Civic Activism in the Danube Region: A Case Study from Slovakia
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Discussions paper (only)

Pre-Introduction
This discussion paper has been born as an unwanted baby that was conceived by a mistake. It probably should not be part of the discussion at all. When I received an invitation to the discussion within the programme Anthropology of Contemporary Europe due to my research interest in postsocialist transformations in the region (recently mainly civic activism) and then read about the focus of the discussion on the Danube („the Danube“, not the Danube river), I totally misunderstood the topic. I write this pre-introduction because I think this is a rather interesting misunderstanding from an anthropological point of view. Coming from small Slovakia and the city of Banska Bystrica (200 km far from the Danube river), I consider the word „Danube region“ a synonymus for the whole country – Slovakia is a Danube region in my and many Slovak citizens´ understanding. The Danube is the second largest river in Europe, its basin is one of the most international river basins in the world. It originates in Germany and flows for 2,860 km through ten countries including Slovakia, but its drainage basin extends into nine more countries. Within Slovakia, the river passes 172 km through South-West Slovakia (including the capital Bratislava). Most of major Slovak rivers (such as Vah, Hron, Ipel, Nitra) flow into the Danube river. This is one of the arguments why me as a citizen of Slovakia see myself as an inhabitant of the Danube region. I feel connected with the river even if I do not live directly in its near vicinity. The Danube river has been part of my upbringing and education – a lot of poetry and drama I had to learn at school was devoted to the Danube river – this was mainly a production of the 19th century Enlightenment movement representatives - the Danube in their works was a symbol of the Slavic connection and solidarity. The Danube river has been present in a number of folklore genres all over Slovakia: many songs from numerous Slovak regions (even the ones in the very east of Slovakia) are built on the idea of the Danube.
In addition, there is also a strong political strengthening of the „Danube region“ label. In 2010, the European Commission presented a new Communication called „EU Strategy for the Danube Region“ (COM (2010)715), followed by an Action Plan. The strategy focuses on connecting countries of the Danube river basin, primarily in the areas of mobility/transport, energy and culture/tourism. The EU Danube region strategy which is mainly presented through new funding mechanisms has significantly strengthened the idea of the Danube macro-region.

The following text refers to the research I have been carrying out in recent years. It focuses on the growth of civic activism and social movements in Slovakia which also includes (some) research in Bratislava, the country’s capital and the city with several nicknames: The Beauty at the Danube River, The Greedy at the Danube River or The Wart at the Danube River – depending who writes about it. The discussion paper only briefly describes main directions in the research as its main objective is to provide key information on the research and open space for discussion. As stressed before, due to (some) misunderstanding, the paper is not built primarily on the „Danube-oriented“ research. However, it tends to provide basic information about one of the thematic socio-anthropological trends in the „Danube regions“ (CEE regions): local activism as part of the growth of civil society in CEE.

**Introduction**

Civic activism in Slovakia has been a slowly growing although not always a visible phenomenon of the civil society rebirth and development since the 1990s. It has been reflected in a number of formal and informal activities that aim primarily at improving the quality of urban environment, urban space and urban life or – more generally – at fostering sustainable urban development in the times of neoliberal globalisation. Most of these activities do not fit into narrow definitions of „traditional“ social movements which mostly focus on protest activities or mobilisations around political or social questions. Activities described in this discussion paper are usually small-scale and address everyday challenges of urban inhabitants. They are rarely organised by established organisations, more often they are informal grassroots mobilisations of groups of people who do not rely on or trust in political structures and want to contribute to urban change themselves and do something meaningful. These grassroots groups might be sometimes supported by local non-profit organisations and can be considered agents of change as they identify a problem, effectively challenge decisions and actions taken by the city council and contribute to transforming urban governance. Urban
activism here is understood as collective action of groups of people in order to accomplish their goals, while employing a variety of strategies (Jacobsson and Saxonberg 2013: 255).

The paper is built on previous research of socio-cultural and political-economic changes in postsocialist Slovak cities: transformation of urban spaces, impact of globalisation, rise of diversity, changes in urban governance, and strategies for urban sustainability (e.g. Bitusikova 2009; Bitusikova-Luther 2010a, 2010b). Various forms of activism have been present in all these areas, but the topic itself – urban activism, movements and organisations and their role in shaping urban development in Slovakia – have not attracted the attention of domestic or foreign scholars so far. The paper contributes to two different theoretical discourses. Firstly, it engages in the discourse on urban activism and social movements as part of civil society in Central and Eastern Europe, and secondly, it follows the relation of urban activism to urban governance and participatory democracy. Although these concepts fall mainly into the domain of sociology or political science, anthropology with its ethnographic approach can contribute to the debate by investigating local and global forms of collective action.

