

Ethnic features of symbolic appropriation of public space in changing geopolitical frames – the case of Oradea/Nagyvárad¹

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Abstract

If a person, a group or a society takes possession of a place, a territory, after naming it makes an effort to indicate its boundaries and to mark it with peculiar features typical of that person or group. But what happens, if another – in our case: ethnic – group lives there in mass, forming an organized minority as the former ‘ruling nation’? This place may become the scene of power struggle. Culturally diverse Oradea (Nagyvárad in Hungarian) as every city in North Transylvania went through several power changes in the 20th century, which have affected its demographic features (e.g. ethnic structure) as well as the image of the city. Every power (local or national) tried to prove the right to ownership by the control of ethnic composition and of the image of public space. Street names, statues/monuments, specially chosen colours and different types of buildings have always referred to the characteristics of the actual power. In this paper an attempt is made to present these changes in power, their effect on the (ethnic) image of Oradea, the city lying at the Hungarian-Romanian state border and ethnic boundary. It is aimed to present the endowment of spatial features of changing street names, monuments and buildings with symbolic meanings.

Keywords: *ethnic relations, urban space, symbolic conflicts, street names, commemoration*

Introduction

After physically occupying a territory every human group and political power make an effort to seize it in symbolic meaning as well. The tool for this is the so called symbolic appropriation of space, as its aim is to clearly make the local inhabitants and the external world know about who the owner of the territory is. From the onset of nationalism the previously neutral ethnic marking has

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been replaced with the ethnic based concept of nation, as the proprietor of the space. In the forming of ethnic identity those characteristics play a pivotal role along which the boundary is drawn between „us“ and „them“, indicating the separate existence of the “other” group (BARTH, F. 1969). At the moment when several ethnic communities would compete to feel themselves master of the same place and indicate certain parts of it, tensions may occur.

This relation implies the core of conflict, since the group in possession of the local political power is able to control the frame of local conflicts over symbolic issues, allowing or restricting the similar aspirations of the other group by administrative way. In this manner the urban space, its formation, next to/instead of practical standpoints can easily become the field of hostilities between ethnic groups, where the majority controls the situation. Although these processes naturally are not independent of nationwide tendencies, locally there can be divergences to both authoritarian and democratic directions. The minority ethnic group keeps alive a different, alternative urban space which promotes the emergence of a „doubled world“ (BARNA, G. 2000). In this complex system the act of naming of a street, placing a commemorative tablet or choosing the colour of a public building all have some significance beyond itself: they become the topic of power struggle between the ethnic groups.

The research site, Oradea/Nagyvárad is situated along the Hungarian-Romanian state and ethnic border. In view of frequent changes in geopolitical and ethnic composition during the 20th century the symbolic appropriation of urban space has had a pretty various pattern. An attempt will be made to outline how the spatial frame has been being formed by the two ethnic groups, the Hungarians and Romanians since the end of the 19th century. It is to be set forth how the urban space becomes the subject of political power struggle in a multiethnic city.

Ethnic and geopolitical changes in Oradea/Nagyvárad

During the 20th century, Oradea/Nagyvárad passed through changes of state power several times, which considerably influenced the ethnic structure and the image of the city. Before 1919 Oradea/Nagyvárad situated almost in the centre of the Hungarian Kingdom; it was the seat of Bihar County. The city had an overwhelming Hungarian majority population (about 90%) during the period of the Austro–Hungarian Monarchy, while the Romanians represented about 5% of the total. The third important ethnic-religious group were the Jews (20–24% by religious affiliation), who spoke mainly Hungarian and German as vernacular (*Table 1*).

After the World War I, Nagyvárad was ceded to Romania and under the new name Oradea Mare became the seat of Bihor County. The new

Table 1. Ethnic structure of population of Oradea/Nagyvárad between 1880 and 2002 (%)

| Year | Total | Romanian | Hungarian | German | Jewish | Roma | Other |
|-------|---------|----------|-----------|--------|--------|------|-------|
| 1880m | 34,231 | 6.3 | 87.4 | 3.6 | .. | .. | 2.7 |
| 1890m | 42,042 | 6.1 | 89.5 | 2.5 | .. | .. | 1.9 |
| 1900m | 54,109 | 6.4 | 89.6 | 2.7 | .. | .. | 1.3 |
| 1910m | 68,960 | 5.5 | 91.3 | 2.1 | .. | .. | 1.1 |
| 1920e | 73,025 | 11.8 | 62.2 | 0.8 | 24.6 | .. | 0.6 |
| 1930e | 88,830 | 26.3 | 53.7 | 1.1 | 16.7 | 0.6 | 1.6 |
| 1941m | 98,621 | 5.2 | 92.1 | 0.9 | 1.3 | 0.1 | 0.5 |
| 1948m | 82,282 | 32.8 | 63.9 | 0.2 | 2.2 | .. | 0.9 |
| 1956e | 98,950 | 36.0 | 59.0 | 0.3 | 3.6 | 0.0 | 1.0 |
| 1966e | 122,534 | 46.1 | 51.4 | 0.4 | 1.2 | 0.0 | 0.9 |
| 1977e | 170,531 | 53.9 | 44.1 | 0.4 | 0.5 | 0.6 | 0.6 |
| 1992e | 222,741 | 64.8 | 33.3 | 0.4 | 0.1 | 1.0 | 0.4 |
| 2002e | 206,614 | 70.3 | 27.6 | 0.3 | 0.1 | 1.2 | 0.6 |

