OTHER AND DIFFERENT: MARIBOR IN SEARCH OF ITS NEW (HI)STORY

Drugi i Drugačiji: Maribor u potrazi za svojom novom istorijom

APSTRAKT Regionalni centri post-tranzicijskih društava postaju sve više uključeni u globalnu konkurenciju gradova i regiona, dok se u isto vreme suočavaju sa preprekama u svom razvoju, koje su posledica centralizacije odlučivanja i razvoja glavnih gradova. U kontekstu Slovenije, sve ovo je povezano sa reformom lokalne uprave i njenog lošeg sprovođenja što je omogućilo regionalnim političkim i ekonomskim elitama da stvore i podrže netransparentne i često kleptokratske odnose. Ova studija slučaja analizira neuspele strategije brendiranja grada, koje je sprovela Gradska opština Maribor, što je doprinelo još jednom kolapsu grada i njenog regiona i sprečilo dalji razvitak Maribora. Naš zaključak nudi alternativni pristup koncipiranju novih urbane priče, fokusirajući se na lokalne i regionalne zainteresovane učesnike.

KLJUČNE REČI brendiranje grada, Maribor, razvoj, kleptokratska politika, flâneur

ABSTRACT Regional centers of post-transitional societies are becoming increasingly involved in global competition between cities and regions, while at the same time experiencing setbacks in development, caused by the centralization of decision-making and development in State capitals. In the case of Slovenia, all of this is linked to the reform of local government, the poor execution of which has allowed regional political and economic elites to establish and uphold intransparent, often kleptocrat connections. Our case study analyzes the failed city branding strategies of the City Municipality of Maribor, which have contributed to yet another collapse of the city and its surrounding region, and triggered the Maribor uprising. Our conclusion offers an alternative approach to conceiving of a new urban story, focusing on local and regional stakeholders.

KEY WORDS city branding, Maribor, uprising, kleptocrat politics, flâneur

Cities and urban areas of the globalized world are increasingly aware of the significance of their self-presentation: the stories that secure them a certain place within the hierarchies of attractive destinations. If international and internal...
tourist flows are taken into account, quality of life rankings should not be disregarded either. Cities tend to adopt this new conception of local and regional identity as a necessary part of development politics within city branding strategies (see Dinnie, 2011; Petrović, 2009; Bartol and Hočevar, 2005). Certain aspects of space, particularly its local and regional history, as well as contemporary infrastructural upgrades, are evolving into key factors of place branding, the essence of which is summed up well by the subtitle of one of the leading global counsellors of such placements: „Glocal, Virtual and Physical Identities, Constructed, Imagined and Experienced” (Govers and Go, 2009). However, in post-transitional societies, competition among cities and regions tends to result in uneven socio-spatial development (Golubchikov, Badyina, Makharova, 2014), particularly marked by increasing gaps between the urban regions of state capitals, and other regional centers that developed under socialism. Although the rhetoric in independent Slovenia continues to favor the polycentric model of (regional) spatial development (see MZIP, 2004), insight into practical experience reveals an increasing centralization of both political decision-making, and of socially significant functions and positions almost exclusively in Ljubljana, the State capital. Moreover, despite over two decades of specialist and, above all, political debates on the topic, social (co)operation remains without an intermediate level of territorial organization. The in-existence of regions appeals to national as well as to municipal political elites. To the former, as there is thereby no threat to the centralization of political decision-making, and to the latter, as nothing threatens the interconnections of their particular local political and economic interests.

Increasingly centralized decision-making has forced Maribor, the state’s second largest city and the regional center of north-eastern Slovenia, into a search for new place branding strategies. This text scrutinizes the failure of these strategies. A short presentation of the city’s history is followed by an analysis of changes that Maribor experienced in the search for its new story.

Attempts at creating a new urban and regional identity with the help of internationally resonant, but poorly executed projects, coupled with the fact that the Slovenian local self-management reform has set up the conditions for relatively unchecked operation of local politico-economic kleptocrat alliances, have resulted in more than a simple setback in the development of Maribor and the surrounding region. In the autumn/winter 2012/2013, the Radar affair, which can be seen as the pinnacle of the former mayor’s populist and intransparent politics, mostly supported by the City Council of the Municipality of Maribor, first resulted in the Maribor uprising, and then in the all-Slovenian uprising (see Kirn, 2013). Although this text mostly focuses on the failure to efficiently (re)brand the city and region, i.e. on the problems encountered in the search for a city’s postransitional identity in a centralized state, the conclusion cannot withhold from a reference to the city residents’ revolt against such unsuccessful, and often kleptocrat politics.

