



## THE PHENOMENON OF MINSK: THE CITY SPACE AND THE CULTURAL NARRATIVE

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The article addresses the issue of cultural identification of Minsk as an Eastern European post-Soviet capital. In order to understand the city's present it is necessary to consider the radical changes it underwent in the 20th century, including almost a total destruction, radical change in ethnic structure, rapid after-war spatial expansion and, lately, the intensive symbolic production as a post-Soviet capital. To identify the characteristic features of Minsk through the sociological lens, cultural theory as well as historical reconstruction and cross-national comparison are employed. The article seeks to reflect the organisation of space and cultural narrative produced in Minsk today, as well as to consider the common strategies of thinking about Minsk. The changing statuses of Minsk and its symbolic role in the last century necessitate a profound reconceptualization of Minsk as a phenomenon. The authors argue that the analysis of the ongoing changes in post-Soviet capitals (both in and out of the European Union (EU)) presupposes the reconstruction of their socio-cultural context.

Keywords: capital city, city space, cultural narrative, Minsk, post-Soviet capital, visibility.

### Introduction

During the last two decades post-Soviet cities have undergone profound transformation connected with the major societal shift from Soviet-style socialism to different forms of capitalism. The changing and challenging status of being an Eastern European post-Soviet city has been aggravated for Minsk by the status of the capital of a newly independent nation. The general course of development in the 1990–2000s has revealed that post-Soviet states have taken quite different paths of integration into the world economy (including cultural economy). These differences had to do with the political perspective (some countries strived for membership in the EU while the others preferred close relationships with Russia, or developed local regional cooperation) in pair with the security matters (NATO or Russia as major alliance forces). The most embracing differences lay in the relationship towards global capitalism. Cities carry a multiplicity of potential ways to capitalisation, but the choice of strategies to make the city a site of cultural enterprise and representation as well as the range of the symbolic sources for this representation is quite broad.

Construction of new images of post-Soviet cities dealt first of all with time dimension. A very common strategy of historical *Aufhebung* was the profound reference to the cities' past, which was partly provoked by the specific resentment that people felt towards the Soviet period when local traditions had been widely neglected and, moreover, violated by the Soviet symbols and the Soviet architecture.

In these terms Minsk as a city and even more as a capital faced plenty of complex challenges that other cities did not face. The reference to history that was a popular strategy in Minsk in the beginning of the 1990s put under question many features that constituted Minsk at that time, including the capital status as such. On the one hand, Minsk had to change its image from "one of the Soviet Republics" to the capital of a new national state which implied among others a massive introduction of national symbols into the city space. On the other hand, however, there was a conflicting tendency that undermined the status of Minsk as a true capital. Historically, Minsk became the capital of Belarus only in 1919, with the Soviets, while before, most cultural hopes and references of Belarusian intellectuals had been connected with Vilnius – this multicultural field of political struggle of many nations. That is why we may admit that *Minsk had never experienced being a non-Soviet capital before 1991*.

Another important historical feature that Minsk had to cope with was World War II: it brought about the drastic reconfiguration both to the visual outlook of the city and to the ethnic representation of Minsk dwellers. Two "objective" events, destruction of the city centre and the elimination of a great part of the Jewish population, set the background for the profound after-war reconstruction of the city. Even though it is not possible to speak here of constructing a totally new city (which is also an existing pattern for building capitals and/or rebuilding the cities after the WWII), in 1944 Minsk looked more like "a phenomenological potentiality for the city giving birth to the new text of culture than a historical necessity" (Medeuova 2008: 174). Given the facts that (a) the city lies at very convenient crossroads with an extended net of railways, (b) after the WWII Minsk ceased to be a "frontier" Soviet city, and, (c) geopolitically, the border was moved far away to the West, an opportunity to build a big city with the socialist future seemed easily can come into being.

The flair for social construction that reigned in the Soviet Union (SU) coupled with the post-war enthusiasm eventually set the stage for implementing new social forms of reality, those of "advanced socialism". Although there never existed some "single Soviet and socialist space", the "contents" of the Soviet architecture were similar everywhere despite of the forms it took (Milerius 2008: 46, 51).

Another important twist to the city history was the situation the new capital found itself in 1991. Having been transformed into the "socialist city", Minsk had to face the postmodern condition that here took the form of the necessity to build a nation out of the city's socialist city space. In a world that had abandoned the grand narratives Minsk was to reproduce the national symbolic and cultural forms having mostly socialist background at its disposal. There were few historical elements to refer to in this city while the nation itself had to struggle for its international recognition.