Legend: m = mother tongue; e = ethnicity; .. = no data. Source: Hungarian (1880–1910, 1941) and Romanian (1920, 1930, 1948–2002) census data: VARGA, E.Á. (1999)

Hungarian-Romanian state border was drawn near the western edge of the city. Hungarians still formed the majority, but the share of Romanians and the Jews (the latter newly established as an ethnic category) had increased (FLEISZ, J. 2005).

According to the second Vienna Award in 1940, North Transylvania (included Oradea/Nagyvárad) returned to Hungary. The state border was drawn almost at the southern edge of the city. As a consequence of the war-time events (e.g. mass forced migrations, changing power situation of ethnic groups, Jews subjected to discrimination) the overwhelming majority of the population declared themselves Hungarian again at the 1941 census.

The Hungarian rule lasted only four years, as the Soviet and Romanian troops captured Oradea/Nagyvárad in 1944 and Northern Transylvania got back to Romania. After the Holocaust in 1944, only 37% of the deported Jews had returned to Oradea/Nagyvárad (Remember..., 1985). During the communist regime the proportion of Hungarians decreased because of the mass colonisation of Romanians in the frame of the state-controlled socialist urbanization. The decrease was slower in the first period until the middle of the 1960s then accelerated during the communist Ceaușescu-regime with a fairly strong nationalistic course (Table 1). The colonisation processes and the favourable demographic characteristics of the Romanian settlers resulted in turning of Romanians into the most populous ethnic group in the city by around 1973. This date meant a turning point in the struggle for local political power as well: since then the mayor has always been Romanian. Between 1948 and 1956 two villages (Episcopia Bihorului/Biharpüspöki, Seleuş/Váradszőlős) with Hungarian majority were annexed to the city as well as later Podgoria/

Hegyalja (VARGA, E.Á. 1999). Until 1980 new housing estates were built up, some of them by demolishing the old districts of the town.

Nowadays Oradea/Nagyvárad is a municipality, the seat of Bihar County. Due to the emigration after 1989, the number and proportion of the Hungarians decreased further. On the other hand, the share of Romanians and the Roma has increased steadily.

Since the political changes in 1989, the Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania (a political party, called RMDSZ in Hungarian, UDMR in Romanian,) is represented in the local government and since 1996 occasionally in the state government too. The local position of the Hungarian community has always depended on the composition of the central government, on the strength of the party's negotiation position. But independently of the fact that RMDSZ has Romanian allies or not if an ethnic-related issue is at stake the Romanian parties generally join forces against it. In the last few years the Hungarian community has been polarized politically to a moderate wing (RMDSZ) and a more radical one (EMI: Hungarian Youth in Transylvania).

Methods of symbolic appropriation of urban space

In multiethnic settlements like Oradea/Nagyvárad, the symbolic appropriation of space generally has an ethnic connotation too. The aspiration for dispossess the urban space is carried out by various space appropriation strategies and procedures. Using HARRISON's categories we can observe all four types of symbolic struggles: the valuation, the proprietary, the innovation and the expansionary (HARRISON, S. 2000), but most frequently used are the expansionary and valuation.³ These are perceptible proceedings, moreover they are made visible in the cityscape. Therefore, from the several ways and possibilities for symbolic appropriation (see BODÓ, J.-BÍRÓ, A.Z. 2000) we focused on the striking features, which influence and transform the public spaces and the image of the city.

Six main fields of the visible symbolic appropriation of space were examined closely, which form quite a correlative system. On the one hand they are direct methods for symbolic appropriation of space: *street names*, *commemorative tablets* and *statues/monuments*. The term of "direct" means that these tools are primarily in the competence of the local government, so can be ruled by the political majority. Besides, their message is easy to be identified for locals and

³ HARRISON, S. (2000) investigated the political uses of symbolism, especially those signifying group identity. He found that during political struggles conflicts emerge over important symbols. In case of valuation conflict the rival groups make attempts to mutually undermine each others' symbols while glorifying their own, meanwhile the purpose of expansionary conflict is to replace the competitor's symbols explicitly.

outsiders alike. On the other hand the built environment was also dealt with, which could serve as indirect methods for symbolic expansion, such as *sacred places*, some *features of buildings* e.g. style, colour (flags including) and *public inscriptions*. These fields differ according to their visibility and to the grade of discretion of the proceedings, but this symbolism can be interpreted primarily among the locals. Naturally, both the direct and indirect tools have common features: their underlying contents are very important and in both cases it matters whether they are found in public or hidden (internal) spaces.