The main objective of the discussion paper is to examine the role and different forms of urban activism in the cities of Banská Bystrica (Central Slovakia) and Bratislava (Western Slovakia). The study provides a brief picture of urban activism in two cities and a micro-level insight into the strategies, practices and relationships of local organisations and movements through narratives and stories of the people behind them.

Based on my research results I argue that:
1. urban activism, movements and organisations in Banská Bystrica and Bratislava have grown into a larger diversity, better interconnection and more collaboration, and
2. the nature of urban activism has been changing and developing towards a considerably growing citizen participation and engagement in urban development, urban heritage protection and urban governance.

Civil society, urban movements and activism in Central and Eastern Europe (sorry, not a Danube-focused paragraph)

The body of literature on civil society and urban movements and activism in Central and Eastern Europe has been so far restricted to certain countries of the region, mainly Poland, Hungary, Czech Republic and Russia (see for instance the volume by Jacobsson and Saxonberg 2013; or studies by Cisař 2010, 2013a, 2013b; Fagan 2004, 2005; Glinski 2002;
Navrátil and Pospíšil 2013; Pickvance 1997, etc.). In the first decade after the end of the communist regimes, a number of scholars from outside of Central and Eastern Europe paid a special attention to the region that was seen as an excellent laboratory for studying processes of the transition towards democracy, civil society and market economy (see, for example, Hann 1990, 1996; Pickvance 1996, 1997; Rose, Mishler and Haerpfer 1996; Verdery 1996 and others). These first contributions captured a broad range of topics reflecting turbulent changes of postsocialist societies and stimulated a vivid academic debate on theorisation of postsocialism, transition, civil society or legacy. Some of them, however, made conclusions based on the notion of Central and Eastern Europe as a uniform region under the Soviet Union „colonial“ domination (using Verdery's description, 2002: 15). Jacobsson and Saxonberg state that treating all the countries of Central and Eastern Europe as one region leads to „an overly homogenized view of the region given the great variety of differences among political institutions as well as the state- society relationships that exist“ (Jacobsson and Saxonberg 2013: 2). An increasing number of scholars including those from Central and Eastern Europe stress the importance of recognising different nature and pluralism of civil society and activism in each country (e.g., Hann 1996, 2002, 2003; Tarrow – Petrova 2007; Císař 2010; 2013; Torsello 2012 a, b).

Another generalisation made by several scholars was that civil society in Central and Eastern Europe was weak, lacking capacity and unable to enhance civic engagement at the grassroots level (e.g. Rose, Mishler and Haerpfer 1996; Howard 2003) as a result of a low number of social and political organisations, high level of distrust in them, weak civic infrastructure, the lack of membership or employment in civil society organisations or low individual civic activism (see also Ekiert and Foa 2011; Petrova and Tarrow 2007; Navrátil and Pospíšil 2013). One of the misleading conceptions of some „Western“ scholars, supported also by several dissidents from Central and Eastern Europe, was the assumption that there was no civil society in Central and Eastern Europe during the period of state socialism, given the low numbers of registered associations (e. g. Hankiss 1990), and therefore, there was nothing to build on after the fall of the communist regime. This has been disproved by numerous anthropological studies that demonstrated examples of a range of activities and associations that existed during socialism (see for instance Buchowski 2001; Hann 1990, 1992; Hann and Dunn 1996). Torsello argues that in addition to official and politically controlled organisations, there was a parallel „civil society“ (or „second society“, Gall and Kligman 2000) consisting of semiformal and informal networks, associations or foundations that were not necessarily of a political nature (Torsello 2012a). Buchowski suggests that this unofficial
civil society took various forms, including informal interest groups, community collaborations and even extended kin groups and networks (Buchowski 2001: 123-124). Also Gal and Kligman argue that various activities and organisations existed in the region before, it is just their public legitimacy that is new. The socialist state tried to eliminate the power of organisations that were between the state and family, but it does not at all mean there were no such organisations (Gal and Kligman 2000: 93-94). They just had different forms, mostly of informal and semi-formal character.

