

Alexandru Calcatinge (Ed.)

Critical Spaces

Contemporary Perspectives in Urban,
Spatial and Landscape Studies

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CRITICAL SPACES

Contemporary Perspectives in Urban,
Spatial and Landscape Studies

edited by

Alexandru Calcatinge

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“the researcher's neutrality is solely an illusion because they must be totally involved in the work they carry out which requires their scientific and spiritual devotion”

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<i>Alexandru Calcatinge</i>	
Contemporary Critical Spaces.....	9

ARCHITECTURE AND BUILT ENVIRONMENT

<i>Alexandru Calcatinge</i>	
The Critical Space as Education.....	13
<i>Josep Muntañola Thornberg, Magda Saura Carulla</i>	
Architecture and Culture.....	31
<i>Sibel Yasemin Özgan, Saadet Zeynep Bacinoğlu, Emirhan Coşkun</i>	
The Potentials of Rule Based Approaches in Design Formation Processes. .	51

URBAN AND SPATIAL PLANNING

<i>Ágness Erőss</i>	
Contested Spaces. Ethnic Visibility in the City of Oradea.....	69
<i>Caroline Sohie</i>	
Spaces for a World in Transit.....	89
<i>Marina Neagu</i>	
Spatial Planning Challenges for Enhancing Economic Resilience of Small Towns.....	109
<i>Maurizio Carta</i>	
Re-Imagine, Re-Cycle, Re-Load. New Urbanism for the City of Future....	131
<i>Jani Kozina, Mimi Urbanc</i>	
Contemporary Processes in Peripheral Rural Areas in Slovenia.....	147
<i>Vera Graovac Matassi</i>	
Contemporary Urban Changes in Croatia.....	167
<i>Julia Neuschmid, Ljubica Gajević, Manfred Schrenk, Wolfgang Wasserburger</i>	
The Blind's Critical Space and the Role of Modern ICT.....	179

CULTURAL LANDSCAPE STUDIES

<i>Alexandru Calcatinge</i>	
The Cryptic Path of Cultural Landscape Studies.....	207
<i>Arthur Spiegler, Brigitte Macaria</i>	
Green Belt Landscapes and Small Towns.....	215
<i>Paul Groth</i>	
Key Processes of Cultural Landscape Change.....	237
<i>Phil Turner</i>	
Citizen Involvement in Landscape Character Assessment.....	255
<i>Wilfried E. Schreiber, Raularian Rusu</i>	
Historical Cultural Landscapes as Critical Spaces in Romania.....	275
About the Authors.....	289

Contested Spaces. Ethnic Visibility in the City of Oradea

Ágness Eróss

The city is a place that provides anonymity, at the same time serves as a surface to express opinions, ideologies, differentiating features, both for individuals and groups. Additionally, city offers place for intermingling, on the contrary can turn to be an arena challenged by contesting groups and imaginations about public space. In case of traditional multi-ethnic cities with rich cultural and architectural heritage in Central-Eastern Europe these struggles often emerge upon the question: who owns the place or who is visible in the urban space? And by “who” in many cases one should understand ethnic group living in the settlement. Since the second half of the 19th century, nationalization of public space has become widely employed tool for any political power to symbolically express its ownership over a given territory. There are a great variety of frequently applied methods starting from changing street names and commemorative statues/inscriptions until replacing old buildings (even whole districts) with new ones, promoting and embodying the new regime. While for the actual group who is in position of power the aim is to clarify their leading role, for a minority group visibility in public space can be considered as a signal of existence. Present paper aims to show how the symbolic appropriation of public space by changing street names has taken shape in Oradea (Nagyvárad in Hungarian), a traditionally multicultural town in the boundary of Hungary and Romania.

Introduction

Central Eastern Europe is traditionally multicultural, multi-ethnic, multi-lingual and religiously diverse region, where the state border does not coincide with the ethnic boundaries. This results in the presence of autochthonous ethnic minority communities living en masse or dispersed in nation states all around the region. The relation between majority society and such autochthonous minorities living in their territories is loaded with conflict in numerous different levels. Mutually committed nationalistic acts and historical grievances are emerging topics on state level discourses influencing local and interpersonal relations as well. On the other hand, the existence and situation of the minority communities are commonly used tools of political interest. Especially in times of economic or political hardship ‘playing the minority card’ (draw attention to the real or sometimes rather magnified problem where given minorities can be ‘blamed’ by the majority society or ‘rescued’ by the mother nation) is often to be found in political toolbar.

