Shrinking Cities in the Post-Soviet Sphere: Perspectives on the monofunctional city of Kherson, Ukraine

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Ukraine is a paradigmatic post-Soviet country. Independent since 1991, Ukraine was an integral part of the Soviet Union following the 1922 end of Russia’s post-revolutionary civil war. Like Russia itself, Ukraine is a highly centralized country with one very large city (Kiev) and only a few medium-sized cities (e.g. Kharkiv, Odessa). The size of Ukraine’s tenth-largest city is only sixteen percent that of Kiev. Given its long membership within the Soviet sphere, Ukraine was subject to the entirety of the economic programs of the Soviet government, including industrialization and resource extraction. Ukraine thus has a variety of cities whose economic function up to 1991 was heavily industrial in nature (e.g. Zaporizhia, Kryvyi Rih), and whose economic function was centralized around only one or two industries, such as coal mining or steel production.

Ukraine is also paradigmatically post-Soviet in the political, economic, ecological, and urban challenges it has faced since the Soviet breakup. Subject to corrupt and often authoritarian leadership, and radically fluctuating economic conditions, the country has also struggled with the legacy of environmental waste and urban planning decisions made during Soviet times. Much like Russia, Ukraine’s birth rate has plummeted and the country as a whole is losing population. With a population of over 52 million in 1993, Ukraine’s population was in 2014 only 43 million. It will not come as a surprise, therefore, that ten of the eleven largest cities in Ukraine lost population between 1990 and 2011, with Kiev the only exception.

Kherson (Херсон), the sixteenth-largest city in Ukraine as of 2011, has a rich history. The city was founded in the 18th century with its name inspired by the ancient Greek settlement of Chersonesus (Χερσόνησος). Kherson’s name was clearly intended to connect Russian colonization of a formerly Muslim Turkish region to the “civilization-building” activities of the Greeks. The city was designed on a grid system similar to those of many other Russian cities of the same era (Samara, Irkutsk, etc.) Today the city is once again located at a frontier, this time of the Russian-annexed Crimea.

Kherson is typical of Ukrainian cities in many respects. It is moderate in size (2011 population 302,528), declining in population (16.2% loss since 1990), was formerly heavily economically centralized (textile production and shipbuilding), and has suffered attendant and tremendous economic decline since the Soviet breakup. The city also wrestles with attendant problems in its social makeup (high unemployment) as well as presumably in environmental conditions (no data available). Formerly a proud if small member of the Soviet industrial and agricultural economy, Kherson today struggles to find a place for itself in a post-Soviet economic picture within a nation that is itself struggling with adjustment to post-Soviet political and economic conditions.
In addition to its negative economic and demographic trends, Kherson also faces the challenging policy and planning conditions that have characterized Ukraine and most of its cities since independence. Chief among these are rampant corruption, which causes distortions in land use and planning decisions; top-down-planning, which causes delays and disconnects between the city’s general plans and actual conditions; abandonment of industry, which has led to substantial brownfields with low or no levels of activity; and poor maintenance of housing, which has led to depressed living conditions and accelerated obsolescence of housing stock. Together these challenges confront Kherson with difficult, seemingly insuperable planning and redevelopment problems at the local level.

Corruption is a principal problem in Ukraine. Endemic at the national level, corruption in urban development processes was codified in 2012 by passage of “centralization laws” that provided Ukraine’s central government with decision-making power over local land use and planning decisions. This centralization, now in the process of revocation under Ukraine’s post Maidan-revolution (late 2014) government, was merely a ratification of prior large-scale corruption. In Kherson, corruption in developing and permitting led to the construction of an out of character central-city mall in the city’s principal historic square, and to the permitting of a large peripheral shopping mall on part of a former textile plant that both destroyed the former industrial buildings and drained much of the central city of retail activity. Corruption in Kherson, in other words, directly contravened the well-being of downtown and the integrity of the urban fabric.

