

## LOCAL INTERESTS, IDENTITY AND SLOVAK HERITAGE: ELITE DISCOURSES ON URBAN DEVELOPMENT IN BÉKÉSCSABA, HUNGARY

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### Local interests, identity and Slovak heritage: elite discourses on urban development in Békéscsaba, Hungary

This study is based on semi-structured interviews with Békéscsaba's local elite and aims to explore the narratives of the town's urban progress and the enforcement of local interests related to urban development. The paper also examines the elite narratives on the local society and the issue of the town's Slovak heritage. Békéscsaba is a mid-sized town in South-Eastern Hungary, resettled mainly with Lutheran Slovaks and became the seat of Békés county after showing remarkable economic progress in the 19th – 20th century. However, the discourse of being underdeveloped and peripheral, and having poor lobbying capacities became dominant in the second half of the 20th century. This was the context in which the economic crises after 1989 and 2008 – 2009 arrived. Both crises were followed by massive out-migration from the town. Slovak heritage was ambivalently discussed during the interviews; some interviewees neglected or dispraised the issue, while others highlighted the heritage's embeddedness in culture that also forms a basis for touristic attractions. That is the factor for a particular urban mentality of Békéscsaba, which needs to be treated with non-traditional urban development approaches. However, most narratives turned back to a picture mentality as a factor for the lack of progress and urban setback. Urban development efforts have aimed thus to remedy this century-old debt, but many have legitimate doubts as to whether the mental disadvantages can be recompensed with stone and concrete, with poor top-down as well as bottom-up interest enforcement. However, we should not ignore the structural background of Békéscsaba's uneven development.

**Key words:** Slovak heritage, urban development, identity, elite discourses, Békéscsaba, Hungary

## INTRODUCTION

As a consequence of various movements of urban socio-economic and environmental change, discourses on urban development has become increasingly diverse in the last decades (Moulaert et al. 2007). The discourses of neo-liberal urban development, eco-urbanism (e.g. green or smart cities) or social innovation (e.g. certain grassroots and feminist movements, civic democracy) contrast superficially, however, critical reflections have revealed that these all could be tamed and incorporated by the neo-liberal urban regime. Hence, they serve the original goals set by this hegemonic regime and the political and economic elite behind it (Swyngedouw et al. 2002, Brand 2007, Moulaert et al. 2007 and Raco and Flint 2012). Numerous theoretical research has been done so far to identify the links between urban regime theory, urban policy and governance, local elites and discourses, by combining

Gramscian ideas on hegemony and counter hegemony, Foucauldian genealogy or regulation theory. While the institutions for democratic participation are also weak in the western part of the European continent (Swyngedouw et al. 2002), this research has underscored the importance of elite discourses in knowledge formulation, shaping local urban policy and developmental practice (Jessop 1997, Moulaert et al. 2007 and Atkinson et al. 2010). Outside party politics, elite groups and formations have thus fundamental role in discussing developmental needs and goals, and in transferring them to the political arena. Furthermore, elite groups could legitimate or criticize prevailing or earlier paths of development, by bringing new issues into the public discourses. It is of high importance particularly in mid-sized cities like Békéscsaba, Szolnok, Kaposvár (Hungary) or Prešov, Nitra or Trnava (Slovakia).

After the right-wing government came to power in Hungary in 2010, the frames of a new urban policy were outlined with centralizing local municipalities (legal environment, and debt assumption – see Pálné Kovács 2016). Reforming public administration and regional policy institutions characterized this change, and the European Union-funded structural and cohesion policy goals were also re-designed. Finally, the government became also the main character of the urban policy arena by launching the so-called Modern Cities Program (MCP) in 2015, which was dedicated only to the largest Hungarian towns and cities (Somlyódiné Pfeil 2017 and Rechnitzer et al. 2019). These changes demonstrate the evolving local, new urban regimes with top-down initiatives, state-controlled actors and finances of development, putting emphasis on large-scale urban development projects (cf. Swyngedouw et al. 2002), which contextualize the prevailing (elite) discourses on urban planning and development, and which are the focal point of this paper.

### BÉKÉSCSABA, A MID-SIZED COUNTY UNDERGOING PERIPHERIZATION

Békéscsaba, the subject of our case study, is a mid-sized town in South-Eastern Hungary with 58,000 inhabitants (Fig. 1). After the Ottoman rule, the vacant settlement was resettled mainly with Lutheran Slovaks in the 18th – 19th century, and became the seat of Békés county after showing remarkable urban progress in the late 19th and in the 20th century.



Fig. 1. Békéscsaba town location in a broader territorial context

Nevertheless, Békéscsaba and Békés county have remained peripheralized in present-day Hungary and in the Great Hungarian Plain as well. Arad, the natural centre of this region, became part of Romania after the Treaty of Trianon in 1920, and Békéscsaba had no opportunity to reach the same level of infrastructural development, partly due to its geographical position. Situated between Szeged and Debrecen, Békéscsaba is the largest member of a unique, multi-centred settlement network (with Gyula, pop. 30,000 and Békés, pop. 18,000). Despite this, the town realised the lag in the second half of the socialist period and set the objective for overcoming infrastructural shortcomings and mobilized funds for industrial development and state-financed housing investments (Köteles 1999).

