

Research Article

# Urban Change and Social Cohesion in Post-Socialist Contexts: An Empirical and Theoretical Assessment

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## Abstract

This paper examines an underexplored dimension of the social impacts of gentrification, namely the neighbourhood social cohesion, in Tirana, the post-socialist capital of Albania, which experienced a rapid development during the last decade. Based on a survey with 201 residents of neighbourhoods with distinct levels of urban transformation, it explores the correlation between gentrification pressures, such as increasing housing prices, commercialization, tourism pressure and intensification of redevelopment and social cohesion. The latter is measured with the help of a Social Cohesion Index (SCI) relying on four dimensions: trust, belonging, interaction and attachment to place. The regression and exploratory mediation analyses are applied to assess statistical associations and indirect pathways while also exploring the intermediary effect of cultural displacement. We found that housing affordability is the strongest predictor of declines in social cohesion, and that cultural displacement appears to play a mediating role in the relationship of urban redevelopment intensity to social cohesion. Socio-economic groups show different perceptions of urban change. Long-term and lower-income residents are more likely to perceive urban change negatively and higher-income residents tend to regard urban renewal more favourably. This paper contributes to the growing literature on post-socialist cities by developing a context-sensitive analytical framework for understanding gentrification in rapidly transforming urban contexts. More generally, it highlights how perception-based mechanisms connect macro-level urban transformation with meso-level neighbourhood dynamics and micro-level social outcomes. It therefore helps to reconceptualize gentrification as a condensed and perception-mediated process.

**Keywords:** Gentrification; Social Cohesion; Post-socialist Cities; Urban Transformation

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## INTRODUCTION

Gentrification has played a prominent role in urban studies and was originally conceived of as a class-based process that involved the changing of inner-city neighbourhoods [1-5]. It has since been interpreted as a hybrid process of reinvestment, re-urbanization and revalorization of both material and symbolic values of urban space and

is typically associated with rising prices in the housing market, changing consumption behaviours, and the displacement or exclusion of incumbent residents [1,2, 6-8]. Despite differences in the particular forms gentrification may take, it is the result of structural and institutional processes, flows of investments, and city-forms of history [2, 9-12].

Gentrification in post-socialist cities is of course influenced by the unique context of rapidly accelerating liberalization of markets, wide-scale privatization, under-developed or “poor” institutional regulation, and intensification of socio-spatial restructuring. These all factors tend to create more compressed, more asymmetrical and more hybrid forms of urban change than observed in Western European or North American cities [3, 9, 11]. The case of Tirana (Albania), for example, is particularly illustrative of the effects of ongoing urban restructuring processes, as of the early 1990s, under the combined impact of:

- (a) internal migration.
- (b) Internally generated or informal development.
- (c) innovations and growth in tourism; and
- (d) state-led redevelopment of core neighbourhoods.

All of the processes above have contributed to urban and suburban changes with increased land values, strengthened commercialization and clear change of residents’ social composition [5, 12-14].

Although much has been written about the structural changes of post-socialist gentrification, including housing market liberalization, urban redevelopment and rising socio-spatial inequalities, the processes by which these are manifested in the social realities of people’s everyday lives remain under-investigated. Specifically, very little empirically based research exists on the perception-based processes by which linkages are constructed between macro-scale urban change and micro-scale social cohesion. This gap becomes particularly important in the context of post-socialist cities like Tirana, where economic, institutional and cultural change take place at the same time (rather than in succession). Under these conditions, conventional and linear models of gentrification may not be only inadequate to explain how individuals experience and explain structures pressures.

This research explores whether cultural displacement acts as a mediator between the perceived gentrification pressures and neighbourhood social cohesion in Tirana, based on a perception approach connecting macro level urban change with the micro level daily experience. This paper argues that gentrification in post-socialist countries is a condensed and hybridized process with different impacts on different income groups and durations of residence, etc.

Empirically, the study draws on survey data from 201 residents across neighbourhoods in Tirana experiencing different levels of urban transformation. It examines the associations between perceived gentrification pressures, cultural displacement, and neighbourhood social cohesion.

This paper makes three contributions. It introduces the concept of compressed gentrification to account for the simultaneous aspects of post-socialist urban change. It

offers a perceptive perspective to relate cultural displacement to neighbourhood social cohesion. It demonstrates that the social impacts of gentrification are separated by income and by time. This research work advances gentrification theory by introducing the concept of “compressed gentrification” as a distinct analytical framework.

### *Research Gap and Contribution*

Notwithstanding the significant body of Western and post-socialist gentrification literature, there are some critical gaps still to address. The SOTA studies have mainly concentrated on structural drivers of urban transformation, like housing market deregulation, reinvestment, state-led redevelopment, or socio-spatial re-configuration. These theoretical routes were highly fruitful to explain gentrification processes in both areas. But they continue to be limited in three key respects.

Firstly, in most of the literature, gentrification is seen as a process that has mainly material and spatial consequences, a question to which less attention is paid to in what ways these changes are lived, interpreted and experienced in people’s everyday lives.

Secondly, even when post-socialist urban studies did recognize the simultaneous existence of multiple transformation processes (such as privatization, informal development, rise of tourism), there has been limited attention to how these processes are translated into social outcomes through perception-based mechanisms.

Thirdly, there is still little theorising connecting the macro structural conditions of urban restructuring to the micro level of social bonds, in many cases of simultaneous and rapid urban transformation (where economic, institutional and culture changes take place at the same time).

This study fills those gaps and shows how a perception-based analytical framework can consider cultural displacement as a mediating process of neighbourhood social cohesion between the structural forces of urban change. Using Tirana as a proximate example of fast and ‘compressed’ change, it helps to push the literature forward from a solely structural account and emphasizes the potential of subjective and symbolic factors.

Therefore, existing frameworks remain insufficient to explain how simultaneous structural transformations in post-socialist cities are translated into differentiated social outcomes at the neighbourhood level.

### *Research Questions and Hypotheses*

In order to plug the gaps identified above and to empirically investigate the impact of gentrification on social cohesion, within a policy context, this research is framed *around the following questions*:

RQ1: What are the effects of perceived gentrification pressures on neighbourhood social cohesion?

RQ2: Does cultural displacement mediate the relationship between perceived gentrification pressures and neighbourhood social cohesion?

RQ3. How is that relationship influenced by socio-demographic variables? (e.g., income, length of residence)

H1: Neighbourhoods experiencing higher perceived gentrification pressures will have lower neighbourhood social cohesion.

H2: Cultural displacement is negatively associated with neighbourhood social cohesion.

H3: Cultural displacement mediates the relationship between gentrification pressures and neighbourhood social cohesion.

H4: The association between the strength of gentrification pressures and social cohesion is more robust for residents who have long been living in the neighbourhood.

H5: Residents with a higher income report higher perceived social cohesion score than residents with a lower income.

The subsequent section develops the theoretical framework of this study by bringing together economic, cultural, and institutional accounts of gentrification in post-socialist cities. It also introduces the notion of compressed gentrification, and places cultural displacement within a perception-based model connecting structural urban change to neighbourhood social dynamics.

Namely, the research indicates that cultural displacement operates as a mediating process whereby structural processes of transformation are mediated through social variations in neighbourhood cohesion. This marks a move away from structuralist accounts of gentrification to a synthesis of structural and perceptual approaches in which identity and everyday social experience are brought to centre stage.

Here, the proposed framework places the post-socialist gentrification process within a context-sensitive model by which the combined forces of economic contraction, symbolic rendering, and perception-driven reactions works together resulting in varied social implications throughout cities.

## **THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND POST-SOCIALIST CONTEXT**

Gentrification has evolved substantially since its early use in 1960s urban studies to describe socio-spatial change in working-class areas of London. It is now understood as a multidimensional process involving economic, cultural, institutional, and political transformations of urban space.