One evergreen topic of such conflicts is the visibility of minorities. Visib-

ility in that sense means the spatial representation of minority including the display of multilingual street signs or settlement names through position of minority language in official administration until free operation of any cultural act or tradition.

Naturally, spatial representation of the community and access to public space plays different role in majority and minority communities' life. For the minority visibility serves as glue: it strengthens the intra-group cohesion and broadcast a more or less simplified picture about the community. At the same time it proves the existence of the minority group in front of the outside world. This is what makes the renovation of a church, the maintenance of a minority school or the organization of a cultural event important: it is a symbol of the presence and emphasizes faith in future existence. Following this logic, street names in a multicultural-multiethnic environment reflects the contemporary situation among different communities. In a less tolerant regime visible signs and inscriptions of a minority group may fall victim to the homogenization intentions of the majority. Although the legal framework is usually established to regulate the application and visibility of minority languages (it is connected to the ratio of minority citizens living in a given settlement) there are plenty of examples how the execution is hampered or stalled. Under such circumstances the visibility of ethnic and cultural symbols and inscriptions becomes part of a power struggle between the majority and minority. In a wider sense this issue centres around the question who owns the space; and challenges democracy concerning to right of freedom of speech and representation and access to urban space.

Present article aims to show episodes of ethnic visibility in Oradea, a town situated in western Romania with rich multicultural heritage. The research focused on street names: how those become one of the major topics of ethnic visibility and how the contemporary power makes attempts to control the urban space by renaming it.

Why street names matter?

After physically occupying a territory political power makes effort to seize control over it by expanding its symbolic power over the given space as well. The aim of symbolic space appropriation strategies is to clarify who the owner of the territory is, both for locals and outsiders (Bodó, Bíró, 2000). In that sense (re)naming a street is one of the generally applied instruments of emphasizing symbolic power over a given space: it is evidence that the owner has the “power to consecrate or reveal things that are already there” (Bourdieu 1989, 23p.) This is especially true in case of commemorative street names which intend to communicate the ideology and interpretation of history of the given group.

Moreover, street names are substantial in symbolic struggle: since they have a clear practical function (orientation) people use them in everyday situations, therefore only by mentioning a street name it becomes part of ordinary conversations and indirectly makes the official readings of history and ideology embedded into social interactions. Consequently street names “mediate between political elites and ‘ordinary’ people.” (Azaryahu 2009, 54p.) Since the birth of nationalism the previously ethnic neutral designations have been replaced by the names connected to the ethnic based concept of a given nation, as the possessor of the space. As Barth noted (1969) in the process of ethnic identity formation especially those characteristics play important role which point out the boundary of „us” and „them”, this way enhancing separation and emphasizing distinctiveness of a given group. Thus, in case more ethnic communities live in the same place tensions may occur over the symbolic appropriation of the space. In this sense, the urban space, its formation, next to/instead of practical standpoints can easily become the field of power struggle between ethnic groups, where the majority dominates the relationship. In parallel, the minority group may keep alive an ‘other’, alternative urban space which contributes to the existence of a ‘doubled world’ (Barna, 2000). In this complex relation-system the act of naming a street, placing a commemorative tablet or erecting a church all have some significance beyond its practical function: it might become the subject of power struggle between ethnic groups.

The research site, Oradea is situated along the Hungarian-Romanian state and ethnic boundary. The autochthonous citizens are proud of its long history, rich culture and great religious and cultural diversity, and how they put it the “peaceful co-existence” of ethnic groups.

Visibility of ethnicity in a multi-ethnic city, the case of Oradea/Nagyvárad

Ethnic and geopolitical changes in Oradea

During the 20th century, Oradea passed through several changes of state power, which influenced considerably the ethnic structure and the image of the city. Before 1919 Oradea situated almost in the centre of the Hungarian Kingdom, it was one of the most prosperous cities in the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. The city had a predominant Hungarian majority (about 90%, including the mainly Hungarian speaking Jewish communities) during the period of the Monarchy, while the Romanians represented about 5% of the total population. The third important ethnic-religious group were the Jews (20–24% according to religion), who had mainly Hungarian and German mother tongue (Table 1). This was the golden era of Oradea: excellent figures of both Hungarian (Endre Ady) and Romanian (Iosif Vulcan) literature lived in the town. The wealthy elite and the city council erected new, art nouveau palaces, while the theatre was designed by Fellner and Helmer, well-known architects all around the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. The architectural heritage is admired until today and stands as an evidences of an elegant past. Right before WWI Oradea was called as “Paris by river Körös”.