Street names

In Oradea/Nagyvárad the number of streets has increased from 160 to 739 over the last 150 years. During that time, the earlier, hitherto quite stable street names changed many times, mostly in the wake of the shifts in the state power. One can find only three, ethnically neutral names, which could survive at least two changes of state power (Volga, Michelangelo, Schubert), while none of the names survived throughout the 20th century.

Until the end of the 19th century street names were natural, motivated names in the city, similar to the contemporary trends. It means that about half of the streets were named after their characteristics (big, short, wide) or the institution and function found in the street (bath, brickmaker, Capuchin, nun etc.). Later, with the spread of nationalism, the names of settlements and streets had turned to be ‘nationalised’, which resulted in an abundance of streets renamed mostly after Hungarian historical persons (e.g. kings, politicians with local origin) instead of ethnically neutral names. The share of the street names with Hungarian connotation coincided approximately with the ratio of the Hungarian population.

This naming process was stopped by the World War I and the following events, when Transylvania (included Oradea/Nagyvárad) was annexed to Romania. Since then the share of street names with ethnic connotation has never dropped below 30% (*Table 2*) and most of them were named after persons

Table 2. The number and ethnic connotation of street names in Oradea/Nagyvárad, 1859–2006 (%)

| Year | Total | Romanian connotation | Hungarian connotation | Ethnically neutral | Without name |
|------|-------|----------------------|-----------------------|--------------------|--------------|
| 1859 | 160 | 0.0 | 1.9 | 80.0 | 18.1 |
| 1902 | 209 | 0.5 | 22.5 | 62.7 | 14.3 |
| 1931 | 536 | 47.4 | 3.7 | 48.9 | 0.0 |
| 1942 | 611 | 0.5 | 51.8 | 45.9 | 1.8 |
| 1957 | 710 | 33.1 | 19.9 | 46.2 | 0.8 |
| 1980 | 716 | 29.2 | 2.1 | 68.1 | 0.6 |
| 2006 | 739 | 38.4 | 4.3 | 57.0 | 0.3 |

without local linkage. In the interwar period new districts were built up mainly for Romanian colonists, which had doubled the number of the streets. This gave the chance to expand the patriotic-national naming practice, which was intended to make clear the ownership of the city. Among the early arrangements next to the order of bilingual official and shop inscriptions the so called 'nationalisation' of street names came into force in 1919/20 (FLEISZ, J. 2000).⁴ At that time most of the newly given names were those of canonized Romanian historical persons, politicians and of the royal family. The Romanian related names were located in the central parts of the city, while some suburbs were dominated by neutral names. The names of main roads and squares also had Romanian origin.

During the four years of the returned Hungarian authority in 1940–1944, a revision took place in case of street names as well. The proportion turned over: Hungarian street names dominated the urban space (52%) while only three Romanian related names could survive. Most of the street names given were unmotivated referring to personalities without any relation to the city and some of them reflected Hungary's actual geopolitical motivations (e.g. Hitler, Mussolini and Horthy). In this period, the number of an important category of names increased: the (mostly unmotivated) geographical names, of which many were intended to support the revisionist targets of Hungary (e.g. Pozsony [Bratislava], Temesvár [Timișoara]).

The history of the Romanian communism can be divided into two periods regarding the character of political system. During the first era (1947–1958) – under the aegis of the idea of internationalism – the formerly meticulously supervised ethnic-based naming was changed by a relatively tolerant attitude of the government; the street names reflected a fairly balanced situation between the ethnic groups. Although the Romanian was the ruling nation and the Romanian related street names formed the majority, there were more Hungarian related names than ever before and after in minority position. Moreover, among these names Hungarian kings and (not only communist) politicians could be found which had been unprecedented for ethnic groups out of real power. Among the ethnically neutral names the share of those related to the actual ideology (communist politicians, artists, and important dates) were significant (8.2% of the total street names) with about half of the main access and ingress roads and one third of the squares.