After the economic shocks of the political transition in 1989 and the 2008 – 2009 crisis, the town and its region faced a high level of unemployment and economic recession, and continuously struggled to stabilize its economy and labour market.

There are no remarkable question marks considering the urban planning of Békéscsaba. Without a historic town centre, significant urban decay or suburbanization, there is not any particular geographical emphasis on the urban development in the town (Kovács 2005). Nevertheless, the town's Slovak heritage might be framed as having a potential for a touristic development in Central European context (Murczyn 2008). However, compared to multi-ethnic cities in the Global South, the context and perspectives for ethnic heritage planning are different in Hungary, where ethnic issues are predominantly limited to Roma population and to Hungarian minorities beyond the borders. Heritage planning thus usually lacks ethnic dimensions (Ashworth and Tunbridge 1999). Furthermore, place-marketing based on ethnic heritage planning requires careful examination. Remaining deeply enconced in the logic of competitiveness and entrepreneurship, there is the danger of sacrificing the authenticity of local culture to its commodification (Kavaratzis and Ashworth 2015 and Plüschke-Altöf 2017).

## AIMS AND METHODOLOGY

As outlined above, elite discourses are analysed in this paper in connection with the urban development of Békéscsaba. On the one hand, we are eager to explore the dominant narratives about the town's progress, challenges and opportunities. The field of urban development is considered to be a political area, therefore, our aim was to examine some coherent or at least deeper layers of public discourses polarized according to the political balance of power. On the other hand, it is an interesting research topic how the local society is perceived by the elite and how the Slovak heritage is a part thereof as a social and mentality factor, as a constituent that shapes the society, so primarily, as a non-material element.

For this purpose, we conducted 15 in-depth semi-structured interviews. The representatives of the local municipality, politicians, expert and civilian intellectuals, people representing the town's scientific, economic or civilian sector were interviewed in 2019. We interviewed five current or former politicians (Interviewee 4, 6, 8, 11 and 14), and four expert intellectuals engaged in the field of urban development (Interviewee 5, 7, 8 and 14), four civilian intellectuals (Interviewee 2, 9, 10 and 12) and four economic actors (Interviewee 1, 3, 13 and 15). The interviews were recorded personally, mostly at the interviewees' workplace or home and audio recordings were made in all cases.

Respondents were asked in a semi-structured manner with some differences depending on the groups of interviewees, as specified above. The first set of questions concerned the introduction of the respondents, their professional background, the urban role of the institution/organisation they represent, while the second group of questions regarded issues related to the town. The third group focused on lobbying of local interests, while the fourth group examined the solutions of urban development, their means and various possibilities, as well as the urban development actions and projects. Finally, the fifth set of questions sought to explore the characteristics of local society and its role in urban development. The interviews were processed anonymously, therefore, they are presented in this study anonymously as well. We used textual and discourse analysis, and we also extracted typical narratives from the interviews and presented them in a literary context (Atkinson et al. 2010). The results thus are discussed by making comparisons with the relevant literature findings.

In addition to differences with regard to party politics and fault lines, some well-defined topics have been identified in the interviews, so consequently, both the focus and structure of the study follow them. First of all, we explored the dominant narratives of Békéscsaba's urban development and the respective lobbying related to urban development. Thereafter, we examined the remarks on the local society made during the elite interviews, and within this context, the issue of the town's Slovak heritage is also elaborated on.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Elite narratives on historic the urban progress of Békéscsaba

*“Csaba is not that bad a place,”* said one of the interviewees (Interviewee 3), pondering the geographical and infrastructural situation of the town. In many respects, this statement well describes the spatial relativity of Békéscsaba's geographical position. In the Middle Ages, the town was only a small village, settled in the area of the Körös rivers. Following the Ottoman rule, the settlement started to become a town as a result of settling new residents; the first Slovak settlers received their settlement permit in 1718. In 1776, the settlement obtained a permit to organise a weekly market on Wednesdays and from 1846, on Saturdays. Flood control, such as the construction of the Élővíz Canal, and improving traffic conditions and, hence, freight transport played a significant role in urbanisation. Several main roads, towards Oradea, Arad and Battonya, were improved at that time, however, economic development was brought by the construction of railways. The town was engaged in serious lobbying in order to be a part of the railway lines between Pest and Sibiu, and then between Szolnok and Arad. The project was accomplished and the railway line started to operate in 1858. The progressiveness of the Lutheran Slovak, who founded the town, played an important role here, while the town administration of Gyula was not characterised by that kind of progressiveness (Tábori 1970 and Tóth 1976b).

*“Grain is what made this town big,”* said Interviewee 9. That is true of several Hungarian towns and cities in the Great Plain since the upswing in cereal-growing and its consequences, the construction of railways was the key driving force for urban progress. By 1870 – 1871, a section of the railway line between Oradea–Szeged–Nagykanizsa–Rijeka opened also linking Békéscsaba and the town become

a transport hub (Beluszky 2001). Even though Békéscsaba was not the centre of local railway lines in the county, the town established two additional narrow-gauge railways that became important and were engaged in both freight and passenger transportation. Following the construction of railways, the establishment of hard-surface macadam roads began in the Great Hungarian Plain, which strengthened the characteristic of the town as a transport hub (Tábori 1970, Tóth 1976b and Dövényi 2007).

