

The resilient small industrial  
town in Europe:

the social and cultural perspective

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# Why is it important?

- 27 % of EU population lives in towns, industry is 'over-represented' in them (*Servillo et al., 2017*)
- The small industrial town is omnipresent in Europe, part of its common history
- Subjectivities of culture-led/creative-led development in traditional industrial towns have led to some conflicts in the past (*Cruickshank et al. 2013, Gainza 2016, Gribat 2013*)
- Sociocultural aspects (specificities, strengths ...) in industrial towns are less known



# Research Questions

*„The common rhetoric parades their [industrial cities] poverty and low wage economies as proof of their poor prospects, failing to observe signs of regrowth“*

## PHOENIX CITIES

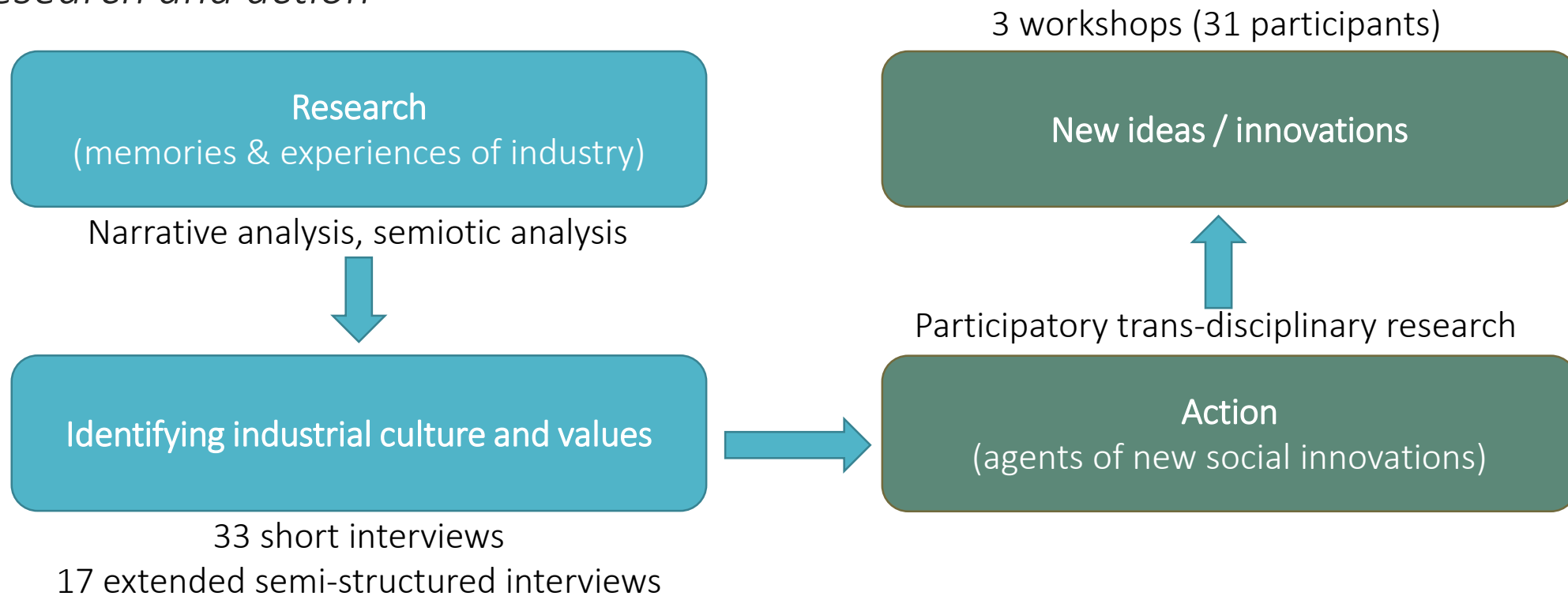
The fall and rise of great industrial cities



- Adding new evidence on the link between industry and industrial traditions and social innovations
- Do specific societal and cultural norms in traditional industrial towns influence social innovations?

