URBAN IDENTITIES AND DIVERSITIES: A KEY TO THE RENAISSANCE OF THE CITY?[1]

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Abstract:

This paper looks at factors of urban identity forming in a contemporary city. It studies diversity as one of the characteristics of the city and its relation to identity as the other side of diversity. It explores urban strategies that focus on the regeneration of historic city centres and revitalisation of urban life and urban identities as well as on attracting visitors and investors to the city. This emphasis on cultural planning is an important part of urban development strategies that aim at the support and growth of local economies. This paper presents a case study of the middle-size city of Banska Bystrica (Central Slovakia). It identifies and analyses six factors that contribute to urban identity construction in the city and examines hetero-images – reflections of the image of the city in the minds and memories of visitors. In the final part the paper focuses on studying the local government approach to revitalisation of urban life in Banska Bystrica.

Keywords: *city, identity, Europe, Banská Bystrica*

Introduction

"What is the city but the people?" This sentence written by William Shakespeare remains true throughout the whole long history of the city and can be taken as a starting point for a social anthropological study of the city. The city is home for millions of people who choose to live in this open and diversified

society. It is understood in many, often contradictory ways: it may be loved, celebrated and glorified, or hated and damned. The main characteristics of each city can be summarised in three words expressed in 1938 by one of the classics of urban theory, Louis Wirth: size, density and heterogeneity (Wirth, 1938). The city is also a physical environment with specific forms of social, economic and institutional organisation and with a complex system of public and private spaces. It is an urban setting where diverse identities meet and collide. The challenge for each city is to create inclusive spaces that can address different identities and fulfill the needs of all the segments of a heterogeneous population. As Socrates said, "Our purpose in founding the city was not to make any one class in it surpassingly happy, but to make the city as a whole as happy as possible." (Plato, translated by Lindsay, 1957) The question for an urban anthropologist is what is it that makes people happy in one city and unhappy in another; why do people prefer one place to another; what is hidden behind the soul of a city and love for a particular city. Are the objects of a positive relation to a city and identity-forming elements streets, squares, buildings, institutions, shops, parks, a river, festivals, customs, theatres, universities, smells, sounds (silence), rhythm, memories...? A positive relation of the inhabitants to their city and positive identification with the city reflect the health, energy, dynamics and vitality of the city. However, one should never forget that both the people who love their city and the objects of their love change in the course of time. Streets and buildings change; the structure of the population changes; memories and collective memory – the reservoir of knowledge, experience, images, feelings and attitudes (Kilianova, 1996) – change, too. It is in memory that history and the present meet. This element of memory is an important factor of identity construction Urban identity-forming is influenced by numerous factors of a material and spiritual nature. The city is a colourful mosaic of people, cultures, subcultures and diverse lifestyles that have an impact on the attitude of each individual towards his/her city. Urban inhabitants form their identity through various pictures, images and symbols. Since the 1980s the development in many contemporary cities has led to revitalisation of urban identities, initiated by local governments and private enterprises. The characteristic feature of this process is the shift from the focus on material and symbolic aspects of the city to the support of urban culture, diversity and creativity organised in numerous public spaces. Movement for rediscovery and revitalisation of urban traditions and rituals, organisation of urban festivals and parades, reconstruction of historic city centres – these are activities that create space for collec-

tive identity construction of the urban inhabitants and at the same time aim at attracting tourists and investors (De la Pradelle, 1996).