As a result, the economic centre of Békés county shifted to Békéscsaba due to the increasing trade and industrial development related to agriculture in the middle of the 19th century. In the era of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, steam mills, a tobacco exchange shop, brickworks, presses, small textile plants were also established (Dankó 1970 and Tábori 1970). They expanded in the interwar period, and poultry processing also started. After WWII, the poultry processing plant was supplemented with a cannery and a cold storage unit. The agricultural sowing structure, which was set up for growing field crops, also shifted in the direction of growing vegetables (Mosolygó 1976). Serious reorganisation was carried out with regard to textile plants and a clothing factory began to operate as well. The establishment of the first significant industrial plant (the factory manufacturing agricultural machinery) took place under the industrialisation programme in the Great Hungarian Plain in 1968 (Simon 1976).

#### Narratives of underdevelopment and local interests

According to the relevant literature, the town asserted its interests and developed its economy well until WWII, which is partly why the town could later manage to move the county seat out of Gyula (1950), however the latter's close location to the border was a disadvantage, and Gyula's population and economic performance grew slower than Békéscsaba's (Velkey 2003). Nevertheless, the county seat achieved significant progress during the era of socialism and its dynamism came to a halt compared to the average in the Great Hungarian Plain in the beginning of the Kádár era. Therefore, the modernist-technocratic National Concept for Settlement Network Development, with regard to advanced centres, assigned the essential task for Békéscsaba to "catch up" with other cities (Dankó 1970, Tóth 1976b and Kovács 1999).

Thus, narratives that can also be observed in connection with many other settlements in the Great Plain, are present in the literature with regard to Békéscsaba as well, which dates the golden era, the peak of urban progress to the era of Monarchy (Beluszky 2001), although ignoring the social and environmental price of development, as it was clearly articulated in one of the interviews. Contrastingly, according to the literature and interviews, the discourse of being underdeveloped and peripheral became dominant in the second half of the 20th century. The border changes after WWI are only one reason for that, as a result of which Békéscsaba and its county have become geographically marginalised. On the other hand, the town has a historical shortcoming that was attempted to be reduced "forcefully" during state socialism. Despite that, Békéscsaba has not managed to become the dominant centre of its county up to this day. Partly, there is a geographical reason for that. Therefore, since it is the largest member of the settlement network in Békés county (Békéscsaba, Gyula and Békés), cooperation became the main program instead of rivalry by the end of the 1980s (Tóth 1981). After the regime change, there were variable, but at least always some kind of intentions for developing the urban asso-

ciation, the so called Mid-Békés Centre. Currently, there is also an opportunity for that, however, there is still some work to do in that particular field, as some of the interviews pointed out.

*“I believe, because there were some initiatives previously, if Gyula, Békés and Békéscsaba can collaborate on starting a joint programme instead of starting one against each other, as they usually do [...] if that worked, that would be a forward-looking initiative. They could take measures to develop either the infrastructure or the road network.”* (Interviewee 3).

Nowadays, Békéscsaba also shares a number of functions with Gyula: the county hospital, the court and one penitentiary is located in Gyula. In addition, the centre of the largest multinational company in the county is in Orosháza. Our interviewees mentioned further examples when Békéscsaba is explicitly challenged by its neighbouring towns, Gyula in particular, situated only 15 km far from Békéscsaba, with regard to tourism, sausage manufacturing or the newest foreign direct investment<sup>1</sup>. However, it shall be noted that Gyula had also had a negative experience with respect to its relationship with Békéscsaba; when it lost the position of county seat, it was like a defeat for the town, followed by ignorance during the era of socialism, when the regime was eager to develop Békéscsaba instead (Velkey 2003). However, some of our interview partners emphasized that Gyula is better known as a cultural and touristic centre, and is at a more advanced level than Békéscsaba with regard to lobbying. This illustrates that Gyula has managed to regain its position in many regards and behaves as a rival for Békéscsaba. Békéscsaba’s “underdevelopment” was often linked to its poor lobbying capacity: *“even smaller towns are doing better than Békéscsaba”* (Interviewee 5), *“we have to fight for our rank, for being acknowledged”* (Interviewee 6), because *“those who are from here, did not succeed in being pushy, did not manage to assert the interests of Békéscsaba.”* (Interviewee 1).

Such a narrative of underdevelopment makes local agents responsible for not being good enough in interest representation and oversees structural issues (e.g. urban and economic development policies) leading to the peripheralization of certain towns. The following example regards the feeling of neglect in the era of socialism:

*“However, the town’s enforcement of local interests and the whole county in connection with the regional development programmes was quite poor. There is a legend which claims that when the map was laid out on the table, the coffee mugs and a scone were placed on it, and when the country was examined, the coffee mugs were always placed on the right side, down here, on Békés county, therefore, nothing was allocated to this area.”* (Interviewee 8).