The post-1989 OECD surveys (analysed by Raiser et al. 2001, see Petrova and Tarrow 2007) show that the interest of citizens in Central and Eastern Europe in politics or in the needs of others has not been different from other OECD countries, it is just the level and frequency of citizen participation and the type of engagement that is different. Císař introduces at least two reasons of lower civic participation in the Central and Eastern European countries after the fall of the communist regime: 1. since the old regimes identified with a ritualised version of political mobilisation and activism, collective action continued to be viewed as part of Communism even after its fall; 2. „political freedoms acquired in the new democratic regimes were not viewed as an opportunity to finally express genuine social needs, but as an opportunity not to participate at all. For post-Communist citizens, freedom literally meant the liberal notion of ‘freedom from politics’, not a republican concept of freedom to ‘take part in politics’“ (Císař 2013b).

I fully identify with Císař’s statement. The lower citizen interest and activism in the first years after the fall of state socialism in Czechoslovakia was to a large extent the legacy of communism. Collective memory of forced political participation and mandatory or semi-mandatory membership in various “socialist” organisations and associations¹ was still vivid and strong. The communist strategy towards collectivism changed the nature of social relations and strictly divided the public and private spheres. It led to a profound individualism and „familism“, and to lowering of social trust: trust became „luxury goods“ limited to small and private, mostly family „circles of trust“. Personalisation or individualisation of social relations was an important element of building trustworthy relations among individuals in Central and Eastern Europe (Giordano 2003: 13). Trust is an important resource for collective

¹ All citizens in socialist Czechoslovakia were being forced to join organisations such as Revolutionary Trade Union, Socialist Youth Union, Socialist Union of Women, Union of Czechoslovak-Soviet Friendship, and some others. The membership was formal and members of these organisations were expected to participate in regular meetings and events organised by committees of these organisations, employers or the Communist party. To refuse the membership was considered an act against the communist regime and ideology, and it always had consequences. Compulsory citizen participation in May Day Parades, Liberation Days, October Revolution celebrations and other communist holidays was another form of forced collectivism.
activism. The post-1989 democratic society liberated citizens from forced collectivism and opened opportunities for new forms of collective activism; however, building social trust has been a long process. It seems that the change comes slowly with a new generation that has not experienced communism, has no memories of old practices based on fear and distrust, and builds relationships on a different basis.

Studying civic activism in Central and Eastern Europe should be seen in the context of the civil society revival. Urban movements and grassroots groups may be defined in different ways\(^\text{2}\), however, there is an increasing agreement among scholars that these movements have become increasingly heterogeneous and their growing emergence can be explained as a consequence of new urban policies and neoliberal restructuring in the new millennium (Mayer 2006, 2007). This development has been observed also in cities of Central and Eastern Europe. Fast urban transformations, rapid growth of mega-projects, commercialisation and privatisation of public spaces or gentification of neighbourhoods lead to mobilisations of citizens against the neoliberal urban policies and projects. These local grassroots initiatives and movements empower citizens and teach them to employ different strategies. Active empowered citizens take part of responsibility for the processes within their community, and at the same time strengthen their local identity, mutual trust, solidarity, integrity and social control. This is what Robert Putnam calls social capital (Putnam 1993), an important ingredient of the sustainable development of any city or society.

Urban activism and movements in Central and Eastern Europe, including Slovakia, have been growing in the last decade as a response to fast neoliberal urban developments. Although the patterns of urban activism and movements have become similar to the rest of Europe or North America, there are some features, especially in organisational structures, forms and strategies, that may be considered region-specific as will be discussed later.

Civic activism in Banská Bystrica and Bratislava

\(^\text{2}\) For instance, Manuel Castells in his definition of 1983 describes urban social movements as „urban-oriented mobilizations that influence structural social change and transform the urban meanings“ (Castells 1983: 305). Margit Mayer and Julie-Anne Boudreau, summarising Castells’s definitions, explain that urban movements „combine activism around collective consumption with struggles for community culture as well as political self-management“, while „transforming urban meanings implies to the undermining of the social hierarchies that structure urban life and producing, instead, a city organized on the basis of use values, autonomous local cultures, and decentralized participatory democracy“ (Mayers and Boudreau 2012: 275, citing Castells 1983: 319 – 20). According to Susana Finquelievich, urban movements „deal with new conflicts, social bases and social forces“, and they have „their own and unique field of action because they deal with urban matters, urban affairs (Finquelievich 1981: 239).
The locus of my research have been two cities: Banská Bystrica, a medium size city of 80,000 inhabitants, and Bratislava, the capital of Slovakia with almost half million inhabitants (co-author Daniel Luther). The cities are located only 200 km from each other, but they show many differences.

