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Post-Communist City on its Way from Grey to Colourful: The Case Study from Slovakia

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Post-Communist City on its Way from Grey to Colourful: The Case Study from Slovakia

Alexandra Bitusikova

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Post-Communist City on its Way from Grey to Colourful: Case-Study from Slovakia

The paper is a case study of the city of Banska Bystrica in Slovakia in the light of political, socio-economic and cultural changes. It discusses urban diversity and integrity from an anthropological qualitative perspective. On the example of three different historical periods (1918 – 1948: the democratic Czechoslovakia; 1948 – 1989: the communist Czechoslovakia; 1989 up to the present: building new democracy in a new state) the study shows transformations of the city and urban life.

The research results show how political systems influence conditions, in which urban diversity and heterogeneity develop. During the democratic period of the first Czechoslovak Republic (1918 – 1948 with the exception of the World War II), Banska Bystrica was a multicultural city with a rich ethnic, religious and social differentiation of the inhabitants. Diverse social and cultural life was flourishing in tolerance until the World War II. After the communist coup in 1948, the situation dramatically changed. Totalitarian regime was systematically suppressing any diversity or pluralism in public spaces for fear of a mass protest against the regime. Diversity in public spaces was replaced by homogeneity that does not tolerate any difference. After the 'velvet revolution' in 1989 and the 'velvet divorce' in 1993 dramatic political, economic, social and cultural changes transformed the face of the city. Reconstruction of the city centre opened the door to diversity. For the inhabitants diversity and plurality is a symbol of 'Western' democracy, which is in contrast to uniformity of the communist past. Yet, although the change from homogeneity to diversity has been welcomed by most citizens, everyday life in heterogeneous society asks for more tolerance and understanding.

The study demonstrates that diversity can grow and flourish only in democracy, which allows differences and pluralism leading to richer and diversified urban life.

Keywords: Urban diversity, post-communist city, democracy, Slovakia

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Post-Communist City on its Way from Grey to Colourful: The Case Study from Slovakia[1]

by Alexandra Bitusikova

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One of the main characteristics of the city is its heterogeneity and diversity. In sociological and urban anthropological writings of the 20th century the city is often described as a dichotomy to rural area. While the city represents complexity, diversity, variety, changes and innovation, the countryside or small town are defined by simplicity, tradition, homogeneity, social continuity and cultural unity. Cities are more ethnically, religiously and socially heterogeneous than the countryside. That leads to greater tolerance and understanding on the one hand or to potential intergroup conflict on the other hand.

On the example of the Slovak city of Banska Bystrica we can study transformations of the city in the light of political, socio-economic and cultural changes in the 20th century and explore impact of ideologies on pluralism and diversity of the city. The methods of the interview, participant observation, oral history, study of archive documents, regional newspapers and memoir literature have been used in the study. Historic approach has

also been applied to understand certain phenomena of social relations and communication of various groups and individuals.

The coat-of-arms of Banska Bystrica

Banská Bystrica is a medium-sized city situated in the mountainous region of Central Slovakia on the Hron river.[2] In 1255 it was granted important municipal and mining privileges and rights by the Hungarian ruler Belo IV and became a free royal city. Rich ore deposits of precious metals attracted first mostly German settlers. Silver and copper mining sustained dynamic development of the city. In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries Banská Bystrica flourished as a major Central European mining city and was well known as *'the copper Banská Bystrica'*. The medieval city like other European cities developed its economic strength because of trade and commerce. The successful development resulted in luxurious architecture - palaces and residences of noble families situated on the central square. The 'golden age' of the mining city lasted until the seventeenth century, afterwards the city became an important centre of crafts, commerce and services.

Map of the Slovak Republic with Banska Bystrica in the centre

Having lived in Banska Bystrica for most of my life, I have become a participant – observer and informant myself, which helped me to visualise and compare various images of the city in different historic periods, particularly the communist and post-communist periods. Studying older period of the democratic first Czechoslovak Republic, interviews and archive documents revealed the history.