Maribor – a short history

Maribor is the second largest Slovenian city (pop. app. 97,000). Initially a fortified medieval town located at an important crossing point on the Drava river, its expansion began with the construction of the Southern Railway in
Austria-Hungary in the mid–19th century, when development was concentrated around the Railway works and small and mid-size enterprises. Before 1918, the Germans had been the major capital owners and public life protagonists, and the town had lived in the shadow of Graz, the capital of Styria. After WWI, despite attempts at cultural assimilation, German entrepreneurs were still at the helm of industrialization, largely drawing on the flourishing textile industry enabled by new hydro plants on the Drava river. In 1941, the Yugoslav part of Styria was annexed by Nazi Germany, the regional economy hence redirected towards satisfying the needs of the military, resulting in the construction of an aircraft engine factory. At the end of WWII, 47% of the city buildings were badly damaged or destroyed in air raids, as were traffic infrastructure and industrial facilities.

The liberation was followed by reconstruction that lasted until the mid–1950s. Thanks to its industrial history and educated workforce, Maribor became one of the leading Yugoslav industrial centers. Apart from the textile and food-processing industries, it also became an important metallurgical center with large socially-owned companies each employing several thousand workers and some even having their own research and educational centers. In 1975, the University of Maribor was established to meet the needs of the regional economy. It evolved from educational institutions that had already existed (law, agronomy, medicine), and has placed emphasis on technical sciences ever since.

The economic crisis during the 1980s and the loss of the Yugoslav market after Slovenia gained independence resulted in the city’s economic collapse, accompanied by strikes, the bankruptcy of most large companies, the loss of 30,000 jobs and the rise of the unemployment rate to nearly 25%. Maribor nevertheless managed to (partially) overcome the crisis thanks to its workers’ daily migration to nearby Graz and small and mid-size service and industrial businesses that evolved from the healthy portions of fallen industrial giants and accumulated knowledge. Today, Maribor boasts a university, cultural life, tourist and service industries, but nevertheless remains an industrial center once again suffering developmental pains, much like those of twenty years ago. (see Oset, Berberhih Slana, Lazarević (eds.), 2010)

Changes in the urban space

The transformation from a medieval town with a strong Jewish community, first to a provincial Austro-Hungarian town, then to a mid-size industrial center in Yugoslavia, and finally to a post-socialist and post-transitional city, has left a mark on the city’s image, resembling the one notable in other cities with similar history (see Klimes, Dmitrieva (eds.), 2010). Maribor’s image combines an originally Gothic but later heavily Baroque-ized castle surrounded by four defense towers, Austro-Hungarian provincial architecture, remnants of pre-WWII industrial architectural heritage, a number of socialist residential neighborhoods and industrial zones, other functionalist architecture, and „metropolitanization” attempts of the recent capitalist era. If architecture of the socialist regime may be
described as containing more than a few examples of high quality functionalism, most of (post)transition architecture consists of above all generic non-places of architecture (Auge, 2009), not too remarkable in terms of quality.

Much like many other post-socialist environments, Maribor strives for a new urban image that would reflect a modern, forward-looking city. The process is boosted by de-industrialization and the development of the service sector, on the one hand, and systematic endeavors of the municipal authorities, on the other. The question is, to what extent these new, either envisaged or implemented changes are original and regional in character, and to what extent we are dealing with a case of generic, copy/paste development.

A good example of generic construction is a project popularly dubbed the Maribor Manhattan (Picture 1). The municipal authorities approved the spatial plan before the beginning of the crisis. The neighborhood was planned to cover 170,000 square meters and include a 115-meter high building on the right bank of the Drava river, next to the city’s largest shopping area, as well as „exclusive residential apartments, offices and conference halls, a green recreational oasis ...“ This plan, of megalomaniac proportions even in non-crisis circumstances, is a typical example of the mimicking of „metropolitanization“ found all across Slovenia and the wider region, with municipal authorities striving to create miniature „Manhattans“ based on unrealistic aspirations. In Slovenia, these are most often materialized as high-rise office buildings that, as a rule, remain short of tenants, and, on the other hand, are readily supported by construction lobbies due to their cost-effectiveness.