After the retreat of Soviet troops in 1958, a socialist regime of an increasing nationalistic line had been built gradually. This went hand in hand with the elimination of Soviet related names (BENEDEK, J.–BARTOS-ELEKES, Zs. 2009). With the building of new, big housing estates (Rogerius, Nufărul) huge

⁴ A decree came out already in 1920 to 'nationalise' the 50 most important streets, which means that these got Romanian names (FLEISZ, J. 2000).

amount of streets appeared which unmotivated, artificial names (e.g. subjects, plants, persons) were given to, except some geographical ones referring to the surrounding villages. The most important categories of the street names (persons, geographical names and plants, animals) formed two thirds of the total names. In the wake of the above-mentioned ‘desovietization’ it is not surprising, that the share of the names related to the communist ideology decreased to 3.8% by 1980.

Following the collapse of communism, as a general feature of the transition period in this region, the nationalism kindled again and as a matter of fact, superseded the former official internationalist ideology. Many street got new or its interwar name, so the proportion of the street names with Romanian roots, especially of the persons’ names increased. Nowadays Oradea/Nagyvárad has 739 streets from that 57% is ethnically neutral. Romanian street names dominate the city centre, while the few Hungarian names are concentrated in areas, where they live in higher proportion. Only two important public places have Hungarian name and none of the Hungarian names represent the history of Hungary (politicians, kings, dates), most of them are artists or have local connotation. In case of new streets (at the edge of the city) a tendency can be seen: the naming practice approximately follows the present ethnic proportions – without neutral names.

Table 3. Relationship between the ethnic composition of the inhabitants (e) and the ethnic connotation of street names (s) in Oradea/Nagyvárad, 1900–2006 (%)

| Year | Romanian | Hungarian |
|-------|----------|-----------|
| 1900e | 6.4 | 89.6 |
| 1902s | 2.1 | 97.9 |
| 1930e | 26.3 | 53.7 |
| 1931s | 92.7 | 7.3 |
| 1941e | 5.2 | 92.1 |
| 1942s | 0.9 | 99.1 |
| 1956e | 36.0 | 59.0 |
| 1957s | 62.5 | 37.5 |
| 1977e | 53.9 | 44.1 |
| 1980s | 93.3 | 6.7 |
| 2002e | 70.3 | 27.6 |
| 2006s | 89.9 | 10.1 |

It is also necessary to research the connection between the ethnic structure of the population and the ratio of street names with ethnic connotation. As we can see in *Table 3*, these two indicators only have coincided during the Hungarian rules, but even in that case the local Hungarian government made an effort to monopolise the street names for Hungarians, excluding the Romanian minority.

So the (re)naming of streets is rather a tool for the actual local government – in harmony with the measures of the current central government – to rule and control local communities, particularly in case of culturally diverse cities like Oradea/Nagyvárad.

Another important issue is the visibility and usage of the different street names by locals. Since there is a significant, autochthonous Hungarian

minority in the city, they generally use the Hungarian names originated from the first half of the 20th century.⁵ Nowadays only Romanian street name plates can be found in the city, despite the share of the Hungarian community reaching 20%. So, local Hungarian EMI started to claim for bilingual plates, which is a legal demand (VERESS, E. 2006). The local council accepted the resolution to have bilingual plates, but then an endless negotiation started, because the claims of the two ethnic groups have not coincided. Romanian representatives would have only put out plates with Romanian names (without translation) and place the Hungarian 'utca' (= street) inscription at the bottom only. Representatives of the moderate, Hungarian ethnic party (RMDSZ) having participated in earlier governance would have been satisfied with the translations, while EMI demanded the 'original' Hungarian names under the official Romanian names.

There is still no solution, just tensions, as the local government finally took a decision about the bilingual street name plates but it is still unwilling to act properly. The EMI's activists did not wait years; they started to paint the Hungarian names to buildings whose owners they had agreed on. Since then a 'hare and hounds' has been going on between Romanian and Hungarian nationalists (sometimes the Romanian officials also get involved): paint down or draw over the Hungarian names then paint again (*Photo 1*).



Photo 1. Official (Romanian) and painted (Hungarian) street names in Oradea/Nagyvárad (photos by Kocsis, K.)

⁵ Many Hungarians (mainly elders) use exclusively the traditional Hungarian street names and they do not really know the official ones.

Politicians also started to deal with this case; a complex discussion has emerged about the issue. In this case the front lines run not among the political parties rather than among ethnic groups, meanwhile the majority of the local Romanians in principle do not oppose the bilingual street names.

This case demonstrates the importance of being visible. The Hungarian community of Oradea was previously a majority and ruling ethnic group; they would like to strengthen their ethnic identity and their importance, they want to make their presence visible even at the expense of arousing conflicts.