The period 1918 – 1948 [3]

The first Czechoslovak Republic was established on 28 October 1918. Banska Bystrica became an administrative centre of the Central Slovak District. At that time it was a small town with only ten thousand inhabitants. Although the city was situated in the region with the dominant Slovak population, the ethnic structure of the city inhabitants was heterogeneous and was influenced by historical development of the city in the Austro-Hungarian Empire. German settlers who had developed mining and craft activities, assimilated in course of time, but a number of German words and

phrases have survived in the local dialect. The strong magyarization (hungarization) on the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries also left traces in local communication and identity. Jewish community numbered more than ten per cent of urban population (Bitusikova 1996a). Although the number of people claiming Slovak nationality grew to 90% after 1918, trilinguism naturally survived until 1948 when the communists took over the power. By religion, the predominant religions were Roman-Catholicism (60%), Protestantism (25%) and Judaism (10%).

The period of the first democratic Czechoslovak Republic could serve as a model for tolerant co-existence of diversified urban population. In Banska Bystrica, all social, cultural and economic activities were concentrated in the city centre on the square, called Masaryk's Square. The square lined with palaces and houses of the former '*Ringbürger*' and '*Waldbürger'* (wealthy burghers and mine-owners) took pride in high towers, the fountain built in the Art Nouveau decorative style, a lot of greenery and the Baroque Marian column. The square was a multifunctional space visited by the inhabitants of the city and the neighbouring villages as well as by numerous visitors and tourists, attracted to Banská Bystrica by historical monuments, natural beauties, sport opportunities and an old proverb: '*To live in Bystrica, and after the death in heaven is best'*. Although the urban population was differentiated by the social strata and by professional, ethnic and religious affiliation that was reflected also in the spatial structure of the city, it was the city centre and the conditions in the new democratic state that had impact on urban life and integration of the heterogeneous urban population.

Typical example of regular contacts of the city dwellers was the daily evening promenade. It was a place of meetings and visual contacts of different groups of urban population regardless of the social, ethnic or religious affiliation. The German greeting *'Küss die Hand'*, the Hungarian '*Kezét csókolom'*, the Latin *'Servus'* and the Slovak *'Dobry den'* that could be heard in the promenade, reflected the multicultural nature of the city. The promenade performed an important function of social integration. As respondents mention: '*I remember common walks and discussions of the Catholic priest, the Protestant vicar and the Rabbi. They served as a perfect example of tolerant communication for all urban inhabitants of various religions and ethnicities'* (J.M., 1921). '*We have never distinguished between us who were who – Catholic, Lutheran, Jewish, Slovak, Czech, Hungarian. If there was a theatre or ball in the Catholic club, we all went there, if in the Lutheran club, we met there. We were brought up in everyday tolerance both in the family and at school'* (E.B., 1913).

In the inter-war period the small city had over hundred and fifty restaurants, pubs, wine bars and cafes, and almost two hundred interest associations, clubs and charities for all groups of inhabitants. The trade and commerce also contributed to the diversity of the place – craftsmen and farmers from the whole Slovakia regularly visited the city markets.

Dominik Skutecky
Market in Banska Bystrica, 1889, oil

The democratic atmosphere of the Czechoslovak Republic allowed the people of all ethnic, religious or social groups to participate in public manifestations, celebrations, religious processions, parades and political demonstrations (Bitusikova 1995). This communication started to be tense at the end of the 1930s when separatist movement calling for the independent Slovak Republic was getting stronger and the Nazi ideology was spreading throughout Europe. On 14 March 1939, the Slovak Republic was established. The regime of the president Jozef Tiso compromised itself by collaborating with the Nazis. The political situation and the Second World War had a strong impact on everyday life of the city inhabitants. The former openness and sociableness was replaced by fear, uncertainty and suspiciousness. The life of the Jewish community was violently interrupted by numerous restrictions and after May 1942 deportations. Several Christian

families in the city and in the nearby villages offered sanctuary to the Jews, but only a few of them survived. On 29 August 1944, Banská Bystrica became the centre of the Slovak National Uprising - the biggest anti-fascist event in Central Europe during the Second World War. Although the uprising was stifled by the Nazis in October 1944, it has been one of the most important events in the modern Slovak history. The short after-war period was an era of the restoration of the Czechoslovak Republic and strengthening the position of communists. In February 1948 the Communist Party took over the political power in the country that was the end of democracy in Czechoslovakia.

The period of 1918 - 1948 (with the exception of the World War II) were the years of a democratic regime with its freedom, plurality and heterogeneity. Democracy allowed the inhabitants of all groups to express themselves freely, to participate in various events or associations that led to the city growth, development and diversity in everyday life. Rise of Fascist ideology and the World War II violently disrupted previous tolerant co-existence of the heterogeneous urban population.