### *Classical Economic Foundations*

Neil Smith's rent-gap theory is one of the most influential economic explanations of gentrification and it maintains that gentrification happens when the difference between the existing rental value of land and the potential rental value after redevelopment is capitalized the so-called 'rent gap' [1]. This 'rent gap' provides an economic motive for reinvestment by investors and developers where land is undervalued, increasing property prices and thereby displacing existing residents [6, 14, 15]. However, in the case of Tirana the rent-gap effect appears particularly pronounced. The hasty privatization of housing stock, rule changes in the real estate market and the liberalization of the monetary and financial system have made places that historically have been depreciated accessible to

gentrification. This provides evidence of the structural reasons behind gentrification, being rooted in the capitalist city.

Cultural approaches differ from economic explanations in their emphasis on identity, lifestyle, and symbolic meaning on identity, lifestyle and symbolism.

### *Cultural and Social Explanations*

Besides 'strictly' economic reading, gentrification, according to the cultural framework, is more about lifestyle, identity and symbols of value. In David Ley's consumption theory, middle classes are attracted to urban environment because of walking distance, cultural facilities, old buildings and 'urban authenticity' [2]. Initial phases of gentrification tend to attract artists, students and other cultural producers looking for locations that are inexpensive and culturally interesting. Final phases tend to target higher-income groups who possess more economic and cultural capital [8].

These groups help to re-define the identity of neighbourhoods from undesirable to desirable and culturally branded. These processes are becoming more and more visible also in the city of Tirana. The expansion of the service economy, growing creative industries and the development of a young educated middle professional class have led to a process of depopulation of the periphery and re-urbanization of the central areas. The needs and consumption preferences linked to lifestyle are more and more coupled with economic processes, thus accentuating transformation of the city neighbourhoods into places of contemporary demands, prestige and world-wide connections [5, 8].

### *State-Led and Policy-Driven Gentrification*

Subsequently, authors have focused on the participation of the state which facilitates and influences the process of gentrification. State-led gentrification occurs when the state is responsible for financing and encouraging gentrification with changes to planning policies, rezoning of areas, investments in infrastructure or other forms of direct intervention or partnership with private capital [6, 12]. These initiatives are usually integrated with other actions designed to improve urban competitiveness, attract investment and integrate cities into the global economy. An unintended consequence, however, is the rise in land values and the displacement of existing residents. State direction in urban change in Tirana is apparent, for example, through the examples of massive renewal projects, such as the regeneration and reclamation of the Lana River and Skanderbeg Square and the widespread construction of high-rise mixed-use developments. These are depicted as attempts at modernization, but also induce increased land and property prices, commercialization, socio-spatial change, and the ensuing role of the state as the 'main agent of gentrification' [12, 13].

### *Neoliberal Urbanism and Financialization*

The emergence of neoliberal urbanism has shifted the dynamics of gentrification. As proceeding from the neoliberal principle, the position of the city in the hegemonic global economy becomes of the central focus, treating as an analytical category [4], that is as a competitive global player, attracting investment and entrepreneurial governmentality [5].

Housing becomes even more commodified as it is turned into another financial instrument as opposed to a social good; financialization hammers home this transition of housing markets towards the international flow of capital: the financialization of the real estate market.[8, 12] What is apparent in Tirana is the signs of financialization that are visible in the fast-expanding mass of new 'luxury' housing developments, increased inward investment (from diasporas as well as foreign investors), and the growth of a short-term rental market. This has led to increased housing prices, commodification, and socio-economic inequalities, higher pressure of gentrification on the city centre.

### *Tourism-Driven Gentrification*

In this process urban tourism has become an important source of territorial change for many cities creating an altogether new phenomenon referred to as Tourism Gentrification. short-term rental markets and the growth of global tourism industry have changed housing markets and urban economies [8].

The potential negative factors – Short-term stays can displace long-term housing, increase rental prices, and replace everyday services with tourism-oriented activities, thereby contributing to cultural displacement and increase rental prices, while services are substituted by tourism-related activities, thus guiding towards cultural dislocation. Some popular tourist areas in Tirana, like the "Blloku", "Pazari i Ri", or the Central Boulevard, are already increasingly transformed through tourism; the growth of a substantial number of cafés, restaurants, and small hotels has enhanced their appeal while putting more pressure on housing and shifting their social composition [5, 12].

### *Green and Infrastructural Gentrification*

Green gentrification is the displacement impact that results when environmental interventions parks, pedestrian-only precincts, cycling infrastructure make an area more desirable and expensive to live in [8]. While such actions contribute to the enhancement of urban life quality, they indirectly result in the reinforcement of rising property values and socio-spatial inequality. In Tirana urban sustainability has been recently promoted (green infrastructure, pedestrianization) through the revalorization of the inner city. Conversely such urban regeneration can trigger 'gentrification' and may lead to the exclusion of the most socially or economically weak groups from those upgraded spaces [5, 12].

### *Theoretical Perspectives on Social Cohesion*

Social cohesion has many different meanings and can be broadly defined as "measures of interpersonal trust, norms of reciprocity and networks of activity, which bind a community together" [7]. Social cohesion also serves as a marker for social capital, according to social capital theory with the distinction of bonding and bridging social capital as proposed by Putnam [7]. Bonding social capital is the links within similar groups, based on homogeneity, which create a sense of solidarity, trust and mutual support, whereas bridging social capital links different groups together and promotes integration in wider society.

Both these two categories of social capital are essential to community cohesion and sustainability. Bridging social cohesion is particularly vulnerable in gentrifying neighbourhoods. Long-term residents could lose their social pack and new shareholders would barely go ahead to build bridges connecting the existing communities. Therefore, both the bonding and bridging social capital will be decreased so as to produce a result of social relations disintegrating. In Tirana where community life had been based on dense social ties and informal social networks, these changes will have significant impact on community cohesion and social resilience [7, 11].

### *Integrating Gentrification and Social Cohesion Theories*

The combination of gentrification theories with models of social cohesion allows us to better explain the social effects of change. Gentrification can be linked to variations in social cohesion through several interrelated processes: more expensive housing market and housing pressure for displacement can erode existing social networks; cultural in-migration can shift the identity and symbolic meaning of a neighbourhood; rising economic inequality can heighten social distance among groups; change in demography can change patterns of interaction, trust and membership.

In post-socialist settings, these processes tend to be particularly strong under conditions of structural disruption brought about by speeding up of market liberalisation, privatization, informal urbanisation and weak regulatory regime. Under these conditions, the processes are not experienced sequentially in post-socialist cities such as Tirana, but rather concurrently creating a 'compressed', hybrid form of gentrification, where economic, cultural and institutional transitions overlap. The effect of this concurrent transition is to magnify both the direct spatial restructuring and the indirect social change.

The present study further operationalizes the phenomenon of gentrification as the multidimensional process that is directly and indirectly linked to social cohesion. Drawing from this conceptual framework, gentrification type is expected to directly correlate to social cohesion, as this financial, commercial, and touristic development, as well as the costs of housing, alters the socio-economic-morphological makeup of cities. Secondly, these are hypothesized to be indirectly related to social cohesion via cultural displacement, which is defined as the perceived loss of neighbourhood culture identity, inability to connect to the place and transformed social behaviours. Cultural displacement is thus an intervening variable that explains the connection between structural change and everyday life experience. Furthermore, the influence of gentrification on social cohesion may be found to differ between groups based on socio-demographic factors. The inclusion of income and duration of residence as conditioning variables exemplifies the diversified nature of urban change experienced and understood by residents in an inner-city area.

Based on the above theoretical synthesis, the present study hypothesizes that gentrification could be viewed as a multi-pathways process that connects structural urban change to social effects, through both direct and mediating pathways.