Banská Bystrica is situated in a mountainous region outside large metropolitan areas, on the periphery of global urban networks. This kind of cities rarely get academic or political attention. Economic crisis had an impact on the rise of unemployment in the city and the whole district (5.9% in the city and 12.9 in the region in 2017), and many families found themselves in a vulnerable social situation. An increasing dissatisfaction of local citizens with the way how the local government solves problems and how it ignores the needs of citizens has had a mobilising effect on civil activism in the city.

Bratislava, The Beauty at the Danube River (a slogan from the Communist times) tells a different story. It is a city located at the Slovak-Austrian border, less than 60 km far from Vienna, with a strong economic power. It is seat of all important companies and state institutions. The Bratislava region repeatidly places very high in EU statistics of the richest regions based on GDP. It was the sixth richest region of the EU in 2014, fifth in 2015 and third in 2017 (after Luxembourg and Hamburg). The fast development of the city, which can be seen mainly through dynamic building activities all over the place, has been a key motivation of local activists to fight against decisions of local authorities and their relation with investors and developers.

Both cities face similar challenges of global processes. With neoliberal globalisation social and spatial polarisation in the cities increases, accompanied by power struggles for the ownership and use of public spaces and disputes over location of new developments (shopping malls, petrol stations, housing estates or waste management facilities).

**Urban activism in Banská Bystrica** (the key research focus and locus) covers a range of initiatives of groups of citizens, organised partly in collaboration with local non-profit organisations that support citizen engagement and participation. The city is known (in Slovakia) for its high citizen participation in various community activities. One of the important features of urban activism in a medium size city like Banská Bystrica is that most people who are professionally or voluntarily engaged in various types of urban activism know each other and are confronted with a certain level of informal social control that is characteristic for smaller (usually traditional) societies. They form a core group of local activists who are interconnected and support each other in their activities (whether they relate
to political protest, environmental initiative, community activism or petition against a new development). Some of these activists belong to non-profit organisations and movements, others are informal members of self-organised groups or ad-hoc initiatives, and there are also several individuals that play a role of leaders who mobilise citizens in particular urban issues.

In the end, it is a single community of active citizens collaborating through various channels and using different strategies that challenges decision-making of the local government. Due to the complex nature of this collective activism, the boundaries of some activities are blurred and it is not always easy to identify their ownership and to measure their impact and effectiveness. At the same time, this complexity demonstrates how important it is to study the holistic picture of urban activism and not to focus on separate categories of movements or activists defined by different theorists.

Banská Bystrica is home to more than 160 registered non-governmental organisations and movements, out of them about 60 are very active. I only focus on urban activism that is related to quality of urban life, environment and heritage and challenges urban policies and processes. Citizen participation in these organisations, movements and initiatives varies, but interviews with local activists suggest an increasing civic engagement, its broader variety, better interconnectivity and higher motivation in recent years. Key movements and organisations that work in the area of urban and community development and citizen participation include: Community Foundation Zdravé mesto (Healthy City); EKOPOLIS Foundation; Záhrada (The Garden) - The Centre of Independent Culture; and the Centre for Community Organising. These movements and organisations represent a proactive collective action: their common mission is to support citizen mobilisation in fostering the feeling of responsibility for the development of their neighborhood and the city and to build bridges among various actors in the city. They support the engagement and participation of urban people and urban communities in local governance in order to strengthen social cohesion, solidarity and local identity. These groups rarely use direct protest as the key strategy of their actions. Their strategies are rather based on a dialogue, engagement, negotiation and bridging.

Despite the lack of confrontation in their actions, they indirectly address a number of urban problems that are ignored or remain unsolved by local government, such as lack of care for public spaces or shortage of interest in needs of various, often marginalised groups of citizens (the Roma, senior citizens, young people or children from disadvantaged families).

The above mentioned non-governmental organisations are often closely related to grassroots activism that has been increasing only in the last decade. This type of urban activism is performed by individuals or groups of citizens that form opposition movements,
often temporary, spontaneous and informal. They are usually collective mobilisations organised by dedicated individuals through petitions against questionable development plans in the city. Their objective is to protect local heritage, to criticise urban restructuring, to challenge non-transparent decisions made by the city council concerning the sale of city properties to developers, and to stop new developments that would diminish public spaces. Local communities, civil associations and individuals often express their skepticism about the willingness of local authorities, members of city council, and real estate developers and investors to listen and accept opinions and demands of the public. The partnership and collaboration of the municipality with the private sector, especially with business actors, investors and developers, is met with a distrust of the public (as mentioned before). Low levels of trust towards municipal authorities and city council members who are often seen as servants of political parties is mostly evident when it comes to decisions about new expensive developments in the city at the expense of public spaces. Constructions of new residence zones (that remain empty because only a few can afford them), hotels, shopping and business centres and the destruction of the habitat of local residents provoke constant opposition of the public.