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
2011e	196,367	67.6	23.1	0.2	0.1	1.1	7.9

Legend: m=mother tongue; e=ethnicity; ..=no data.

Table 1. Ethnic structure of population of Oradea/Nagyvárad between 1880 and 2011 (%). Source: Varga, 1999

After WWI, Romania obtained Oradea, which became the seat of Bihor County. The new Hungarian-Romanian state border was established near the western edge of the city. Hungarians still formed the majority, but the share of Romanians and the Jews (latter ethnic category established newly) has increased (Fleisz, 2005). The hectic interwar period (most of the energy consumed by establishing the state bureaucracy) and economic downturn only allowed maintaining the conditions in the built environment.

After the second Vienna Award in 1940, North Transylvania (including Oradea) became the part of Hungary again. As a consequence of the wartime events (e.g. mass forced migrations, changing power situation of ethnic groups, and discrimination of Jews) the overwhelming majority of the population declared themselves Hungarian again at the 1941 census.

The Hungarian rule lasted only four years, the Soviet and Romanian troops captured Oradea in 1944 and Northern Transylvania got back to Romania. Due to the Holocaust in 1944, the Jewish population was deported and only 37% returned (Remember, 1985).

During the communism, the proportion of Hungarians decreased due to mass colonisation of Romanians in the frame of the state-controlled socialist urbanization. The socialist urbanization and the favourable demographic characteristics of the Romanian newcomers resulted that by around 1973 Romanians became the biggest ethnic group in Oradea (Varga, 1999). Since that time the mayor always has been Romanian. As Oradea remained border town, there was only limited financial investment in the city, which contributed to the survival of the remarkable art nouveau palaces.

The collapse of the socialist regime and the general economic decline resulted in significant out migration of Hungarians. Although in the last ten years Oradea went through positive economic changes, this once prosperous town has not managed to seize back its former regional leading position. Nowadays Oradea is a municipality, the seat of Bihor County with almost two-hundred thousand citizens. According to the last census data 23% of the inhabitants declared Hungarian ethnicity, while 67% was the ratio of Romanians.

Street names in Oradea

As a general phenomenon we can say that each regime made changes regarding street names. Moreover, renaming streets was among the first acts of new regimes. There is plenty of literature available on the relationship of geopolitical changes and renaming of streets. Excellent case studies revealed

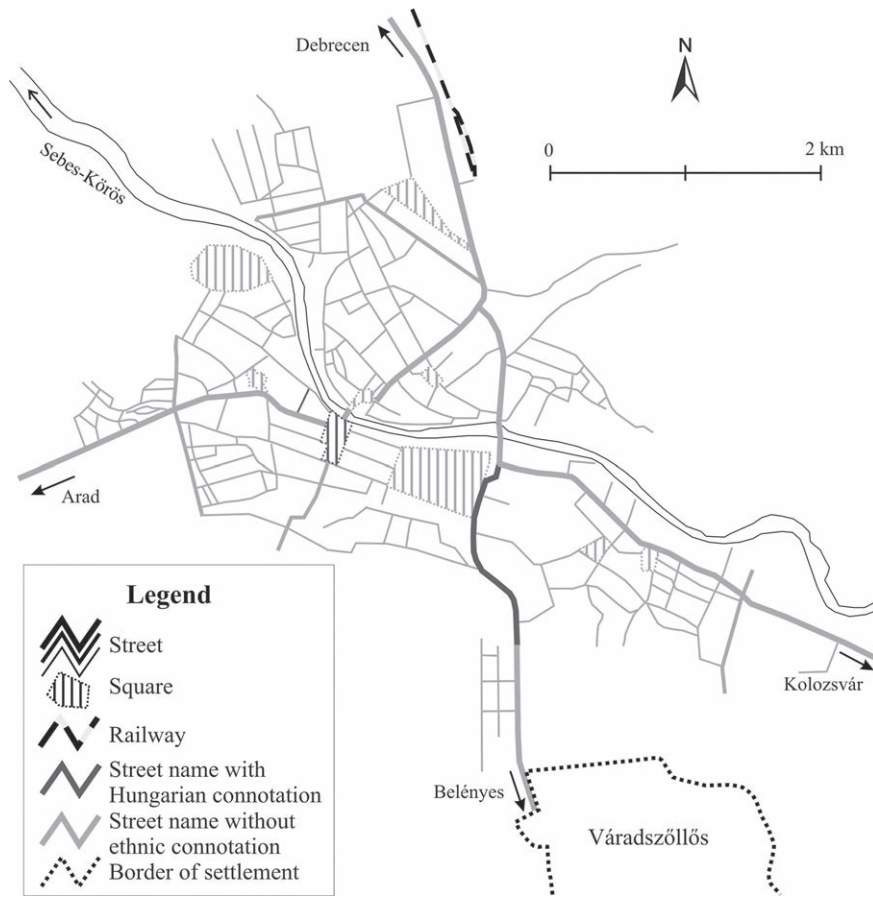
the street name changes following political transformations in Berlin (Azaryahu, 1997), Bucharest (Light et al., 2002) or in Budapest (Palonen, 1993). Researchers agree that street names are the easiest element of cultural landscape to be changed and make it part of everyday spatial practice, at the same time it is still efficient in forming cultural memory.

