrants are less likely to be accepted in cities from Romania, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia, these are less favourable to the elderly population, though most of these social categories perceive them positively (Krakow, Gdansk, Bratislava, Zagreb, Praha) (Fig. 9).

Another critical discussion is related to the satisfaction with public services and amenities. Urban infrastructure is the basis of a liveable city. To have cities for people (not for cars), reliable, effective and comfortable public transport is an obvious prerequisite. The satisfaction related to public transport is significantly lower in non-EU post-socialist countries. In contrast, in the EU post-socialist countries, although not very high, it is higher in Southern Europe cities. Fewer residents are satisfied



Fig. 9 “Is the city where you live a good place to live for ...”—Differences between CEE cities. *Source* EC/DG REGIO, Perception Survey on the Quality of Life (QoL) in European Cities 2019

with public transport in Italy and South-Eastern Europe (the Balkans), where public transport is less used, whereas where more people are satisfied, they will more likely also use public transport (EC, 2016, 2020). As expected, Western and Northern European cities show the highest satisfaction level. In the case of healthcare and education facilities or even sports facilities and recreational areas (such as green areas), the cities in non-EU former socialist countries have the highest dissatisfaction. However, in CEE cities, people are more satisfied when compared to Southern Europe cities. The North-South divide seems more pronounced in this area than the West-East gradient.

Interestingly also, the environmental quality is perceived similarly. Air pollution, noise and cleanliness of cities are regarded as less damaging in the case of former socialist countries than in Southern Europe. In contrast, Northern and Western Europe countries (either or not in the EU) have a much better perceived environmental quality (Fig. 10).

The assessment of EC (2020) concludes that satisfaction with cities’ amenities (especially access to green areas), safety and inclusiveness account for 68% of the level of city satisfaction, therefore our analysis highlights the main issues related to the perceived that should be addressed by decision-makers to CEE cities.

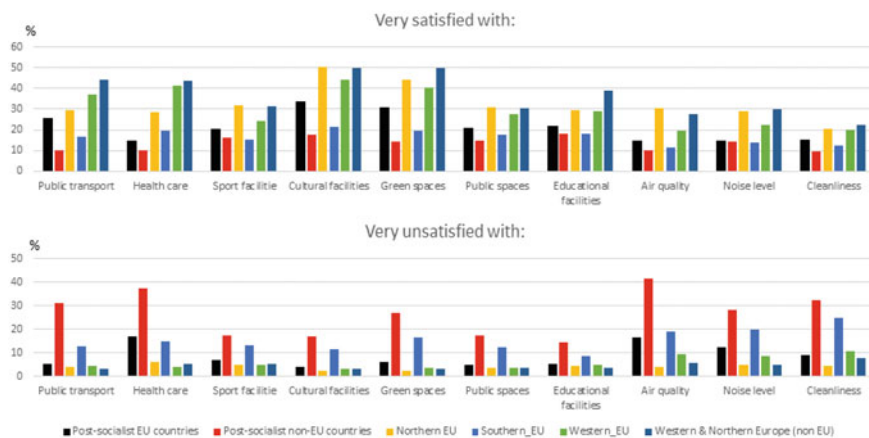


Fig. 10 Satisfaction with public services and environmental quality. *Source* EC/DG REGIO, Perception Survey on the Quality of Life (QoL) in European Cities 2019

5 The Missing Link: A City for Everyone

The analyses above can conclude that the “socialist legacy” may never be overcome (Ilchenko & Dushkova, 2018). Also, the burden of reducing the actual or imagined distance from the West (and the North), in both time and space, remains one of the main concerns of urban policy-makers.

Urbanisation is, in general, and especially in post-communist cities, related to social self-alienation (Redžić & Everett, 2020). The term heteropolitisation can describe, from this point of view, the best scenario for the future situation of CEE cities. It means the transition from urbanistic and socially homogenous systems put in place by communism to heterogeneous “urban mosaics” (Nedović-Budić et al., 2006), i.e. more diverse and flexible, adaptive systems. The latter enhance individuality, creativity, innovation, connectivity and free participation in public well-being (Gentile et al., 2012). Well-balanced heterogeneity of physical structures and urban functionalities, social groups and mobility patterns increases the complexity of cities and also their adaptive capacity.

In CEE countries, setting people’s happiness as the ultimate aim of urban development seems to be a utopia. The post-socialist urban agendas focussed on the economy, i.e. the attractiveness dimension for business and capital, and less on the attractiveness for people. However, keeping young, performant and intelligent people in the city needs more integration into policies. A human resources strategy in administration based on meritocracy needs to be included. Liveability relates to well-being and people’s perceptions but less to happiness, belonging to a community, and feelings of solidarity and conviviality. In this respect, see Liveability Index, integrating Social Infrastructure, Walkability, Public Transport, Public Open Space, Housing Affordability, and Local Employment, or the Global Liveability Index focussed on stability, healthcare, culture and environment, education and infrastructure.