The period 1948 - 89

After the political and socio-economic communist take-over in 1948 the face of the city changed dramatically. The heart of the city – the main square was renamed from the Masaryk's Square that symbolized the former democracy, to the Slovak National Uprising Square. Residential houses and palaces on the square were taken from original private owners and given to the state

ownership during the nationalization. Almost all historical buildings served as shops and offices, the backs of the houses and yards were settled by the Roma and the inhabitants of lower strata, which completely changed the spatial structure of the city. The colours of everyday diversity disappeared. This way of planned urban development, forced by communist ideology and leading to breaking the former social networks, was similar in all East and Central European cities.

The main goal of the communists was to suppress any diversity that was a threat to the regime. All kinds of means were used to reach homogeneity and to celebrate the new ideology of 'equality'. New monumental symbols appeared (memorial dedicated to the Soviet Army, statues of Lenin or other Soviet symbols) and replaced older, mainly religious symbols.[4] Open public spaces like the city square, attracting various groups of urban population, became a potential place for spontaneous or organised protest against the communist regime, and therefore were considered dangerous for the new communist power. The socio-integration function of the city centre was intentionally limited and replaced by the traffic function that became highly dominant and had a negative influence on the quality of life and environment on the square. The square became a traffic junction for public transport. The life disappeared from the centre each day after the working hours. The look of the square was grey, dull and sad, and so was the look of the people visiting it. They all had to look for any social and cultural activities in other parts of the city or – more often - in private, at their homes. The only occasions when the square was full of people were politically motivated and organised political rituals - manifestations (May

Day, anniversaries of the October Revolution and the Slovak National Uprising). This situation lasted until 1989 when the communist regime in the country collapsed in the '*velvet revolution'*.

The period after 1989

In November 1989 the city centre in Banská Bystrica (like squares in other cities of the former Czecho-Slovakia) was filled with thousands of people hoping for the new future. After long years of totalitarian regime the square became a place of free manifestation of democratic ideas. We all were participating in November events holding our symbolic keys to the new era, full of belief and desire to change the future. Political and socio-economic changes were soon reflected in the city life. After restitutions, most of buildings were given back to the former owners or sold to private companies and banks. Many houses were transformed into luxurious private shops, banks, restaurants and cafes. Reconstruction of the backs and yards of the houses and their transformation into residential flats brought life into the city centre. The spatial structure of the city has changed again – while before November 1989 it was only Roma who inhabited the houses on the square, after restitutions these houses became affordable only for a new post-communist bourgeoisie and became the symbol of prestige, social status and wealth.

An important step to revitalise the city life was the complete reconstruction of the main square in 1994. Within five months the square changed from the traffic crossroads to the pedestrian zone with a new paving, lamps, newly

planted trees, benches, drinking fountains and lots of garden cafes and restaurants. The most dramatic was the change of the people and their attitude towards the city. The inhabitants, so indifferent to their city in the communist past, have welcomed the change with a feeling of great euphoria. Life and colours were back on the square, which has been transformed into a large open-air stage for various social and cultural activities. The characteristic feature of the change has been growing diversity in the streets of the city. In the daytime the square is now full of tourists, people who come to relax, meet business partners or friends, old people sitting on benches and watching life, mothers with babies, young people on their rendez-vous. The evening promenade has revived again. People enjoy coming to the square for a walk, having dinner in an outside restaurant and becoming a part of the dynamic street life. In summer also numerous cultural programmes and festivities attract people to the square (concerts, theatres, festivals, craft markets etc.). After years of limited opportunities people slowly learn how to express themselves freely and to enjoy life spontaneously, without fear of being watched by the secret police.

Democracy, however young, has contributed to revitalisation of urban life, but it wouldn't be enough. You have to create incentives and build opportunities for social interactions. Reconstruction of the square has reinforced local identity and integrity of the inhabitants. On the other hand, the new square has also become a symbol of internationalization, westernization and Europeanism, especially for the middle-aged and young people who compare the city with other cities in Europe: *"When I sit in the garden cafe on the square, I feel like I am in Paris."* The dream to return to

Europe and to live '*western*' way of life, however idealist it was, is coming true. The survey made among the city inhabitants, the media interviews with the people, and my participant observation support this statement. The square is now a place where the inhabitants get into contact with diverse social types, subcultures, values, various manners of dressing and behavior that leads to acceptance of social, cultural and ethnic heterogeneity.