More ingenious was the city’s approach to planning the construction of facilities for the events in the framework of the European Capital of Culture (ECC) in 2012 (Maribor shared this title with Guimarães). In 2009, an international
architectural competition was launched in cooperation with the Association of Architects of Maribor, under the auspices of the International Union of Architects and the Chamber for Architecture and Spatial Planning of Slovenia. The authors were invited to design the embankments along the Drava river, a wooden footbridge across the river, and a new building to host the Arts Gallery of Maribor (UGM). Four hundred participants from 48 countries submitted a series of interesting solutions, with the new UGM building obviously being the greatest challenge, given that it attracted 217 proposals. The international jury announced its decision in March 2010, and the selected projects were exhibited in the old UGM building from June 3 to August 29, 2010.

The award-winning solution for the new embankments along the Drava river, a work of a team of architects from Rome, included squares, streets, walking paths, piers, spaces for pedestrians and cyclists, and green areas (Picture 2). It is a simple layout respectful of the city’s „veduta“, but monotonous and linear with scarce shade and failing to elaborate on the multi-purposefulness of the space. The jury therefore suggested that the authors should „provide more comfort and create a kind of ‘living room’ on the river banks“ (Vidmar (ed.), 2010: 20). The first award for the wooden footbridge design went to a Spanish author who proposed a simple, wood-paneled bridge that does not distinguish between pedestrians and cyclists.

The hardest decision was the selection of a UGM building design. Four awards and 7 recognitions were given. The award-winning solution by Hungarian architects (Picture 3) comprises 8,000 square meters of gallery space, an architectural center, a children’s museum and a creative industries center. The decisive factor was its maximum height of 19.4 m only and a simple form featuring a white façade and a large terrace facing the river, promising to become the city’s iconic image. The jury nevertheless recommended a consideration of how to „shorten/reduce the roof silhouette towards the south-western corner“ (Vidmar (ed.), 2010: 50).
Unfortunately, none of these projects, originally planned to be implemented by 2011, evolved beyond proposals and visualizations. Part of the reason lies in the financial crisis and contentious relationship between the municipal and national executives, but the main obstacle was a concoction brewed in the local/regional „kitchen” through the lobbying of regional cultural circles and the leading Slovenian architectural bureau. After the competition results had been announced, they came up with a new proposal – the Maks cultural center that would be located in a disused cotton mill in an industrial area and would incorporate the new UMG building. The estimated construction costs amounted to 30 million EUR. The Hungarian architectural bureau, which worked on the finalization of the project at the time, brought an action against the City of Maribor. The outcome was the out-of-court settlement and their withdrawal from the project.

The Maks cultural center evolved into another fiasco in the city’s development. The construction pit, the creation of which cost the municipality around three million EUR has recently been sold to a businessman from Kuwait for 600,000 EUR. Allegedly, he is going to use the location to erect an „American university”. At the same time, the Sadar + Vuga architectural bureau from Ljubljana filed an appeal at the District Court in Maribor, demanding that the Municipality of Maribor and municipal company ZIM return 650,000 EUR worth of debts.
Consequently, Maribor is one of the rare ECCs that failed to take advantage of its nomination to renovate old facilities or obtain new ones (glej Trček, 2012a). The complication following the international competition was not unexpected. It exposed the opposition of the Slovenian architectural circles to international competitions – a practice previously uncommon in Slovenia. Their preferred choice is lobbying and political maneuvering to keep the Slovenian market closed to foreigners. Such a development sent a negative message to the international architectural-urban planning circles, and it will certainly have implications for similar international competitions in the future.

Maribor did not escape generic face-lifting either, in line with the neo-liberal consumer-business approach. It found expression in the monolithic glass facades of large financial and insurance companies and the shopping centers strewn along the main commuter routes, leaving the historical city center in a sorry state, and its revitalization an unresolved issue. The changes were accompanied with belated suburbanization, particularly involving richer urban classes. It is connected with the shortage of urban environments characteristic of Slovenia and the predominant anti-urban values cherished by the majority (see Hočevar et al., 2005 in Kos, 2007).

