

SHIFTING INNER-CITY SOCIODEMOGRAPHICS: THE CASE OF RIGA

RĪGAS IEKŠPILSĒTAS IEDZĪVOTĀJU SOCIĀLI DEMOGRĀFISKO RĀDĪTĀJU DINAMIKA

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Abstract

Post-socialist inner cities are rapidly re-urbanising - a process that typically involves major changes in their population composition. The aim of this study was to find out how the sociodemographic status of inner-city residents of Riga changed between 2011 and 2021. In order to do that, this study explored and summarised prior research on the inner city of Riga and expanded on these findings by employing a neighbourhood-level statistical analysis of the most recent population composition and housing data, which was then mapped. The results revealed that not only did the inner-city population grow in size in the second half of the decade, but it also attracted an increasing number of young adults of a high socio-economic status, among other signs of reurbanisation increasingly present in the study period. Most of these reurbanisation processes were spatially fragmented, thus increasing the risk of growing socio-spatial inequalities within the inner city and between the inner city and the outer city.

Keywords: *Riga, inner city, sociodemographic status, reurbanization, gentrification*

Introduction

The dynamics of population size and composition in inner cities have been extensively studied, both regionally and globally. Studies of post-socialist inner cities have often revealed important patterns, such as a generally growing and stabilising urban core and an influx of young and highly educated professionals (Haase et al., 2009; Kubeš & Kovacs, 2020), trends of gentrification and consequential displacement (Pastak & Kährlik, 2021), studentification and changing social cohesion (Fabula et al., 2017), and speedy social and demographic change (Temelová et al., 2016). These processes that are central to reurbanisation – the last stage in the urban development model – are still relatively fresh and difficult to generalise, particularly in the post-socialist space, and thus new case studies are useful.

As reurbanisation introduces somewhat optimistic demographic and spatial changes, it is often called the revival or renaissance of the inner city. In the case of Riga, only around 2010 and after a prolonged shrinkage did the inner city start experiencing gradual stabilisation in its population size. Previously, from 1989 to

2011, the proportional population loss in the historic centre of Riga (HCR) was more than double the overall population loss in the city, and from 2000 to 2011, Skanste was the only inner-city neighbourhood to see an increase in population, owing to the construction of high-rise residential buildings there (Krūmiņš et al., 2019; Treija et al., 2020).

Riga has commonly been examined on a city or metropolitan scale, or in comparison to the surrounding suburbanising or non-metropolitan area. This research interest is understandable due to the rapidly growing suburbs and even some evidence of counterurbanisation in the periphery of the agglomeration of Riga (Skadiņš, 2018), but it can sometimes also lead to the inner city being overlooked. Furthermore, a study of left-bank neighbourhoods revealed the presence of social heterogeneity (Bauls et al., 2003), which is likely also the case for the rest of the city; consequently, to detect sociodemographic dynamics a local analysis is needed.

Although neighbourhood-level studies of Riga have not been frequent, some of the existent statistical analysis and survey-based research on spatial and sociodemographic processes has been highly insightful and demonstrated significant differences in population composition between the inner- and outer-city neighbourhoods. Accordingly, the inner city had a higher concentration of highly educated, higher-paid residents in managerial and qualified professional positions. Unsurprisingly, the distribution of highly educated people paralleled the preferred residence areas of managers and skilled professionals, and while households of two and more persons were less likely to reside in the inner city, linked to the second demographic transition, two-person households were more likely to reside in the inner city than the outer city. Additionally, in terms of ethnicity, the inner city had a higher concentration of Latvians (Krišjāne & Bērziņš, 2014; Zhitin et al., 2020; Sechi et al., 2019).

There are various factors that have influenced the changes in the composition of inner-city population. The relative attractiveness of the inner city, especially in regard to its pre-war housing and public space, of particular interest for young adults, has grown (Krūmiņš et al., 2018; Krišjāne & Bērziņš, 2014). Inner-city residents were found to appreciate the cultural, entertainment and shopping opportunities, as well as the safety, but, despite the growing appeal of inner-city aesthetics, were dissatisfied with the noise and expensive and/or outdated housing, including their courtyards, facades, residential services and energy-efficiency, as well as the quantity and quality of green spaces (Treija et al., 2020; Sechi et al., 2022). Moreover, a decreased distance to the downtown was found to be associated with a decreased share of residents liking their neighbourhood (Šolks, 2013). Such contradictory survey-based findings are likely explained by the heterogeneity between and within the neighbourhoods and the change in attitudes toward the inner city being gradual.