The case of Oradea offers a great example to study how regime changes are followed by shifts in street names. By analysing data from maps printed out in the last two hundred years a database was built up. Street names were evaluated according to their ethnic affiliation and three groups were created (Romanian, Hungarian or ethnically neutral street names). The category of ethnically neutral street names was applied for those names that are not connected directly neither of the ethnic groups.

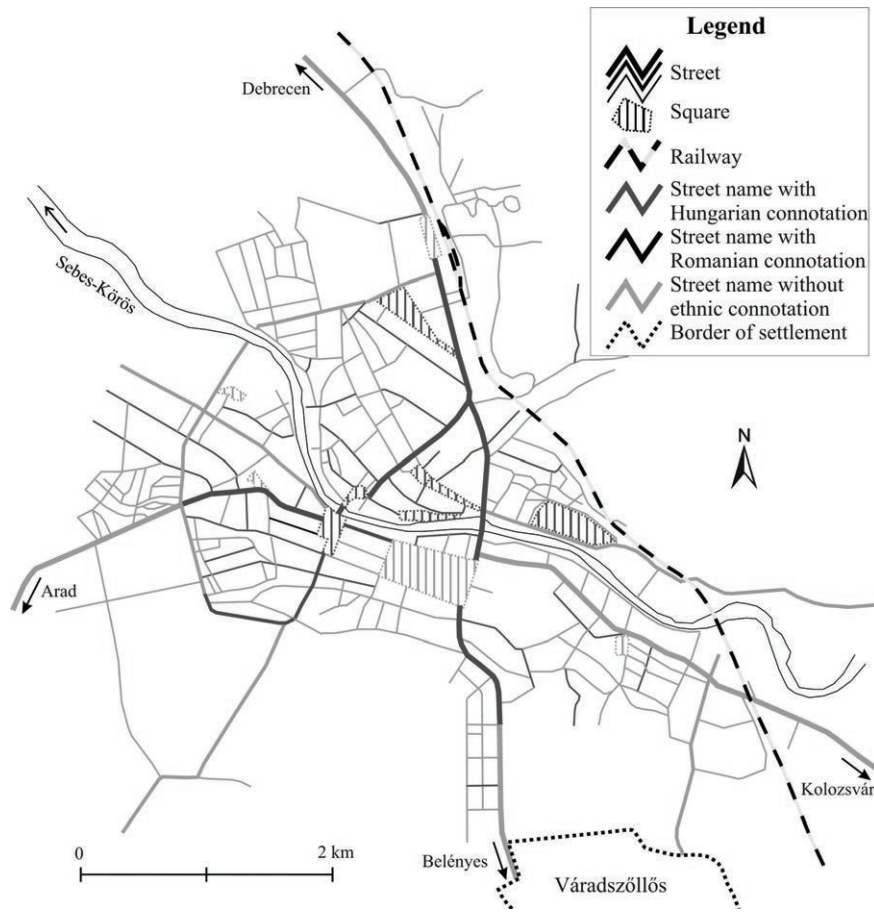
In the last 150 years the number of streets has increased from 160 to 739 in Oradea. There are only three, ethnically neutral names, which could survive at least two changes of state power, while none of the names lasted throughout the 20th century.

Till the end of the 19th century street names were natural, motivated names in Oradea, similarly to the contemporary trends. It means that about half of the streets were named after their characteristic (big, short, wide) or the institution and function found in the street (bath, brickmaker, Capuchin, nun etc.) (Picture 1).