Commemorative tablets, statues/monuments

With commemorative tablets or with statues in the first place the exact part of space becomes marked, it modifies the neutral public space, while central or periphery position differentiates in importance (JAKAB, A. Zs. 2004). On the other hand these tablets/statues serve as a “*lieux de mémoire*” with the term of P. NORA (1999, 142): mark an exact (but not necessarily real) person, event from the past which is highlighted by the present as decisive part of the (community’s) collective memory. These also reflect the historical narrative of the group and era when the memorial was erected (AZARYAHU, M.–FOOTE, K.M. 2008). Every tablet/statue has a target group and the same memorial can have different judgement by different groups. Hereby in case of a commemorative tablet not just the exact content of the memory text, but the whole context is needed to be investigated: the place where it is, the ceremony built around it, and even the history of the erection or replacing, demolishing.

Placing a new *commemorative tablet* is perhaps the easiest way of symbolic appropriation of the space. In Oradea/Nagyvárad commemorative tablets have been placed since the 19th century; that time the texts were written both in Hungarian and in Latin; the latter were located mostly on churches. The tablets commemorate persons⁶ or events, e.g. end of war, construction of a building (see VENDE, A. 1901).

By our days, beside the religious inscriptions, only those tablets survived, which were quite hidden ones (e.g. in gardens, in cemeteries). In open public spaces, we only found Szigligeti’s tablet from this period and it is interesting that it has no Romanian translation. Nowadays the most of the tablets are only in Romanian and these commemorate Romanian persons and events. Only a few bilingual plaques can be found mostly about ethnically neutral subject (e.g. memorials about institutions or about characters of novels). Placing

⁶ At the end of the 19th century we could identify only three tablets commemorated persons (all in Hungarian); two of them were local victims of the Hungarian War of Independence in 1849, the third was a famous Hungarian writer, E. SZIGLIGETI.

of commemorative tablets proliferated in the 1990s, when many monolingual Romanian tablets appeared, some of them with nationalistic message.⁷ At the same time Hungarian tablets were not equipped in public space. But since 2001 several Hungarian tablets can be found inside the building of the Partium Christian University, which is the first autonomous Hungarian university in Romania since 1959. In 2007 a new Hungarian tablet were placed in open public space and it is without Romanian translation.⁸ On the whole, commemorative tablets do not serve as scene of joint celebration of ethnic groups, they are rather for the in-groups.

Comparing to tablets, *statues and monuments* are more spectacular signs in public space. According to A. VENDE (1901) St. Ladislaus' first (horseback) statue was erected already in 1390.⁹ Until 1923, the statue(s) of this "great national Saint" (VENDE, A. 1901. 177) were dominated Oradea/Nagyvárad's symbolically most important point, the main square, at that time bearing his name.¹⁰ This square has always been occupied symbolically by the contemporary power. In 1924, after the change in state power, Romanian King Ferdinand's horseback statue was erected in the same place, whereas St. Ladislaus' statue was moved to the current place, to the park of the Roman Catholic Basilica (FLEISZ, J. 2007). During the communist regime, a Soviet war memorial took place here, while in our days (since 1994) the Romanian prince from the 16th century, Mihai Viteazul/Michael the Brave (on horse) can be found here (*Photo 2*).¹¹

In case of erecting statues, the 20th century can be characterised with the aspiration for absoluteness, which means the lack of tolerance towards the monuments of 'others'. In the interwar period, by 1937, almost all Hungarian statues, even the politically neutral ones were gradually removed from public spaces (FLEISZ, J. 2007). As a retort to these events, the Hungarian authorities did the same in the first half of the 1940s.¹² The majority of the recently ex-

⁷ In Cluj-Napoca/Kolozsvár, the same has happened (BENEDEK, J.-BARTOS-ELEKES, Zs. 2009).

⁸ This tablet is dedicated to the memory of a café which served as a meeting place for artists at the turn of the 20th century.

⁹ St. Ladislaus was a medieval Hungarian king, considered to be the founder of Oradea/Nagyvárad. His first statue destroyed during the Turkish occupation in the 17th century.

¹⁰ St. Ladislaus' second statue (made of stone) was erected in 1739; it was replaced with a statue made of bronze in 1893.

¹¹ According to the Romanian official historiography, Mihai Viteazul (Michael the Brave) was the one who united Transylvania, Wallachia and Moldova for the first time (1599). Additionally the main square, where it is now, called Unity. While for the Hungarians he is not more than the Habsburg's mercenary, who occupied the Hungarian Principality of Transylvania for the Habsburgs.

¹² In the interwar period nine Romanian statues and tablets were placed, but only one is still standing (FLEISZ, J. 2007).



Photo 2. Symbolic appropriation of Oradea/Nagyvárad's main square by using statues: St. Ladislaus' statue (photo by FEKETE, S.) during the Austro–Hungarian Monarchy and Mihai Viteazul's one (photo by TÁTRAI, P.) nowadays

isting statues were erected during the communism. First, mainly artists got memorials and until 1960 – like in case of street names – the minorities also had the chance to place their own memorials (BANNER, Z. 2002). Later, during Ceaușescu's nationalistic communist regime, Dacian and even Roman kings, emperors were sculptured to confirm the Daco-Roman(ian) continuity about the origin of Romanians and secondly but implicitly to prove the right for Transylvania.¹³ Parallel to this process, the memorials of ethnic minorities were getting to be removed.