While overall socio-spatial differentiation has increased due to economic restructuring, income inequality, housing system and residential mobility, the socio-economic and residential segregation has remained comparatively low, with limited separation of the wealthy. Riga has a high level of social mixing and a low level of socio-economic spatial divisions. This is typical of the post-socialist space, as low segregation levels have been linked to a shortage of new housing; they are also impacted by a time lag, as income inequality does not immediately affect space. However, as the wealthier city residents seek better housing, segregation is likely to grow between and within neighbourhoods (Hess et al., 2018; Musterd et al., 2016; Sechi et al., 2022). The inner city has experienced fragmented gentrification, with selective residential upgrading and revitalisation in middle-to-upper-class areas being driven by intensifying gentrification, followed by re-investment in the inner city. Between 2006 and 2015, all of the more than 600 newly built residential housing units in the HCR were financed privately and aimed at upper-income earners. Naturally, next to this selective gentrification, there was also an ongoing deterioration of the pre-war housing stock (Treija et al., 2020; Sechi et al., 2022; Krišjāne & Bērziņš, 2014).

Furthermore, the above-average inner-city residential mobility rates boosted socio-spatial differences in the city (Krišjāne & Bērziņš, 2014; Treija et al., 2020). High residential mobility has also likely affected sense of place, as roughly half of the HCR population felt a sense of belonging to their neighbourhood or community (Treija et al., 2020). However, this could have been magnified by inept criteria for setting the administrative neighbourhood boundaries; there are likely to be divergent spatial and social processes within those boundaries (Ušča, 2010).

On the one hand, reurbanisation was hindered by the soaring suburbanisation levels, which, characteristically for the post-socialist space, have a comparatively short history in CEE countries. Accordingly, it has been too soon for the suburbanites to return to the inner city. On the other hand, reurbanisation was slowed down by the “adverse social environment” in some of the inner-city neighbourhoods, e.g., Grīziņkalns and Maskavas forštate. The latter had little investment in development and the lowest social affluence in the inner city. Nevertheless, it has been predicted that reurbanisation should be just a matter of time (Šolks, 2010; Sechi et al., 2019). Since the residential satisfaction of younger Riga residents has been influenced by mobility modes and neighbourhood quality perception, while sociodemographic factors have remained non-significant (Krūmiņš et al., 2018), these neighbourhoods are likely to experience a turnaround in the near future.

A substantially changing population composition might indicate that the inner city is to expect a more mature level of reurbanisation and new waves of revitalisation. An early insight into the dynamics of sociodemographic change can be very important for future planning. Thus, this paper examines the most recent temporal change of sociodemographic characteristics of the inner-city residents of Riga, employing

statistical analysis to answer the research question “How has the sociodemographic status of the inner-city residents of Riga changed between 2011 and 2021?”

Data and methods

This study used neighbourhood-level data from population census collected by the Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia (CSB). Under focus in the study were the 11 inner-city neighbourhoods, but in order to provide a more comparative and comprehensive view of the city, data about all 58 neighbourhoods was used. Riga is administratively divided into 58 neighbourhoods, of which typically nine – i.e., Centrs, Vecpilsēta, Skanste, Brasa, Grīziņkalns and Avoti (all on the right bank of the River Daugava) and Ķīpsala, Āgenskalns and Torņakalns (all on the left bank of River Daugava) – are considered the inner city. In this study, another two neighbourhoods (Maskavas foršate and Pētersala-Andrejsala, both located on the left bank of the River Daugava) were included due to their sociodemographic character, built environment and physical proximity to the inner city. While the HCR makes up just 1.43% of the city’s area, these 11 neighbourhoods make up 10.7% of the city, and 21.8% of the city’s residents live in these neighbourhoods (Central Statistical Bureau, 2023; apkaimes.lv, 2017).

A set of main factors was chosen to provide insight into the changing sociodemographic characteristics, including data on the share of residents of age who hold a degree, median net income, population size, average population age and age structure, household size and marital status, ethnicity, and residential mobility. These are factors that have been both reviewed in earlier literature and are associated with reurbanisation, allowing for a better comparison and assessment of trends. In order to capture the most recent changes, the chosen time period was the decade between 2011 and 2021. In addition, housing statistics related to years of construction, rental versus owner-occupied, and empty versus occupied were briefly analysed to provide an overview of the housing situation in the inner city. This statistical data was categorised as experimental due to having been collected using new data sources and methods. While this ensured availability of the most current data, these methods are not constant or internationally harmonised. Finally, to analyse the changes and depict the spatial patterns, new variables were calculated using the compiled dataset and expressed as fractions, which were then grouped and mapped.