In the last decade, several reactive or protest movements were organised in Banská Bystrica by groups of citizens that used a range of strategies: information campaigns, petitions, debates and negotiations with the municipality, protest art exhibitions, film productions, physical mobilisations of citizens or creative protests (such as organising cleaning brigades or art performances in areas endangered by new development plans). One of the largest mobilisations was organised by Citizens to City, which is a non-political grassroots initiative of Banská Bystrica citizens. In 2006, this informal organisation initiated public debates, a children’s art exhibition “My vision of the Museum SNP park” and a “live chain” of more than 2000 citizens against the development plans in the large green park area near the Museum of the Slovak National Uprising. The public protest successfully stopped the development plans and the destruction of the green area. Citizens to City further organised public debates on the new Master Plan of the city (“Will anyone build near your house? The future of free spaces in Banská Bystrica”, 2008) and formulated critical statements with recommendations addressed to the Chief Architect and the municipality.

Another civil initiative was a “Petition of citizens against building a hotel near the Museum of the Slovak National Uprising” in 2008. 3.740 citizens signed the petition. In the end, their battle was won in the Supreme Court.
Two petitions against building residential villas in the area of the Calvary, a cultural heritage monument situated in the recreation zone of the city, were organised by the same person, Klára, and signed by 7,000 citizens. The Association of Slovak Architects and the Cardinal Korec publically supported the petitions, too, and the case attracted lots of attention of national media. The city of Banská Bystrica finally stopped the development plans by refusing to give building permission to the investor.

The story of an “informal group Art connects people (Ľudi spája (ť-je) umenie) and its initiative “For! the amphitheatre” started in 2013 when a group of city council members tried to persuade the council about selling the old amphitheatre situated near the city centre in an attractive area. Several young professionals decided to stop the sale and save the amphitheatre as a centre of artistic creativity. For almost a year they were attending city council meetings and were persistently presenting their arguments. They prepared several public events and initiated an open petition “For the revitalisation of the amphitheatre” addressed to the citizens of the city. In February 2014, they organised a week-day long workshop for students of architecture with lectures for the public and an exhibition of ideas, sketches and designs of the amphitheatre prepared by workshop participants. The key member of the initiative said: “In the past everyone was telling us that we are not experts, we are just idealists. The week of urbanism in Banská Bystrica should show that we can work with idealism also at the professional level” (Juraj). All these initiatives led first to a Memorandum signed by the Mayor and the members of the initiative, and finally to an agreement in the city council about the rent of the space to a company that will collaborate with the Art connect people initiative to fulfill their ideas.

When analysing initiatives and petitions for protecting urban heritage, it turns out that it is often the same activists who organise them, which shows how important the role of an individual can be in mobilising other people. People from formal organisations and movements are also involved in most of these actions as supporters. Záhrada centre serves as a meeting point for many of the initiatives and as an incubator of new ideas.

Informal and ad hoc grassroots movements and initiatives in Banská Bystrica are predominantly related to the protection of public spaces in the historic city centre that is a legally protected historic architectural reservation. They operate with arguments to preserve urban heritage and green areas. The initiatives of NIMBY type are not so common. It may be explained by the fact that the central historic part of the city has always been the main source of pride for local inhabitants (more see Bitušíková 1998, 2009) and patriotism is rather strong as expressed in an old proverb “To live in Bystrica, and after death in heaven”.

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A rather new and very important local activism in the city has been related to political fight against extremist political leader of the region (2013-2017). It is represented by “Not in Our Town” initiative and movement - I can discuss the case during the discussion as I have been an active and engaged member of the movement.

A fast growing way of civic engagement is based on social networks interaction. The digital era opened a broad range of means of communication that have profoundly changed the nature of civic participation and mobilisation. A number of grassroots initiatives are organised entirely through Facebook and they prove to have a strong effect on local activism in Banská Bystrica. All Facebook groups are connected and majority of the people involved in both formal and informal urban movements and initiatives are followers of these groups and contributors to the debates.