Revitalisation of cities, city cultures and identities and creation of new urban images and symbols as the means of marketing the city have developed in two ways described by Bianchini and Schwengel (1991) as "Americanisation" and "Europeanisation". Americanisation means reconstruction and transformation of redundant, decaying urban sites into spectacular spaces with theme-park entertainment, markets, restaurants and leisure shopping, usually located on a waterfront (e.g. Boston, New York's South Street Seaport, London – Docklands or Sydney – Darling Harbour; Stevenson, 2003: 100-101). Europeanisation has been developing since the 1980s. It focuses on urban cultural planning and cultural policy and its main objective is local cultural development and support for local creativity as a basis for strategies to revive local economies (Stevenson 2003: 104). The key element of this approach is the rhetoric of local difference and diversity. Initiatives focus on identification and promotion of local distinctiveness, specific features of the city and through creative practice the nurturing of a positive image and a sense of place and belonging (Stevenson 2003: 104). The process of cultural revitalisation and revival of collective urban identities in European cities is a top-down process influenced and managed by policies of cities, regions, nations and European transnational institutions. The Council of Europe and the European Union initiate many activities to promote the process. The most famous one is the European Union competition for the European City of Culture that has been organised since 1985 as a result of an agreement by the Council of Ministers of Culture. Following its results it is evident that a number of cities that were awarded this title profited from the initiative. They not only transformed and revitalised physical spaces in the city, but they also had an impact on the relation of urban inhabitants to their city, their identity, responsibility and interest in participation in the governance.

The city can be understood as a complex of identities and diversities. Identity and diversity play an important role in contemporary urban strategies. While in the 1970s–1990s urban studies emphasised mainly inequalities, differences and spatial segregation from the point of view of different categories (ethnicity, race, religion, gender, sexual orientation, social stratification, etc.), since the 1990s terminology has shifted to the issues of diversity and differentiation where diverse identities meet and mix and create a multilevel environment leading either to polarisation and fragmentation or to inclusion and integration. According to Stevenson it is the urban setting that is the place where diversity

is most evident and where the biggest freedom to be "different" exists. Cities are places where difference is both created and most likely to be tolerated (Stevenson 2003: 41). As Landry suggests, diversity in its many forms and broad understanding is the primary element of vibrant urban spaces and activities leading to visual stimulation (Landry 2006: 253). This fact is used in numerous development strategies of contemporary cities that build upon the rhetoric of local differences and celebration of urban diversity. Diversity is becoming a slave of urban marketing. Several urban-anthropological studies (e.g. Zukin, 1997; Marcuse, 2000; Davis, 1990) criticise neoliberal use and manipulation of the term diversity which is often presented by city representatives as an exotic and aesthetically attractive feature of the city and which is positively accepted unless it stands against free market or it points at inequality. On the one hand, urban authorities face pressure from minorities asking for support and promotion of their cultural needs (e.g. minority schools, clubs, media, festivals, political parties etc.). On the other hand, they feel pressure from investors and cultural tourism to create an image of the city as a centre of innovation, diversity and cultural activities and festivities for all. Urban diversity policies include creation of public spaces that are meeting points and places of social interaction for various groups. Following Worpole and Greenhalgh (1996, quoted by Shaw and MacLeod; 2000: 165), "the best public spaces have rhythms and patterns of use of their own, being occupied at different times by quite different groups, occasionally by almost everybody. Their attractiveness, flexibility, and pluralist sense of ownership make them very valuable features of urban life." Building of good quality urban public spaces that are places of integration and inclusion, create conditions for meeting of diverse identities and address often contradictory needs of different segments of the population remains a big challenge for contemporary cities (Beall, 1997).

"*Alive in Banská Bystrica, after death in heaven*": Factors of identity-forming in the city of Banská Bystrica

The following case study raises some issues concerning mechanisms that have an impact on identity-forming among the inhabitants of the city of Banská Bystrica (Slovakia).[2] It has been based on the results of qualitative research

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2   Banská Bystrica is situated in the middle of Central Slovakia in the Hron Valley, surrounded by several mountain ranges. It has almost 85,000 inhabitants (up to 100,000 in wider agglomeration) and it ranks among medium-sized cities (fifth largest city in Slovakia).

(face-to-face interviews and participant observation), and an analysis of archival documents, contemporary regional press and memoirs.