Diversity may bring also tensions. Not everyone welcomes it easily. After years of homogeneity and forced equality people need time to get used to more colourful face of the city. New political situation - democracy in a young independent state – has awaken old ghosts of nationalism and intolerance that show their teeth from time to time, mainly in the media. Distrust to the 'others' is a Central European heritage from the complex historic development in various regimes and states.

Conclusion

The case study of the city of Banska Bystrica in the light of different historic periods and political systems proves that it is only democracy that brings and allows diversity, development and growth of the city and its life. The material reveals the points of coherence between ideologies and socio-political systems, and the possibilities for social communication, contacts and activities of city inhabitants in different historical periods. The period 1918 - 1948 was an era of the democratic Czechoslovak Republic. The democratic spirit of the state reflected in diversity of social contacts in

various clubs, cultural and religious events, taverns, pubs, restaurants etc., and allowed the city inhabitants to openly express their views, to use their potential for the benefit, growth and development of the city.

The communist period of the years 1948 - 1989 disrupted integrity of the population and limited motivation and any opportunities for creativity and innovation. The communist ideology systematically suppressed social communication on public places for fear of any mass protest against the communist power. It tried to break all social networks and social activities of the inter-war period. Instead of diversified social contacts, activities leading to the isolation in the family or in the work team (in the so called *brigades of socialist work*) were supported. The multifunctionality of public spaces was purposely replaced with the dominant traffic function, which condemned them to become places of no social importance.

The 'velvet revolution' in 1989 has caused revolutionary political, economic, social and cultural changes in the society and each city of Slovakia. The revitalisation of the city centre in Banska Bystrica has reawaken the city inhabitants from the previous lethargy and reinforced their local identity, which is important for the community life, motivation, responsibility, creativity and innovation leading to the city development. A number of urban studies show how significant is an integration role of public spaces that stimulate citizen's participation in various activities. In the case of Banska Bystrica, like in other revitalised post-communist cities, enthusiastic approach of the city inhabitants to the square transformation has resulted from their vivid memory of the grey and stereotyped life during

communism, which is in sharp contrast with the diversified life in democracy. As an university student puts it: *The square has become a pearl of the city. Walking on the square makes everyone happy and even romantic. It is now a square without buses and without people rushing home. There are the same people here, yet different, in a different mood. I am happy to live in this city'* (M.S., 1980). It seems that diversity and pluralism can flourish only in democratic conditions, but it also needs incentives, instruments and tools like carefully planned and organised public spaces that are motivating and stimulating for everyone and lead to positive identification of the people with the city where they live.

Footnotes

[1] Throughout its history, Slovakia has often been on the crossroads of various cultures and languages. For almost a thousand years it was a part of the multi-ethnic Hungarian Monarchy and from 1918 to 1992 a part of the Czechoslovak Republic (with the exception of the World War II period). In January 1993 after the 'velvet divorce' from the Czechs Slovakia started to write a new chapter of its history as an independent state. Demographically, Slovakia is a state of 5.3 million inhabitants. 85% of the inhabitants claim Slovak nationality, 10% Hungarian nationality, another minority groups include Czechs (1%), Roma (1.7% according to the census, but estimated number is 10%), Ruthenians – Ukrainians and Germans. As to the religion, 69% of the inhabitants are the Catholics, 10% the Protestants (Evangelical church and denominations), another religions include the Greek-Catholics, Orthodox and Jewish.

[2] Banska Bystrica has almost 100.000 inhabitants (in 2002) and in Slovakia it belongs to medium-sized cities (fifth largest city in Slovakia).

[3] Some parts of this paper were published in: Bitusikova, A.: Transformations of the city center in the light of ideologies. International Journal of Urban and Regional research, Vol. 22. No 4, 1998, p. 614 – 622.

[4] The best example of these activities was the transfer of the Baroque Marian column with a bust of Virgin Mary from the centre of the square to the less visible castle area. The reason was strictly ideological: the Soviet communist leader Nikita Chrushchew was expected to visit the city in summer 1964 and it was not appropriate to present religious symbols on the central square. Paradoxically, the ideological reason served a good thing. Transferring the column from a busy and polluted city square to a quiet place has helped to its protection.

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