So, today’s narratives have been somewhat reformulated: with regard to lobbying, Békéscsaba is now lagging behind, not only at a national, but local level as well. Notwithstanding that the town has had mainly mayors, who were compatible to the ruling government; a liberal mayor between 1990 and 2006, and mayors from or close to the governing party FIDESZ (Young Democrats) party since 2006. The town’s favourable position obtained during socialism thus cannot be longer observed nowadays, which is a particular character of the local urban regime nowa-

<sup>1</sup> The parts factory of Airbus helicopters is established in Gyula.

days. “Underdevelopment” or “the feeling of being left out” is a narrative that is highly representative of the contemporary public discourse, and also the self-image of Békéscsaba and other similar towns. Fitting to the neoliberal development discourses, such narratives may imply for the outsiders, such as governmental members deciding on the allocation of resources for urban development, that they have something to compensate for, they have to repay debts accumulated throughout centuries. At least, it is suggestive that Békéscsaba received the largest amount of the resources under the MCP (Fekete 2019 and Gajzágó 2019).

The expressway M44, financed by the MCP, often mentioned as the primary factor of urban development, is under construction in accordance with the promises and expectations, and is expected to be completed by the end of 2020 or the beginning of 2021. “*We may be naive, but everyone expects a lot from this,*” commented Interviewee 13. In addition, the development of Csaba-park and an energetics programme is in progress, and a swimming pool as well as a new sports centre is being built in the town (ISDS 2018). Many interviewees raised the questions as follows: What will be the effects of these mostly expensive, non-profit public investments in urban progress? Whose interests are represented in these projects? Whether and how could these new facilities be maintained and operated?

#### Narratives of crises

As a result of the far-reaching crisis after the transition in 1989, a new economic and trade structure was formed in the country, in the Great Plain and in Békéscsaba as well. In the Hungarian geographical literature of the 1990s, the line between Balassagyarmat and Békéscsaba was well known, beyond which unemployment became an extremely serious issue. Békéscsaba managed to cope with that era relatively well due to its functions as a county seat but the surrounding villages found themselves in a hopeless situation. This period, when socialist primarily agriculture and agro-based industries lost their Eastern markets and became in crisis, was recalled by several interviewees.

*“Prior to the change of regime, the economy was defined by the food and light industry based on the public sector. It is not a great position to be in. Consequently, Békéscsaba lagged behind seriously following the change of regime. There was no structural change, no economic restructuring, and it was not really a factory that could be privatised easily and well. There were only a few industrial activities that were suitable for attracting foreign investments, a few printing companies and machine tools companies. [...] Food industry was ruined, it collapsed and fell apart, the cold storage unit and large organisations were incapable of operation. So, it was a dire situation, meaning that Békéscsaba reached the same level of GDP after the 2000s that was reached before the political transition.”* (Interviewee 14).

The structure of the economy did not really change after that, completely new economic cultures did not emerge, while the old ones disappeared. With regard to industry, stability and employment are ensured by mechanical engineering and manufacturers supplying to the automotive industry which actually had their traditions. Regarding agriculture, it is a serious issue that the agricultural products leave the region mostly without being processed due to the lack of background industry. In accordance with our interviewee with an insight into this area, one reason is the land-based and not quality-oriented, i.e. product-based funding. Development is

also prevented by human relations and “post-socialist personal habits” which can be observed, for instance, in the operational issues of sales associations.

The economic crisis of 2008 and 2009 arrived as a “second shock”. It had a different patterns and primarily affected manufacturing and construction industry. “*Companies did not collapse one by one, however, the level of unemployment increased, emigration accelerated, even to foreign countries which was not typical before. And recovery was really slow*” (Interviewee 7). Crisis management of the biggest employers was of key importance for the employees at that time. Economic experts among the interviewees date the recovery even to 2014 – 2015, since that was the time when unemployment disappeared and was slowly replaced by labour shortage.

### Emigration

The emerging labour shortage is partly due to emigration, a key issue that came up in most of the interviews, thereby strengthening the discourse about poor lobbying and neglect. In many cases, outward migration was among the first problems that the interviewees mentioned. One of the interviewees, who is engaged in trade, explained various aspects of this process:

*“Thousands and thousands of people left Békéscsaba; they went abroad. I am sure that 5-7 thousand people left Csaba, nearly 10% of the town’s population. [...] People have started to come back, which is good news, and the wages are a little bit closer to the expected level, so fewer people leave the town. But this is still a very poor county. [...] Tensions run high [...]. It is devastating to see that people come back to the town at Christmas and Easter. [...] Lots of people think like that: they say how much they love it here, but sure, their heart are broken. [...] Possibilities are available here as well, not everything is full of »rubbish«, and it’s not true that people cannot earn money here, however, they have to compromise, that’s for sure.”* (Interviewee 13).

Since the population census in 2001, actually, the town’s population has decreased by 9 thousand, including a natural decline as well (KSH 2011 and 2020). The loss by natural decrease and migration was equally 3-3 thousand people between 2001 and 2011. After the last census, the registered annual loss was around 6 hundred, near 3 thousand altogether, which means that the rate of decrease halved. Here, the natural decrease made up for three-fourth or four-fifth from the total, however, there are high uncertainties in this data due to difficulties in data collection.