In this article, we focus on Minsk as a post-Soviet capital, as a locus of national representation under post-Soviet conditions. Our main argument is that in order to understand the present configuration of Minsk's cultural narrative as a national capital one has to refer simultaneously to different time periods and synchronize divergent historical developments in the given spatial organisation. For this reason we employ the methods of historical reconstruction, cultural theory, urban studies, Pierre Bourdieu's space analysis (Бурдьё 1994а), and Jean Baudrillard's concept of symbolic exchange (Бодрийяр 2006; Дьяков 2008).

The article consists of three sections. First, we trace back the context in which Minsk shaped its present image. Then, the possible parallels are drawn with other post-Soviet cities as presented from the perspective of urban studies. In the last section we discuss the cultural narrative of today's Minsk and its implications for the city's future.

### Minsk-Old-New

"Minsk-Old-New" is the name of an Internet site dedicated to the city of Minsk (*Минск старый и новый* 2003). The site focuses not on the city's present (as entertainment sites do) or the city's future (as the site of the city's Government does where all the building plans, projects and normative acts are displayed). Minsk-Old-New is a story told about the connection between what used to be and what is now being called Minsk (cf. Сацкевич 2008). The site's publications endeavour to re-establish name-based connections between the momentarily shots of the past, often done by chance or on the amateur level, and today's media-canonised images of Minsk as the smooth and shining capital.

The strategy of connecting the city's past with its present by tracing its visual and name history is not uncommon today. To a great extent it fulfils citizens' and city visitors' need for the context where to place the visual reality in which they get immersed. The peculiarity of such projects dedicated to Minsk (cf. Полесская 2004) is featured by the paradoxical intention of presenting the objects of zero-level presence: most of the objects under focus have not been there for a long time, and even the living memory about them is hardly maintained anymore. The knowledge about massive church destructions in the 1930s, the location of old marketplaces and ethnic cemeteries that were "upgraded" in a Soviet manner into squares or city parks has mostly turned into a private affair (Полесская 2004; *Минск незнаёмы...* 2002). There is no "popular" knowledge about the local city history with its protagonists and influential persons, which is, e.g., vivid in Warsaw or in Vilnius with all the places of memory. In Minsk there are now plenty of memorial plates on the buildings, however, majority of them refer to the closer past, about half a century ago (people who lived there) up to one century and a half (buildings). Obviously, by re-establishing the connection between the present and the past, people seek to define and authorise their own urban identity, but in case of Minsk this turns out to be *the memory about the places and people that are quite alien to the existing image*, both in terms of culture and origin.

To some degree, the collective memory in Minsk is similar to that of Lviv and Vilnius as the cities that were situated on the cultural and ethnic borders. The big difference lies, however, in the fact that Minsk has become a capital (unlike Lviv) and that it had to be built almost from scratch by the people who settled down there after the War (unlike Vilnius).

The common perspectives on the organisation of the city space in Minsk and on its present image as Gestalt are to date presented by two approaches. One of them focuses on the visual representation of Minsk as an *image for cultural sale* under the postmodern condition (Sarna 2008) while the other discusses the city space as *public space*, as a locus of freedom and democracy (Trubina 2008). In other words, the implicit message that the city represents has been by now analysed either as an entity of visual representations (on the surface), or as a possibility for the social action of a special “urban” kind (in-depth investigation of the city space).

Researchers note a huge political impact of the social space created in Minsk lately, the “overpoliticization of the city space” (Trubina 2008: 376), “the synchrony and even synonymy” of the city order-making with the way the order is being established across the whole Republic (Sarna 2008: 337). However, the citizens’ reactions to this “over-politicised” condition diverge significantly. On the one hand, people want to depoliticise the city space, to make it more of their own, to attach to it “a lighter sense” (Trubina 2008: 376). This is a need to contribute to the development of the city’s cultural infrastructure “that comprises, in fact, the core of the Western city” (Cope, Milerius 2008: 18). On the other hand, there is growing conformism that stems from the everyday-life practices of control in state-governed urban spaces (Zaporozhets, Lavrinec 2008: 101). The state keeps its interests and legitimacy very closely and does not allow the “unauthorised” alterations to the use of the urban space by the citizens through the strict regulation of the use of the public space, which is otherwise abundant in the city (Trubina 2008: 365). As a result, fragmentation of social interaction as well as shrinking of the public space occur (Trubina 2008: 359–361). The “triumph of uniformity” that takes place in Minsk remains in sharp contrast with other major cities of a region where even the striking neighbourhood of old wooden huts and new hi-tech buildings reminds of the irregular and partly chaotic way of building (Sarna 2008: 338). To the contrary, Minsk presents a model of space laboriously polished by the authorities. According to the ruling policy the capital city should fully match the “high standards” of representation, which in practice adds to the city much of a postcard view. No modern capital city is free from “tourist spots”. However, in Minsk where few places carry much historical importance, the common ways of representing the city even to its citizens is closer to the postcard views than to everyday-life. The established media representation of the city is impersonal, bird’s-eye, and it *excludes personal narratives*, or makes them only marginal (Полесская 2004). Minsk exists as a “city-not-for-itself”, while the citizens only occupy the city space but rarely create it. As a result, the *shortage of public representation* of the city life and, moreover, *lack of differentiated cultural infrastructure* that could draw the stratifying lines across the citizens, become characteristics of today’s Minsk. According to one

