

Toponymic Politics and the Role of Heritagisation in Multiethnic Cities in Romania

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“This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in International Journal of Heritage Studies on 1 June 2022, available at <https://doi.org/10.1080/13527258.2022.2076719>.”

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Although scholars have made considerable progress in understanding the dynamics of heritagisation and toponymic politics, research is yet to explore how these may interact with each other. Drawing on a mixed-methods comparative qualitative study, this paper explores the politics of place naming and multilingualism in the context of heritagisation in three multiethnic cities in Romania: Târgu Mureş, Oradea and Baia Mare. We argue that the recent trends of heritagisation introduce a new element in the politics of place naming in ethnically diverse cities. Heritage becomes inclusive when it loses its importance in the power struggle between minority and majority political representatives. Once the demographic weight of the minority decreases and the appearance of minority language in public space does not anymore pose a threat to the hegemony of the majority, heritagisation initiatives – including the display of multilingual signs – may develop. In cities where ethnic proportions remain balanced, however, ethnic rivalry continues to prevail as the dominant element of toponymic politics. Nonetheless, while the simultaneous heritagisation and political commodification of historical toponyms offers better visibility for autochthonous minority communities, they equally risk eroding minority language rights under an ambiguous regime of political and economic calculation.

Keywords: critical toponymy, place naming, minority language rights, heritage tourism, multilingual signs

Introduction

In the last decades, we have globally witnessed the (re)invention and commodification of (local) heritage. Cultural and (commodified) ethnic-linguistic diversity have become valuable elements of place advantage, economic resources for tourism and place marketing (Hall and Rath 2007). Hypothetically, multiethnic cities in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) would be beneficiaries of these new developments, but in practice, 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 (Murzyn 2008; Narvselius 2015; Kubiszyn 2021), which generally evoke contestation.

One example is Romania, which is home to 1.2 million Hungarians, one of Europe's largest autochthonous minorities, where the issue of Hungarian public inscriptions is highly contested. As possible reminders of the former Hungarian ownership of the region, Hungarian language signs and other symbols might be perceived as a threat to the sovereignty of the Romanian state, questioning its dominance of public space (Dragoman 2011). Several press reports and articles have covered stories of local power struggles, including painting over the minority names in multilingual town signs (Tamási, 2020), guerrilla actions to display street names in Hungarian on private properties to gain visibility in public space (Civil Elkötelezettség Mozgalom 2014) or to correct the incorrect Hungarian spelling on official street name signs (Szucher 2019). Furthermore, there have been several court cases demanding both the display of bilingual street signs (Szigeti and Szikszai 2016) and the repeal of city council resolutions ordering that (Szabadság 2018). In sum, the case of Hungarian inscriptions in Romania has been a politically overcharged topic, a conflict trigger, and an issue to bargain with between the Romanian majority and the Hungarian minority.

On the other hand, more and more municipalities have realised that both multicultural heritage and place names are commodifiable assets, especially in the field of tourism. As the past has increasingly been viewed as a marketable resource by urban decision-makers, a new window of opportunity has opened for national minorities to represent their language and symbols as markers and mementos of the rediscovered past, turning them into monetisable assets for urban heritage projects. Hence, we were interested in discovering how the local strategies/politics of place naming might be affected by the heritagisation and commodification of place names. In which ways do the demographic

weight and resulting political potential of minorities matter in this respect? Can we trace new strategies in place naming and examples of visualisation of place names, reflecting a more inclusive approach to incorporating minority signs?

We argue that the twenty-first century trends of heritagisation and toponymic commodification represent a new element in the politics of place naming that may give a new impetus to previously existing place naming strategies and visualisation practices. It seems that in cities where ethnic proportions are balanced and there is ethnic competition, heritagisation does not appear as an element of toponymic politics. Instead, there is a symbolic struggle between representatives of the minority and the majority that is framed in terms of minority rights and strengthening local minority identity. In contrast, we have found some evidence that once the demographic weight of the minority decreases, and the appearance of minority language in public space does not pose any serious threat to the hegemony of the majority, heritagisation initiatives may develop in which multilingual signs may be important elements.