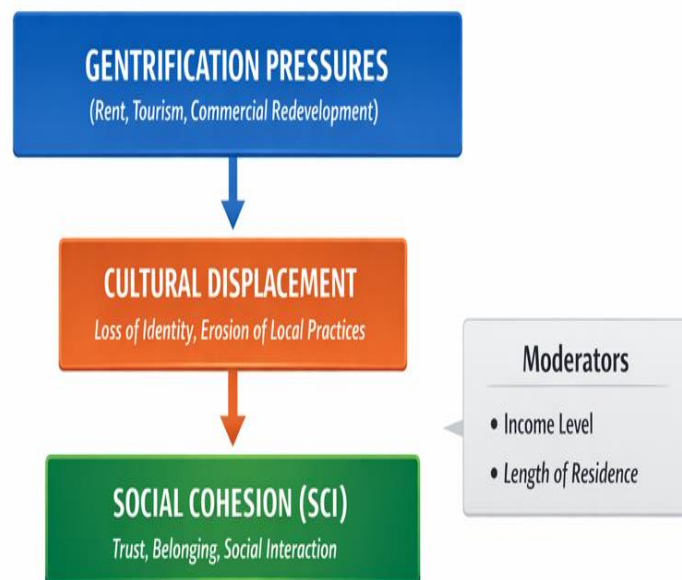
First, a direct economic pathway is proposed, in which growing levels of housing costs, commercialization, tourism pressure, and redevelopment intensity are directly associated

with decreasing levels of neighbourhood social cohesion. These processes have direct effects on residents' material condition and social stability.

Secondly, an indirect socio-cultural pathway is hypothesized, whereby structural urban change is translated into social experiences of everyday life mediated through cultural displacement. Here, cultural displacement serves as a "mediator" of this relationship indicating the perceived erosion of identity, place attachment and daily social routines.

Finally, the effects of these relationships will differ by socio-demographic variables, with income and decades of residence as the potential moderating factors in experiencing and believing in gentrification forces.

This two-route model provides a relatively more integrated way of comprehending gentrification in post-socialist context, where economic and symbolic transitions function in parallel rather than one after another. In our paper, we define the theoretically grounded and multi-dimensional concept of "compressed gentrification", in which gains in economic, cultural and institutional realms happen in parallel and are transformed into social consequences via perception tied mediaries like cultural displacement.



**Figure 1.** Conceptual model of gentrification, cultural displacement, and social cohesion

### *Conceptual Model*

The analytical pathway proposed in this study can be summarized as follows:

***Gentrification pressures -> Cultural displacement -> Neighborhood social cohesion***

In such model of gentrification in post-socialist cities, perceived gentrification pressures such as rent increase, commercialization, tourism pressure and redevelopment intensity are theorized to have both direct and mediating impacts on social cohesion (indirectly through cultural displacement). Local-specific indicators such as income level and length of residence are introduced as moderating factors. Hence, gentrification in this model is

imagined to be condensed, multi-driven process of connecting structural change of city to social outcomes.

### *Positioning “Compressed Gentrification” within Existing Frameworks*

The idea of compressed gentrification invoked in this research, to some extent, extends and at the same time departs from the existing theories by highlighting the coexistence and interaction of various forces of urban change in the post-socialist setting.

First, in contrast to sequential Western examples of gentrification with its stages of disinvestment, reinvestment and gradual socio-spatial change, the authority of Tirana presents a different temporality. There is no single phase of urban change, each factor the growth of tourism, the state projects of redevelopment, the market liberalisation and the cultural ‘return’ coincide and overlap more quickly.

Secondly, in a comparative view with the ‘mono-causal’ explanations of gentrification, especially extending from Neil Smith’s rent-gap theory, the concept of compressed gentrification draw attention to the constraints of a mono-causal reasoning. While rent differentials and capital reinvestment remain necessary conditions, they are not sufficient to explain the social outcomes observed in rapidly transforming post-socialist contexts. Here economic processes are rather embedded into institutional transformations and perception-driven reactions, creating material and immaterial gentrification. Thirdly, by bringing in the tourism-led gentrification theories, focusing on the short term rental market and consumption politics of the city, the compressed view notices that instead of being a standalone phenomenon, tourism works along with other concurrent forces, with power relationships interplaying among the state intervention, food profit-oriented capital accumulation, and socio-cultural transformation to construct a combination of effects.

Lastly, benefiting from the contributions of post-socialist urban scholars (e.g., Zoltan Kovacs; Jan Kube), this paper expands the concept of hybrid urban transformation to refer to a process of ‘temporal and structural compression’. Although hybridity has been identified as a defining feature of post-socialist cities, this paper suggests that the simultaneity of transformations needs to be accounted for. It is this compression that amplifies material and perception-based displacement pressures. In that regard compressed gentrification may be read not as variation that results from case specificity but as a sharpening of the concept allowing for the expression of the intersection between structural change and daily life that inevitably characterizes fast-changing places.

## **METHODOLOGY**

In the paper, the quantitative and hypothesis-based approach is employed to see if any gentrification related stresses correlate with differences in neighbourhood social cohesion in Tirana. The method follows the conceptual model of the study and is designed for the empirical testing of the hypotheses.

### *Research Design*

This study adopts a cross-sectional quantitative research design based on primary survey data collected from residents living in neighborhoods undergoing varying degrees of urban change.

The research design integrates descriptive, comparative, and inferential statistical techniques in order to:

- Examine patterns of perceived neighborhood change.
- Examine the relationship between pressures for gentrification, perceived community stability, and social cohesion.
- Test the relationships between key variables as defined in the conceptual framework.

This design allows both exploratory analysis and hypothesis testing, providing a structured basis for examining the relationship between gentrification pressures and social cohesion outcomes.

Before estimation of the model the assumptions of the regressions were checked using diagnostic tests (e.g. multicollinearity, which was well within the limits ( $VIF < 2.5$ )). Given the cross-sectional, perception data, we test for statistical rather than causal associations. The result from the mediation analysis, in that sense, is merely a pointer to the evidence of possible causal mechanism. While the empiric models do provide some explanation of the dynamic process of gentrification, cultural displacement, and social cohesion, the findings should therefore be interpreted cautiously. It would require additional studies that utilize panel or longitudinal data and more advanced mediation methods (e.g. bootstrapping) to prove causality.

### *Sampling Strategy and Data Collection*

Data were collected through a structured questionnaire administered to 201 residents from several neighbourhoods of Tirana (Blloku, Pazari i Ri, Ali Deme, Lapraka, Astir and the Kombinat) were interviewed. These neighbourhoods were selected to compare different stages of gentrification, ranging from the already highly commercialized, gentrifying parts of the central city to the stabilized, less redeveloped outer neighbourhoods.

A stratified sampling method was employed in order to have some coverage across key socio-demographic groups (age, income level, tenure – owners, tenants and shared dwellings, length of residence).

Data collection was conducted through a combination of face-to-face and online surveys to maximize participation and improve coverage.

The questionnaire included sections on:

- Socio-demographic attributes,
- Conditions of housing,
- Perceptions of neighborhood change,

- Perceived displacement pressure,

It has to be borne in mind that the sample is not entirely representative of the population of Tirana. There is a rather predominant number of respondents with higher education and higher income levels and this bias may influence perceptions of urban change and social cohesion. Any conclusions drawn must therefore be assessed carefully regarding this bias and the extent to which the other socio-economic groups were adequately represented.

### *Variable Operationalization*

To test the proposed hypotheses, variables were organized into four main analytical categories:

Independent variables (Gentrification pressures): perceived rent increases, commercial expansion, tourism pressure and redevelopment intensity.

Mediating variable (Cultural displacement): loss of neighborhood identity and culture of the neighborhood as perceived by the respondent; weakening of place attachment.

Dependent variable (Social cohesion): mutual trust among residents, social interaction is frequent, a high level of social cohesion is observed and support among residents.

Table 1 depict socio-demographic characteristics that are included as moderating variables (Socio-demographic characteristics): the age, income, education, and the length of stay.