The real revival of erecting statues and monuments has occurred after the political transformation in 1989. Similarly to the case of the commemorative tablets, in the 1990s only statues of Romanian persons (first of all kings and politicians) were set up., The first new Hungarian statue of this period was erected in 1996, but during the last ten years a wave of raising has started – not without conflicts: the right-wing Great Romania Party (PRM) denounced

¹³ A whole statue park (with Dacian, Roman and Romanian historic persons) was created in the garden of the former Roman Catholic bishop's palace by 1977, the date of Ceaușescu's visit in Oradea/Nagyvárad. A new entrance had to be opened at the back of the palace for the dictator (declared as main entrance), this way he could not have a chance to notice St. Ladislaus' statue at the front (information by Rev. József Tempfli, former Roman Catholic bishop).

the Calvinist Church because the inscription of the statue was in Hungarian instead of the permitted Latin.

In our survey 17 Romanian statues/monuments (plus the 'statue park') 10 Hungarian and 8 ethnically neutral (mostly religious) similar objects were counted in the city. This distribution basically fits to the present ethnic proportions. But if their spatial position is investigated it could be found that – with the exception of two Hungarian artists' sculptures –, they are located in parks, gardens in almost hidden positions, while Romanian statues dominate the main squares and roads, the symbolic hearts of the city (Figure 1).

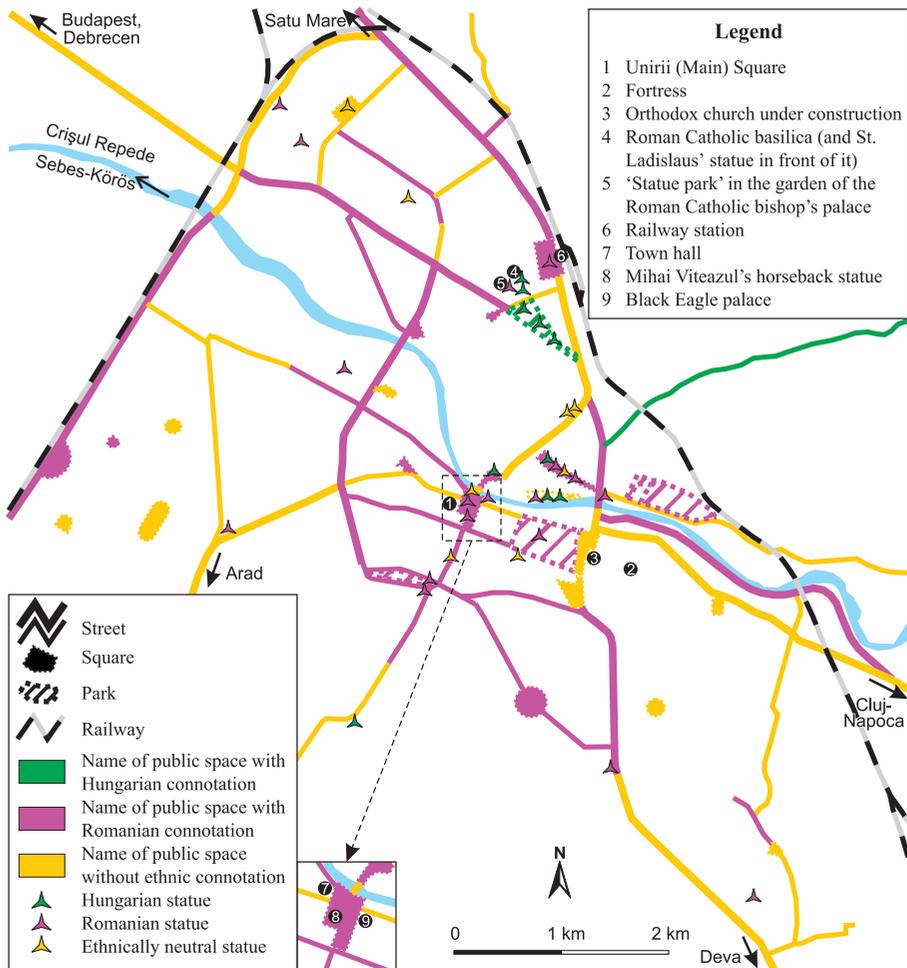


Fig. 1. Contemporary ethnic connotation of main streets, squares and statues in Oradea/ Nagyvárad

So in the last 20 years, parallel with the political strengthening of the Hungarian community, new ethnic-based but rather political tensions originated from almost every attempt of visible monopolisation of public space by either of the sides. In the followings the focus will be put on less visible, more hidden, more refined methods for symbolic appropriation of space.