We reach this conclusion in the following steps. First, we review some considerations from the existing literature on heritagisation and demonstrate how it connects to the politics of place naming. Then, following a discussion of methodology, we overview the major issues of local toponymic politics and multilingual signs and summarise our findings on the presence of heritagisation in our selected research sites. We conclude by highlighting the political dynamics that mediate the appearance of heritagisation initiatives, emphasising the role of political and economic calculations as well as the dangers that they may pose for minority rights advocacy.

Heritage as Object of Toponymic Politics

Whilst in a broad sense anything can be heritage, in practice heritage is produced by and deeply embedded in power relations (Harvey 2001), and is dependent

on identity politics (Graham, Ashworth, and Tunbridge 2000). Heritage is ‘a product of the present’ (Tunbridge and Ashworth 1995), which was developed following a certain agenda. Consequently, heritage is not obsolete, but created in and by heritagisation, which is defined by Sjöholm as ‘the transformation of objects, places and practices into cultural heritage as values are attached to them, essentially describing heritage as a process’ (Sjöholm 2016, 26). Importantly, heritage is produced, reproduced and reflected by discourses (Waterton 2010), which suggests that a variety of competing interpretations collide and engage in conflict and contestation (Graham, Ashworth, and Tunbridge 2000; Harrison 2010). Nevertheless, one reading and narrative of the heritage often becomes dominant, to which ‘other groups are strongly encouraged to gravitate’ (Waterton 2010, 2). Typically, the literature on this subject analyses heritage from the perspectives of race, class, and gender. However, in multiethnic cities with autochthonous minorities in CEE, the most exposed fault line is rather ethnicity, which is often bended with exclusionary nationalising narratives (Filep 2017).

As Light reminds us, place names are not merely tourist attractions but can also be ‘conceptualised as a form of (intangible) heritage and [that] the contemporary consumption of such names can be considered as a form of heritage tourism’ (Light 2014, 146). A typical example of this linkage between heritage, toponymy and tourism is the display of multilingual street (name) signs. In the tourism industry, language has increasingly been commodified both to attract tourists and to enhance tourism experience. On the one hand, the use of major international languages, most notably English, has become widespread on the signage of international tourist destinations. Other non-local languages (e.g., German, Russian) may also be used to attract and cater for particular national tourist groups (Bátyi 2015). On the other hand, a growing number of destinations are actively displaying and otherwise using local minority languages to

attract more visitors through the authentication of the tourist experience (Heller, Pujolar, and Duchêne 2014; Laihonon and Csernikó 2019). In this context, language has been conceptualised as a sustainable tourism resource, because not only does its use add value to the tourist experience, but also ensures its survival through strengthened pride and interest in using the minority language (Lonardi, Martini, and Hull 2020). The use of minority language may also be accompanied by street renamings and displays of traditional toponymic markers that showcase the heritage of that language speaking group.

Moreover, the inherent power-relations in heritagisation may not only be apparent in *what* is displayed but also in *how* names are displayed. The font and style of letters, the accuracy of spelling, the visibility of minority language inscriptions and the hierarchy of languages all carry information about their relative importance and the local power relations of various language-speaking groups (Jordan et al. 2021; Plautz et al. 2021).

Finally, place names and their spatial appearance (town and street signs, etc.) are also studied by critical toponymies, which has made significant progress in mapping out how toponyms are used as an instrument of power and ideological manipulation (Azaryahu 1996), as well as how minority and subaltern groups contest and/or resist the place names of the majority (Duminy 2017). More recent scholarship has also begun to investigate the popular reception and limits of top-down renamings (Crețan 2019; Crețan and Matthews 2016; Light and Young 2014, 2017) as well as the commodification of place naming rights (Light and Young 2015; Medway and Warnaby 2014). CEE cities have featured prominently in critical toponymic scholarship, however the studies has also been largely confined to post-socialist renamings (Azaryahu 1997; Palonen 2008; Foote, Tóth, and Árvay 2000), or to the history of street-name changes

(Bartos-Elekes 2016; Mácha, Lassak, and Krtička 2018; Rusu 2019, 2020), while analyses of how the various autochthonous ethnic groups negotiate the complex and often contradictory discourses of memory have been scarce (Chloupek 2019; Erőss 2017; Erőss and Tátrai 2010).