**Table 1.** Socio-demographic characteristics

<b>Variable category</b>	<b>Indicators</b>
Gentrification pressures	Rent increase, commercial expansion, tourism pressure, redevelopment intensity
Cultural perceptions	Loss of identity, place attachment, cultural change
Social cohesion	Trust, interaction frequency, belonging, mutual assistance
Socio-demographic	Age, income, education, length of residence

The above classification allows to make well defined analytical distinction between independent variables, dependent variables, mediating variables and moderating variables, thereby overcoming the existing limitations of the research design.

The variables and analytical model are structured to test the hypotheses H1–H5 defined in the previous section.

### *Construction of the Social Cohesion Index (SCI)*

The four aspects of social cohesion were operationalized by a set of survey items using a five-point Likert scale (1= strongly disagree, 5= strongly agree). The items were standardized (z-scores) prior to index creation to facilitate meaningful comparison of the constructs [between the dimensions of social cohesion]. The Social Cohesion Index (SCI) was calculated as the average of the standardized components:

$$SCI = 1/4 (Z_{trust} + Z_{belonging} + Z_{interaction} + Z_{attachment})$$

Cronbach's alpha (0.78) demonstrated acceptable internal reliability, justifying the aggregation of the four dimensions into a general composite index. The indices based on perception, such as the SCI measure perceived social cohesion not objective social cohesion. Higher index values indicate higher levels of perceived neighbourhood social cohesion. For ease of interpretation, the index was rescaled to range from 0 (lowest cohesion) to 1 (highest cohesion).

### *Empirical Model Specification*

To formally test the proposed hypotheses, the study estimates the following regression model:

$$SCI_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 Rent_i + \beta_2 Commercial_i + \beta_3 Tourism_i + \beta_4 Redevelopment_i + \beta_5 Income_i + \beta_6 ResidenceLength_i + \varepsilon_i$$

where:

- $SCI_i$  represents the Social Cohesion Index.
- $Rent_i$  captures perceived rent increases.
- $Commercial_i$  represents commercial expansion.
- $Tourism_i$  reflects tourism pressure.
- $Redevelopment_i$  measures redevelopment intensity.
- $Income_i$  and  $ResidenceLength_i$  are control variables.
- $\varepsilon_i$  is the error term.

To examine the mediating role of cultural displacement, an additional set of equations is estimated:

$$CulturalDisplacement_i = \alpha_0 + \alpha_1 Redevelopment_i + \alpha_2 Rent_i + v_i$$

$$SCI_i = \gamma_0 + \gamma_1 Redevelopment_i + \gamma_2 CulturalDisplacement_i + \varepsilon_i$$

This specification allows the study to test whether cultural displacement acts as a mediating mechanism between gentrification pressures and social cohesion.

The choice of model specification reflects the conceptual model for the study. While gentrification pressures are expected to have direct and indirect influences on social cohesion through cultural displacement, socio-demographic control variables will be examined as moderating factors in order to reflect the different experiences of urban change within different population groups.

### *Statistical Analysis*

Regression assumptions were verified with appropriate diagnostic tetrandrous referencing of findings. Multicollinearity statistics were below the recommended levels ( $VIF < 2.5$ ). As the data set was cross-sectional and perception-based, the analysis only determines an association rather than a causal effect (i.e., no variables were manipulated to induce change). This implies that the application of mediation analysis should be interpreted as warning, however, as no statistical test of indirect effect was carried out (i.e., no Sobel's test or bootstrapped confidence intervals). To ensure this relationship could be

observed in a robust fashion in the future, more sophisticated mediation analysis should be utilized, i.e. bootstrapped mediation (e.g., 5000 resamples).

All statistical analyses were conducted using standard econometric procedures, ensuring robustness and internal consistency of the results. The results thus obtained have internal consistency and are considered robust.

### *Ethical Considerations*

The survey was carried out within the guidelines of ethical work for researchers with human participants. It was not mandatory to participate, but it was voluntary, and nobody was asked for a name or any other fact that might reveal their identity; thus, the responses are kept anonymous. The research fulfils the procedures outlined by the European University of Tirana.

### *Methodological Contribution*

Methodologically, this paper contributes to the literature by conceptualizing social cohesion as a multidimensional construct in a post-socialist urban context and by applying a composite Social Cohesion Index to survey-based data from Tirana. Although the mediation analysis remains exploratory, it helps identify possible indirect pathways linking urban change to social outcomes through cultural displacement. In this sense, the study provides a basis for future research using more robust causal designs and longitudinal data. The mediation analysis in the present study is exploratory (i.e., no formal statistical tests of indirect effects (e.g., bootstrapped confidence intervals) were performed) therefore the findings should be viewed as suggestive of causal relationships rather than evidence of mediation.

While the mediation analysis indicates the possibility of a mediated pathway via cultural displacement, no formal tests for mediation (e.g., bootstrapped confidence intervals) were conducted so the interpretation of causality remains limited. Table 2 depict age group distribution for n=201.

**Table 2.** Age group distribution (n = 201)

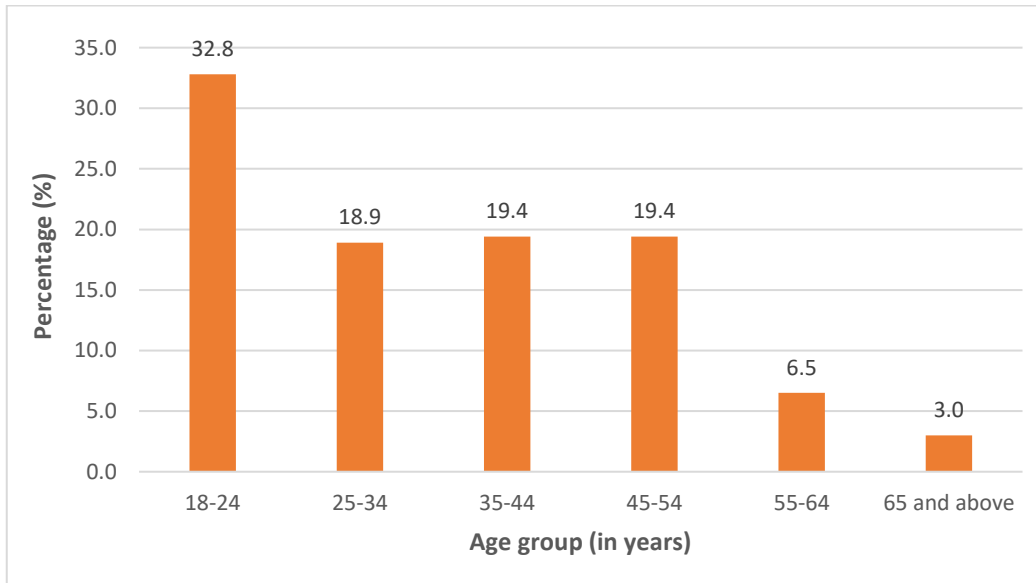
<b>Age Group</b>	<b>Frequency (n)</b>	<b>Percentage (%)</b>
18-24	66	32.8
25-34	38	18.9
35-44	39	19.4
45-54	39	19.4
55-64	13	6.5
65 and above	6	3.0
Total	201	100

Table 3 until 9 depicts respectively gender distribution, nationality percentage, educational attainment, household size, housing tenure / dwelling arrangement, Monthly

income level and the Length of residence in current home. Additionally, Figure 2 depict the age group in percentage.