# Method

*Jessop et al. (2013): Social innovation research should be an interactive process of research and action*



*NEW KNOWLEDGE*

# Case study towns

Common denominators in different national contexts:

- Third-tier towns (pop. min. 8000, max. 86.000)
- Strong industrial tradition
- Peripheral in national context

Ideal types of SMIT's in a national context:

- ✓ Re-industrial (Corby, UK)
- ✓ Transformed socialist-industrial (Velenje, SI)
- ✓ Post-industrial/shrinking (Fieni, RO)
- ✓ Neo-/post- industrial (Kajaani, FI)
- ✓ Post-industrial/service-based (Heerlen, NL)





# 1. Dominant / local narratives of industry

## 1st narrative: **THE GLORIOUS INDUSTRIAL PAST**

- Industry is connected with fond memories (*prosperous, successful, cosmopolitan ...*)
- Generational gap (*first-hand experiences vs. transmitted experiences of the young*)
- The pride of the industrial past is particularly told through specific town semiotics



# 1. Dominant / local narratives of industry

## 2nd narrative: **POSITIVE ASPECTS OF INDUSTRIAL DECAY**

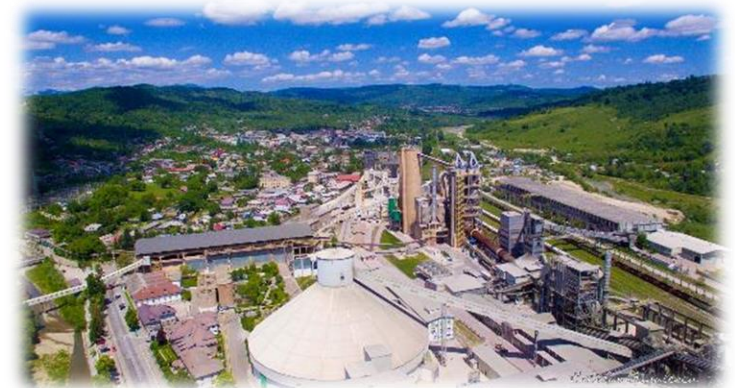
- Deindustrialisation brought positive ,human‘ aspects: *comradery, volunteer work, Union movement, feeling of empowerment and unity in the local community*
- Dominant narrative: *unemployment, crime, drugs ...* Local narrative: *helping the neighbours, gender equality, positive aspects of ,smallness‘ or small-town culture, resilience*
- Better environment: *new and cleaner jobs, technological innovations ...*



# 1. Dominant / local narratives of industry

## 3rd narrative: **FEAR OF CHANGE & GROWTH**

- Past practices & old conventions are preferred
- Corby, Velenje: *rise of populist movements*
- Heerlen: *fear of gentrification with new culture-led investments*
- Fear of globalisation, fear of new foreign investors: *social responsibility of big industrial companies is questioned*
- Out-migration of young (educated) people (*fear of social isolation, close-mindedness ...*)