With the current economic crisis and the consequent waning of the remaining part of the regional, technologically outdated industry, the unemployment rate in the city and the wider region has been increasing again. This is evident from statistics on the number of thefts, burglaries and juvenile delinquency, as well as from deserted, dusty bars and buildings in business-consumer centers. The city’s present image therefore harks back to the situation of two decades ago, with new locks now securing the doors of half-empty new business and trade centers and uncompleted facilities. All of this is also reflected in changed urban axiality, functions and, inevitably, in urban life as a form of (co)living.

Changes in urban functionality

Although the regional center of northeastern Slovenia, Maribor’s importance diminished over the past twenty years as a consequence of the reform of local government that began in the mid–1990s. It increased the number of municipalities from 60, at the time when Slovenia gained independence, to the present 212. Consequently, despite the 20-years long debate, Slovenia still does not have regions or (co)decision-making on the regional level. Many new municipalities do not meet the minimal, mandatory functional criteria and consequently cannot finance the municipal budget through local taxes. The Court of Audit analysis shows that only 48 municipalities were financially independent in 2010. One paradoxical consequence thereof is a greater centralization of political and development-related decision-making compared to the situation during the 1980s, when polycentric development was an official development strategy. (See Kos, 2000)

Such political and developmental centralization strongly affects Maribor’s fate. Although it is the second largest city in Slovenia and an important regional center, so far only one institution of national importance has been relocated
to Maribor (The Post Office of Slovenia). The greatest number of them have remained, or have been newly established in the capital – Ljubljana, which, through public administration, financial and service sectors, the trading sector and creative industries contributes one half of the national economy.

Deindustrialization, regional suburbanization and the centralization of political decision-making is also reflected in a decrease in population. While in the 1980s the municipality had more than 180,000 residents, the current City of Maribor, indeed smaller in size, only has slightly more than 112,000 residents. During the past two decades, barring three years preceding the financial crisis, Maribor had a negative migration balance, although Slovenian society as a whole is extraordinarily immobile in this respect. The delay in the regionalization of Slovenia also destroyed the national hierarchy of cities’ centrality. Although urban municipalities do exist – with the very term „urban municipality” indicating a regional center – the legal definition of their status is vague and it does not bring developmental advantages.

Undoubtedly, as the second largest city in the country, Maribor has a number of macro-regional functions, e.g., a university, a medical center, secondary schools, courts, regional national administration offices and public services, and national cultural institutions. Despite all, the outcome of the economic transition in independent Slovenia was negative for Maribor, which is not merely the impression of Maribor and Styria residents but a statistically verifiable fact. In the context of increasing state debt and a deepening financial crisis, centralization is getting an ever firmer hold on the sphere of project financing: most of the financial resources available through national calls for development projects go to stakeholders from Ljubljana. The recognition of this fact additionally increases, particularly in the political sense, antagonism in the relations between the Other/different Maribor and Ljubljana. The residents of Maribor consider „froggies” (a pejorative term for Ljubljana residents) primarily as exploiters, while Ljubljana residents see their compatriots living in Maribor as not overly competent workers.

Accusations along the lines of „who-exploits-whom”, indeed encountered in many comparable countries, would remain part of „folk culture” had it not been for their serious impact on the city’s development. Such antagonism creates a basic political division between the capital and the regional center which did not have the option of ameliorating the economic transition problems by taking advantage of the function of national or regional capital. More importantly, it introduces populist politics into Maribor, of the kind that attracts voters and scores victories by cultivating opposition to the center and engaging in political „infotainment” rather than by tackling development challenges.

The city’s politicians, on the other hand, attempt to create a new development story of Maribor. Since the centralization upset the network of functional centrality, Maribor resorted to a different approach, searching for its new significance within a wider, usually European context. To achieve this, it competes for international cultural and sport events and engages in politically supported projects. In line with this, in 2000 Maribor was nominated Alpine
City; in 2012 it was the European Capital of Culture and hosted the World Youth Chess Championship, while in 2013 it was the European Youth Capital.

