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CALL FOR ABSTRACTS

“...we have more heroes than squares”: Symbolic landscape changes in Central and Eastern European cities

Session organisers:

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Since 1990 Central Eastern European (CEE) countries face the dual challenge of processing the socialist past and redefining the boundaries of the nation (Nadkarni 2003; Palonen 2008), which is comprised of the complex dynamics of remembering and forgetting that can be traced in the restructuring of urban iconography (Azaryahu 1997). Concerning the socialist past, thirty years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, reoccurring waves of decommunization still dramatically transform the urban landscape in the region: following 2010 in Hungary, after the Euromaidan in Ukraine and currently as effect of the Russian invasion in Ukraine streets are renamed and statues and memorials has been demolished, moved, or damaged.

The redefinition of the nation is similarly difficult because – due to the tumultuous history of the region (e.g., shifting state borders, forced [re]settlement of ethnic groups, ethnic cleansings) – sizable autochthonous ethnic minorities are present in the territories of non-kin nation states, in some regions and municipalities forming the local majority up until nowadays. Hence, elements of local heritage (including toponymy, memorials, buildings) stand as a spatial mnemonic of a population that is either completely absent or only in minority these days. Thus, CEE cityscapes can be described as “...the living landscape of supremacies and beliefs, of hopes and needs, traumas and memories” (Czepczyński, Sooväli-Sepping 2016: 14). Therefore, although CEE cities have a particular and valuable multiethnic heritage to showcase and capitalize on, this heritage is contested and subject to symbolic space appropriation struggles (Rusu 2019; Lonardi et al. 2020). In other words, in the process of reinventing and/or commercializing local heritage for touristic purposes, CEE cities typically face the challenge of the interrelatedness of the (re)evaluation of the past and the (re)invention of various layers of history and multiple identities (Kubiszyn 2021; Narvselius 2015), which often evoke conflict and contestation.

Such contestation occurs in urban space which in CEE context can be perceived (and often functions) as an arena, where rivalry for the visibility of ethnic-cultural-linguistic symbols of majority and minority plays out (Bartos-Elekes 2016). When explaining the importance of public space Staeheli and Mitchell highlight that “For those people who are marginalised, finding a space to be seen or heard, (...) is vital to their ability to develop a political subjectivity; (...) and to their struggle to gain recognition from the state and the political community.” (Staeheli and Mitchell 2007: 809). The inherent social power of being visible explains the conflicts centred on symbolic appropriation of public space. Symbolic space appropriation strategies can take various forms: demolishing the previous regime’s symbols are usually followed by the installation of new symbols, reinterpretation or even appropriation of previously existing ones (Harrison 1995). Naming and renaming streets are especially powerful tools in urban landscape that “mediate between political elites and ‘ordinary’ people.” (Azaryahu 2009: 54) and can be perceived as manifestations of banal nationalism (Billig 1995).

This session on symbolic landscape changes welcomes conceptual and empirical papers pertaining to the manifold relations between politics and urban space, addressing history, ethnic relations/contestations, geopolitical/local conflicts, toponymy, street name changes, heritage making, linguistic landscape, symbolic appropriation of public space in CEE cities. We seek contributions from diverse approaches and disciplines.

If you are interested, please send your abstract to Patrik Tátrai (tatrai.patrik@csfk.org) by the **15th May 2022**. Please also upload your abstract to the CATference website, indicating that you intend to present in this session.

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