“Onion dome conquest” and the built environment

Since in Romania ethnic and religious boundaries coincide more or less, the expansion of churches has always been supported by ethnic groups, and even by the contemporary state. During Hungarian rule, generally the Roman Catholic Church was favoured, while the Romanian state has always been preferred the Orthodox Church, even during the declared atheist period between 1947 and 1989.

Building a new *church* is a spectacular but rather indirect method of the symbolic expansion. In the city with the increasing of Romanian population, there was a growing demand on building new churches. The location, style and size of these new churches clearly refer to symbolic appropriation of space. In the interwar period seven Orthodox and Greek Catholic churches and chapels were built, all in the so called “neobrâncovenesc” style (PÉTER, I. Z. 2005).¹⁴

Table 4. Number and distribution of churches according to the language of the service in Oradea/Nagyvárad (2007)

| Churches | Number of churches with | | Under construction |
|----------------|------------------------------|-------------------------------|--------------------|
| | Service in Romanian language | Service in Hungarian language | |
| Orthodox | 23 | – | 6 |
| Greek Catholic | 3 | – | – |
| Roman Catholic | – | 12 | – |
| Calvinist | – | 10 | – |
| Lutheran | – | 1 | – |
| Unitarian | – | 1 | – |
| Baptist* | 10 | 2 | 1 |
| Pentecostal* | 11 | 1 | – |

* In case of Baptist and Pentecostals the figures include rather house of prayer than real church. In the city, there are three synagogues too, but only one functions

Even so, in that period Hungarian Churches (Roman Catholic and Calvinist) also built new temples.

After the anti-religious era of communism, a new wave of church-building has begun in 1990. As the financial conditions were not equal, mainly the Orthodox Church has been the winner of this rush (Table 4), which resulted in tensions between denomina-

¹⁴ The neobrâncovenesc is an archaizing style based on Wallachian architecture from the reign of prince Constantin Brâncoveanu in the 17–18th century (PÉTER, I.Z. 2005. 261–263).

tions.¹⁵ By the Calvinist Church over the last 20 years approximately 2000 Orthodox churches were built – or has just started to build – in Transylvania, using state sources.¹⁶ Although the expansion of the Orthodox Church is observable, the proportion of the Romanian and Hungarian churches fits to the contemporary ethnic proportions. The onion dome conquest not only could be emphasized by the growing number of the Orthodox churches but also by their spatial position: usually they occupy centre positions and fill any small free spaces.

Out of the churches, other *public buildings* can also be suitable for symbolic gaining ground, through their *style, size, colour, decoration or function*. But these are quite refined methods, perceptible almost exclusively for locals.

How do they work? As it was mentioned earlier, style is a very tell-tale sign; for example in Oradea/Nagyvárad art nouveau considered to be ‘Hungarian style’, because during Hungarian rule up to World War I edifices were erected typically in this style, while neobrâncovenesc considered to be ‘Romanian style’. So if a building is constructed in the latter style, this will expand the ‘Romanian territory’ in the city. Moreover a building, as a real, 3D spatial object is effectively suitable for dwarfing or covering other ones, as it has happened in case of the most important Hungarian heritage, the fortress, which is absolutely covered by housing estates and the new Orthodox cathedral (*Photo 3*).



Photo 3. The fortress is invisible from the main road (A), being in the shadow of the Orthodox cathedral and a block of flats (B) in Oradea/Nagyvárad (photos by Kocsis, K.)

In Romania *colours* have special importance in symbolic struggle. Generally green is associated with Hungarians, while yellow is considered to be a Romanian colour (think of the two national banners!). In the main square of Oradea this dual colouration is striking. The most of the buildings

¹⁵ Two important conflicts have been observable: the rather ethnic-based tension between the Orthodox and the Calvinist Church and the tension between the Orthodox and the Greek Catholic Church of restored independency.

¹⁶ Information by Mr. János Antal, Calvinist Church, Oradea/Nagyvárad.

are painted with yellow, only the Roman Catholic church is green. Here, the Black Eagle is built in art nouveau style: the palace also represents the importance of colours: this building was renovated in 1984 and got back its original turquoise green colour. Two years later it had to be repainted to yellow.¹⁷

Although *flags* are not really the part of buildings, they have to be mentioned here as a frequently used decoration. Excessive use of flags is an everyday phenomenon in Romania (*Photo 4*).¹⁸ In Oradea/Nagyvárad, Romanian and EU flags wave on public buildings. In the centre, one can find public building with five national flags on the front.

