

Refugees and the Revitalization of ‘Shrinking Cities’: Challenges and Opportunities

by Norma Schemschat (PhD candidate, ENS Paris)

Introduction

In the past years, mayors and planners in Europe and the U.S. have discussed the revitalization of so-called ‘shrinking cities’ by welcoming refugees. One of the most well-known examples is Cleveland’s *Dream Neighborhood* (Day 2017). The idea has gained new momentum among city officials in Europe following 2015’s “long summer of migration” (Hess et. al. 2016), during which many refugees sought asylum in Europe and beyond. ‘Shrinking cities’ struggle with the effects of depopulation as major driver of urban shrinkage. Refugees, so it is hoped, can help reverse population losses and, by that, shrinkage in general. However, is it really that simple? While the argument of abundant housing is strong in times more and more people on the move, long term considerations must go beyond mere accommodation (Meier 2018). The thesis investigates belonging as important social, political and personal factor which needs to be drawn into consideration when discussing refugees’ role in revitalization processes.



Research-Guiding Questions

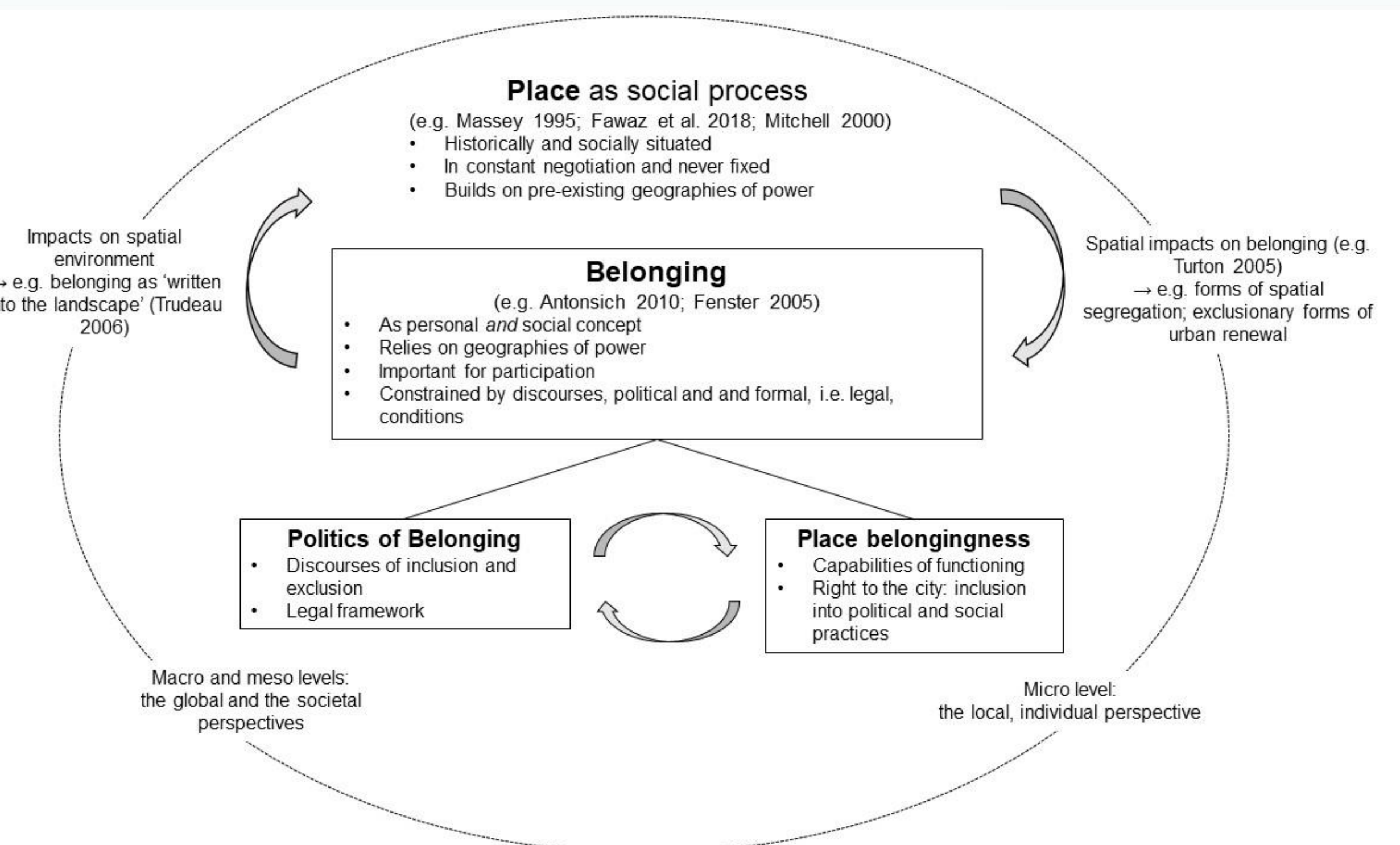
- In which ways are refugees being included in planning processes and how are they perceived by local planners and policy makers?
- What are the *politics and formal structures of belonging* (i.e. the legal and political contexts and discourses of inclusion and exclusion) – both nationally and locally?
- What do we learn about the daily lives of refugees in these ‘shrinking cities’ and how does shrinkage influence their *place belongingness* (i.e. their economic and social integration, labor market access, availability of and access to social services and networks, mobility, and their individual perception of being in a place)?
- How do refugees perceive their own role in place-making processes in the cities under investigation?