Maribor was also the only candidate for hosting the 2013 Winter Universiade. This project, relocated to Trentino, is a good illustration of the problems associated with Maribor’s „re-branding” and conflict within its relationship with the national political elite. The very fact that Maribor was the only candidate suggests that this is not a profit-generating event. The estimated costs of organization rose from the initial 60 million EUR to 300 million, only to be reduced under the pressure of the economic crisis to 30 million EUR. The previous national government promised to co-finance the Universiade, but the new government withdrew the decision. The project was infested with squabbles between local politicians, who failed to prepare legal and formal basis for the building of infrastructure, and responsible national departments. The rising project costs can also be partly attributed to the plans of the regional skiing lobby to take advantage of the project and enhance the Pohorje Sports Center.

The International University Sports Federation demanded that the Municipality of Maribor pay compensations for the cancellation of the Universiade. The Municipality transferred the payment in December 2013, the transferred amount still remaining a secret. The administration of the newly elected „uprising mayor” refers to the provision of the Law on Access to Information of Public Character, claiming that revealing the number would be to the detriment of the mediation, thus sadly perpetuating the intransparent politics of its predecessor who was done away with during the uprising (see Galun, 2014).

With the deepening of crisis which forces cities into prudence and search for solutions that would ensure the same quality of life through smaller budgets, the attempts at creating new stories are rather excessive than not. The reason is that they do not bring long-term synergy, frequently not even short-term profits, but they presuppose substantial financial resources and complex logistics which municipalities cannot ensure. A more difficult course, but a more suitable one in the long-term would be to find new opportunities for the development of the regional economy that would comprise tourism, culture and education.

Radars – an ideally typical example of kleptocrat politico-economic symbiosis and the trigger of the Maribor Uprising

The populist politics of municipal authorities with majority support in the City Council resulted in a series of intransparent decisions. Aside from the aforementioned carelessly planned attempts aimed at bringing the city and region international recognition, mostly based on the desire to compete with Ljubljana rather than on feasible financial constructions and expected mid- and long-term synergetic effects on the municipality and region, it is the broader area of infrastructural development where corruption and kleptocrat networking of local and regional politicians and so-called businessmen find it easiest to
flourish. A whole range of companies (co)owned by the municipality was either subject to arranged intransparent privatization or became refuge to certain, emeritus members of staff. Another area where private interests and politics most often get entangled through nepotistic networking practices, is that of granting concessions.

If we add austerity ideology into the equation, in the context of a city and region that are sliding further and further down the slope of stagnation, and lagging behind in comparison to the urban region of Ljubljana, we get the ideal conditions for a general public uprising, civil rebellion. In Maribor, it was the radars that triggered the residents’ revolt. Instruments, designed to detect and penalize drivers oblivious to speed limits. Organized traffic, as well as its guaranteed safety and fluency, are one of the infrastructural priorities of any city, and it is not unusual that the issue be approached through public-private partnerships. In Maribor, the municipality established a joint-venture with the Iskra Sistemi company. Initially, the investment was planned to amount to five or six million EUR, but finally rose to 30 million EUR. This kind of development is not too rare when it comes to financial planning of investments in Slovenia, where annexes to contracts are legalized by financial flows from the state and municipal budget to private enterprises. Formal excuses for annexes typically first amount to unforeseen circumstances, projects’ technical complexity, geological issues in the field, etc.

The residents of Maribor rebel and head to the streets when they find out that the contract between the municipality and the concessionaire effectively means that the investment would be financed exclusively from the fines for speeding. Over the next three decades, 92 per cent of the money, collected in such fashion, would go to the concessionaire, and a mere 8 per cent would end up in the municipal budget. This can be described as an ideally-typical case of legalized post-transitional kleptocracy. Taking into account that Maribor was chosen to host the Universiade, which was cancelled at the very last moment due to financial and infrastructural unfeasibility, that the European University Sports Association demands compensation amounting to several million EUR, that the municipality buys 10 million EUR of credit, supposedly to be used for new infrastructural investments, but proceeds instead to spend it on filling up budget holes, this is where the citizens decide they have had enough of the mayor and his network of significant others. While the rebellious residents of Maribor demolish the radars, the mayor proceeds to run for a seat in the National Council, the second chamber of the Slovenian parliament with a right to legislative veto, where 22 out of 40 members represent local interests. The mayor, already involved in a number of trials, wishes to thereby receive parliamentary immunity. A crowd of several thousand people gathers in front of the Old City Hall during the Electoral College vote, rightfully demanding that he resign, but this is not enough to convince the electors. This is the snowflake that unleashes the avalanche. Indeed, there have been prior protests against austerity measures in Ljubljana, but this brings events to a whole new level, as, compared to the capital, Maribor is a much more impoverished, wounded city. Around 10,000 people attend peaceful protests demanding the mayor’s abdication on
November 26th. According to a decision of the Slovene political summit, the police is sent to counter the protesters. It proceeds to bombard us with tear gas, have a helicopter hover over our heads, and special units chase us around town, arrest and beat people up, and use pepper spray against peaceful demonstrators (see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2012_Maribor_protests and Trček, 2013).