In fact, the same happened in other towns in the county and in most regions of Hungary. Villages have been constantly facing population loss for a much longer time, and the situation is “devastating”, “hopeless” and “catastrophic”, as one of the interviewees described it. Emigration indicates the lack of perspective in the town as well, and in the interviewees’ opinion, a lot of the emigrants were young and educated. Some claim this process has been going on since the 1970s, but new residents from villages no longer move to the town.

*“Lots of cars with foreign licence plates can be seen on holidays, and at weekends and times like that, restaurants, clubs and bars are full of people, but when the holiday is over, everything becomes empty again. Thereby the population is continuously decreasing. The data show also same; in fact, the town does not have*

*any possibilities. It is characterised by deterioration, emigration and ageing.”* (Interviewee 14).

From a bottom-up perspective, people also try to deal with this partly macro-level issue in Békéscsaba. In addition to creating innovative workplaces, particularly as a remedy to the emigration of the youth, the development of higher education as well as the aforementioned expressway came up showing that the capital city is also a reference point in a cultural context:

*“Our trust is in the highway; the young generation loves to be mobile and if Budapest is a two-hour drive away, maybe they will even be able to make it to a concert after work. But a solid campus in Békéscsaba would be also good, an educational programme for a thousand people would definitely be able to stabilize the town”* (Interviewee 6). *The abovementioned three factors are intertwined in the context of global division of labour: “Truly hardworking people live here and if there are no roads, work cannot be brought to them.”* (Interviewee 13).

Emigration can be viewed also from a different perspective: it is a mirror to the local society, to the local employees, and it is the mentality, the human character of the local people, which leads us further to the topic of ethnic heritage. And it is also a remarkable reference on the particular effects of uneven development.

*“These days, with wages and efficiency like this, we are not at an advantage and the latter cannot be changed. The same workers, who do not wish to be efficient here, are the most productive workers in Germany if they leave for there. And it is because of the environment, the local mentality. This is what we carry in ourselves from the socialism.”* (Interviewee 3).

### Slovak heritage

The basis for the town’s mentality is partly the local society, its division and composition. The town’s population was 50 thousand in 1941 and 44 thousand in 1949. In addition to the war casualties, around 5,500 ethnic Slovak left the town as a result of the Slovak-Hungarian population exchange and emigrated to Czechoslovakia. Based on language, the proportion of the local Slovaks declined to 5,800 inhabitants (12%) by 1960, however, that time around 30% of the total population, 14,400 residents could speak Slovakian. By 2011, only 2,500 people (4%) claimed to be of Slovakian ethnicity, based on nationality, language or language use amongst family members and friends. (Tóth 1976a, KSH 2011). However, it is estimated that 30% of the town’s population is of Slovakian origin through at least one of its grandparents (Uhrin 2015). This is an approach that involves data. One of the interviewees, however, approached this issue with an historical point of view and basically drew attention to four social pillars, of which the issue of Slovak heritage is discussed here.

*“What does a market town look like, and what is preserved from that era? The layer of agricultural entrepreneurs is preserved which can be clearly seen and from that perspective, the town has not lose its relation to the soil [...] Another perspective are the Slovak roots which is preserved by a significant part of the town: in its traditions, language, religion, culture. [...] And there are the industrial workers, the traditions of industrial working culture and professional culture are still present, vocational training still follows those traditions. There is an emerging layer of intellectuals, a more highly-skilled group that is partly linked to public institutions and partly to the college.”* (Interviewee 7).

The situation of the Slovakian heritage is the topic that was ambivalently discussed during the interviews. On one hand, only a few of the interviewees thought it to be important to highlight. One interviewee said: *“the Slovakian heritage is only represented by the Slovak secondary school which has one Slovak class, and half of the students of that class is Hungarian”* (Interviewee 11). Contrastingly, another interviewee of Slovak ethnicity, referred to Slovak heritage as being oppressed, a part of which is to disdain the unique, archaic dialect of the local Slovak (similarly to other ethnic groups in the Carpathian and Pannonian region that are separated themselves from the major ethnic group). However, this person also pointed out that despite the linguistic assimilation the town’s Slovak heritage also serves as a touristic attraction.

*“People do not realise the Slovak heritage, you have to be Slovak to realise that. Here we have this town, and the only interesting thing about it is its Slovakian roots, that is why many Slovaks still visit the town each year. The heritage of folk culture and folk architecture are here. It would be great to preserve the houses with the so called podstena [podszyena]. [...] It is present in their cast of mind, their family traditions, in name days, [...] in cooking, gastronomy, in using words at the level of the common people and I am not even sure that they know they use Slovak words. Primarily, it can be linked to agriculture. It is present in the names of some districts of the town, in religious practices and in the fact that mostly Lutherans live here. It can be seen in people’s taste, language, but now only within the family. Thirty years ago you could listen people speaking Slovak on the streets more often.”* (Interviewee 9).

