

Contested spaces: Ethnic visibility in the city of Oradea

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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 has the right to be visible in the urban space; and by “who” in many cases one should understand which ethnic group?

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 dominant group the struggle is to clarify their leading role, for a minority group visibility in public space can be considered as a sign of existence at all.

Present paper aims to show how the symbolic appropriation of public space has taken shape in Oradea/Nagyvárad, a multiethnic city in Romanian-Hungarian border region. The article pays special attention to present how the public space gets re-structured and ethicized by the aforementioned symbolic appropriation struggles, in certain cases called into being such hidden ethnic places that functions as ‘safe places’ for the less visible minority group.