Later, with the spreading of the nationalism, the name of settlements and streets started to become nationalized. This was the time of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, when the Hungarian nationalism reached its peak. This resulted in increasing amount of streets renamed after mostly Hungarian historical persons (e.g. kings, politicians). The share of the street names with Hungarian connotation coincides approximately with the share of the Hungarian population, while there were only two streets named after Romanians (Picture 2).



Picture 1: Street names in Oradea in 1859 (source: author's edit)



Picture 2. Street names in Oradea in 1902. (Source: author's edit)

World War I and the following events, when Transylvania (included Oradea) was annexed to Romania turned this processes to the opposite direction. Since that time, the share of street names with ethnic connotation has never gone under 30% (Table 2) and most of them were named after historical persons canonized in Romanian history. In the interwar period new districts were built up mainly for Romanian colonists, which contributed that the number of streets had doubled. This gave the chance to expand the patriotic-national naming practice, which was intended to prove the ownership of Oradea. Among the early arrangements next to the order of bilingual official and shop inscriptions the so called ‘nationalization’ of street names came into force in 1919/20 (Fleisz, 2000). In that time the canonized Romanian historical persons, politicians and the Romanian royal family could be found among the new names. The Romanian related names were located in the central parts of the city, while some suburbs were dominated by neutral names. The main roads and squares also had Romanian names.

Year	Total	Romanian connotation	Hungarian connotation	Ethnically neutral	Without name
1859	160	0	1,9	80	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

Table 2. The number and ethnic connotation of street names in Oradea/Nagyvárad, 1859–2006 (%). Source: Erőss, Á., Tátrai, P. 2010

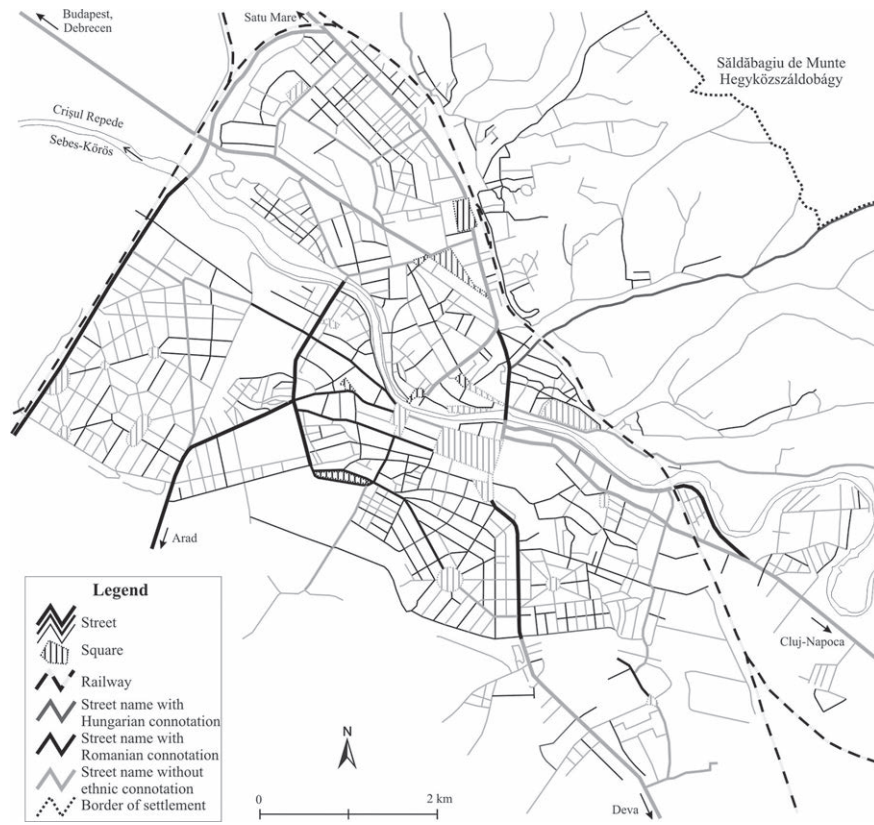
During the four years of the Hungarian authority in 1940–44, a revision took place in case of street names as well. Hungarian street names dominated the urban space (52%) while only three Romanian related names could survive. Most of the streets had unmotivated names and some of them reflected Hungary’s actual geopolitical orientation (e.g. Hitler, Mussolini and Horthy). In this period, the number of mostly unmotivated geographical names started to increase, of which many were intended to support the revisionist aims of Hungary (e.g. Pozsony [Bratislava], Temesvár [Timișoara]).

