

The politics of displaying minority place names:

What is behind the local deals?

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Although the practical function of place-names is to differentiate one place from another, critical place-name studies rather emphasize their second semiotic layer, namely symbolizing possession. Place-names are strongly attached to the denominator person/group and its ideology. Hence naming as a process is related to political claims and power. According to the ethnographical approach, the ritual of naming justifies the possession; (re)naming a territory's toponymy strengthen the possessor's symbolic power over the territory. Thus place-names reflect the existing power relations.

Ethnically and culturally diverse settlements in Central and Eastern Europe with tumultuous history (shifting state borders, forced settlements of ethnic groups, changing minority-majority positions) often witness local power-struggles along ethnic/linguistic boundaries that may center on the visibility of ethnic groups in public space. Thus displaying mono/multilingual place names (and other geographical names) in public space is embedded into political discourses and debates. The majority group is empowered to control the linguistic landscape and/or limit the other groups' visual self-

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representation (i.e the evidence of existence of minorities) in the linguistic landscape. Such conflict of interests and power dynamics may contribute to the evolvement of alternative city-texts and ethnically peculiar toponymy. In that context the topic of naming and the representation (or non-representation, absence) of geographical names are far outreach the level of local politics and embedded into the national discourse on minority politics.

The present paper overviews how place names are generally presented and how multilingual settlement and street name plates are placed, replaced and damaged in some multiethnic/multilingual settings in East Central Europe and what sort of regional differences, peculiarities can be revealed in this sense. Focusing on untypical cases examples from Slovakia, Romania and Ukraine, where the display of multilingual place names would not be mandatory by law, my goal is to present what kind of processes, political deals have an influence on visibility of minority place names, and what reasons can be found behind the deals.

I argue that – although the visibility of geographical names and ethnic groups is highly politicized issue in which the participating parties have different aims and power – on local level the linguistic landscape is formed by constant power dynamics and allow local patterns different of national narratives. The study identifies patrimonialisation as one of the most important motifs behind the deals, meaning that previously neglected minority toponyms, or old name of the city (re)appears as capital in tourism, city branding – especially if it is not a “threat” for the prevailing ethnic hierarchy. In this approach, minority names can refer either to the presence of an ethnic group or to the history, cultural heritage of the city.