**Table 3.** Gender distribution (%)

Gender	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Female	141	70.1
Male	60	29.9
Total	201	100.0



**Figure 2.** Age group (%)

**Table 4.** Percentage for Nationality

Nationality	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Albanian	191	95.0
Other / Foreign nationality	10	5.0
Total	201	100.0

**Table 5.** Educational attainment (n=201)

Educational level	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
No education	1	0.5
9-year basic education	2	1.0
Secondary education	13	6.5
Bachelor's degree or above	185	92.0
Total	201	100.0

Representation within the age group, income strata and tenure status (owners, renters, informal dwellers) were assured by stratified sampling technique. face-to-face as well as web surveys were utilized to improve participation rate. The questions covered personal

and household characteristics, house attributes, beliefs about neighborhood change, perceived stress from displacement, and multiple measures of social cohesion.

**Table 6.** Household size (n=201)

Family size	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
1 person	3	1.5
2-3 persons	79	39.3
4-5 persons	100	49.8
More than 5 persons	19	9.5
Total	201	100.0

**Table 7.** Housing tenure / dwelling arrangement (n=201)

What type of dwelling do you live in?	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Rented house	46	22.9
Home in your property	127	63.2
I live with family/friends	28	13.9
Total	201	100.0

**Table 8.** Monthly income level (ALL) (n=201)

Income level (in ALL (Albanian Lek))	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Up to 20,000	12	6.0
20,001 to 40,000	22	10.9
40,001 to 60,000	28	13.9
More than 60,000	139	69.2
Total	201	100.0

**Table 9.** Length of residence in current home (n = 191)

How long have you lived in your current home?	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Less than 1 year	18	9.0
1-5 years	52	25.9
6-10 years	30	14.9
More than 10 years	59	29.4
All life	32	15.9
Total	191	100.0

*Note: Missing responses = 10.*

Commonly, all indicators were elicited using Likert scale questions (1, 5), simple dichotomous (0, 1), and open, ended questions with scores converted to mean numerical values for statistical analysis.

In order to continue to build on the strength of the findings, later studies should incorporate more formal mediation testing procedures, such as bootstrapped confidence intervals or sensitivity analyses. These were outside the scope of this particular study, but the fact remains that they offer a more rigorous framework for research.

## EMPIRICAL RESULTS

This section discusses the empirical results deriving from the research survey carried out on 201 residents of handful of neighborhoods within the city of Tirana. The analysis discusses the relation between gentrification pressures and social cohesion based on the analytical framework defined in methodology.

The findings are divided in two sections such as a short descriptive and a hypothesis-driven part.

### *Demographic Characteristics*

The respondents were 201 and included respondents with different socio-demographic characteristics, such as age, income and length of residence. One important observation is the high percentage of responses by residents in the younger age groups (20-39 years old) (about 43% of the total respondents), which implies a trend of growing appeal of the city center neighborhoods among younger residents in the newer years. The respondents' income distribution appears to be relatively high, with a high percentage of income concentration in the higher (upper) income group. Seventeen percent (17%) of the responses indicated monthly incomes of less than 40,000 ALL, and 13.9% indicated between 40,001 - 60,000 ALL, while the remaining majority of responses (69.2%) indicated over 60,000 ALL.

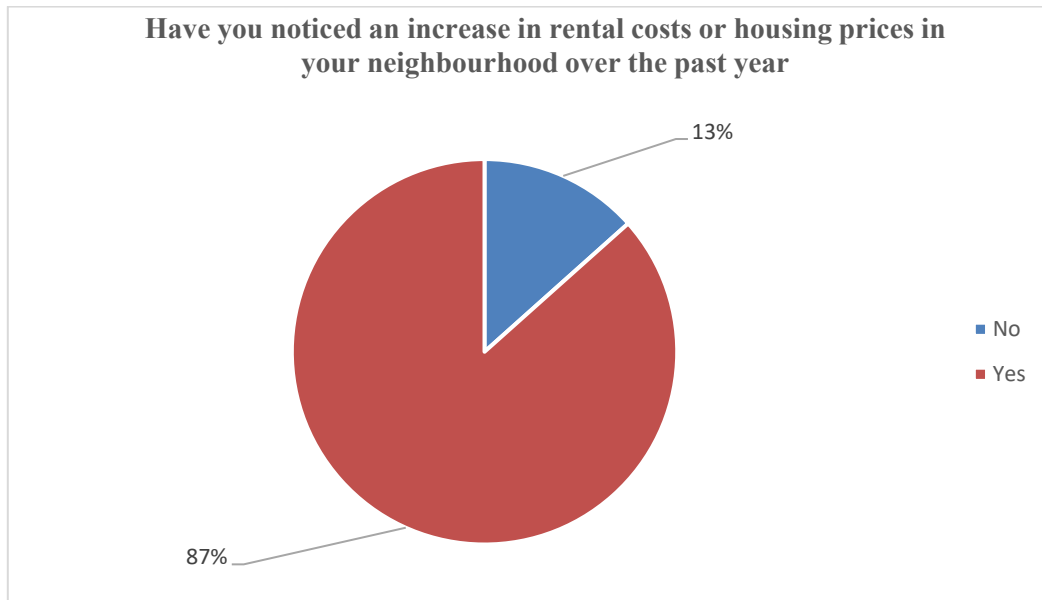
This may also be due to the fact that length of residence of the respondents ranged from five or less years to more than 20 years, with the distribution of responses based on 191 valid responses being as follows: approximately 35% of the respondents lived in their current residence over the five years, while the remaining were living in their current residence for at least five years or more. In any case, the distinction of the newcomers and longer-term residents is very important, since people's attitude towards change and social interaction in the city center neighborhoods never stay same over time.

These characteristics have implications when interpreting the empirical results. The fact that the sample is concentrated in higher income and education categories could also lend itself to a more nuanced perception of the process of urban change, unlike populations in lower income brackets. Specifically, the fact that there are significant number of newer residents and higher income groups in the sample as well indicates that we are capturing both the groups that benefit, as well as the ones hurt from the process of urban transformation. This variation will help us in finding how socio-economic position influences the perception of social cohesion, discussed more in the hypothesis testing section.

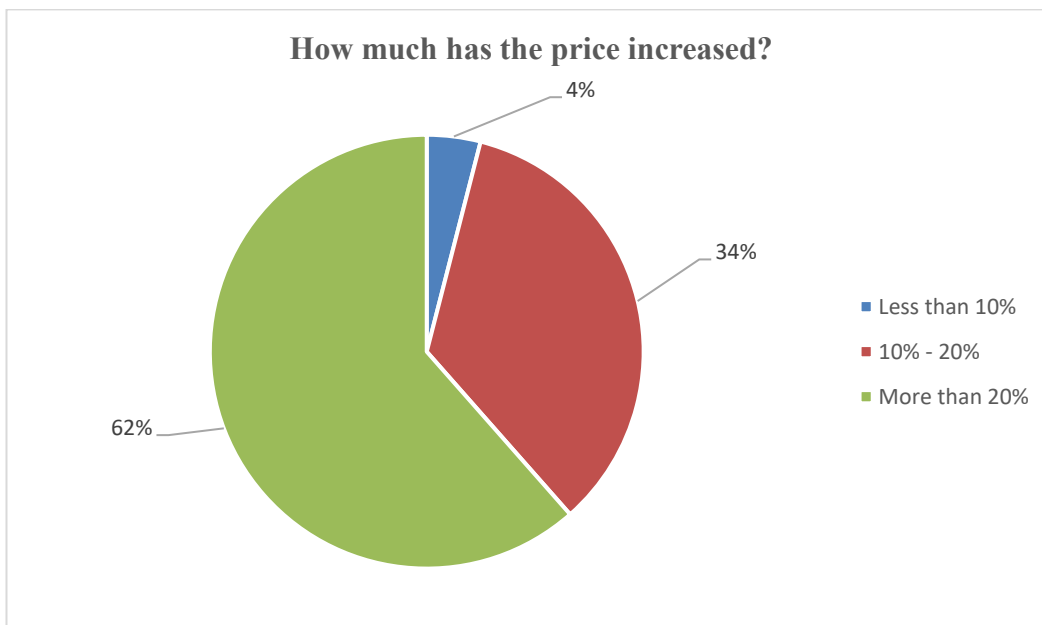
### *Housing Affordability and Displacement Concerns*

Results indicate the effects of intensifying housing pressures. For example, another alarming figure is that as many as 86.6% of respondents claimed that renting or housing costs had escalated in the preceding year. Housing affordability is one of the main determinants of gentrification, with a third of renters indicating their housing costs are "barely affordable" or "not affordable", and 29% will move due to increasing costs.