The autumn and winter of uprisings in Maribor end with extraordinary mayor elections, and the election of a new, so-called upriser mayor. The composition of the City Council, however, hardly changes, meaning that the city practically enters a 1.5 year long period of preparation for the next elections, during which the old legislative and new executive authorities can do no better than resort to petty bickering. On the national level, on the other hand, the political elite uses the uprising to trigger the disintegration of the old and the formation of a new coalition. The latter proceeds to abide by the rules of the troika (IMF, ECB, EC), carrying on with austerity politics and increasing state debts. (For an analysis of the semi-successfulness of the uprisings, see Trček, 2013a)

In search for a new Maribor flâneur
– the protagonist of the city’s new story

The Maribor story of political populism and a careless search for a new urban and regional identity, which amounts to abusing the scarce financial means allocated by the budget to development by spending them on paying for judicial trials and penalties, is merely a consequence of the intransparency of the political system where kleptocrat cooperation between politics and clientelist networks, used to endless subsidies from the budget, prevail. This so-called „comrade capitalism” is a legalized rule, rather than exception, in many post-transitional societies. Furthermore, in a system of extremely centralized decision-making, local stakeholders from small municipalities are mostly impotent in initiating real breakthroughs in development (see Trček, 2012).

If, at the end of our Maribor case study, we ask ourselves, where to look for an urban and regional story, the answer is to be sought in the concept of the flâneur. Although today, the flâneur is considered as a cultural icon that needs to be demystified (see Gluck, 2003: 54–55), a suitable conceptual focus for understanding Maribor lies in the search for its new story. Both the urban stroller and the avant-garde, artistic flâneur are important figures, a prerequisite for urbanity and metropolitanization (see Gilloch 1996) of mid-size cities.

The centralization of Slovenia has been reflected in Maribor’s urban and cultural life. Many cultural workers and young, highly educated people have moved permanently to Ljubljana, the center of economic and cultural life where decision-making about subsidies takes place. Besides, although Maribor is a university city with over 25,000 students, it lacks student (sub)culture. With the deepening of crisis, Maribor continues to be the choice of students from the region who cannot afford to study in Ljubljana. Even those enrolling in the new, ambitious architectural course rarely come from outside the region. Most of them leave the city during weekends. The current reconstruction of the
Medical Faculty building will increase its capacity and hopefully attract more students from outside the region, but what is really needed are university courses with new and different content, to differentiate the Maribor University from its counterpart in Ljubljana.

Suburbanization, unfavorable demographic trends and the lack of lively student life are the trends within Slovenian society (characterized by the shortage of urban space and xenophobia, see Zavratnik Zimic, 2011) that essentially contribute to the absence of the critical mass needed for the development of new Maribor’s urbanity. This by no means suggests that nothing is happening in Maribor. The transformations seen over the past century provide plentiful material for artists, but unfortunately, the artistic circle is small, composed of outstanding individuals or small networks.

Even more obvious than the shortage of artistic, avant-garde flâneurs, is the absence of urban strollers who would both enjoy and co-create Maribor’s new urbanity. In the long term, a new story of Maribor cannot be created by staging events that leave a „metropolitan” impression but have no capillary effect or long-term impact on the city and region. New urbanity can be created through a network of successful micro-stories and projects which may not have an immediate impact, but could eventually produce a milieu that will attract new flâneurs.

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