interpretation, Minsk has turned into a “city of famine” where inability to fill one’s emptiness with contents, lack of opportunities goes hand in hand with the euphoria of irresponsibility (Sarna 2008: 339). We could make a step further and conclude that there is a “famine of the city” in Minsk in the sense that its citizens constantly lack public space and cultural diversity. This is largely the result of the existing policy of regulating the public space and the public participation in the city life, which pushes Minsk more towards the agricultural cities than towards multicultural European capitals.

A specific form of reaction that has developed out of these tendencies is the care for the cleanliness of the city. Many tourists are mesmerised by the fact how clean is Minsk. The citizens are also proud of it. But if we consider the issue closer, then some suspicions arise as to the purpose and social functions of this pattern. In his essay on political delegation and fetishism, Bourdieu contends that, in a situation where a group delegates their representation to some individual, it seems that a group produces some human being speaking in its name, “while in reality it would be almost as right to say that *it is the official representative who produces the group*” (Бурдьё 1994b: 232, italics added). To paraphrase that, while the image of Minsk produced by the authorities pictures it as a clean city, the citizens interiorise the pattern and not only start to reproduce it, but also, as we contend, transform their ways of thinking about Minsk. If cleanliness becomes a distinctive feature of the city, then, in order to maintain its identity, the citizens will tend to eliminate any possible “contaminant” be it even the arising structures of civil society. And while cultural production enrooted in cultural enterprise lies at the heart of the city *per se*, then in Minsk this important source of producing the urban space becomes suppressed. We distinguish here between the urban and city space as a tribute to the tradition of dividing *Urbanisierung* and *Verstädterung* while in the urban space there should exist some certain public culture with its own values and traditions. In the “city space” people are immersed into the urbanised context, however, this does not necessarily mean that they develop some kind of independent environment where deliberation and cultural production would take place.

As Alexandr Sarna claims, preventing people from throwing litter as a social pattern proceeds to the “sterilisation of the city’s environment”, and affects the population in general (Sarna 2008: 336). People develop a kind of obsession with keeping the city clear, but this is at least an ambiguous trend. On the one hand, citizens make use of the space in various ways. They either take it at its face value or attach exclusively personal additional meanings to the common official objects in hand, thus creating their own maps of meanings and hierarchies (Trubina 2008: 364–366). On the other hand, now there arises a new institutional feeling among the citizens where any contingency or unauthorised behaviour may be perceived as a disorganising element (Sarna 2008: 340–342). This all, in our opinion, brings about the practice of “self-erasure”, when people interiorise the regulative functions of the authorities and do not allow the development of original, “non-canonical” group identities. No major transformation to the symbolic spatial schemes becomes possible except for modification of the newest layer of the group memory.

External renovation is now a common state strategy for managing historical buildings in Minsk. Old city buildings become either literally rebuilt (with the external resemblance of the previous forms, but out of the new materials) or they get only painted anew from the outside. Such strategies fulfil the requirements of visual continuity and consistency with the previous experience. The same happens to the collective identities. Where some “new” feeling is needed, *the opportunities of visibility are exploited*.

Minsk is full of public screens in the streets and metro stations showing TV-news or some animation. Many of them portray some “typical”, almost archetypical figures accompanied by the slogan “We are Belarusians!”. In a wide row of these images, there is a mother with child in an art gallery, young girls standing in the field of ripe grain, or builders of the National Library. Primitive as this strategy is, the images’ tautological message (explaining to the Belarusians that they are, in fact, Belarusians) engenders the structures of symbolic reproduction in the social consciousness in the form of the *binary codes*, or questions and responses. This hyper-reality duplicating reality, especially when mediated by another reproductive material such as image, causes the vanishing of the reality when it turns into “reality for reality”, into fetishism of the lost object (Бодрийяр 2006: 149).