Methods

We selected our research sites based on three criteria. First, the cities must have potential for heritagisation. Second, street naming must have been a locally significant political issue. Third, they must have an altering ratio of Romanian and Hungarian population because the demographic weight of the minority matters for the legal protection of its public language use.

According to the Administrative Codex of 2019, and its predecessor, the 215/2001 law on local administration, administrative units are legally obligated to provide official administrative services, including town signs and public information bulletins, in minority languages as well, if a minority reaches 20% share within the local population. Below this threshold, the availability of such services in minority languages is subject to local agreements. Furthermore, the Framework Convention on the Protection of National Minorities (FCPNM), ratified by Romania, contains provisions for displaying other street signs in minority languages in locales with large minority populations. However, as Romanian administrative law only covers town signs for bilingualisation, many local authorities have used this contradiction in legal obligations to refuse the display of in-city street signs in minority languages (Horváth and Toró 2018).

To better understand local shifts and to evaluate the presence of heritagisation in place naming politics we used fieldwork observations complemented by interviews and archival research in Târgu Mureş, Oradea and Baia Mare. Our archival research

included the analysis of local and regional media reports as well as of minutes of local council sessions. This data was complemented with interviews with two prominent figures of a minority advocacy NGO headquartered in Târgu Mureş as well as with at least two former or present members of local city councils or mayor's offices in all three studied cities. Field research and elite interviews in Baia Mare and Oradea were conducted during multiple occasions in the past decade (2007-2009, 2013-2014, 2021) while research in Târgu Mureş took place in 2021.

Research sites

Our three chosen case studies are situated in those regions of Romania that used to belong to the Kingdom of Hungary, the autonomous eastern part of Austria-Hungary, before 1920. All three selected cities, Târgu Mureş, Oradea and Baia Mare had an overwhelming majority of ethnic Hungarian population. In the repeatedly changing post-WWI geopolitical context, however, their ethnic structures changed. By the mid-1990s, Romanians formed the absolute majority in all the studied cities (Table 1). The decline of Hungarian populations continues to this day.

Table 1. Ethnic proportion in the cities under study, 1880–2011

Although the pre-1920 Hungarian toponymy, especially the street names, was wiped out of the landscape, they have been kept alive by the oral traditions of local Hungarians. Subsequently, representatives of Hungarian political parties and civil organisations often evoke these 'old' names during political debates around street renamings and the display of traditional or historical urban markers.

Results

Târgu Mureș

Târgu Mureș (Marosvásárhely in Hungarian, Neumarkt in German) obtained a bad reputation as a nest of ethnic conflict when Hungarian demands for minority rights turned into violent ethnic clashes between Hungarians and Romanians in 1990. The animosity between representatives of two ethnicities has prevailed, leading to rivalry and ethnic parallelism in cultural and memorial politics (György 2011).

In Târgu Mureș, bilingualism seems to be the main issue that animates civil activism and political agendas. Although bilingual town signs have been displayed ever since the 2001 administrative law came into effect, bilingual street name signs are still a rare phenomenon in the city, despite the provisions of the FCPNM. Indeed, a recent Google Street View-based (GSV) virtual audit of the city's street name signs shows that only 7% of streets had fully bilingual street signs while 86% of streets did not have a single properly bilingual street sign. A common practice in the city is that only the names of the type of public space (street, square, boulevards, etc.) are translated to Hungarian, the actual proper name is not (Holányi 2021). This practice, however, does not satisfy the FCPNM.

Most interlocutors agree that the reluctance and hostility of the city's previous Romanian mayor (in office between 2000 and 2020) was a major hindrance to the display of street signs in Hungarian as well. For instance, informants evoked the 271/2007 city council resolution on bilingualism that remained unimplemented despite court rulings siding with the council. However, some interviewees also criticised the (in)activities of the Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania (DAHR) in the matter. Most criticism focuses on DAHR's belief that the implementation of minority rights is a matter of negotiation. DAHR politicians seem to be convinced that pushing

for the representation of the Hungarian language without absolute majority in the council and a Hungarian mayor in office may lead to unnecessary confrontation with Romanian political partners, hindering future collaboration on symbolic and non-symbolic issues alike. However, an NGO leader alleged based on insider information that DAHR tends to sidestep the issue of bilingualism during political negotiations if the Romanian partners demand additional leadership positions in local institutions in exchange.