The history of the Romanian communism can be shared into two periods regarding the characteristic of political system. During the first era (1947-1958) – thanks to the idea of internationalism – the formerly meticu-

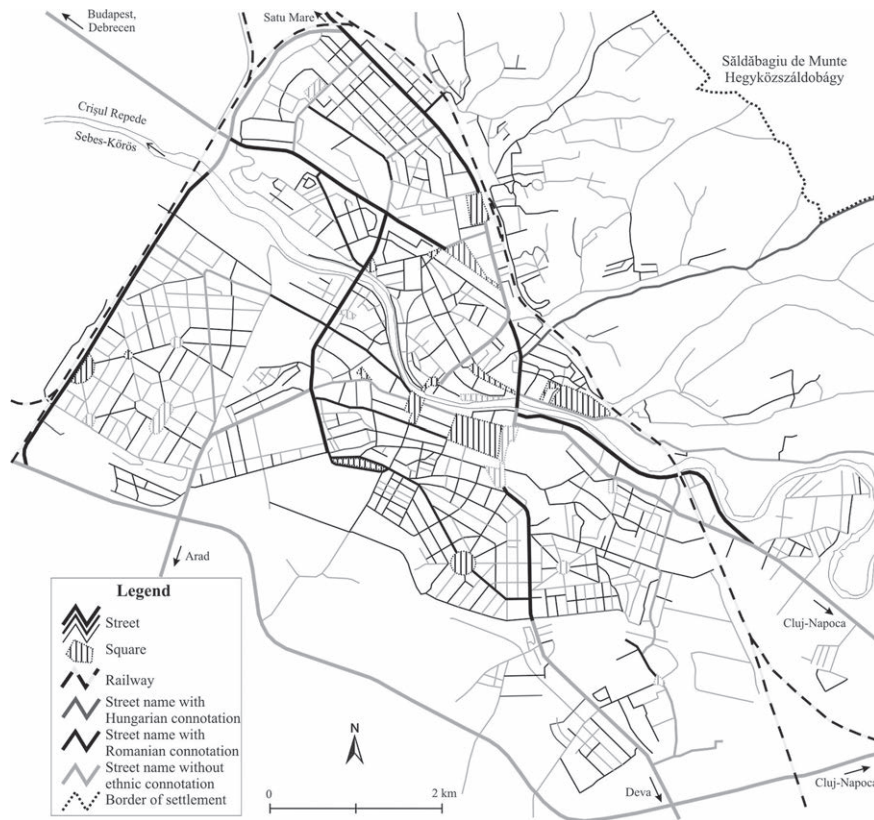
lously supervised ethnic-based naming turned into a relative tolerant attitude of the government; the street names reflected a quite balanced situation between the ethnic groups. Although the Romanian was the ruling nation and the Romanian related street names formed the majority, there were more Hungarian related names than before or following 1990, when Hungarians were in minority position. Moreover, among these names we can find Hungarian kings and (not only communist) politicians, which has been unprecedented for ethnic groups out of real power. Among the ethnically neutral names the share of the names related to the actual ideology (communist politicians, artists, important dates) are significant (8.2% of the total street names); about half of the main access and ingress roads and third of the squares were named after them. After the retreat of Soviet troops in 1958, gradually a nationalistic socialist regime had been built. This went hand in hand with the replacement of Soviet related names (Benedek, Bartos-Elekes, 2009). With the building of new, big housing estates (Rogerius, Nufărul) huge amount of streets were named after unmotivated, artificial names (e.g. subjects, plants, persons), except some geographical ones referred to the surrounding villages. The most important categories of the street names (persons, geographical names and plants, animals) formed $\frac{2}{3}$ of the total names. Regarding 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 (Picture 3).

Following the collapse of communism, as a general feature of the post socialist transition period in the region, the nationalism kindled again. In this manner many streets were baptized in harmony to the new ideology of the regime or recaptured its interwar name, thus the proportion of Romanian street names, especially commemorating Romanian historical persons, increased.

Nowadays Oradea has 739 streets from that 57% is ethnically neutral. Romanian street names dominate the city centre, while Hungarian names concentrate in such areas, where they live in higher proportion.



Picture 3. Street names in Oradea in 1980. Source: Author's edit.



Picture 4. Street names in Oradea, 2006. Source: author's edit.