Urban life can be characterised by dynamics, openness, heterogeneity, diversity, greater tolerance, anonymity, mobility and more freedom that is well expressed in a German proverb "Stadt Luft macht frei" (*Urban air makes you feel free*). All these characteristics contribute to the creation of the image of the city as the basis for construction of urban identity. The concept of urban identity includes both identity of the city itself as well as local identity of its inhabitants. Images of the city are formed either as auto-images (auto-stereotypes) that are created in memory and mental maps of urban inhabitants or as heteroimages (hetero-stereotypes) described as reflections of the city in the memory of visitors.

Auto-images of the city

Each inhabitant of the city forms and remembers his/her own unique image of the city, which can differ from the one existing in the memory of visitors. The way people look at their city may be influenced by their social status, ethnic and religious affiliation, gender, age, physical and mental abilities, etc. From the results of the research in the city of Banská Bystrica we can say that auto-images that are the means and the result of the process of identification of each inhabitant with his/ her city are formed by different factors:[3]

1. Urban symbols (especially the coat-of-arms and its use at various official celebrations with local officials present.

2. Architecture, and urban structures and spaces (dominant architectural structures, buildings, streets, squares, neighbourhoods and other public objects and spaces) are among the most important phenomena of urban identity-forming. In Banská Bystrica, it is mainly the old architecture of the city centre that is the main aspect of identification of the inhabitants with their city. Following interviews with local residents, the reconstructed central square (The Square of the Slovak National Uprising) is considered the most significant public space. Its transformation in the 1990s contributed to the revitalisation of urban life and local identity. Ethnological research confirmed the importance of the central square in the life of the inhabitants in the past and at

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[3] Detailed analysis of identification factors was published in: BITUŠÍKOVÁ, Alexandra. 2003. Čo je mesto? (Mesto v predstavách jeho obyvateľov.) Český lid, 90 (3), s. 217-224.

present (Bitušíková, 1995; 1998), but it is particularly after the reconstruction in 1994 that the square became the real space of social integration attracting a diverse urban population. The inhabitants themselves feel that *"the square is a place that belongs to all"* (J. M., 1922). Its regeneration has reinforced local identity and pride among both young and old people. At the same time, it has become a symbol of internationalisation and a "return to Europe", especially for the younger generation, who compare the transformed city with other cities in Europe, as expressed by a respondent:

"*I am proud of our city now. When I sit on the terrace of the cafe on the square, it feels like being in Paris*" (J. B., 1974).

In addition to its integration and identification functions, the square with its several significant and most popular meeting points (the leaning tower, the statue of Virgin Mary, the fountain and the obelisk) is even considered by individual inhabitants a "magic" place, using the words of Pawlowska (1998). She describes as magic all urban spaces or objects that have a special, often emotional meaning for each or some inhabitants. These places may be insignificant from an outsider's view and usually differ from the ones celebrated in the tour-guides. They are *genia loci*, attracting residents by their atmosphere and promoting positive memories and emotions (Pawlowska, 1998: 31). These can be squares, parks, buildings, memorials, cafés, pubs, cemeteries, trees, etc. – places with a soul, taste, smell, light, sound or silence, favourite spaces for social contacts and communication. Every city resident has his/ her own "magic places" that play an important role in the memory (either individual or collective) and contribute to the creation of the individual unique image of the city and identity building.

3. Geographical and landscape features

Geography plays a strong identification function in the Banská Bystrica image. The city is situated in the picturesque valley of the Hron River, surrounded by several mountain ranges. For the inhabitants, it is mainly Urpín hill, the Hron River and the region of the Hron valley (*Pohronie*) that are part of local identity. All old and present tour guides describe the city as "the pearl of the Hron valley", "the city on the banks of the Hron River" or "the city under Urpín". During the period of the Slovak National Revival (19th century), Urpín hill was a meeting point of Slovak students who used to sing patriotic songs there (Hronské noviny, 13. 9. 1924). Urpín and the Hron are often mentioned in memoirs as places for romantic walks and first rendezvous.