Nevertheless, there has been some progress with bilingual street signs. A former city councillor claimed that following a deal negotiated by DAHR in the late 2000s, the street signs of all new streets are fully bilingual (Figure 1). On-site observations in the new residential district of Belvedere, a 2010s development project, which is yet to feature in the GSV database, verified this claim. In Belvedere, almost all newly placed street signs are bilingual with the two exceptions likely being privately placed signs because they follow an old street sign design that predates the building of the Belvedere district. Similarly, some Hungarian language street name plates and bilingual plates were affixed in the city centre in 2016, although DAHR-critical interlocutors suspect that this was only motivated by the upcoming municipal elections.

Figure 1 – A bilingual street name plate in Belvedere, Târgu Mureş.

When asked about the motivations for demanding bilingual street signage, Hungarian informants evoked the role of Hungarian street signs in strengthening the status and identity of the local Hungarian community. As a local DAHR politician put it, ‘I think, and the most important and first thing that I would do, is to put out Hungarian street name signs as informational signs. Fundamentally for those arriving here from Hungary, but primarily for us, locals, to strengthen the community, to know

that we do not need to feel as secondary citizens.’ Apart from him, however, there is no indication that the issue of bilingualism has ever been debated from a tourism perspective. The struggle for the public representation of Hungarian thus follows the logic of maintaining the local Hungarian community, highlighting the importance of native language signs in the survival of ethnic minority communities (Lonardi, Martini, and Hull 2020).

Overall, both interview and archival data shows that bilingual street name signs represent the primary symbolic political issue in Târgu Mureş that has been a recurring topic for almost two decades. The visibility of the issue is largely due to the 2007–2020 activities of the locally based advocacy NGO, Movement for Civic Commitment (CEMO) that have been actively fighting for bilingualism in courts, on the streets as well as with proposals to the city council. Meanwhile, street renamings have received significantly less public attention. According to a former city councillor, street renamings are not even properly debated in the council because it is known in advance whether the proposal will pass or not. Public debate in the media is also rare. However, the 2021 renaming of Memorandului (Memorandum) Square to Cseke Dániel Square represents an exception. Under pre-WWI Hungarian rule, one of the city’s major streets, currently named after Ştefan cel Mare (Stephen the Great), one of the most important Romanian princes, was Cseke Dániel Street. Following WWI, the Cseke Dániel name survived in the name of a Calvinist congregation that is located between Ştefan cel Mare Street and Memorandului Square. After the election of the new Hungarian mayor in 2020, the congregation petitioned to restore the old Cseke Dániel name. Since the renaming of a major street named after one of the greatest rulers of Romanian history would have caused outrage in the Romanian community, the mayor proposed to the city council to rename Memorandului Square instead, and to move the Memorandului name

elsewhere. Although the Memorandului name, commemorating an important moment in regional Romanian history, is not lost under the present arrangement, the council resolution has been publicly denounced by some Romanian civil society organizations, who were also threatening to sue at the time of writing.

Oradea

Oradea (Nagyvárad in Hungarian, Grosswardein in German) is often referred to as a ‘tolerant’ and ‘multicultural’ city. Moreover, one of the official tourist trails called #Multiculturalcity, advertises Oradea as a city where ‘you will find a combination of diversity and tolerance between religions, denominations, and ethnicities, as well as the mutual respect they have for each other’ (Visit Oradea 2020, n.p.). Nevertheless, the linguistic landscape only recently started to reflect the city’s multiculturalism. The preceding contestation over toponyms and their visualisation, however, tells us a different story from that of tourist advertisements.