**Urban activism in Bratislava** can be mainly described as a battle against local authorities, and their controversial decisions based on non-transparent relations with investors and developers. This part of the discussion paper is based also on the research of Daniel Luther, a co-author of the Bratislava case research. As mentioned before, during the Communist times, Bratislava used to be labelled as „the Beauty at the Danube River“ (this concept could be a topic of a separate study). With a very dynamic, economically successful and fast post-1989 development of the city which is often in deep contrast with other regions of Slovakia, citizens of Slovakia (Bratislava outsiders) gave the city the name „the Greedy at the Danube River“. Local activists invented a new label: „the Wart at the Danube River“ – the name has been created as a response to wrong decisions of local municipalities related to the protection of historic urban zones.

In Bratislava, the protection and restoration of the historic values of the city has become the most important target of civic participation. While the first decade after 1989 was characterised by the tendency to reconstruct historic buildings and spaces, the period after 2000, accompanied by a major influx of multinational capital in the construction growth of the city, motivated civic activism with the objective to protect historic values, heritage and identity of the Danube city. Activists in Bratislava attracted public attention mainly to cases where protected historic zones and historic identity of public spaces were not respected and where industrial sites of important value were threatened.

In the context of the „Danube discussion“, in this discussion paper (based on Daniel Luther’s co-research) I will focus on citizens’ initiatives that have targeted the protection of the historic urban heritage, primarily the initiative “Obnovme Podhradie” (“Let us Restore
Podhradie”). Podhradie is an area under the Bratislava castle, the city landmark. This area comprised historically independent settlements of Zuckermandel, Vydrica and Schlossgrunt (former Jewish ghetto). In the new Communist period of 1948, the Danube riverbank was rebuilt into a four-lane road, which resulted in the demolition of many buildings. Most remaining buildings in Podhradie were further demolished at the turn of the 1960s and 1970s during the building of the new bridge over the Danube River. The picturesque character of the former Fish Square with a neologic synagogue and small streets was totally destroyed, yet, it left strong traits in the memory of the city’s inhabitants. This collective memory is still intensive, nurtured not only by local press, but also by different civic actors. The pictures of the old Podhradie on postcards, photos, drawings or paintings provide a good background for interiors of bars and restaurants or in marketing tools such as tourguides or brochures. They are present on the internet and maintain the picture of the former city neighbourhood.

Official plans to restore the historic buildings emerged right after the change of regime in 1989. The author of the urban study of Bratislava – Podhradie Alexander Németh stated: “After the Velvet Revolution, the restoration of Podhradie became a programme for the local self-government. The public which cared about how Bratislava looked like... also welcomed the nascent programme of restoration of Podhradie.”

The interest in environment, culture and history-oriented civic activists arose after calling an architects’ competition for the development of this area, the results of which were presented by the city management in 2002. The winning design comprised modernist buildings without any links to the historic structure of the space. As a response, the civic initiative Obnovme Podhradie was founded with the aim to convince the local authorities, with public support, to give the “Lost Town” back to citizens through the reconstruction of Baroque palaces, historic landmarks and original streets and through the restoration of the overall look of Podhradie. They launched a civic campaign, having organised public discussions with the representatives of the self-government and inhabitants; together with a community foundation, they created a financial fund and ran a massive media campaign using their own website, billboards, newspaper articles, posters, interviews and exhibitions, and organised a petition and a discussion forum for citizens. In their call they highlighted the essence of the problem: “They intend to build a mega-complex within an area with high historical value, similar to the monolithic buildings of the socialist period”; “how come that our experts do not have a sense for genius loci”; “they systematically destroy the atmosphere

of the old Bratislava which now only lives through old photos".\(^4\) The new building plans became a public cause and led to the cancellation of the result of the public competition. In the meantime, the city management unexpectedly sold a part of the lands in Podhradie to a private investor. The civic initiative *Obnovme Podhradie* asked to consult the sale contract, but the city management refused to disclose it. The suspicions about the city management and the mayor acting in a non-transparent way for the benefit of the investor grew. In addition to the campaign, the activists also focused on controlling the activities of the local authorities. They raised their comments on the new zoning plan and filed a petition signed by 2,500 inhabitants. The building plans in Podhradie were also discussed by the Municipal Committee of the Slovak Association of Nature and Landscape Protection, the Sustainable Development Society and by other civic associations, but the city management did not invite them to cooperate more closely.