„*For us students, Urpín was the hill of love. It was nicely lighted with won-*

derful paths; it is where we used to have rendezvous. We also used to walk on the promenade along the banks of the Hron River" (J. M., 1922).

Geographical names are now reflected in names of institutions or products representing or characterising the city (Urpín beer, the Urpín cinema, the Urpín and Hronka folklore ensembles, the Hron choir, the Hronka cheese shop, etc.).

4. Language (urban dialect; specific intonation; words that are characteristic of only one particular city; and frequent surnames and place names)

The Banská Bystrica language is a factor of identification both within the urban society itself and in communication situations outside the city. Words that are known only among the city inhabitants (e.g. *krepý*, which means dull, stupid), specific use of word endings and intonation that reminds one of singing are clear identification features of an inhabitant of Banská Bystrica. Local, often unofficial names of city quarters, spaces and objects reinforce a common sense of belonging to the city. They can be names of places or objects that no longer exist (or places with a new function) which live in collective memory even after long years (in Banská Bystrica e.g., places like "*u Kemov*" – a former pre-1939 Jewish department store, "*pri Leninovi*" – the space of a former statue of Lenin that was destroyed in 1990, "*pri KPŠ*" – a former political school, etc.).

5. Urban cultural and social events, festivals and rituals

Urban events and festivals play a significant role in identity-forming as well as in the creation of hetero–images. Since the 17th century the most famous event in Banská Bystrica has been the Radvaň market (*Radvanský jarmok)* that used to take place in the nearby neighbourhood of Radvaň (now part of the city). In 2007 it celebrated its 350th anniversary. Other events which are also well known outside the city have been the *Bystrica Bells* song contest; the *Banská Bystrica Bar* sports competition; the *Finex* financial fair*, The City Days* that celebrate the famous medieval mining history of the city (The Copper Banská Bystrica) and the celebration to commemorate the Slovak National Uprising (1944), the largest anti-Nazi uprising in Central Europe (The Insurgent Bystrica).

6. Memories, emotions, fantasies, passions, images and stereotypes

Memories, emotions, fantasies, passions, images and stereotypes are among the most vivid and strongest means of urban identification. The city is lived and experienced in the imagination of each individual in a different way. Stevenson (2003) describes it as the "imaginary city" which is the place of memory, culture, literature or anecdote compared to the real "physical" city consist-

ing of streets, buildings and footpaths (Stevenson, 2003: 113). Each individual connects the imaginary city with categories such as the place of birth, childhood, first love, family, home, happiness, security etc. Verbalisation of these feelings and emotions often reflects a positive relationship of the inhabitants to their city, pride, passion or nostalgic memory. Auto-images can be marked by overestimation of positives of the city when comparing it to other cities. Local patriotism of Banská Bystrica inhabitants is evident from their descriptions of the city as "the pearl of Slovakia", "the heart of Slovakia" and in an old proverb "Alive in Banská Bystrica, and after death in heaven."

Hetero-images of the city

Compared to auto-images of the city, created and often glorified by the inhabitants themselves, hetero-images may reflect different or contradictory characteristics. Banská Bystrica and its inhabitants are often described by outsiders as proud and haughty, and strong local patriotism is seen as superiority, as expressed in pejorative phrases: "genteel Bystrica" or "noble Bystrica" meant ironically, "haughty Bystricians" (die stolzen Neusohler"[4]), "greedy Bystrica" or "the greedy one near Zvolen".[5] These hetero-images reflect not only the outside view of the city and its inhabitants, but also the position of the city in a wider regional and national context and rival relations between the neighbouring cities of Banská Bystrica and Zvolen.