Since the proportion of Hungarians is above the 20% benchmark, the city name is displayed in both Romanian and Hungarian. Similarly to Târgu Mureş, street names and the installation of bilingual street signs are problematic. The political parties and associations representing the Hungarian minority have two major demands: affixing bilingual street name plates and the partial revision of street names until the proportion of Hungarian related toponyms approaches the ratio of Hungarians living in Oradea. According to a former DAHR city councillor ‘There were huge fights’ in the city council in the 1990s when Hungarian councillors initiated the renaming of the main square of Oradea after St. Ladislaus, the eleventh century Hungarian founder king of the

city. While St. Ladislaus was unacceptable for the Romanian majority, ‘Ady¹, of course could be awarded, as he used to make love here, he had become a big poet here, no problem with him.’ In 2010, only two main roads were baptised after Hungarian notabilities and majority of the commemorated Hungarian persons were artisans or had local embeddedness (was born or lived/worked in Oradea). Street names with Romanian connotations (kings, politicians, artists) dominated the city centre (Erőss and Tátrai 2010).

The case of street names was discussed from time to time in the city council, but any resolution seemed distant. Although street actions happened from time to time (see Erőss 2017), the developments took place in courts or behind the curtains. In 2017, the National Council for Combatting Discrimination (NCCD) ruled against the Oradea city council and ordered the placement of bilingual street name plates in the city. Although the city council accepted the NCCD’s decision, it was not implemented referring to a lack of financial resources (Kőrössi 2017). Consequently, the Târgu Mureşan CEMO sued the Oradea city council for failing to display bilingual street signs, but they lost the lawsuit in 2018 (Krónika Online 2018).

In the meantime, a silent deal was accepted in the city council according to which the names of newly opening streets would follow the ethnic proportions of Oradea. This meant that 25% would be named after the names endorsed by the Hungarian community and 75% by the propositions of the Romanian community. Additionally, Romanian and Hungarian notables who were active in Oradea were preferred over figures from the national pantheon (Erőss 2017).

¹ Endre Ady (1877-1919) is one of the most important Hungarian poets. He worked as a journalist and published his first successful volumes while living in Oradea/Nagyvárad.”

Soon the reassessment of local heritage in tourism has become a priority for city leaders. Both the City Development Strategy for 2015-2020 and the Masterplan for 2030 tackles the renovation of architectural heritage and the development of multicultural and historic tourism as the focal points of Oradea's future prosperity (Borma 2016).

When in 2020 the historical downtown and the riverbank in Oradea was promoted as a tourism destination with national importance, the city council soon decided on the installation of trilingual signs, which provide a short description about the history of the given street, indicating the 'old' street names as well. As the mayor's counsellor in Hungarian issues noted, this can be a possibility to 'smuggle back elements of the old Oradea', including street names: 'The idea is that the [tourist information] boards should refer back to the old Hungarian street names too. What matters the most is to realise this, and how it is packaged is only a matter of detail. Whereas, I could say, and this is the truth, that we deserve it' (Pap 2020). Our field experience confirmed that in comparison to the previous period, the trilingual information boards improved the visibility of the Hungarian language. Nevertheless, using the same, smaller font size for Hungarian and English might dilute the local presence of Hungarian language (see Duchêne 2012) in the same vein illustrating the inherent power relations between local majority and minority (see Jordan et al. 2021; Plautz et al. 2021).

Nevertheless, the investment in trilingual signs in the historical centre of Oradea in 2020 realised a long-awaited symbolic act. It appeared in news in 2008 that the central bridge in Oradea – connecting the main square, Unirii (Union) Square (for Hungarians: St. Ladislaus Sq.) and King Ferdinand I Square – would be renamed after St. Ladislaus. The Romanian mayor's comment made it clear that this renaming was to

about the Hungarian activists' appeal to change the name of Unirii Square: 'I can assure everybody that the name of both Unirii Sq. and Ferdinand Sq. remain intact' (Krónika Online 2008). However, the city council voted for the renaming of the central bridge commemorating St. Ladislaus only in 2015. In 2018 DAHR prompted the city council to install a trilingual board to the St. Ladislaus bridge (Fried, 2018; Figure 2). Eventually the ceremony took place in September 2020.

Figure 2 – Above: trilingual table on the St. Ladislaus bridge. Below: the name of the river displayed only in Romanian.

Baia Mare

The former precious metal mining town of Baia Mare (Nagybánya in Hungarian, Neustadt in German) is famous for its former artists' colony, the cradle of modern Hungarian painting, which flourished in the first half of the 20th century.