Only two important public places have Hungarian name and none of those represent the history of Hungary (politicians, kings, dates). Most of the commemorated persons are artisans or have local connection (was born or lived/worked in Oradea). Based on interview with a member of the local government there is an 'unwritten rule' in the local political elite:

"To denominate [streets] after politicians are not our primary goal (...) we rather look for such persons who did something for Oradea." He mentions a good example from the first renaming period (1990-1996). As he remembers, "there were huge fights", because the idea to name the main square after St. Ladislaus, the Hungarian king who had founded the town, was absolutely not acceptable for the Romanian majority, while "Ady, of course, can be awarded, as he made love here, he became a big poet here, no problem. But St. Ladislaus, he cannot be awarded." In the frame of the silent agreement and following long discussions eventually a narrow, insignificant, peripheral street was named after St. Ladislaus and "a very long, very wide, frequently used" street in the centre became the Ady Street. This aforementioned example reveals how the "background deal" and "unwritten rule" work in practice. If the Hungarian community has enough representatives in the local government or manage to find supporters among Romanian politicians, then there is a better chance to get Hungarian related street names accepted. This example highlights that in case of commemorative street names not only the assessment of the given person by the majority and minority what matters, but the spatial position, location as well: to be visible in the centre is more valuable than having a street name anywhere in the town. Moreover, for the local Hungarian community the fact that the (according to their vision) most important symbol of the town is commemorated in a little street is disgraceful and perceived as an arrogant act of the local majority Romanians, who (as many Hungarians phrase it) do not respect the long history of the town. In sum, not only the proportion of ethnic affiliated street names is important but also their spatiality.

Nevertheless, being the opposition means less possibility to influence naming. As the politician follows: "Between 1996 and 2012 there was a [Hungarian] vice-mayor in Oradea, unfortunately not anymore and the consequences are obvious(...). We [Hungarian community] cannot denominate streets. We might get one or two [street names], while they can name sixty Romanian...and we cannot do anything to fight it."

If we look at the data about the connection between the ethnic structure of the population and the ratio of street names with ethnic connotation (Table 3), these two indicators only have coincided during the Hungarian rules, but

even in those periods the local Hungarian government had a strong effort to monopolize the street names for Hungarians, excluding the Romanian or any other minority. Thus we argue that (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.

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

Table 3. Relationship between the ethnic composition of the inhabitants (e) and the ethnic connotation of street names (s) in Oradea/Nagyvárad, 1900–2006 (%). Source: Eróss, Á., Tátrai, P. 2010

Not only the meaning, the ethnic affiliation, or the hypothetical ethnic balance of them, but the visualization, visibility of street names is significant. According to the regularization in Romania, if an ethnic minority's share in the local population reaches 20 per cent or more, it should be possible to use their mother tongue in administrative issues, including the bilingual or multilingual displaying of the settlement name, street names or names of institutions and offices (Veress, 2006). In practice, usually there are certain deficiencies in the implementation, which makes this a common topic of power struggle among Romanian and Hungarian politicians that is usually limited to verbalized debate in different channels of media. Therefore the street action in 2009 organized by local Hungarian youth association, called EMI (Erdélyi Magyar Ifjak, in English: Hungarian Youth in Transylvania) was different and worth mentioning.

Before 2009, the Hungarian language was almost invisible in official inscriptions in the streets or offices in Oradea. The local organization of EMI

started to claim for bilingual plates and inscriptions, which was a legal demand. The local council, including the Hungarian party, RMDSZ (In Romanian: UDMR, In English: Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania), accepted the request for bilingual street name plates, but during the long negotiation it became clear that the claims and viewpoints of the representatives of two ethnic groups had not coincided. Romanian representatives would have only put out plates with Romanian names (without translation) and at the bottom the Hungarian 'utca' (=street) inscription. Representatives of the moderate Hungarian ethnic party (RMDSZ) would have been satisfied with the translations, while EMI demanded the 'original' Hungarian names written under the official Romanian names. As it was presented earlier, in the 20th century street names were changed at least five, but rather more times, in that form the demand articulated by the EMI was not clear and even the Hungarian community was divided whether to support it or and it what form. Eventually, activists of the EMI decided to start street actions: they started to paint old, once existing Hungarian names to buildings (family houses or shops) whose owners they had agreed on previously. For the next couple of weeks the streets in Oradea turned into an open playfield for Hungarian 'painters' and Romanian 're-painters', for whom that street action was an illegal aggression against the majority. The illegally painted, graffiti like Hungarian street names were painted over or demolished with carvings (Picture 5).