Hetero-images are created by visitors and inhabitants of other cities on the basis of a visit to the city or via information from media, guide books or other secondary sources. Good or bad media or a tour-guide image can have a significant impact on the development of tourism or investment flows. It can often differ from objective reality. If it becomes stereotyped, it can take years to improve the image of the city. When searching through online tour-guides, we can read: "*Connected to the outlying districts by some of the country's most precipitous railways, Banská Bystrica is also a handsome historic town in its own right – once you've made it through the tangled suburbs of the burgeoning cement and logging industries*" (www.travelotica.com). Reviews of visitors commenting on their visit to the city mention most often the main square as the place to remember ("*With the most attractive town square in the whole of Slovakia, and*

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4   Original old name of Banská Bystrica was Neosolium (Neusohl in German).
5   Zvolen is the nearest city to Banská Bystrica. Both cities have always been rivals and competitors, which is most evident at mutual sports matches or in anecdotes.

with lots to see and do, Banska Bystrica is one of the highlights of any visit to the region." [www.heartofeurope.co.uk]) and the Museum of the Slovak National Uprising, which attracts on the one hand with its exhibits explaining the most important event in modern Slovak history and on the other hand with its impressive architecture ("*it is unique architecturally – it looks a bit like a deep pan pizza sliced down the middle*" [www.ivebeenthere.co.uk]; or "*looking something like an intergalactic mushroom chopped in half* " [www.travelotica.com]). Opinions of foreign visitors sometimes reflect different views on the reconstruction of the historic centre from the ones of home residents. An American guide who used to come to Banská Bystrica with tourist groups before 1989 argues:

"I am sure that Banská Bystrica inhabitants are proud of their square now, but I am not very excited. It is nice that there are no cars there, but the space around the fountain looks like a subway stop. And why do shop-keepers hang clothes outside on the streets? It looks like the cheapest part of New York. I loved your old medieval square; it certainly needed reconstruction and some details now are lovely, but I am not sure I will ever bring tourists there – it looks like being at home, in the US" (H.C., 1937).

This example shows that what the local people embrace as beautiful, alive, diverse and "western-like" after years of the grey homogeneous looks of the square, some outside visitors mainly from the "West" may find it ordinary and no longer interesting.

Local government: creating and marketing the image of the city

Urban government, local authorities, institutions, travel agencies and other subjects representing the city inside and outside are crucial actors in forming the image and identity of the city. Through "place marketing" and various activities and practices they brand the city and present, sell and offer it to local residents and to visitors, tourists and investors. The policy of local cultural development plays an increasingly important role in many cities of the world. Emphasis is put on the support of an active and creative involvement of citizens in urban activities and their participation in the governance as the basis for the revival and diversification of local economies. Transformation of physical and symbolic urban spaces into places of interaction, integration and inclusion attracting diverse groups of population goes hand in hand with these strategies.

Regeneration of the city centre in Banská Bystrica started from the initiative of the mayor (an architect) in 1994 with the reconstruction of the main square (Bitušíková, 1995; 1998). Transformation of the physical space of the square from the former busy traffic zone into a vivid pedestrian zone also meant a radical transformation of the relation of the inhabitants to their city, and growth of their pride and interest in the city. It contributed to revitalisation of pluralistic and diversified urban life that was for almost half a century frozen under the communist ideology and socialist urbanism serving it. The efforts of the local government did not end with the transformation of the square. In 2006, reconstruction of the castle area (*Barbakan*) was finalised, which resulted in opening a spacious pedestrian zone connecting the square with the castle and offering many opportunities for relaxation and social interaction. Numerous urban newsletters and bulletins that are distributed to every household regularly publish articles on historic monuments, buildings, streets and other places of interest in order to revive the interest of each citizen in his/her city. They describe important spiritual places known as *terra sana maxima,* which are supposed to be a source of positive energy. According to geophysical surveys published in the journal Bystrický permon (March 2007), the most significant place of this kind in Banská Bystrica is the main square. It is described as *genium loci* – a space of local memory and collective information that has been for centuries the main area for gatherings and rallies and the witness of all important historic turning points including the fall of communism in November 1989. Whether one believes in such "scientific" explanations or not, the articles bringing information about the city landmarks make identification of the inhabitants with their city easier and stronger.