The findings also point to psychological displacement. Around 57% of residents with a long history in the city have indicated that the social, cultural or economic identity of their neighbourhood has changed to such an extent that they no longer feel a part of it. This supports the theory that gentrification, although defined primarily as an economic process, also influences symbolic value. Figure 3 and 4 depicts respectively the rental/housing price in past year and Magnitude of price increase for n=174.



**Figure 3.** Rental/housing price increase in past year (%)



**Figure 4.** Magnitude of price increase (%), (n=174)

This exists in the subjective or “psychological displacement” found in the literature. 57% of long-time residents report that the social/economic/cultural identity of their

neighborhood has shifted, to such a degree that they no longer feel at home, regardless of intention to move.

Thus, these findings point to the importance of housing as a social process through which the stability of neighborhoods might be maintained. While the high percentage of respondents who note exacerbated housing costs underpins that economic stranglehold on neighborhood security is real. In addition, the case of psychological displacement proves that the effects of gentrification could go beyond physical exit. It takes place when there is no actual dislocation, but the neighborhood identity and commodities become less affordable to some residents resulting in a reduction of their place-attachment and social-attachment, and this reminds us of the significance of both material and symbolic approach to social cohesion.

### *Hypothesis Testing*

The following section evaluates hypotheses H1–H5 using the empirical models specified in the methodology.

The empirical results are subsequently assessed against the hypotheses generated in the course of the research, looking into the connection between gentrification forces and social cohesion.

#### *Effect of Gentrification Pressures on Social Cohesion (H1)*

Regression results show that of our three gentrification-related measures, perceived rent increases significantly have the strongest negative influence on social cohesion ( $\beta = -0.62$ ,  $SE = 0.14$ ,  $p < 0.01$ , 95% CI [-0.89, -0.35], a magnitude that exceeds the other predictors. This result suggests that housing affordability, at least in this case, is the most direct and consequential manifestation of neighborhood change. Redevelopment pressure significantly remains negatively associated with social cohesion, and the overall model is reasonably strong ( $R^2=0.41$ ). This set of outcomes thus indicates that urban transformation is most strongly related to social fragmentation through economic pressure (rising housing prices).

This indicates that housing affordability constitutes the primary pathway through which perceived urban change translates into social fragmentation.

#### *The Role of Cultural Displacement: Direct and Mediating Effects (H2 and H3)*

The findings are consistent with H2 by showing that cultural displacement is negatively related to social cohesion. The findings also support H3, as far as cultural displacement seems to partially mediate the relationship between redevelopment intensity and social cohesion. However, due to the fact that no formal test of the indirect effect was conducted, the suggested mediation pattern should be viewed as preliminary.

Results reveal that about 63% of respondents believe the cultural identity of their neighborhood has declined, and this trend is especially prominent for residents of long duration. Thus, cultural change emerges as a significant mediating mechanism in the association between gentrification pressures and differences in social cohesion. Indeed, redevelopment may indirectly impact social cohesion by reshaping social territories and

existing social spaces, shifting the local business mix, and fracturing long-established social networks, all of which are strongly associated with more fragmented interaction patterns, less trust, and lower sense of belonging.

Significantly, the study points to a number of implications of gentrification that extend beyond the physical removal of residents. The findings indeed reveal the dimension of what could be termed as 'symbolic' or 'psychological displacement' where residents can lose their sense of place and familiarity while still residing in the same space. This aspect of cultural displacement encapsulates a changing neighborhood identity, routine behaviors, and social significances which lead to lower perceptions of group cohesion.

On the level of analysis, cultural displacement can be conceptualized as one of the main ways in which macro-social processes of urban restructuring are mediated through and embedded in local social relations and social interaction. From an analytical standpoint, cultural displacement can thus be viewed as one of the mechanisms, alongside economic displacement, whereby structural change is translated into social experience. Though economic displacement (mainly in the form of increased housing costs) seems to be the causative force behind neighborhood change, cultural displacement was found to operate as a second, reinforcing process, whereby changes in material circumstances were endowed with social meaning. Such a result foregrounds the necessity of considering perception-based dimensions in the analysis of gentrification in post-socialist settings, where change is so rapid and so closely related to shifts in identity and everyday social practices.

However, since this mediation analysis table does not include any formal testing of the significance of the mediating effect (e.g., bootstrapped confidence intervals), the mediating effect should be viewed as indicative rather than.

#### *Differences Between Long-Term Residents and Newcomers (H4)*

The findings are consistent with H4, indicating that longer-term residents are more likely than recent arrivals to perceive neighborhood change as weakening traditional forms of social cohesion than recent arrivals to say that change was leading to the erosion of traditional social cohesion.

The test shows a significant correlation between length of residency and perception of diminished cultural identity ( $p < 0.01$ ). Longer term residents tend to rate perceived loss of cultural identity (traditional sites where residents gather, local stores, social networks, etc.) higher.

By contrast, newer residents tend to view neighborhood change more positively and attribute redevelopment to better services, better urban environment and economic opportunity. This divergence reflects differences in social position and levels of place attachment. Furthermore, long-term residents tend to have lower values on the Social Cohesion Index, especially for the dimensions of attachment and sense of belonging. This indicates that gentrification appears to affect longer-term residents more strongly. These findings are consistent with other post-socialist cities where the speed of urban change

produces disparate social impacts, thus intensifying tensions between the old and new population.

#### *The Role of Income in Shaping Perceptions of Social Cohesion (H5)*

The results also support H5, indicating that more affluent residents tend to report higher levels of social cohesion and more positive assessments of neighborhood change.

There is evidence from the bivariate analysis that a statistically significant, strong correlation exists between income status and displacement pressure ( $p < 0.001$ ). As income levels decline, residents experience dramatically heightened levels of housing stress, insecurity, and threat of displacement. Correspondingly, levels of trust, belonging and attachment are reduced.

Conversely, respondents from higher-income households more often indicate an optimistic assessment of neighborhood change, expressing expectations of new and improved city infrastructure, amenities, and overall quality of life. These same respondents also score the highest on the Social Cohesion Index, demonstrating a modest ability to cope with urban transformation.

This association is confirmed by the results of the regression where we find a positive relation between socio-economic position and social cohesion ( $\beta = 0.31, p < 0.05$ ). Wealthier socio-economic classes seem therefore to influence the way residents and future residents experience the gentrification process.

Finally, these findings have been put forward to highlight the specific social consequences of gentrification, resulting in socio-economic segregation and producing starkly different means of urban life to those of affluent city dwellers.

Overall, the empirical findings provide support for hypotheses H1–H5, confirming the negative impact of gentrification pressures on social cohesion, the role of cultural displacement as both a direct and mediating factor, and the differentiated effects across socio-demographic groups.

Further evidence of the moderating effect of socio-economic position in the urban transformation-social cohesion nexus, is that those in higher socio-economic strata, having relatively little to lose from economic downturn and more to gain from increased provision and infrastructure, are more likely to gain and sustain social cohesion. Conversely, residents of lower incomes encounter more profound pressures of displacement and cost increase, which is detrimental to their security and integrity. This supports the argument that gentrification exacerbates social-spatial inequalities in post-socialist urban areas. Tables 10 until 13 showing respectively the perceived neighbourhood change, types of changes noticed in the neighbourhood, responses, and Association between government information and perceived impact on community ties.