By the 1990s, the proportion of Hungarians in Baia Mare had fallen below the 20% threshold defined by the 2001 law on bilingual town signs, thus it was not compulsory to display the Hungarian name at the entrances to the city. That is why one of the main symbolic goals of the local Hungarian community has been the multilingualisation of town signs since 2001. In 2016, in spite of the demographic decline of ethnic Hungarians, the political constellation favoured the minority Hungarians to achieve this objective. In the background, two main factors can be identified. On the one hand, the mayor's new political formation called Coalition for Baia Mare gained 11 seats in the 23-member council, five of which were held by the

Democratic Forum of Germans in Romania (FDGR) in the 2016 local elections.²

Another two councillors represented DAHR. This political composition of the council provided the Hungarian representatives a good bargaining position.

On the other hand, at this very time, Baia Mare was a candidate for European Capital of Culture. Multiethnicity and multiculturalism were important slogans in the application and the installation of multilingual place-name signs was expected to score extra points in the evaluation of applications (Maszol 2016). Thus, formally initiated by the mayor, in reality by DAHR, new additional plates with Hungarian and German names were placed under the existing place name signs in all entrances to the city just before the visit of the evaluation committee. As the Germans do not constitute a significant community, the question arises why the German names were installed. As a local DAHR leader put it: ‘Because of the coalition partners, the German Forum and of the even greater acceptance of the Hungarian name;’ whereas another councillor said ‘Well, precisely so that it is not only the Hungarian name but everyone who had something to do with the city.’

So, in this case, the German name of the city, Neustadt lost its ethnic connotation, and its role is both to form a ‘buffer name’ below (figuratively: between) the Romanian and Hungarian ones, decrease the significance of the Hungarian name with making the signs multilingual instead of being bilingual, and to refer to the rich urban history of Baia Mare. However, it must be highlighted that local decision-makers could have been inspired by several other examples in Transylvania where the number of Germans does not justify the display of signs in German. The neutral, de-ethicised

² As local ethnic Germans constitute 0.2% of the total population their political representation (FDGR) is vastly disproportionate.

nature of the German name and the acceptance of the otherwise invisible German community are underlined by the fact that when the signs were vandalised a few years ago, only the Hungarian name was painted over, the German was left intact (Tamási 2020).

Over the last fifteen years, starting with the renovation of the main square, historic names have been introduced at some points of the old town, specifically in the Podul Viilor (Gate's Bridge) where all the historic names of the city are displayed on the glass railing (Figure 3). The Latin version of the city's medieval name, Rivulus Dominarum became especially popular, lending its name to several associations, events; also displayed at the fountain in the focal point of the main square and in the manhole covers throughout the old town. In fact, this name has become part of the city brand referring to the golden era of the city when it was one of the most important gold mining towns in Europe and received its first royal diploma. Preferring the ethnically neutral Latin name of the city can be understood as an inclusive act which connects the present with the past without emphasising the respective power relations and ethnic hierarchy. As these examples show, historic city names are treated as local heritage in Baia Mare on which current city branding and marketing can be based. However, for local Hungarians, the multilingualisation of place name signs means much more than mere city branding; it is about history, heritage, belonging, being accepted, feeling at home and, in fact, identity.

‘When I go in or out of the city and I see this sign, it makes my heart beat, it makes me feel better. And I am proud [...] to have it there, and it is written in Hungarian under the Romanian, “Nagybánya”. [...] And I feel that here I and our ancestors have reclaimed their place in history, and this city is ours as well.’ (local DAHR-leader)

Figure 3 – Historic names of Baia Mare in the city's central bridge

Another aspect of multilingualisation is the question of street names. As the proportion of Hungarians is lower than 20%, in Baia Mare (and in other towns with similar ethnic proportions), the main goal is not to bilingualise street names, but to name as many streets as possible after Hungarian personalities associated with the city. Currently, there are only five street names with Hungarian ethnic connotation out of the 389 Baia Marean streets. All of the Hungarian names are given to relatively insignificant streets in the north of the city, and four of the eponymous persons are local Hungarian artists linked to the Nagybánya artists' colony.