The fault of binary linkages in this hyper-real message lies in their pre-reflexivity. “Traditional” modern structures get produced with the help of postmodern tools. Minsk’s space itself has been by large turned into the screen – the screen that distracts our view with the glaring lights and clean wide streets. Through the binary tactics that split the praxis into the short series of tests, the reference to the subject disappears, and only the “test” discourse remains where the response is already implied by the question. Borrowing much from Jeremy Bentham’s Panopticon, this type of narrative expands itself on the surface, being constantly on the move and avoiding any constant reference. As a result, this distraction to the visual and withdrawal of the real reference causes indifference to the present. There is a problem of civil alienation, different aspects of which include the lack of consolidated city elite (Cope 2008: 449). As some observers point out, this is part of the price people have to pay for the “surface economy of exchange” (Sarna 2008: 344–347).

Unambiguity of the message goes together with the rigid structures. The notion of the binary codes (Baudrillard), as a metaphor, can convey quite well the present cultural narrative in Minsk. Due to the new means of visual social constructivism, new group identities become constructed, represented and reproduced among the people. It is this mechanism that allows the otherwise questionable (in terms of legitimacy) Soviet narrative become dominant in today’s Minsk.

There are several points to discuss here. First, there is an evident parallel between the Michel Foucault’s “surveillance” and Guy Debord’s “spectacle”. The underlying principle in both of them directs individuals towards the point when it would be impossible to create and participate in a social action. From this perspective, “the visual freedom of democracy with its glamorous surface is based on the invisible total surveillance and control” (Усманова 2001: 124). Second, we cannot but consider the

suggestive power of Debord's theory. His conceptualization has served to a certain extent as a framework that works for multiple purposes but nevertheless does not provide the necessary tools for analysis. It is here that we suggest the reconstruction of the sociocultural context as a missing link for the analysis.

### Minsk and other post-Soviet capitals: is there new cultural capital?

As a focus of history, the city embodies the concentration of social power and the memory of the past as well (Debord, quoted in Trubina 2008: 360). In that way, every post-Soviet capital, especially those of newly independent states, have been exerted to enormous pressures of creating new national symbols and national identities. In the following comparison, we will seek to embed the case of Minsk into the context of post-Soviet space. Our aim here is not to provide a full cross-national comparison but rather to outline a range of common tendencies within the realm of symbolical production and city space.

Post-Soviet condition posed a number of common challenges to the new capitals. Three driving forces of re-organising the post-Soviet capital city space at that time were: 1) the necessity to implement new capitalist structures within the body of the cities that had been tailored for producing the narrative of socialism; 2) exploration and construction of the new collective identity around the ideal of the nation-state; and 3) the need of the new governments to establish their own legitimacy.

As a result of the interplay of these challenges and local environments, the synchronised Soviet space became fragmented, multi-life-styled, and not connected to other new nations. Although Soviet codes such as educational background, references to common collective experience, and the Russian language remained in the cultural legacy, new trends and demands of the post-Soviet condition introduced considerable changes to every city, thus configuring types of post-Soviet symbolical space of the cities.

Today post-Soviet space is characterised by the co-existence of different and even incompatible paradigms of capitalist exchange and spatial differentiation (Cope, Milerius 2008: 17). The multiplicity of social and economic structures within the post-Soviet space results from the exemption of the symbolic and power structures that would unite the space under its codes. Moreover, not only codes, but a whole "synchronising mechanism" has broken up, thus making it no longer possible to convert the socio-cultural differences within the same coding system (Milerius 2008: 49). That is why it is extremely interesting to reveal some overarching tendencies and establishing new ties within this desynchronised space.

One of such tendencies is the demographic move from the country towards the capital. While under the Soviet regime the mass movement to the cities, and especially to the capitals, was strictly regulated, the new condition opened the opportunities for many, thus stimulating the inflow of newly "urban" citizens towards the capitals. Aggravated by the economic crisis and disproportionate distribution of resources, the rapid growth of the capital cities (with a background of general population decline)

has become a major tendency. In the cultural dimension this has entangled a radical “watering down” of the urban atmosphere, and its penetration by rural traits (as was the case after WWII) such as the space organisation (agricultural fairs, yard as a place for agricultural activities), time use (spending the weekends in the country house), or the strengthening of the close social structures of relatives and acquaintances). On the one hand, this development has brought about a strong demand in house-building, which meant that the capital cities’ area would grow. However, this new city area was predestined to be standard and massive, thus not culturally introducing new citizens towards the urban atmosphere, but plainly putting them together in large numbers.