**Table 10.** Perceived neighbourhood change (Yes/No) (n=201)

<b>Do you think your neighbourhood is changing?</b>	<b>Frequency (n)</b>	<b>Percentage (%)</b>
No	38	18.9
Yes	163	81.1
Total	201	100.0

**Table 11.** Types of changes noticed in the neighbourhood (multiple response)

What kinds of changes have you noticed in your neighbourhood?	No	Yes
	n (%)	
Increased housing prices	27.9	72.1
Improved public services (p.sh. parks, schools)	93.5	6.5
Changes in demographic composition of residents	64.7	35.3
Opening new businesses (p.sh., cafes, shops)	66.2	33.8

**Table 12.** Valid responses = 191; missing responses = 10

Have you been informed by the local government about the changes in your residential area	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
No	93	48.7
Yes	40	20.9
Directly from local government	5	2.6
I have no knowledge	53	27.7
Total	191	100.0

**Table 13.** Association between government information and perceived impact on community ties (Chi-square test)

			Information from local government				Total
			No	Yes	Directly from local government	No knowledge	
Perceived impact on community ties	Strengthening community ties	Count	3	14	1	7	25
		How do you think urban changes will affect community and social connections within your neighbourhood?	12.0%	56.0%	4.0%	28.0%	100.0%
		Have you been informed by the local government about the changes in your residential area?	3.3%	35.0%	20.0%	13.7%	13.3%
		% of Total	1.6%	7.4%	0.5%	3.7%	13.3%
		Count	53	15	2	20	90

	It will weaken community tie	How do you think urban changes will affect community and social connections within your neighbourhood?	58.9%	16.7%	2.2%	22.2%	100.0%
		Have you been informed by the local government about the changes in your residential area?	57.6%	37.5%	40.0%	39.2%	47.9%
		% of Total	28.2%	8.0%	1.1%	10.6%	47.9%
	They will not have a great impact	Count	36	11	2	24	73
		How do you think urban changes will affect community and social connections within your neighborhood?	49.3%	15.1%	2.7%	32.9%	100.0%
		Have you been informed by the local government about the changes in your residential area?	39.1%	27.5%	40.0%	47.1%	38.8%
		% of Total	19.1%	5.9%	1.1%	12.8%	38.8%
Total		Count	92	40	5	51	188
		How do you think urban changes will affect community and social connections within your neighborhood?	48.9%	21.3%	2.7%	27.1%	100.0%

Have you been informed by the local government about the changes in your residential area?	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
% of Total	48.9%	21.3%	2.7%	27.1%	100.0%

*Chi-square value: 27.112,  $p=0.000<0.001$*

A significant statistical association ( $p < 0.001$ ) demonstrates that informed citizens are more prone to perceive changes as an enhancement of relations while the uninformed tend to perceive a deterioration of social relations.

Significantly, 63% of respondents say that their neighborhood's cultural identity has been lost (most strongly by the long-term residents). The long-term residents point to the loss of gathering places (such as church spaces) and loss of community rituals and informal networks, as well as the replacement of family owned institutions by large-scale corporate stores. This dimension of perception of gentrification exemplifies the symbolic aspect of what is going on.

In general, the empirical results are more consistent with the hypotheses than with the null, and there is systematic variation in the relationships among gentrification stress, cultural displacement, and social solidarity. The findings indicate that structural change affects the family through economic processes as an original mechanism, in particular, housing affordability, while cultural dislocation functions as an intervening mechanism translating structural change into social outcomes. The conclusions will lead to an in-depth discussion in the following section.

## DISCUSSION

In this study, we examined the relationship between perceived gentrification pressures and neighbourhood social cohesion in Tirana, focusing especially on how cultural displacement might mediate this relationship. Results suggest that increasing housing costs is the most significant avenue through which urban transformation impacts social cohesion. Rising housing costs, more than increasing commercialization or tourism pressure, directly threaten residents' ability to stay in place, sustain daily routines, and sustain social networks. They also point to a more general process by which gentrification impacts local life. In Tirana, rising housing costs are experienced as something more than an economic burden they are also a source of destabilization, undermining trust, belonging and reciprocity. Falling affordability renders older forms of interaction increasingly tenuous, and lowers perceptions of social cohesion. In this way, housing affordability is a crucial transmission mechanism through which long-term structural urban change impacts local social relations.

Simultaneously, the research underscores the significance of cultural displacement as an additional mechanism. Evidence indicates that gentrification impacts social cohesion via not just tangible stresses, but also changes in symbolic values. For example, city-dwellers might not move, but the neighbourhood may no longer seem familiar, close, and familiar, and they may not feel the same emotional connection and sense of belonging. Such cultural changes provide an explanation for possible reductions in social cohesion without spatial displacement. This process seems more pertinent to post-socialist cities like Tirana, in which the dynamics of urban change have been predominantly determined by the ‘break-neck rate’ of market liberalisation, deregulation, state-led redevelopment and shifts in patterns of consumption. Unlike other Western cities, where gentrification takes place in a slower fashion, in Tirana these economic, institutional and symbolic changes take place concurrently. Such time compress applies further pressures in material terms and social dislocation.

The results here are generally in line with the existing literature of post-socialist city change, but also add to it. Whereas much of the literature has focused on either economic restructuring or cultural change, here it is demonstrated how the processes work in tandem and how they are mediated by people’s perceptions thus illuminating the process by which structural urban change is converted into social change. More generally, these findings imply that gentrification in post-socialist cities should be conceptualized as a condensed and perception-mediated process, where material forces and symbolic changes combine to create salient differentiations.

Contrasting with much of the existing literature on post-socialist gentrification which predominantly foregrounds structural catalysts such as rent-gap mechanisms, property-led redevelopment or market liberalization, this research points to the importance of perception-focused processes in the translation of structural dynamics into social processes. Indeed, the findings point to the fact that cultural displacement is a significant mediating channel between the material urban changes and their social implications. This suggests that in contexts of rapid transformation such as Tirana, it is impossible to fully explain the social consequences of gentrification without taking into account the residents’ perceptions and practices. The study therefore adds to the existing body of knowledge emphasizing the integrated or simultaneous conceptualization of gentrification as both a structural and a perceptual process.

### *Implications for Gentrification Theory*

Having looked at the study from the empirical point of view, the following section looks at the implications to the existing literature of gentrification from a theoretical perspective.

Standard SOTA models would suggest that the social effects of gentrification are thought to be driven largely by economic exclusion, namely as a result of housing increases. Although support is found for the role of affordability as the main driver of the erosion of social cohesion, these findings demonstrate that this cannot be considered a sufficient explanation on its own.

In particular, results reveal that cultural displacement provides an additional and important explanation of the impact that structural urban change exerts on social cohesion. This indicates that gentrification cannot be grasped only as a material process, but it needs to be viewed as a symbolic shift to be experienced by those affected.

Furthermore, in comparison with relatively linear or stage like models of gentrification, the case of Tirana suggests the existence of many interrelated gentrification actors who act at the same time in different cressets when their effect pull together creating mutual reciprocities of effect. This simultaneousness of effects defies the typical causality discourse and breaks up the distinction between economic, cultural and institutional shifts.

Simultaneously, the research uncovers significant discrepancies. Although more affluent residents maintain positive attitudes toward urban upgrading and stable degrees of social cohesion, the long-term and low-income community members are subjected to increased strains and a diminishment of social attachment. It can be seen that gentrification is not merely have equal impact on everyone's social outcomes. It has reconfigured the spatial distribution of people's social experience.

In sum, these evidence points to the need for future theoretical models of gentrification to depart from a single-path origin and to include combined structural-perception mechanisms in the context of rapid and compressed processes of urban change.

## **THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTION**

This study contributes to the literature on gentrification and social cohesion in three main ways.