Theoretical Framework

What drives people to participate in and care about revitalization processes? Whether refugees participate in place-making processes – or feel like they can do so –, and whether policy makers and planners consider them part of the solution, depends on whether they *belong*: Are refugees included in revitalization processes and by that, granted their right to shaping the city? Or are they merely accommodated in the cities’ many vacant houses?

Belonging will be understood as both social and personal concept that allows for a multi-level analysis of refugees’ daily lives in ‘shrinking cities’. The analysis builds on the understanding that the spatial environment influences individuals’ sense of belonging (Massey 1995; Turton 2005; Trudeau 2006).

So far, a closer look at refugees’ negotiations of place and belonging in ‘shrinking cities’ is missing, and with that a better understanding of the structures of their inclusion in and exclusion from place-making and revitalization processes. Taking this multi-level stance, the thesis aims at better understanding the challenges to and opportunities of refugee-led revitalization processes, and to explore the conditions of their success.



The Case Studies: Towards a Renaissance of the Medium-Sized City?

The cases to be studied are Vierzon (France), Pirmasens (Germany) and Akron, OH (United States), and were selected based on the similarities of their trajectories of shrinkage, and the differences in their national and local contexts of immigration and refugee integration. In terms of urban decline, all cities experienced significant population losses after having reached their peaks in the 1960s and 1970s. In all cases, the main driver for decline was deindustrialization with highly specialized former industries disappearing bit by bit. All three cases share a set of characteristics typical for ‘shrinking cities’: an overall negative population development, high unemployment rates, low household incomes, higher poverty rates and lower levels of education. Differing in their approaches to diversifying their economies and improving their images, they present cases whose analysis can help illustrate how shrinkage creates complex conditions for welcoming refugees, as well as how shrinkage impacts the social tissue of and cohesion within places.

1 The “Shoe City”



Pirmasens (D),
Inhabitants in
1970: 57.773
2019: 40.200
(see Statista 2020)

2 The “Porcelaine City”



Vierzon (F),
Inhabitants in
1968: 35.775
2016: 26.365
(see INSEE
2020)

3 The “Rubber Capital of the World”



Akron, OH (U.S.),
Inhabitants in
1960: 290.351
2019: 197.507 (est.)
(see U.S. Census
Bureau)