Results

In terms of population size, after the prolonged population decline, a notable return to the inner city became evident only in the second half of the decade between 2011 and 2021. In most inner-city neighbourhoods between 2016 and 2021 the population increased by 1.8% to 4.9%, but in some by as much as 21.0% (Ķīpsala) or 45.9% (Skanste). There were also relatively small decreases, of 2.8% and 1.7%, in

Brasa and Grīziņkalns respectively, while Āgenskalns, Maskavas forštate and Torņakalns experienced larger losses (Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia, 2023). Between 2011 and 2021, the concentration of expatriates in the inner city almost doubled – an increase of 38% to 538% depending on the neighbourhood. Generally, moving to the inner city from abroad and vice versa was increasingly frequent in comparison to the rest of the city (Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia, 2023).

The share of residents in the city aged 18 and over holding a degree reached 40.3% in 2021, up from 33.0% in 2011 (Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia, 2023). Figure 1 shows the percentage point variation from the average level in the city. In 2011, all the inner-city neighbourhoods, except Torņakalns and Maskavas forštate, were within or above the average level. While the overall pattern was similar in 2021, the gap between the inner- and outer-city neighbourhoods grew larger and more of the inner-city neighbourhoods rose significantly above the average level.

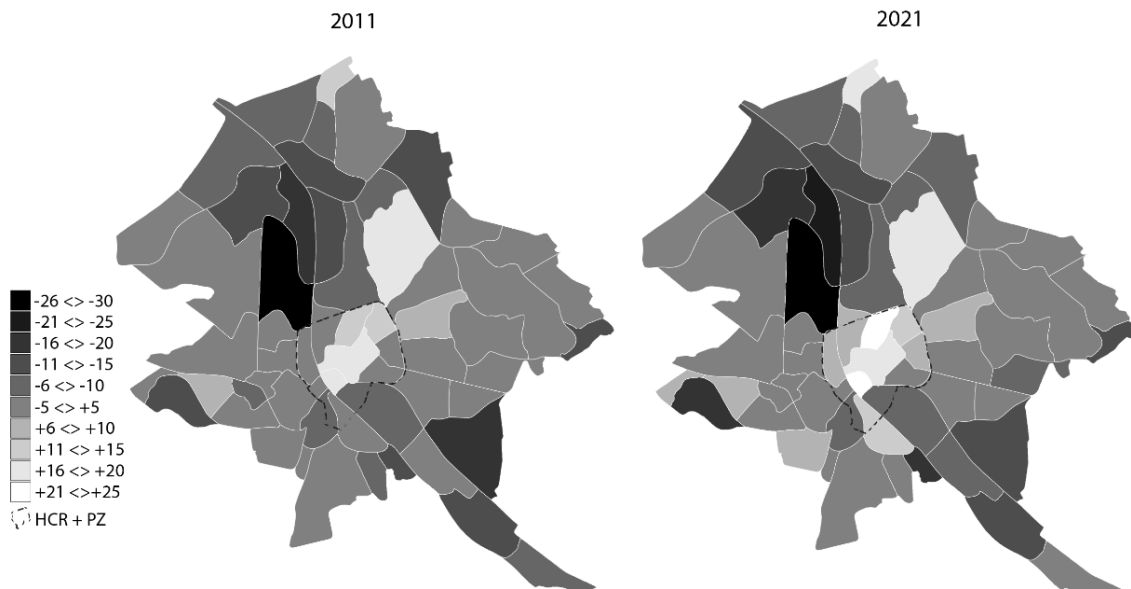


Figure 1. **Percentage point variation (from average level in the city) in the share of residents aged 18+ that hold a degree** (author’s figure based on CSB data)

The inner city not only had a smaller share of residents with elementary occupations (except Pētersala-Andrejsala, Maskavas forštate, Āgenskalns and Avoti), with a particularly large difference from the rest of the city in Brasa and Centrs, but also had a higher concentration of residents paid above the median income in the city in both 2011 and 2021. The median net income in the city in 2021 was 716 EUR, and about 1.2 times higher in most of the inner-city neighbourhoods, only being lower in Torņakalns and Maskavas forštate (Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia, 2023). Again, the gap between the inner city and the outer city kept growing during the period (Figure 2).