The previous urban frameworks focussed on performance, efficiency and competitiveness change in digitalisation, smart specialisation, and sustainable, green city paradigms (Bănică et al., 2020). Integrating these approaches, which can create balanced, environmentally friendly, safe and adaptable but also intelligent and innovative cities, is a solution for happy and liveable cities. This transformation is not easy and has many drawbacks: sustainability is sometimes utopic, resilience might turn into “bad resilience” (opposition to any change), while intelligent cities, if mismanaged, can produce social injustice and environmental issues planning (Ibănescu et al., 2020). Therefore, the operationalisation of these concepts needs careful approaches.

Sustainability can reconnect urban citizens of former socialist countries with their cities and nature (inside and outside the city), making them more aware of growth’s limits and consumerism’s drawbacks. It could also make them seek for more participation in the decision-making process, for more public space of connection with the “body” and “the soul” of the city (Kourtiti et al., 2021; Wahlstrom et al., 2020). Sustainability creates a bridge between individual benefits, public good and environmental quality. It is a utopia only if seen as an end. Sustainability is a way towards a better and more persistent society. Current approaches to sustainability in CEE cities and worldwide envisage post carbon-cities with green and low-ecological footprint development, active mobility (bicycle use, walking) and access to nearby services (see 15-min city concept) (Mocáka et al., 2022; Svirčić Gotovac & Kerbler, 2019).

Resilience is another buzzword of our times, highly used in academic and public discourse in CEE countries, as it emerges from the unpredictability of our “risk society” (Beck, 1992). The resilience of CEE cities can be illustrated by a variety of indicators—e.g. socio-economic, environmental and spatial—that illustrate their co-evolution and adaptation processes of cities after significant perturbations (e.g. the fall of communism, the economic crisis, COVID-19, etc.) (Sandu et al., 2021). If seen only in connection with conservative approaches, this concept is minimal and sometimes dangerous. Returning to the previous state or resisting change can be seen as a form of “bad resilience”, which will maintain obsolete structures and functions. Some scholars link it to the difficulty of former communist cities in transitioning into more liveable cities (Rufat, 2012). For example, preserving unattractive and dysfunctional communist buildings can obstruct modernisation. In CEE cities, the concept of resilience should change in a proactive, evolutionary, adaptive and transformative form that presupposes bouncing forward and not bouncing back. Shocks, either natural or manufactured, must be seen as opportunities for cities to build back better, to restructure and solve institutional, social, economic or environmental issues.

Finally, the concept of smart cities leads to innovation and “personalised modernisation”. One of the six dimensions of these cities, unfortunately presently neglected in the former socialist countries, is that of smart people. It is a viable direction to support more liveable cities. Smarter cities not only use more information and communication technologies (ICT) for more effective resources use and lower emissions (which are also objectives of sustainable cities), but they also have more intelligent urban transportation, water and waste management systems, more interactive and responsive administration, secure public spaces, while being also more resilient to present and future shocks (Kutty et al., 2022). Innovative technology can be an opportunity to



Fig. 11 Towards liveable cities—the emerging conceptual framework

synchronise and reconcile individual and collective interests and can be an effective tool for a “city for everyone”. However, there is a need for an integrated approach to intelligent solutions, which must be interconnected and adapted to the specific needs of individual users. If smart innovation excludes people or social categories from use, creates social injustice, or if it negatively impacts the environment, the purpose of smart cities fails.

In other words, the concept of liveability in a broader context promoted in today’s global world of intelligent, resilient and sustainable cities can fulfil its purpose only if it considers the needs and individual capabilities of the citizens. It will not further atomise post-communist urban societies but will adequately unify and self-organise the social mosaic of CEE countries’ cities under a common umbrella.

Focussing on creating opportunities for everyone could be the missing link that would relate the new concepts of urban design and development to the goal of liveable cities (Fig. 11). Nevertheless, even with these new approaches, the necessary measures to ensure that citizens feel satisfied and happy, that they actually enjoy living in the city do not seem to be a concern for the administration of post-socialist cities, even after three decades of reconsideration of development paradigms.

The main question of how to make cities the home of people remains. Kourtit et al. propose a solution: enhancing and relating the “soul and body” analysis to urban attractiveness (Kourtit et al., 2021), which will fulfil the necessity to find a new urban paradigm integrating the residents’ happiness.