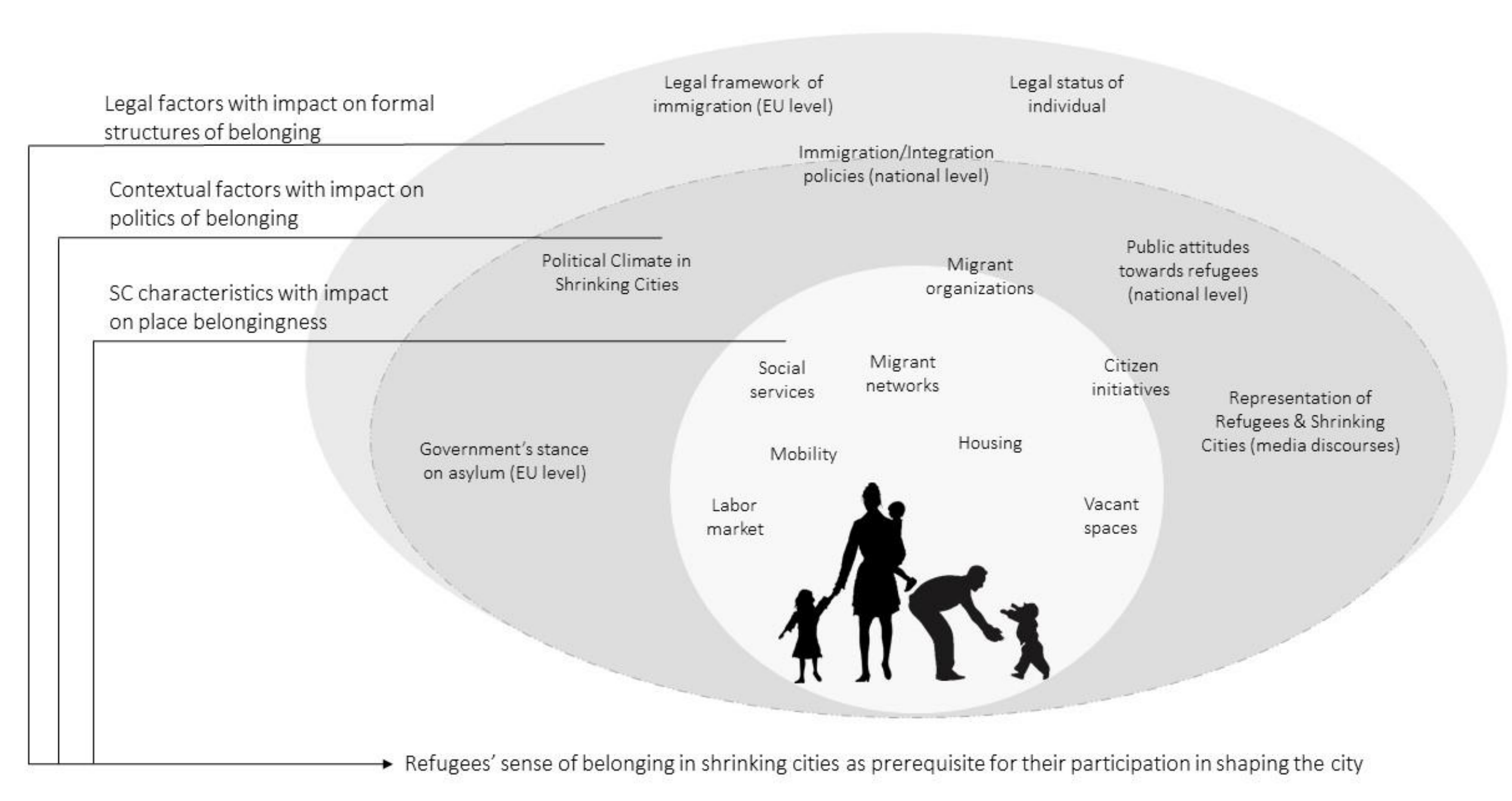
Conceptualization of Refugees’ Belonging in ‘Shrinking Cities’ and Methods proposed

The spatial, social and economic characteristics of ‘shrinking cities’ will be analyzed as aspects of refugees’ “place belongingness”, while local and national refugee discourses and policies will be studied to learn more about given “politics of belonging” (Antonsich 2010). Finally, the legal contexts will be analyzed as “formal structures of belonging” (Fenster 2005).

Following Mekdijan (2018), cities will be understood as ambivalent places for migrants – “both inclusive and exclusive”. Cities affected by structural change, so is being assumed, are particularly ambivalent for newcomers such as refugees. While some characteristics of ‘shrinking cities’ are expected to shape refugees’ sense of belonging positively, others are expected to present challenging forces. The “politics” and “formal structures” of belonging, in turn, are assumed to have an either positive or negative influence.

The research interest demands a Mixed-Methods approach which combines the analysis of planning documents and socio-economic data with discourse analyses of the media, policy documents, and semi-structured interviews of planners and refugees.

Framework for the analysis of the impact shrinkage has on different levels of belonging



Graphic 2: Conceptualizing the Links between “Shrinkage” and Belonging