Like all of Ukraine, Kherson’s planning is subject to top-down regulations that are more or less directly inherited from Soviet times. Development in the city is governed by a general plan, which in turn is produced by a central planning institute (Dipromisto) based in Kiev. Kherson’s general plan, in effect since 2002, was generated by outside planning experts who spent little time in the city and little time gathering local input on planning decisions. Since 2002, updating of this general plan has been inhibited by political and legal problems, as well as lack of funding. In a situation where the need for economic development and new ideas about the physical form of abandoned sites is badly needed, Kherson planners are structurally and functionally inhibited from generating new solutions with legal power. Despite these constraints, planners continue to be entrepreneurial in attracting new residential development to the city.

A visitor to Kherson will be surprised at the large number of extensive, and seemingly empty, industrial sites in the city. Much of the central city is comprised of large-lot industrial facilities, closed and seemingly mothballed since the early 1990s. Those sites near the railroad were textile plants which processed cotton grown in Central Asia, now Uzbekistan; sites near the Dnipro river were and in some cases still are shipbuilding facilities, generating ships both internally and for export. While shipbuilding is an industry with some potential for economic growth, the textile industry is highly unlikely to recover and these industrial parcels will need repurposing. However, such repurposing is inhibited both by the negative economy (little demand for space) and by the top-down planning noted above which prevents redesignation of these areas for other activities. In addition, preservation or rehabilitation of the many notable industrial structures on these sites is likely to be difficult.

Many if not most Kherson workers were employed in the city’s numerous industries, and housed in post-WWII housing developments nearby these industries. Today this housing, in common with Soviet-era housing across the former Soviet Union, is aging and poorly maintained. At the same time, Kherson’s Soviet housing is fully owner-occupied (housing was “crash privatized” in 1992 in an early reform). Ukraine is an “immobile ownership society” due to low housing values, low incomes, and low rental housing
stocks; thus, Kherson’s residents, most of whom are poor, have little opportunity to move to more expensive and more successful cities (i.e. Kiev), and therefore stay in their units. This condition is bizarre to Western urbanists, but it is typical of Ukraine and of many post-Soviet states. Ironically, maintenance of this homeownership housing is still the responsibility of the city’s housing authority, which is poorly-funded and unable to maintain housing at the standard to which it was constructed. The construction quality of much of the housing (prefabricated concrete panels) is leading to obsolescence and also to very high energy costs which are unsustainable in Ukraine’s current geopolitical situation.

How to resolve Kherson’s current problems? Efforts are underway in Ukraine at the national, regional, and city level which may in time provide some remedy. At the national level, laws which institutionalized corruption are in the process of revocation and corruption will presumably be reduced in future. Planning laws which require centralization may also be reformed to permit more locally-driven efforts, but this reform is not yet underway. However, many other decentralization efforts to permit local administration of taxing, licensing, etc. are underway. Regionally, economic development incentives might be further retooled to encourage investors to locate in “lagging regions” such as Kherson. At the city level, democratization has brought a new government that is presumably more transparent and accountable. Yet the structural problems that caused the abandonment and dilapidation of Kherson’s built environment continue, as does the slow deterioration of this built environment. With a rich architectural and urban heritage (again, like most Ukrainian cities), the risks of further demolition in Kherson are substantial. A variety of policy, planning and design solutions for this city are yet to be formulated.

Urban conditions in the Russian Arctic are likely to have many similarities to those in Kherson and to be even more challenging. Declines in industrial capacity and/or resource extraction will have left many cities with reduced economic reasons for being. Corrupt land use and planning practices, as well as continued top down planning, are likely to have caused abusive development patterns as well as disconnects between general planning and the actual on the ground reality and needs of these cities. There are likely to be many large industrial sites that are partially or wholly abandoned, with attendant environmental, economic, and physical problems. Nearby housing is likely to be poorly maintained and inhabited by “immobile homeowners” or, even worse, to be partially vacant, leading to dilapidation. The harsh climate of the Russian arctic is also likely to affect housing negatively and make the need for energy conservation greater. Rule of law and political transparency in Russia is, if anything, worse than in Ukraine, leading to even greater challenges in instituting reforms.

The post-Soviet city is on the front line of challenges relating to planning reform, urban regeneration, and innovation in thinking about future development and urban design. Kherson’s situation, with some promise for the future but large obstacles, is likely to be indicative of the substantial planning challenges, enmeshed with economic, political, social, and design factors, facing Russian cities in the Arctic.

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