Local Hungarian politicians wish to baptise another three to five streets after Hungarian personalities (mostly local artists) and to restore some of the historic, ethnically neutral names in the old town in the coming years. One of the main criteria for naming is acceptability by the majority, however signs of heritagisation and heritage tourism are also outlined: 'Tourism, local values, Hungarian values, which are in fact universal, because art has no language, but Hungarians happened to be the protagonists [in art scene] in the beginning' (local DAHR-leader).

As geography matters in this issue, renamings are planned mostly in and around the old town, where, on the one hand, most of the Hungarians live (Tátrai 2011), and on the other, the symbolic value is much higher. However, unlike in Oradea, there are no silent deals on following the ethnic proportions when it comes to (re)naming the streets.

Discussion and Conclusion: Heritagisation and the Janus-faced Representation of Minority Language

Multilingual Signs and the Partial Representation of the Hungarian Minority

The appearance of official multilingual signs (street name signs and tourist information boards) is inversely proportional to the demographic weight of minorities. As cross-

ethnic voting is still rare in the region, the demographic weight of minorities largely accords with their proportional representation in city councils. Consequently, ethnic demographics matters in the local politics of place naming. Minority representatives need to find allies amongst the councillors of the majority to realise their symbolic political objectives. When heritage tourism appears, the city councils, which previously seemed less enthusiastic about advertising multiculturalism and affixing multilingual signs in public space, became interested.

However, it seems that multilingualism is spatially limited to historical city centres and official heritage sites that are marketed to tourists. Initiatives to bilingualise or multilingualise official city signage always commence from the city centre, prioritising symbolically important venues first. Nonetheless, their momentum fades away before the initial objectives would be achieved due to a mixture of budgetary constraints, change in the local balance of powers or loss of interests in properly carrying out the initiative once the political gain has been realised. Street names referring to or commemorating minority heritage are often found to be further from the centre (e.g., new developments in Oradea). Generally, boulevards, major roads and squares have either neutral (e.g., Trandafirilor [Rose] Sq. in Târgu Mureş) or names with ethnic Romanian connotation. The few Hungarian ones are limited to artists (e.g., Ady Endre Str. in Oradea) and locally significant politicians (e.g., Bernády György Blvd. in Târgu Mureş) names. Therefore, the visibility of the Hungarian related street names remains limited both numerically in terms of street names and bilingual street name signs, as well as in terms of spatial hierarchy, having been pushed to more insignificant locations.

Heritagisation and the Political Commodification of Place Names

The data gathered confirms previous findings on the influence of politics on toponymy

and heritage. It seems that in the CEE context, rediscovering multiethnic heritage opened a new direction in politics of place names, that exists alongside commodification and decommunisation explored in previous studies (Light and Young 2014; Rusu 2020).

There is an obvious relationship between place naming and commodification which offers an opportunity for minority civil initiatives to improve the public representation of minority language and culture. In this context, then, commodification is not necessarily a negative process, but rather a chance to move beyond the impasse of traditional minority rights-based political discourse. However, toponyms are not simply commodities with a price tag, but commodities in a political sense, which are revalued and exchanged on the ‘stock market’ of majority-minority political matches regarding toponymic inscriptions, bilingualism and eventually minority rights concerning language use in public space. This has most notably been the case in Târgu Mureş, where interviewees revealed how the immediate priorities and interests of different political actors play a key role in the display of Hungarian street name signs. In this context of balanced ethnic proportions, interethnic competition for dominance over the local symbolic landscape persists and consequently heritagisation has not appeared as an element of toponymic politics yet.

Especially in Oradea, as long as the political discourse on bilingual street name plates was framed in legal terms, citing international treaties and national anti-discrimination laws as legal basis, the majority Romanian city council employed a range of tactics to postpone, refuse or otherwise kill off minority initiatives, typically citing national laws and regulations as well as the lack of financial resources as their rationale for inaction. However, once heritage tourism became the focus of local development,

the interests of minority and majority political actors began to converge both in Baia Mare and Oradea.