Picture 5. Scenes from the EMI activists street action. The official (Romanian) street names above, below the once existing, Hungarian street names. On the left the freshly painted, on the right repainted version. (Photo: author)

Next to the clear political goal of such street action highlights, on the one hand the significance of visibility, especially in case of minority's representation in public space. On the other hand it calls our attention how the urban space can function as a topic and as an arena of symbolic space appropriation strategies and actions at the same time. The struggle over bilingual street names is about space and by such street actions the debate came out of the office to the streets, reaching out local inhabitants more efficiently than before. We might say that real importance of the EMI action is in its power to directly address and call for articulating opinion, take sides in a given topic. In that sense the struggle over street names and their visibility in Oradea can be embedded into a wider, more general discussion: who has the right to be visible in the urban space?

Interestingly enough, in everyday life of local inhabitants street names have far less practical relevance than it might be expected. Based on a questionnaire and interviews conducted with local Hungarians and those who moved to Oradea to work or study there, we argue that local inhabitants primarily orient through landmarks other than street names. In the questionnaire (dedicated to reveal ethnic differences in spatial practices of Hungarian and Romanian university students) the respondents were asked to name the meeting places they usually fix an appointment. After evaluating the results (n=208) the representative main square, Piața Unirii (n=84) and the pedestrian zone of Strada Republicii (n=75), both in the centre, were named as favourite meeting points. Nevertheless, less than half of the respondents referred to the places by their present official names. Both ethnic groups favoured mentioning some iconic building as meeting point in the Piața Unirii (e.g. Vulturul Negru, Biserica cu Luna), instead of the official name of the square. Hungarian respondents mainly used the old Hungarian name of the Piața Unirii (n=52, Szent László tér/ St. Ladislaus Square), while they referred to Strada Republicii (n=30) by its colloquial name [Main Street (n=18) or Walking street (n=12)].

During interview situation, it turned out that sometimes respondents did not even know the contemporary official name of the given street or the usage of the name is situational (in case of official matters or when they talk to Romanians). Keeping alive and using in everyday conversation situations the Hungarian street names (mainly from the period of Austro-Hungarian Monarchy) are part of Hungarian culture and identity. Since the Hungarian street names are absent from urban space one only can be aware of them if he or she is part of or related to the Hungarian community. The historic Hungarian names are inherited from one generation to other, this way secure a linkage

between past, present and future of the community and serves as a signal of ethnic identity. The same phenomenon was described for instance in Cluj, the cultural centre of Transylvania. According to Plugor (2006, p70.) many local Hungarian feels that using traditional Hungarian street names is a sign of respect towards past and a signals a commitment and statement of being part of the Hungarian community.

Conclusion

By analysing street names in Oradea, a multi-ethnic town in Western Romania, the aim of the paper was to present how different powers in the last 150 years made efforts to seize the public space by renaming it and transform urban space following their ideology by commemorative street names. In case of Oradea, except the first decades of Socialism, street names reflected the power relation between Hungarians and Romanians: the group in position of power could (re)baptize public space in greater proportion. Intolerance can be detected towards minority's right to be visible in urban space: throughout the 150 years the share of minority related street names were always behind their share in population.

Besides the number of street names related to a minority the assessment of the person commemorated also matters. In Oradea there is a strong intention to commemorate local persons who are rather artisans or scientists rather than historic persons or politicians. This is part of a silent agreement in the local government and aims to secure more visibility and less debate about street names among representatives of the communities. In practice the actual position of Hungarian politicians in the local government what makes this agreement work as a guarantee. Next to the question whom to commemorate, where to commemorate is equally disputed, as it was showed in the case of St. Ladislaus Street. From the point of view of visibility, the city centre is far more valuable, thus strongly controlled by the contemporary power. Nevertheless, the struggle over street names between minority and majority is embedded into a more general power struggle. While for the minority it can easily become a sort of freedom fight when they want to emphasize the strengths of the community cohesion with a clear message articulated to the majority. For the contemporary power, the majority it is close to a power demonstration.

In the struggle for street and settlement names and their spatial representation in Central Eastern Europe space becomes a tool, where different groups

would like to be represented. The common question in most of the cases is about who has the power to be visible? From this point of view the struggle over street names in Oradea can be embedded into a more general debate: how can a minority group influence visibility and representation in the urban space.

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