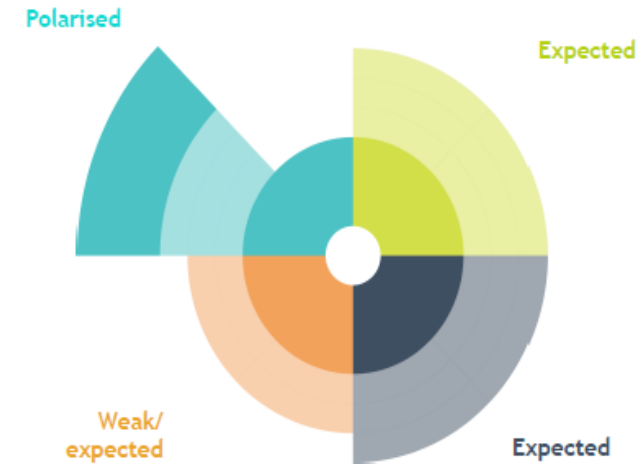
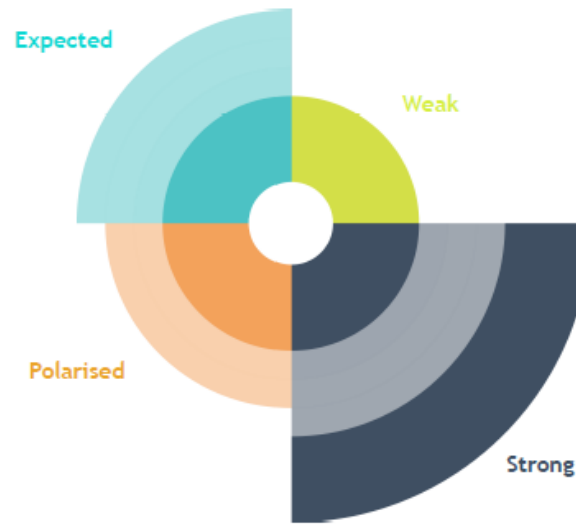
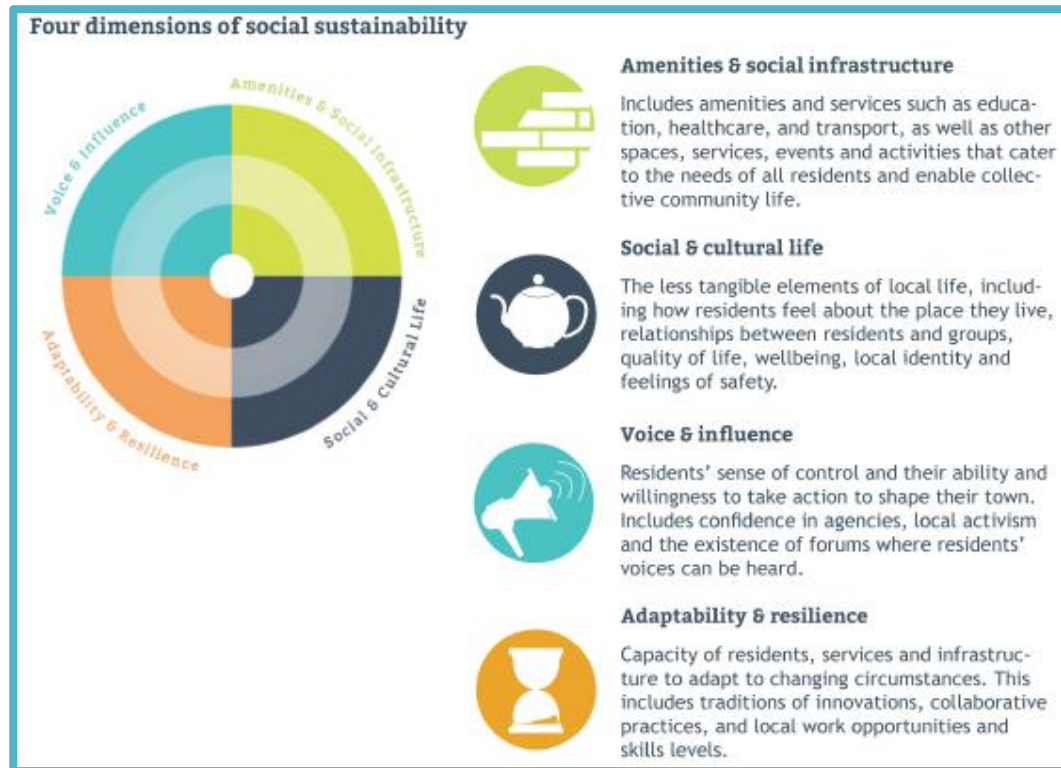




# 2. Social innovations in industrial towns

1st: SOCIAL SUSTAINABILITY FRAMEWORK

2nd: HISTORIES OF SOC. INNOVATIONS



## 2. Social innovations in industrial towns

### TRANSLATING PRACTICES INTO SOCIAL INNOVATIONS

- Common themes:
  - the young
  - new employment opportunities
  - community integration
  - social isolation
- Drawing on existing or restored (industrial) traditions or
- Very practical solutions for local needs

EXAMPLE OF VELENJE (SI):

Bipolar and  
vulnerable  
economy

Fish farm



Unclear future after  
the coal mine  
closure

Strengthening &  
professionalizati  
on of NGO  
sector



Out-migration of  
the educated young  
population

Mentoring  
scheme



# Key messages

1. The great variety of small industrial towns
2. Uniqueness: Strength or social capital of industrial towns (*specific industrial values & heritage and smallness ...*)
3. Industrial city as „the good city“ (*forgotten aspects of developmental research: community, welfare state, solidarity, emancipation ...*) all the more important in times of COVID-19
4. Narratives can expose (true?/alternative?) problems of industrial towns:
  - ✓ *Political non-representation (rise of populist political movements)*
  - ✓ *Fear of globalisation*
  - ✓ *Youth out-migration*

- Research Centre of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts (SI) – Lead partner
- University of Eastern Finland (FI)
  - University of Bucharest (RO)
  - University of Amsterdam (NL)
    - Social Life Limited (UK)
    - The Young Foundation (UK)



# Want to know more or be involved?

- Full reports: <https://jpi-urbaneurope.eu/project/bright-future/>
  - 1. Research Centre of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts (SI) – Lead partner
  - 2. University of Eastern Finland (FI)
  - 3. University of Bucharest (RO)
  - 4. University of Amsterdam (NL)
  - 5. Social Life Limited (UK)
  - 6. The Young Foundation (UK)
- Special Issue "Alternative Futures of Small Industrial Towns,, in Urban Science Journal

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**arrs**

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