First, it advances a "compressed and hybrid" model of gentrification in post-socialist cities. While traditional models primarily developed in Western contexts conceptualize gentrification as a linear and sequential process, this research demonstrates that in Tirana multiple drivers of urban change, including economic liberalization, state-led redevelopment, tourism growth, and cultural transformation, operate simultaneously. This simultaneity produces faster, more intense, and overlapping socio-spatial effects, suggesting that post-socialist gentrification follows a structurally distinct trajectory that requires a rethinking of existing theoretical frameworks.

Second, the study introduces a perception-based mediation framework linking macro-level urban processes with micro-level social outcomes. By empirically examining the mediating role of cultural displacement, the research highlights how structural transformations are translated into lived social experiences through symbolic and perceptual mechanisms. This contributes to the literature by moving beyond direct causal interpretations and incorporating subjective dimensions of urban change, thus bridging urban political economy with socio-cultural perspectives.

Third, the study refines the understanding of social cohesion in the context of gentrification by conceptualizing it as a multidimensional and socially differentiated outcome. The findings demonstrate that social cohesion is not uniformly affected across populations, but is significantly moderated by socio-economic position and length of

residence. This highlights the importance of integrating inequality and positionality into theoretical models of urban change, emphasizing that gentrification restructures not only space, but also the distribution of social experiences within the city.

Taken together, these contributions provide a more comprehensive and context-sensitive framework for analyzing gentrification in rapidly transforming urban environments, particularly in post-socialist settings where institutional, economic, and cultural dynamics intersect in complex ways.

In sum, they advocate stronger integration of structural and ideational mechanisms in a more context-sensitive framework to comprehend gentrification on post-socialist cities where the mechanism interaction generates variations on social scale.

## LIMITATIONS

The limitations of this study are as follows:

First, the use of cross-sectional survey data limits the ability to establish causal relationships between gentrification processes and social cohesion. Significant correlates have been identified, and longitudinal approaches such as a multi-level panel study would be needed to grasp the time-related processes and cause-and-effect links.

Second, while there are respondents from several neighborhoods of Tirana in the data, the sample size overall is fairly small. The sample could be more spatially reflective of Tirana, which may have increased the power of the tests.

Third, the data are based on individuals' subjective perception of their environment, and the responses may be subject to bias. Nonetheless, individuals' perceptions are especially pertinent to the issue of social cohesion, as they are related to peoples' actual experiences and the social significance of urban transformation. Fourthly, only specific neighborhoods experiencing obvious changes were studied, therefore the findings cannot be generalized to other parts of Tirana, i.e., peri-urban areas. An additional limitation concerns the sample composition, which is characterized by a relatively high proportion of respondents with higher education and income levels. This may introduce bias in the perception of urban change and social cohesion, potentially underrepresenting the experiences of more vulnerable groups. As such, the findings should be interpreted with caution and not generalized to the entire population of Tirana.

Finally, this study takes a primarily 'demand side' approach by only examining the demands of residents. In future studies, attention should be paid to 'supply side' elements, such as developers, planners and institutional stakeholders.

## POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this study have important implications for policymakers in rapidly transforming post-socialist cities such as Tirana.

As the results show, gentrification in particular at heightened rents and socio-cultural displacement, directly affects social integration in the city. In this case, policymakers should prioritize social sustainability alongside economic development. [11, 12].

Regulation of the rental housing market is also a significant policy area. Lack of regulation can cause instability of rental markets leading to housing insecurity, displacement and socio-economic inequalities [16-18]. Legislative mechanisms such as rent controls, increased strength of residents rights, and the capacity of tenants to obtain longer-tenancy agreements has a role in balancing the rental market [19]. Tax measures such as rent support grants to landlords allowing for lower rents may also be effective policy levers [20-22].

Urban development policies need to address adequate affordability provisions in order to create more socially mixed communities. Other policy issues should also be enacted to prevent negative impacts of redevelopment on areas such as social impact assessments for major re-development projects [18, 20].

A further key policy issue for urban development is the preservation of local cultural identity. Cultural displacement has been shown to have far-reaching negative impacts in terms of community stability and cohesion; therefore, policies promoting neighborhood markets, small scale local businesses and traditional space preservation are likely to help preserve the identity of an area [11]. Better participatory planning is equally important. If more transparent decision making could be surfaced and population of residents involved, it would facilitate a lot in overcoming the feeling of being left behind and promote social integration with new migrants [7].

Lastly, social coherence should also be added as a key marker to evaluate urban policy. Monitoring social impacts along with spatial and economic implications would make sure that urban regeneration is a sustainable and inclusive project [12].

## FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

The future directions of research must expand the analytical depth and width both methodologically and geographically. Longitudinal studies are going to be useful to test the causality of gentrification and social cohesion under the limits of cross sectional data. Longitudinal data, including panel datasets capturing pre-, during-, and post-gentrification phases, would allow for a more robust examination of causal mechanisms which include pre-gentrification, during gentrification and post-gentrification conditions which can be used to explore causal mechanisms of displacement [11, 12]. Additional, mixed methodologies needed to be further developed.

Quantitative indicators will greatly aid evidence-based approaches, but the potential of qualitative methods should not be neglected. Approaches such as interviews, ethnography, participatory mapping open up the possibilities of exploring the affective, cultural and iconic impacts of urban change in the post socialist city [8]. Researches would be recommended to ventures into more than the neighborhood.

Widening the spatial scale to peri-urban municipalities, suburban areas, and growing suburban peripheries would allow us to better grasp the intricacies of socio-spatial disparities and change processes. Cross-city comparisons with other Albanian urban settlements and post-socialist capitals in the region could situate Tirana within a wider context of urban transition [9, 11].

Additionally, research in this area must be multidisciplinary. Cross-fertilization between urban economics, sociology, anthropology, real estate, environmental planning, and urban economics expertise has great potential to shed light into the intricate relationship between built environment, mobility, social interaction, and quality of life [23-28]. Specifically, future work should focus on the interaction between gentrification and green infrastructure, and environmentally and climate- resilient urban design.

Finally, it would be desirable that future studies should encompass a wider group of actors, reflecting the supply side of gentrification: developers, urban planners, investors, tourism actors and others. This would allow a more comprehensive analysis of the institutional, economic, and power relations underlying urban change in Albanian cities [5, 12].

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

In this study, we investigated the associations between perceived pressures of gentrification and neighbourhood social cohesion, while considering the potential mediating role of cultural displacement. The findings highlight several important insights.

First, although some perspectives suggest that gentrification is unrelated to housing affordability, our results indicate that housing remains a central mechanism through which urban change affects the social fabric, reinforcing the classical economic interpretation of gentrification.

Second, the findings demonstrate that cultural displacement constitutes a distinct and significant dimension in the translation of structural change into lived social experience. This underscores the importance of perception-oriented approaches in examining the social impacts of urban transformation.

Third, the results reveal that the consequences of gentrification are socially differentiated. Long-term residents and lower-income groups are disproportionately affected, while higher-income groups are more likely to perceive physical changes in the environment positively, thereby reinforcing socio-spatial inequalities.

Fourth, the case of Tirana supports the conceptualization of gentrification in post-socialist cities as a rapid and multidimensional process, in which economic, cultural, and institutional transformations occur simultaneously.

Additionally, the evidence suggests that gentrification should not be understood solely as a process of spatial and economic restructuring. Rather, it should be conceptualized as a perception-mediated process that reshapes meanings and social experiences. In this sense, gentrification in post-socialist cities involves not only spatial transformation, but

also a compressed and socially differentiated process through which structural changes are experienced and interpreted.

## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS:

"Conceptualization, O.L.; Methodology, S.B.; Validation, O.L., and S.B.; Investigation, S.B.; Resources, D.F., and G.A.; Data Curation, S.B.; Writing – Original Draft Preparation, S.B.; Writing – Review & Editing, O.L.; Visualization, D.F.; Supervision, O.L.; Project Administration, O.L.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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