From our perspective, Amartya Sen’s theory of capabilities can be successfully applied in the case of cities from CEE countries in order to harmonise modern approaches to city design and development to the individual needs of individuals and tackle social inequalities and injustice in the cities. It is particularly when it comes to the least developed cities, the capabilities theory could be the link and the key to making cities more liveable, resilient and sustainable. The central idea of this theory is to “enhance substantive freedoms for every single person” (Anand, 2018). The framework imagined by Amartya Sen includes (a) political freedoms—the ability to participate in the decision-making process; (b) economic facilities, i.e.

openness to the labour market; (c) social opportunities for health, education and social equity; (d) access to protection and security (Sen, 1999).

People from cities of CEE countries must learn how to be free after a long period of communism when freedoms were restricted. Moreover, during the transition, societal inequalities increased considerably. Presently, the challenge would be to enhance equity, consider the public good and reconsider the sense of community without returning to a classless, egalitarian model.

From a capabilities perspective, smart, resilient and sustainable cities should enhance the agency and authority of people and empower citizens to embrace a healthy and good life, to choose their path and accomplish their potential without hurting others or damaging the environment.

Human development should be the basis of urban development. Urban governance should consider not just GDP but also life expectancy, health, social equity, reducing poverty, promoting efficient institutions, democracy and participation in the decision-making process. For all these, the instrumental value of participation is essential (Bajmócy, 2021).

6 Conclusions

The current study is broad and brings together many extensive and complex issues. However, it does not intend to approach them analytically but rather to rearrange them, as in a puzzle. These essential pieces give the overall picture of liveability's conditionalities in cities of the former communist countries in Central and Eastern Europe.

One can wonder to what extent the category "post-socialist" or "post-transition cities" is still relevant today (Stenning & Hörschelmann, 2008). However, we argue that the hybridisation between the socialist legacy, the transition period outcome and the new processes of Europeanisation and globalisation induces the specific characteristics of CEE cities. They witness a catch-up development and uneven transformations while maintaining a peripheral position. Transitioning from an egalitarian to an individualistic society and from a centralised decision-making process to democracy does not mean, by default, better economic, social and environmental performance, nor a better quality of life in the cities.

The analysed datasets of both statistical indicators and survey data show that CEE cities significantly improved liveability in the last 20–30 years. They are nowadays relatively close to Southern cities in terms of statistical/objective indicators (but they are both lagging behind Western and Northern cities). However, CEE cities look more dynamic and have a positive evolution, especially in economic terms, while southern cities look rather static. Regarding the perception of people living in cities, the conclusion is that post-socialist cities are still catching-up and concentrating on the highest share of people who are unsatisfied with their lives and with the quality of amenities and services that make cities liveable.

However, there are also discrepancies between the objective and subjective perspectives on liveability, especially in the context of the new emerging paradigms based on the convergence of sustainability, smartness or resilience.

This synergy of new urban concepts and theories in the context of CEE cities can create a novel framework to ensure sustainable, resilient and intelligent modernisation while maintaining a focus on people. Sustainability means enhancing the sense of community by ensuring the opportunity for the participation of all individuals in the decision-making process. Within the smart city context, intelligent project investments should increase the focus on the personalisation of services and technologies to increase the well-being of individuals. In resilience, this is linked to reducing social vulnerabilities, especially in disadvantaged communities exposed to more risks to create preparedness (capacities and knowledge) to respond and remain as secure as possible in extreme events.

Meanwhile, liveability means not just meeting the basic needs of someone but also, and more importantly, enhancing individual freedom and capabilities. The assessment relies on the theory of capabilities proposed by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum, which states the importance of individuals' freedom to choose from different opportunities and to accomplish their full potential while pursuing happiness. Urban decision-makers should consider each city's specificities and aim to produce "cities for everyone". Only by encouraging diversity, individual liberty of choice complementarity with promoting civic solidarity and responsibility for public interest, will this approach induce happiness while producing liveable cities.

The integration of these components can sustain the transition from the liveability of neighbourhoods and cities to the happiness of individuals within their communities, from city4all to city4everyone, by concentrating on awarding opportunities for each person regardless of her/his status and belonging to specific social categories.

The novelty of the approach is that it brings together major themes of urban studies in a Central and Eastern European context: on the one hand, liveability and its life satisfaction subjective component, and on the other, the need to adapt to the current globalised context in which concepts such as sustainability, resilience or smartness are transferred to the reporting mode of urban life. The connection is made by appealing to a theory that originates in the 1970s—the theory of capabilities—which can integrate objective ecological, technological or urban security gains with the subjective needs of individuals.

The limitation of the approach is closely related to its novelty. The broadness of the topics included does not allow for an in-depth analysis of the issues that are only briefly discussed. Also, the indicators are only analysed until 2019 and therefore, do not include the COVID-19 pandemic which has changed the face of the world and cities in recent years. Our future research will focus more on the relationship between urban capabilities and more narrow dimensions of urban liveability, sustainability, smartness or resilience. Also, including more recent shocks will allow us to acknowledge the differentiated impact on individuals and urban population beings and functionings.

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