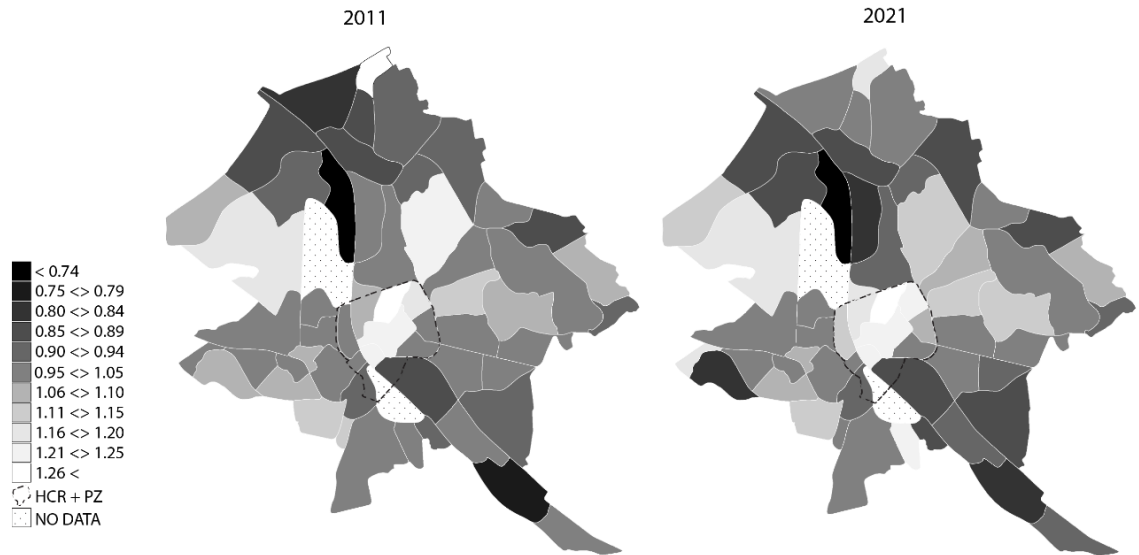


Figure 2. Net income in Riga (Riga = 1.00) (author's figure based on CSB data)

The average age of the inner-city population also decreased. Remarkably, the average population age in Riga increased from 41 to 42 between 2011 and 2021, but despite this overall ageing trend the inner city was getting considerably younger on average, as young as 33 in Skanste (2021). (Figure 3) In line with the previous research, the inner city was increasingly attracting young adults, demonstrating a growing divergence between the inner- and outer-city neighbourhoods. In 2021, the share of millennials, or 25-to-44-year-olds, in the inner city was between 0.29 (Maskavas forštate) and 0.37 (Skanste). Although the share of 15-to-24-year-olds in the inner city decreased during the period, there was an upward trend when comparing 2021 to 2016 – likely a sign of studentification (Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia, 2023).