The “urban development” activities of the Lutheran Slovaks, who established the town, was highly appreciated by many. Békéscsaba also has its “urban developing” forefathers who went a long way in order to make the former village thrive (Erdmann 1999). This is the narrative of progress, which also came up in the interviews. Contrastingly, the latter interviewee’s another narrative linked Slovaks to the setback as well: *“I truly think that this region is hopeless. When I pay a visit to Slovak settlements, all I can see is deterioration, corrosion, poverty and emigration. I cannot see any hope.”* (Interviewee 9).

Another interviewee described the Slovak as a group of strong civil associations (Interviewee 7), which gives lessons to be tolerant and cohesive. Indeed, several institutions and organisations aim to preserve the use of the minority language and culture: Consulate-General of the Slovak Republic (Generálny konzulát SR v Békešskej Čabe), the Local Slovak Self-Government (Slovenská samospráva župného mesta Békešská Čaba), and the County Slovak Self-Government (Celoštátna slovenská samospráva v Maďarsku), kindergarten, primary school, secondary school, Slovak Culture House, the Organization of Slovaks in Csaba (Čabianska organizácia Slovákov), Association of Slovak Youth (Organizácia slovenskej mládeže v Maďarsku), Slovak Centre of Pedagogy and Methodology (Pedagogické metodické centrum v Maďarsku), Research Institute of the Slovak in Hungary (Výskumný ústav Slovákov v Maďarsku), folklore house and base museum, religious practices in the Slovak language, a department in the library, Slovak club, orchestras, Slovak boarding house and restaurant, etc. However, the commodification of the Slovak heritage is at low level nowadays. The intangible part of the Slovak heritage is presented (materialised) by several memorial places, statues, bilingual street names, geographical names and customs. With regard to our topic,

the research institution is of particular importance. It was established by the Alliance of Slovaks in Hungary in 1990, and is now operated by the National Slovak Self-Government. The institute is primarily engaged in social science research, literature, and historiography. However, its tasks also includes education, trainings, operating a press house and organising cultural events. It is awareness-raising and suggestive that the College of Békéscsaba did not allow the placing of a research institute within the college (Gyivicsán et al. 2010 and Vantara 2013).

### Urban mentality, image and identity

The Slovak heritage is thus a factor that causes the “interesting”, however romanticized mentality of the town (Interviewee 8). In addition, further urban narratives were also mentioned during the discussions. One of the interviewees thought that one reason of “underdevelopment” can be observed even in the mentality of the local population, serving as a tool for responsabilization (Plüschke-Altöf 2017), since “*people are more thorough elsewhere. It feels bad to say it out loud, but I think we are below average, Mr. Pató Pál<sup>2</sup> is a part of the people living here. This is true for the town as well. [...] The town has not got enough will to act.*” (Interviewee 1).

As demonstrated in the chapters above, the narrative of being ignored and responsabilization of the people can be detected during the interviews, which, according to some opinions, comes together with the lack of progressive thinking in Békéscsaba. That is also supplemented by the often low level of active civil participation nationally and the lack of bottom-up initiatives. With respect to the Slovak heritage, another factor is the explanation that the aforementioned disadvantages were caused by the ruling elite that came from outside of the town during socialism, when Békéscsaba was led by the “*the Slovak jerks from Tótkomlós*” (Interviewee 8). This narrative obviously degrades and casts a shadow over the positive and romanticized narratives of the Slovakian heritage. Is the balance tipped towards the other side these days, as a result of lazy thinking, the lack of innovation and difficulties to collaborate that is typical of the town and the people? Such elite narratives look for responsibilities inside the society again, not outside in the actors of uneven geographical development.

*“For the sake of the development of this region, people need to come to each other and show some interest in each other, which I do not see. I wish I could say that the town wants to be modern but when the everyday people are asked, it seems that they do not wish to be modern, and it hurts to say that. Limitations are in people’s heads. In my opinion, it would take three things: a thought, by which I mean talent, the ability to lead the people. It takes people who are supportive of this and it also takes money. I think Békéscsaba currently has none of that. [...] It seems like Békéscsaba has fewer and fewer talented people each year.”* (Interviewee 9).

Another soft component is the image of the town. It is indicative that the iconic building of the town is a mill burned down at the time when the interviews were made. However, the town does not really have emblematic buildings, which are

<sup>2</sup> Pató Pál was an administrative officer [Latin: *iudex nobilem*] of Esztergom county during the Hungarian Reform Era, and the town clerk of Szőgye (nowadays: Sodin). Sándor Petőfi was inspired by him to write one of his poems, in which he mimics the Hungarian gentries via the refrain that become a catchphrase: “Oh, we have time for that”.

famous countrywide, but this can be obviously challenged. The interviewees rather highlighted the countless green areas, the characteristic of the town as a green town in the sense of a physical urban landscape. Urban development wishes to contribute to this by rehabilitating the Elővíz Canal. As for the wider environment, the opinions are not so positive at all: “*our landscape is not attractive,*” said Interviewee 6.