The results of the second public competition for the Vydrica zone were published in 2007. In this competition, foreign architectural teams (Italy, Poland) were more successful than the domestic ones. None of the winning projects considered the historical context, and all of them contained a modern design. The results of electronic voting of citizens contrasted with the architects’ visions. According to Martin Huba, member of the civic association *Obnovme Podhradie*, around 93 per cent of respondents who joined their survey favoured construction in a historical style: “This is a proof of how they go blindly against the majority will of the citizens. I consider it terrorism by developers.”\(^5\)

The massive public discussion showed how collective memory influence the attitudes of the persons involved in the debates. The negative expert and lay opinions published by the mass media gave the impression that the majority of the citizens were against the plans of the investor and of the self-government:

“In my opinion, modern-style construction would desecrate the overall atmosphere around the castle.”

“The castle and the area under the castle in Bratislava is a place, the core of the city, where Bratislava always was. This was the genius loci of the city. We have more than enough of sterile modern glass facades with window washers embarrassingly waddling on ropes. This needs to be preserved or restored.”\(^6\)

\(^6\) Ako si predstavujete budúcnosť bratislavského Podhradia? Online: [www.tema.pravda.sk](http://www.tema.pravda.sk).
Most people who joined the debate argued for historical-style buildings, providing examples of European cities where it was possible to sensitively reconstruct buildings, squares or entire neighbourhoods destroyed by wars. But the then chief architect of Bratislava Štefan Šlachta declared in public that the future Vydrica in Podhradie could not be historical, because it was past to which there was no return. The citizens took the majority view that the investor and the city council acted against the interests of most inhabitants and that architects did not consider local history important because they were not born in Bratislava, for which the chief architect was blamed to the largest extent. In discussions, the identity of the inhabitants of Bratislava became part of the argumentation.

In 2010, the investor group presented another project in which, according to its statements for the mass media, the historic space was respected by partly preserving the street structure and by the building material used (stone). The reaction of the civic initiative was represented by the appeal: “We can’t tolerate it!” The next construction project was presented to the public in 2012. The city council with a new leadership organised a public discussion on the project, in which civic activists argued again for a replica of the former Vydrica, with no success. Most participants, however, agreed at least in the fact that the new construction should resemble the former neighbourhood. The project was also published in the mass media and raised a broad public discussion, the content of which can shortly be described with the following statements:

“We haven’t come to any conclusion throughout all these years. It’s the same story all the time.”

“Again, it’s just about cubes and blocks. Bleak, boring and without life....”
“I think buildings should be primarily constructed for people living in the city, and just then for the jury of some kind of architects’ competition.”
“It’s embarrassing how stubbornly the 'competent ones' reject the idea of replicas of the original buildings that used to stay there... Yet, I don't demand the building of replicas of all houses...”

“I'm glad that most Bratislava inhabitants are against modern-style buildings. And we must do everything possible to prevent having just cubes there. Just let them remember forever

that cubes do not belong to the centre and to conservation areas. And absolutely not under the castle. There are other neighbourhoods where they can build them.”

People’s reactions that we have collected from 2002 until the present show that the look of the former Vydrica is deeply rooted in the historical awareness of Bratislava citizens. The efforts to restore the original buildings met mostly with sympathies of the citizens who joined the public discourse. They expressed their positive attitudes also towards the activities of the civic activists:

“I’m happy about the activities of the civic initiative Obnovme Podhradie for two reasons: firstly, this activity can help improving the aesthetic and functional look of Bratislava; and secondly, because it is one more informal platform which points out the lack of transparency in decision-making on public affairs – not only in our city.”

The activists of the initiative Obnovme Podhradie managed to highlight the conflict between the commercial interests of developers, allied architects and city officials on one hand and the citizens’ cultural interest in preserving the historic values of the city on the other hand. They mobilised part of the public by engaging them in several protest activities, promoted their common interest in preserving the historical identity of Podhradie, and demanded that the citizens’ opinion is respected. The public opinion forced the developer to modify the project which, however, has not been implemented to date.

Citizen’s voice, engagement and participation

The interviews with activists from the studied organisations, movements and initiatives suggest that citizen engagement and participation has been slowly increasing, but also changing in its nature. “Activism has increased a lot, I can see the progress from passivity to activity, more trust, less fear. People participate, they are not afraid of signing petitions, however, they still do not cooperate enough. There are many active people and groups here, but they do not know about each other, and the municipality fails as the mediator” (Beata).