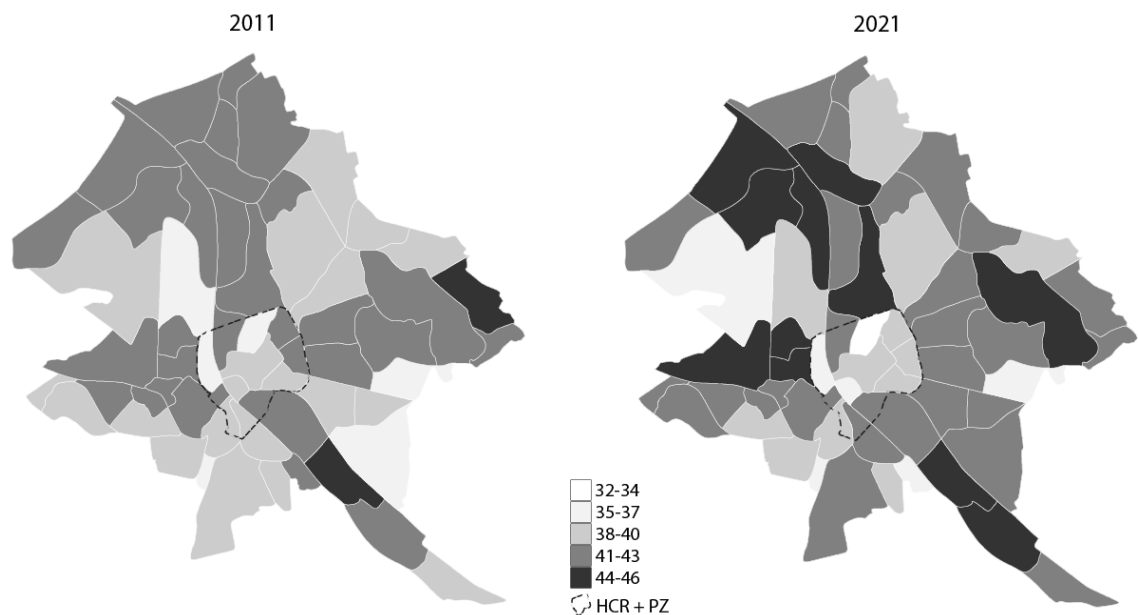


Figure 3. Average age in Riga (author's figure based on CSB data)

Between 2011 and 2021, the share of two-or-more-person households decreased in all inner-city neighbourhoods, as the share of one-person households was the only group to grow – though, in most inner-city neighbourhoods, this increase was smaller than the city average. Additionally, the share of persons with the marital status “unmarried” in the inner city was between 0.44 and 0.63, above the average level of 0.42 in the city in 2021 (Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia, 2023).

In the context of reurbanisation, an essential subject is housing. With a few exceptions, there was little newly built housing in the inner city. (Figure 4) From this perspective, since the inner city is densely built-up already, an increase in segregation linked to development of new housing should not be significant. In 2021, about 15.6% of housing was empty in Riga; in the inner city the share varied from 21.8% in Brasa to 52.0% in Vecpilsēta, and mostly applied to buildings that were built before 1945 (Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia, 2023). Empty housing creates a risk of degradation of the environment, as well as a risk of social and cultural decline. While it also provides some potential space for revitalisation, it would most likely lead to an increase in socio-spatial differentiation.

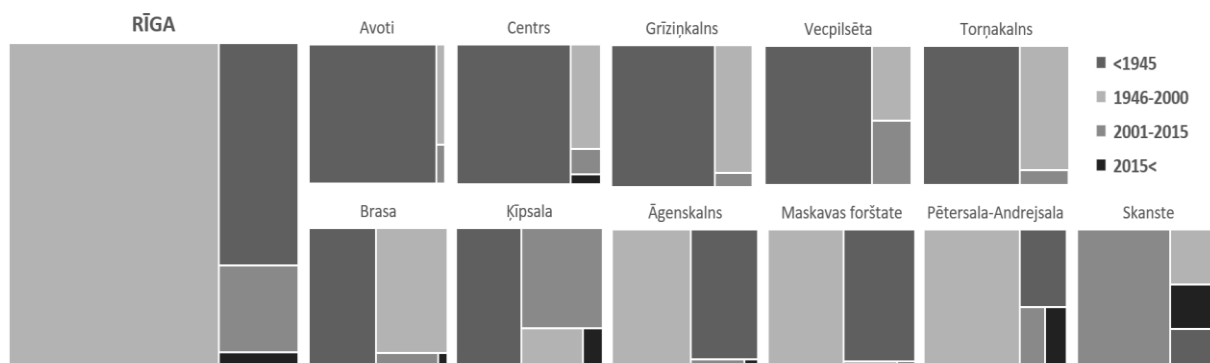


Figure 4. **Housing stock in the inner city by construction period** (author’s figure based on CSB data)

High residential mobility in the inner city was an ongoing trend in 2021. Within the span of a year, the place of residence remained unchanged for 0.80 to 0.89 of the population in the inner city – more “inner” neighbourhoods had higher mobility compared to the average level in the city of 0.90 (Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia, 2023). One of the requirements for high residential mobility is availability of rental housing. While the concentration of rental housing in the inner city is higher than the city average (Figure 5), from 2011 to 2021 the share of owned housing increased in Avoti, Centrs, Grīziņkalns, Ķīpsala and Vecpilsēta, while the share of rental housing increased in Āgenskalns, Maskavas forštate, Pētersala-Andrejsala, Skanste, Torņakalns and Vecpilsēta (Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia, 2023).