The characteristics of market towns in the Great Plain could be dominant on their own, however, Békéscsaba does not have that typical landscape. The structure of the Hungarian towns and cities in the Great Plain has long been researched in urban geography literature, and accordingly, it is known that the town and cities in the Great Plain usually have a concentric structure, occupy a vast area, and have a relatively small historical town centre. However, it was significantly modified by the establishment of industrial areas and housing estates in the socialist period, especially in the case of larger cities or county seats (Beluszky 2001). Thus, Békéscsaba could avoid the construction of housing blocks near the town centre either, which partly required giving up some parts of the former, wide residential area with mainly terraced, single-storied houses. Beyond these small-town-like areas, there is a belt of orchards, loosely built-up suburbs, in which housing blocks and further industrial areas were also built, creating an area with mixed functions. In the towns and cities of the Plain, including Békéscsaba, residential areas were followed by the belt of farmsteads (in Hungarian: tanya) without any sharp borders, however, this has changed a lot by now. During state socialism, the area of farmsteads was significant, however, following the transition, residential and commercial suburbanisation forced dramatic changes in the outskirts of the town with regard to land use, significantly confining agricultural areas and related farmsteads (Becsei 1976, Kovács 1999, 2005 and 2009 and Tímár and Baukó 1999). According to one or two interviewees, the areas of farmsteads are virtually about to come to an end, however the potential of farmsteads in local agriculture were also presented. (Interviewee 10).

Nowadays, it is beyond dispute that the most important element of the town's image, and what is more, it's identity and thus the crucial touristic and indeed successful product is the Csabai kolbász [sausage of Csaba], which is also a Hungaricum, and a sausage festival for decades (Bottyán 2016). The sausage festival was mentioned in almost all of the interviews, usually as something to be proud of, and in other cases, as a reason for having disputations with regard to its implementation and location in Csabapark. In addition to the festival, the town has diversification as a goal with regard to tourism; previously it aimed to focus on sports, or attempts were made to develop the exploitation of thermal water (Duray and Nagy 2005). In the past decades the idea of culture-based urban development came up in relation to the Munkácsy District named after the famous painter, who spent his early years in the town. This is, however, only at the phase of planning.

The “*Stormy Corner is not that stormy anymore*”<sup>3</sup>, this is how Interviewee 13 described the friendliness of the town and its surroundings and its changing identity, referring to that there are seemingly no serious social issues and tensions in the town. Reflecting on each of the elements covered in this chapter, our interviewee,

<sup>3</sup> Stormy Corner (Viharsarok) is name given to the territory of Békés county (a manmade landscape) in the inter-war period, which regarded the local activity of the so called agrarian-socialist movements.

whose words have been cited several times, has given a thought-provoking summary reflecting to the peripheralized position of the town:

*“It is not the civic characteristics that makes the brand, the notability of Békéscsaba and Békéscsaba itself emblematic. The fact that this town is not a town should have been acknowledged. In my opinion, while it is great idea that Békéscsaba is the town of Munkácsy, since the town is related to Mihály Munkácsy, who is a really famous painter. But for those who visit the town, Békéscsaba is rather the town of the Slovaks, the town of sausage and the town of the agricultural workers living here, it is a town of farmers. Perhaps what is honest and built on good foundations is more stable than building on imaginary things, like pretending that the town is a civic town. [...] Its difference is in its roots. Otherwise, I think it is a welcoming and friendly town and a lot of components of the rural culture and hospitality can be discovered at community and other events. But can a county seat be totally empty in the evenings? It is like a village, everybody stays at home, the streets are empty, there is no hustle and bustle. It is a village, a really huge village that became a town, a town with a county authority, a county seat. But it is still a village.”* (Interviewee 9).

## CONCLUSIONS

Based on our studies, three conclusions are worth considering. First, the discourse of underdevelopment and being ignored was easily detectable in the elite interviews. Békéscsaba, just like other Hungarian settlements, is typically compared to the western regions and fitting to a linear historic approach it is considered “lagging behind”. Urban development efforts and attempts of the MCP aim to remedy underdevelopment, a “century-old debt” (disinvestment). Therefore, in connection with Békéscsaba, several approaches of regional policy are validly questioned, because the development of the material spheres does not automatically entail the rise of the intellectual sphere.

Second, various difficulties of urban lobbying can be observed. On the one hand, this can be seen, partly as an inherited negative consequence, at the level of urban governance, which suggests that there are problems with the connections to Budapest and there are difficulties in pursuing urban development needs. It is an interesting question whether the forward-looking intention to develop and improve, the progressivity formulated in connection with the reminiscence of the era when the village became a town is only a sentimentality of being nostalgic? The success of the progress is supported by the facts. This is the area where there are definitely more research opportunities primarily for researchers who study the history of urban mentality and deal with the town’s past. On the other hand, however, the few social, bottom-up initiatives and poor enforcement of local interests is also a crucial factor, however, it does not seem to be outstanding in Hungary.