For Romanian city councillors, the appearance of mostly trilingual signs not only has been appealing for their revenue generating potential, but it also alleviated the initial political risk that the reactions of nationalists Romanians would have posed had they displayed signs without the inclusion of German. Importantly, as the increased visibility of Hungarian signs in Baia Mare and Oradea has been achieved under the auspices of heritage tourism development, they may undermine the efforts of future minority rights-based advocacy. Even though members of the local Hungarian elites tend to celebrate these developments as long-awaited breakthroughs in the implementation of minority rights, which can be used as political capital to increase minority politicians' support among minority voters, this may be no more than an illusion. Given that in the current predicament the public use of Hungarian is promoted because of its perceived economic benefits, this support might be revoked in the future if this potential fails to materialise. In the absence of a firm commitment to rule of law with regards to minority language rights amongst political elites, the fate of Hungarian inscriptions remains uncertain. Concomitantly, the rise of heritagisation obscures the differences between the traditional advocacy campaigns for the implementation of minority rights and the new urban development initiatives promoting multilingual signs for the sake of heritage tourism, further weakening the power of minority rights-based advocacy.

However, these signs are primarily identified as tourist signs displayed under the auspices of heritagisation. Furthermore, if Hungarian inscriptions are mainly present on heritage signs and in the company of German signs, it suggests that both Hungarians and Germans belong to the past, whereas Hungarians are still a significant part of the

local population. As such, perhaps paradoxically, multilingual inscriptions not only have the power to make minority groups visible but also to make them invisible or dilute their local significance amidst the array of multilingual signs (Duchêne 2012) as the cases of Oradea and Baia Mare illustrate.

Authoritarianism and Local Patriotism in Place-Naming

The analysis of how heritagisation occurs reveals the dominance of the local political class. In Romanian top-down place naming and name visualisation regimes, the temporary alliances, long-term coalitions and priorities of political actors govern what, when and how initiatives will be realised. The failure of CEMO, among others, to achieve breakthroughs in minority language use demonstrates that unless civil society objectives serve the interests of all members of the local ruling coalition, they are bound to end in failure. Similarly, minority politicians have been shown to abandon their stated minority rights objectives in order to protect their sometimes delicate political and economic positions in the local helms of power. Nowadays, however, the theoretical economic potential of heritagisation-induced bilingualism provides Romanian decision-makers with enough leeway to support symbolic initiatives proposed by minority politicians. Nonetheless, any negotiations occur strictly within local political circles, without open consultation with the public or NGOs, similarly to what has previously been observed in the region (Crețan 2019; Light and Young 2017). As such, the presence of minority language signs is still the result of informal political deals and delicate coalition building. Thus, their fate remains uncertain because they are not based on minority language rights, including national law, but on the ever-changing interests of contemporary powerholders.

Finally, it is worth noting that both ‘behind the curtain’ deals and heritagisation projects specifically cultivate local heritage over the contested aspects of Hungarian and

Romanian national history (for comparison see Mácha, Lassak, and Krtička 2018). Consequently, they favour poets, scientists and artists of local connections (e.g., Ady Endre in Oradea, painters in Baia Mare) or foreground the periods of medieval greatness (e.g., the use of the Rivulus Dominarum brand in Baia Mare). However, due to historical reasons, compiling a list of notabilities with local relevance is simpler for the Hungarian community (Erőss 2017), thus the Romanian majority might still choose a name from the national pantheon, which makes these local deals fragile. Still, the distantiation of local heritage from nationalist historiography makes it more inclusive, reduces potential inter-ethnic conflicts and opens the possibility of mutual acceptance and local reconciliation. However, whether this potential will be fulfilled remains to be seen.

To conclude, our findings open a range of promising research directions at the intersection of heritagisation and critical toponymies in autochthonous multiethnic settings. First, further research should investigate how heritagisation influences the attitudes, narratives and political calculations surrounding minority language rights. Our tentative conclusion is that heritagisation weakens the already frail power of minority right advocacy and risks subduing it to economic considerations. However, this hypothesis needs to be tested in future research in multiple settings. In a similar vein, the attitudes and opinions of the wider public should be surveyed to ascertain the degree of popular support behind heritagisation projects and its impact on interethnic relations beyond the political elites. Last but not least, the tentative notion of the political commodification of toponyms invites us to reconsider the nature of commodification and potentially extend it beyond its traditional economic articulation.

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