The above-mentioned methods (street-names, statues, 'onion dome conquest', style, colour, covering) can be concentrated into a common one, which resulted in a very significant transformation. This method is directed to occupy the city centre (generally the main square). We could identify two (even simultaneous) steps of this process. At first the transformation of the historic centre is carried out by replacing others' memorials with own ones, constructing new buildings – mostly churches –, changing the colours, etc. Then a possible second step may follow to create a new civic centre. In Oradea/Nagyvárad this second phase is not as spectacular as in some cities in Transylvania (e.g. Cluj-Napoca/Kolozsvár, Satu Mare/Szatmárnémeti, Baia Mare/Nagybánya),



Photo 4. Romanian national colours on the roof of the hen-roost in the zoo of Oradea/Nagyvárad (Photo by Kocsis, K.)

but there have been efforts to create a new centre in the Independence Square. Erecting of the monument to the Romanian soldier and the construction of the new Orthodox cathedral are worth mentioning in line with appropriation of symbolic space.

Other inscriptions

In the city, we can find many inscriptions from the advertisements to the official inscriptions. Starting with the commercial ones, it is observable that in Oradea/Nagyvárad there are only a few Hungarian inscriptions on shops and even less

¹⁷ Information by Mr. Vági, László architect and councillor in Oradea.

¹⁸ During the last decades Cluj-Napoca was a typical case for this; even the dustbins were painted to blue-yellow-green (BENEDEK, J.–BARTOS-ELEKES, Zs. 2009). In Oradea only a few extreme case of using of national colours can be found, mostly in the zoo (see *photo 4*).

on advertisements at the street. The bilingualism of the shop signs depends on the owner and on the size of the shop. In small shops owned by Hungarians we can see inscriptions in both languages, while Romanian owners usually do not pay attention to this issue.

In case of official inscriptions, both languages are used on the most important public buildings, e.g. town hall, prefecture, railway station (*Photo 5*). Only those schools have bilingual sign, in which the language of the education is Hungarian.

The examples above have a common feature: the order of the inscription always starts with the Romanian sign and under that continues with the Hungarian one. The only exceptions are the inscriptions of the Calvinist Church, where generally the Hungarian is the first language.

It is not a research objective but we have to emphasize that the order or the language of the inscription can change immediately if we enter into the 'private' sphere, inside the buildings.¹⁹ In private sphere minorities are in a 'safe space' they can use their language without control. So the distinction between the private and public sphere is very important as in case of other fields of symbolic struggle.



Photo 5. Bilingual inscription on the railway station in Oradea/Nagyvárad (Photo by Kocsis, K.)

¹⁹ For example Hungarian Churches can be Hungarian monolingual inside the church. Contrary to this, one can find such bilingual school, where the inscriptions inside become only Romanian.

Conclusion

According to the attitude of the contemporary power, we can identify eight periods in the last 150 years with different strength and direction of symbolic appropriation of space. In five of these periods, local government made efforts to monopolize the public space for the favoured ethnic group.²⁰ In other periods, the ethnic-based symbolic expansion did not have importance (before the end of the 19th century) or the ruling ideology was more tolerant (from 1945 till the 1960s) or the democratic rules have balked the one-sided activities against cultural diversity (since the end of the 1990s). Among democratic frames both actors of the power struggle has been capable to take part in the symbolic contest, naturally the majority dominates the context.

Evaluating the different methods for symbolic expansion, it can be stated that every power applied the direct methods by choice. The different regimes have renamed the streets, have removed and erected statues and commemorative tablets. Of course, these are less expensive and more effective ways than creating new buildings even a civic centre. The common feature of every symbolic conquest by local governments is that primarily the locals were targeted with these signs to demonstrate the power relations. Next to this it has to be mentioned that these methods are materialized mostly in public space. Investigating it from the aspect of the urban space, latter has won an underlying, extra connotation: its formation became a tool for the rival groups that has formed remarkably the image of the city.

We reckon that the visibility is the key of the issue and through symbolic appearance one can recognize (or not) different groups – in our case ethnic groups. In Oradea/Nagyvárad, only two ethnic groups aspire to be visible; the two most significant ones, Romanians and Hungarians. Both of them have already formed ethnic and political majority too in the last hundred years. Both want to be visible to win the struggle, which cannot be won and both want to strengthen the identity of the group through symbolic actions.

According to the visibility, we can identify an ethnic hierarchy. In present day, on the top the Romanians can be found, followed by Hungarians. But this ethnic system of the city does not form an organic system; it is the complex of parallel societies. There is the official, Romanian society, which can be seen almost everywhere, and a 'hidden', Hungarian society also exists with their parallel institutions, networks and with different perception of the city.

²⁰ Under Hungarian rule: between the end of the 19th century and 1919, between 1940 and 1944; under Romanian rule: between 1919 and 1940, from the 1960s to 1989 and from 1989 till the end of the 1990s. The changes were sharp only in case of changing state-power.

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