Third, a more or less general conclusion can be drawn with regard to the town’s Slovak heritage, which can be said for other Hungarian towns and cities with similar past (e.g. the deportation of the ethnic Germans from Budaörs or Sopron). The Slovak heritage of the town has been in regress since 1945, caused especially by the mass emigration following WWII. We are living in an age when the decline of material heritage, and especially the decline of the population need to be compensated with preserving and developing “mental heritage”. This is definitely an urban

development task that cannot be managed by the politics itself, i.e. by carrying out traditional urban development activities.

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### **MIESTNE ZÁUJMY, IDENTITA A SLOVENSKE DEDIČSTVO: DISKURZY ELITY O ROZVOJI MESTA BÉKÉSCSABA V MAĎARSKU**

Mesto Békéscsaba, ktoré je predmetom našej štúdie, je stredne veľkým mestom s 58-tisíc obyvateľmi na juhovýchode Maďarska. Po tom, ako pravicová vláda v Maďarsku navrhla rámce novej urbánnej politiky, spustila v roku 2015 program Moderné mestá určený iba pre najväčšie maďarské mestá, vrátane Békéscsaby, ktorý kladie dôraz na veľké projekty rozvoja miest. V takomto kontexte sa prevažne uskutočňujú (elitné) diskurzy o mestskom plánovaní a rozvoji, ktoré sú ťažiskom tohto príspevku. Na jednej strane sme sa pokúsili preskúmať dominujúce naratívy týkajúce sa rozvoja mesta, problémov a modernosti, na druhej strane sme študovali, ako je miestna spoločnosť vnímaná elitou a akým spôsobom je do toho zapojené slovenské dedičstvo ako sociálny faktor a faktor mentality. S týmto cieľom bolo realizovaných 15 hĺbkových pološtruktúrovaných rozhovorov. Rozhovory s reprezentantmi miestnej samosprávy, politikmi, odbornými a občianskymi intelektuálmi a predstaviteľmi reprezentujúcimi vedecký, ekonomický alebo občiansky sektor mesta prebiehali v roku 2019. Rozhovory boli analyzované s využitím diskurznej a naratívnej analýzy.

Békéscsaba dosiahla významný rozvoj počas obdobia rakúsko-uhorskej monarchie, medzi dvoma svetovými vojnami, ako aj v období socializmu. Dynamika rozvoja sa zastavila na začiatku Kádárovkej éry v porovnaní s celkovým rozvojom územia Veľkej maďarskej nížiny. Vo vedeckej literatúre sa objavujú naratívy týkajúce sa Békéscsaby, ktorá datuje svoj zlatý vek, svoj vrchol urbánneho rozvoja a pokroku do éry monarchie, ako to bolo formulované v jednom z rozhovorov. Naopak, podľa vedeckej literatúry a rozhovorov sa v druhej polovici 20. storočia stali dominantnými diskurzy o nedostatočnom rozvoji a periférnosti. Diskurzy o “nedostatočnom rozvoji” alebo naratívy “o pocite byť vynechaný z hry” boli ďalej potvrdené po krízach v rokoch 1989 a 2008 – 2009, s významným nárastom emigračných tokov po druhej uvedenej kríze. V rozhovoroch boli zdôrazňované slabé lobistické schopnosti predstaviteľov mesta (ako aj župy), najmä v porovnaní so susedným mestom Gyula. Tento problém sa dostal do širšieho kontextu vtedy, keď respondenti uvádzali nedostatok progresívneho myslenia, nedostatok spoločenských iniciatív smerujúcich zdola nahor v Békéscsabe. Vo všeobecnosti takéto diskusie posilnili potrebu čiastočných kompenzácií zo strany vlády pri pridelení prostriedkov z programu Moderné mestá. Vznikajú však pochybnosti, či „mentálne“ nevýhody môžu byť nahradené kameňom a betónom. Rozvoj v materiálnej oblasti neznamená automaticky rast aj v oblasti intelektuálnej.

Počet obyvateľov slovenskej národnosti a ich podiel dramaticky poklesli po druhej svetovej vojne. Podľa odhadov je v súčasnosti približne 30 % obyvateľov mesta slovenského pôvodu prostredníctvom aspoň jedného zo svojich starých rodičov. Avšak stav slovenského

dedičstva je témou, o ktorej sa v rozhovoroch diskutovalo protichodne. Na jednej strane, iba málo respondentov to pokladalo za dôležité zdôrazniť. Ostatní tvrdili, že slovenské dedičstvo je pilierom miestnej identity zakorenenej v kultúre a slúži aj ako turistická atrakcia, avšak je zároveň potláčané z hľadiska využívania jazyka. Toto dedičstvo predstavuje niekoľko inštitúcií (múzeí, občianskych organizácií, reštaurácií a pod.), alebo nemotné či zhmotnené prvky (názvy ulíc, sochy, atď.), avšak komodifikácia slovenského dedičstva je v súčasnosti na nízkej úrovni. Prišli sme k záveru, že pokles významu materiálneho dedičstva a najmä pokles počtu obyvateľov, musí byť kompenzovaný zachovaním a rozvojom nemotného dedičstva. Toto je určite jedna z úloh urbánneho rozvoja, ktorú nemôžu zvládnuť samotní politici iba vykonávaním tradičných aktivít zameraných na rozvoj mesta.



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