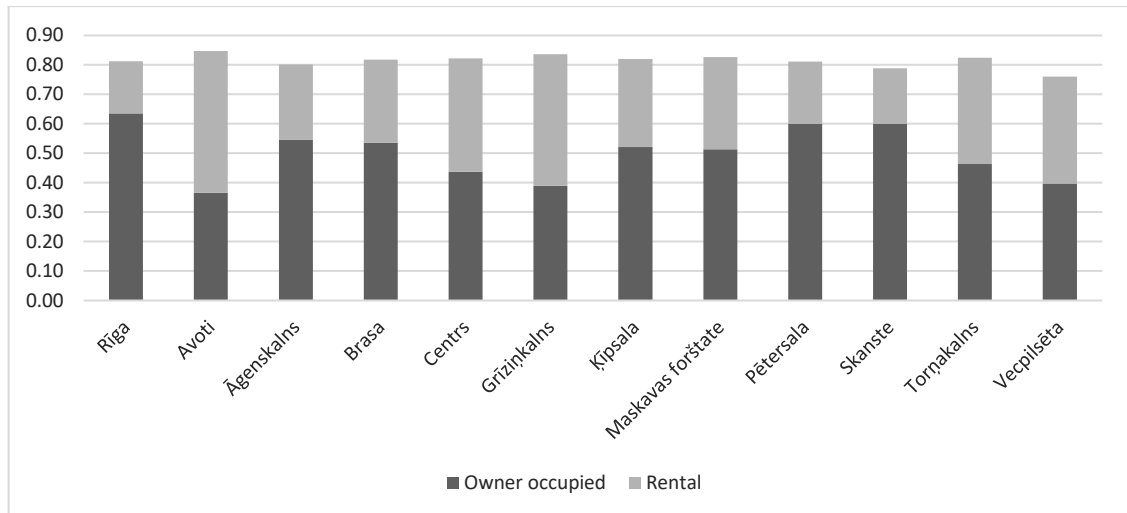


Figure 5. **Share of rental versus owner occupied housing in 2021** (author’s figure based on CSB data)

The results allow detailed spatial sociodemographic changes in the city to be seen, as well as an increasingly divergent population composition both within the inner city and between the inner city and the outer city. The majority of these findings are in line with prior studies but demonstrate more pronounced patterns, e.g., the growing share of young, highly educated and well-paid residents and expatriates in some previously declining inner-city neighbourhoods is closely associated with gentrification.

Conclusion

The sociodemographic status of inner-city residents in Riga changed significantly between 2011 and 2021, not only confirming the observations regarding the dynamics of the population composition of the inner city in the literature review, but also signalling the existence of a more mature form of reurbanisation and gentrification. Not only did the inner-city population grow noticeably in the second half of this period, but, throughout the decade, the inner city was also increasingly favoured by affluent younger and highly educated residents. The inner city both maintained its status as the most socially affluent part of the city and increasingly diverged from the outer city.

Data analysis also revealed significant differences within the inner city; the performance of a neighbourhood seemed to be determined by its “innerness”. The neighbourhoods that stretched further out from the boundaries of the HCR had consistently lower rates of reurbanisation, thus a separate micro-level analysis would be beneficial in order to investigate the rising socio-spatial inequalities and their implications within and between the inner-city neighbourhoods – more precisely, to see if increased levels of segregation are likely due to the changing sociodemographic environment in the inner city, as these processes have been quite fragmented. At the

same time, the prevalence of the trend of reurbanisation must not be generalised about or overestimated but examined in interaction with such processes as the still-increasing suburbanisation and possible counterurbanisation.

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Kopsavilkums

Postsociālisma pilsētu iekšpilsētās noris strauja reurbanizācija – process, kas parasti ietver būtiskas pārmaiņas iedzīvotāju sastāvā. Šī pētījuma mērķis bija noskaidrot, kā laika posmā no 2011. līdz 2021. gadam ir mainījies Rīgas iekšpilsētas iedzīvotāju sociāli demogrāfiskais statuss. Lai to izdarītu, tika apkopoti iepriekš veiktie pētījumi par Rīgas iekšpilsētu un, ņemot par pamatu to sniegto ieskatu, tika veikta statistiskā analīze apkaimju līmenī, izmantojot jaunākos iedzīvotāju sastāva un mājokļu datus, kas pēc tam tika attēloti kartēs. Rezultāti atklāja, ka desmitgades otrajā pusē ne tikai palielinājās iekšpilsētas iedzīvotāju skaits, bet iekšpilsēta arī piesaistījusi arvien vairāk gadus jaunu pieaugušo ar augstu sociālekonomisko stāvokli, līdzās citām arvien izteiktākām reurbanizācijas pazīmēm pētītajā periodā. Lielākā daļa no šiem reurbanizācijas procesiem bija telpiski sadrumstaloti, tādējādi radot risku sociāli telpiskās nevienlīdzības kāpumam gan pašā iekšpilsētā, gan starp iekšpilsētu un ārpuspilsētu.

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