In addition to transition of physical structures, urban authorities put much effort into the revival of urban life in public places. They regularly organise and support dozens of cultural festivals and celebrations for local residents and outside visitors. The City Days are among the most important ones. They take place at the beginning of September together with the Radvaň market. The programme includes a historic parade in medieval costumes, a market with traditional handcrafts, and a number of cultural activities. In 2007, The City Days were organised in the spirit of the competition for the title "European City of Culture" in 2013. Each project competing for this title has to focus on a vision of sustainable revitalisation of the city; presentation of its historic, cultural and spiritual heritage; involvement of the city in European culture and close

cooperation with various European partners; empowerment of citizens and their participation in urban governance; and support of regionalism by closer collaboration between the city and the region. The Banská Bystrica project called "Banská Bystrica – BaBy born in Europe" should become an integral part of the strategy for social and cultural sustainable development of the city. Following the speeches of the mayor, the city chose the method of active and creative involvement of all citizens and cultural institutions as well as private businesses in the process (V Bystrici zaživa, October 2007). Both the mayor and the president of the region (VÚC Banská Bystrica) stated that joining the European competition has been a priority for the city and the region. The 2007 City Days were a rehearsal for the final stage of the project. The programme under the umbrella of the "European City of Culture" logo included a living picture of the famous painting "The market in Banská Bystrica" by Dominik Skutecky from the 19th century; revival of the coat-of-arms; concerts, theatres, artistic performances, and an international conference "Cultural policies of European cities for the next decade". In the press release the mayor said: "The most important thing is that each inhabitant of Banská Bystrica identifies positively with the city and will be proud of it. The ambition to receive the title of the European City of Culture has to be the ambition of every citizen of Banská Bystrica" (www.sme.sk/c/3463609, 31. 8. 2007).

In addition to the effort to compete for the title of the European City of Culture, urban authorities started the initiative to add Banská Bystrica to the UNESCO heritage list as a part of world industrial heritage.

Conclusions

This study examines mechanisms that have an impact on the construction of identity of urban inhabitants. Six factors are identified and analysed: urban symbols; architecture and urban structures and spaces; geographical and landscape features; language; urban festivals and rituals; and emotions, memories, images and stereotypes. Auto-images as reflections of local inhabitants and hetero-images as reflections of outsiders are part of the image-making of each city. The developments towards reinforcement of urban identities and at the same time support for tolerance of diversity are an integral component of the trend towards regeneration of cities and their creative and economic potential. Globalisation is the main engine behind this trend. It stimulates competition in all spheres of life from economic to social and cultural ones, and – despite

the opinions of all opponents – it makes cities invest in preservation and promotion of their own specificities and cultural heritage if they want to be winners in global competition. The process of revitalisation of cities is supported by European, national, regional and local institutions and self-governments. The middle-sized Central European city of Banská Bystrica joined the process in an active, dynamic way, expressed mainly through its effort to win the title of The European City of Culture in 2013. The local self-government is the main initiator of the new urban strategy that built upon the promotion of urban culture and its unique features as a crucial part of urban planning. This strategy corresponds with the development in other European cities in which cultural policy meets urban planning with the objective of creating cities where inhabitants will feel safe and happy, and of attracting visitors, investors and highly qualified and skilled professionals (knowledge workers) who look for dynamic centres of creativity and innovation. Urban cultural heritage, architecture, arts, cultural activities and vivid and diversified urban life – these are domains that play a crucial role in the renaissance of the city, and in strategies of the economic, social and cultural sustainability of the city. It is important to balance the top-down process led by policy-makers and influenced by global forces with the bottom-up process that aims at strengthening the local identity of urban citizens and involving them in the governance. Managed and "soft" integration of local and global processes, practices and influences can lead to growth and prosperity of the city and contribute to better coexistence and a good quality of life for all segments of the urban population.

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