The activist Peter thinks that it is not so much the numbers, but the quality of the participation that has changed. “The generation of the people who never experienced communism thinks and acts in a very different way from their parents. They are more active, self-confident,

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skilled, well-travelled and informed. It is important to support these people and give them a chance to implement their good ideas because there are also many young people who follow different, wrong, anti-social, neo-Nazi, racist ideas…”

It is important to stress that it has been mainly the individual citizen engagement in the form of informal initiatives, volunteering, event participation, advocacy, financial giving, blogging or contributing to social networks discussions (see also Navrátil 2013) that is significant and frequent, but also more difficult to measure by quantitative methods. People who help those in need (outside their family circles) on regular or occasional basis, who write citizen complaints about negative aspects of urban development, who do volunteering may be invisible, but they do exist. Císař argues that civic self-organisation, consisting of collective action mobilised without the involvement of an organisation, constitutes one of the common types of activism in Central and Eastern Europe. He documents this type of activism in the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Bulgaria. In these countries, “collective mobilizations of this type tend to be numerous and at the same time small in size. The action repertoire seems to be dominated by petition and non-violent demonstration…” (Císař 2013b). Similarly, Navrátil and Pospíšil point out that in the Czech Republic despite low membership in civil society organisations, there are a large number of active civil society organisations and a considerable share of citizens that contribute individually to civil advocacy or support civic campaigns (Navrátil – Pospíšil 2013). Surveys and research from Slovakia support this argument. Proactive and positive (often “soft and silent”) collective as well as individual activism seems to dominate against collective protest activism and demonstrations. And it is precisely this type of local urban self-organised activism that tends to escape the researchers’ lense and is still very much understudied in Central and Eastern Europe.

Conclusions
In this discussion paper I presented briefly some results of a case study on growing urban activism in Banská Bystrica and Bratislava.

The main argument was built against the statements of the scholars that describe civil society in Central and Eastern Europe as weak and underdeveloped. The usual indicators used for measuring the level of civil society (electorial participation or membership in voluntary civic associations) are insufficient for the analysis in post-socialist societies due to different historical and political experiences. The research shows that civil society in Slovakia (based on the example of Banská Bystrica and Bratislava) is more diversified and vibrant than it was after the fall of state socialism more than two decades ago, and the interest and engagement of
local people in urban affairs has been growing in recent years. The reasons for this growth are multiple. The first reason may be that democracy in the country has matured, and citizens have learned that they cannot rely on the paternalistic hand of the state any more. They have slowly become more empowered, and realise that it is them who can and should influence processes in their cities. The second reason is that it is the generation of younger people that are most active: people, who have not experienced practices of state socialism, are well-educated and well-travelled and are not afraid of raising their critical voice against authorities. It is important to stress that it is still only a small share of local people who are engaged in urban activism, but it has been rising. The evidence is a growing number and variety of grassroots initiatives and movements established by citizens, mainly young people.

Urban activism in Banská Bystrica and Bratislava is diverse and often based on small initiatives that might be overlooked by majority of citizens or by media. Its characteristic feature is exactly the fact that it is built upon numerous and diverse civil activities of a smaller scale, and not on large movements and organisations. This is in line with Čísař’s (2013b) and Navrátil and Pospíšil’s (2013) arguments about the dominant forms of activism in Czech Republic. Civic activism in Slovakia is usually based on self-organisation without the involvement of formally organised institutions. The majority of activists prefer to use the word “initiative” for their actions instead of “movement” or “organisation”. They find small local activism rewarding because they can see tangible and immediate results. The focus of majority of initiatives is on the improvement of living conditions in the city, urban environment and heritage that is purely on local issues. The most common strategy of studied initiatives is a dialogue, formal and informal negotiation and bridging. Organised demonstrations are very rare, any protest mobilisations take a form of a petition. All these strategies and practices are part of urban politics that have to be studied.

According to the Slovak sociologist Martin Bútora, the latest trend in Slovakia shows that it is mainly these sectors of civic activism - citizen participation in community activities including urban activism, and formal and informal volunteering - that have shown an increase, while in other kinds of civic engagement (including election participation) a decline can be observed (Bútora et al. 2011). The reason for this trend is partly connected with growing disillusion of many people with domestic politics.

The lessons learned from the initial research on urban activism in the cities of Banská Bystrica and Bratislava show us the importance of looking at activism from a holistic point of view. Urban organisations, movements and initiatives in the so-called transformation society of Slovakia appear in different sizes and different forms and follow different approaches than
those in Western democracies although they may address similar topics of neoliberal urban policies. Urban activism in Slovakia and other Central and Eastern European countries has to be studied in the context of the revival, fast development and significant changes of civil society since 1989. It is important to enlarge the definition of urban activism and recognise various forms of action, larger and smaller, visible and less visible, local and global if we want to understand the trajectory of urban activism, grassroots movements and initiatives in the cities of the region and to contribute to the discussion on urban mobilisations worldwide.

References