The national structure of post-Soviet capitals has also changed towards “purification” of the discourse, when the Soviet-super-national elites dissolved, and the focus of the symbolic space has significantly shifted towards the national symbols. For example, the citizens of Tashkent, the capital of Uzbekistan, admit the “distinctive super-ethnic Tashkent identity” that was rejected and destructed during the post-Soviet transformation, including the places and connotations that were significant for it (Kosmarski 2008: 219). In Baku, the capital of Azerbaijan, the cultural space has also significantly changed. We can find the evidence that the Russian-speaking Baku sub-culture that flourished in the Soviet times was also characterised by the super-ethnic values and organisational principles: first, many Azeri adopted the Russian as a medium for everyday communication; second, during the war conflict with Armenia in the 1990s, the representatives of this urban group would save Armenians from violence. Moreover, in this case the Russian-speaking urban environment of Baku was also destroyed as a result of massive inflow of people from the country who could not “socialise as citizens” and “carried rural behaviour patterns” with them. The fragile urban culture simply failed to “digest” them (Rumyansev 2008: 257–258). While the presence of Russian-speaking city elites in the USSR can well be explained by the imperial-cosmopolitan system of education that combined sending the best students to Moscow and Leningrad for further studies with sending Russian specialists to all the countries of the USSR, its impact for the city cultural development and symbolic production was enormous.

Another important tendency of the post-Soviet capital-city space is the “creative approach to the past”. Postmodern condition has affected the post-Soviet transformation by lending its tools to the authorities in the process of building new national identities and aligning the past with the accepted symbolic reference model. As Kulshat Medeuova points out when analysing the phenomenon of Astana, the newly built capital of Kazakhstan, postmodernity is “actively historical”: any usage of history is orientated towards creation of a new myth, not the reconstruction of the old ones; it is free from canons and not far from day-to-day didactics (Medeuova 2008: 185). In this everyday-life persistence as well as in the “shopping” approach to the past, postmodernity is clearly present in the otherwise modern tendency towards building a solid platform for a nation-state. What is more, the active transformation of the past within the mass consciousness does not recognise even the established, material part



of the city culture. Sergey Rumyansev supposes that in the near future the centre of Baku will be radically rebuilt into a “city-cum-shop window representing a “prosperous” country for foreign tourists” (Rumyansev 2008: 266), which perfectly matches the tendencies that can be seen now in Minsk.

What is more, the impulse of social creation is so strong on the post-Soviet space that the case of Astana, a newly built capital, should not come as surprise: if the city cannot cope with the challenges of building the nation culturally, then a new, more “appropriate” capital is probable to arise. While in Minsk the issue of moving the capital has not been seriously raised yet, the renaming of the two main avenues in line with the dominating cultural narrative provides a vivid example of the scale of such a “creative” approach to history.

Other postmodern features common to the post-Soviet capital space transformation include “double coding” as attaching to every element’s function a shade-function of irony, nonsense or multiplicity. It is this perspective that allows us to explain the erection of “classical” (Rome-type) buildings or other “unexpected” artefacts such as the building of the National Library in Minsk.

The eclectic of the post-Soviet capital is just one way of describing the multi-layered state of the cities. Although the history of non-Western-European cities is often affected by the long-established “unorganised” ways of creating the city space including illegal building-spots (Rumyansev 2008: 239), now they have turned into even more heterogeneous diversity. The chaotic city organisation, according to Rumyansev, receives further development in the carnival of multi-coloured high-rise buildings and posh cars of the new economic elites. It is in the nature of the city, he claims, to increase the diversity of its cultural space with every transformation it undergoes (Rumyansev 2008: 262–263). On the one hand, we may agree with such a perspective because the diversification of experience among the city dwellers inevitably leads to the coexistence of different life-styles. On the other hand, the material representation of different epochs is also crucial to the reproduction of cultural diversity. In Minsk, this “material” condition of the destructions of WWII contributed to the *involuntary unification of the city space and texture*, even when compared to other post-Soviet cities. At the same time it seems that the use of new differences arising in the once synchronised Soviet space is a viable strategy for producing new cultural meanings.

Along with the new diversity, new borders inevitably appear, and this trend is also quite important in thinking of the post-Soviet capital. New fears and social divisions begin to characterise former Soviet cities. People become alienated from each other. While the effect of depersonalisation could be so strong exactly because of the contrast of the country and the city (when people move to the capital, they may expect some “specific” ethos there, so they are more likely to yield to the proposed framework of impersonality), and it is here that the authorities should step out as the coordinating force for social tensions (Kosmarski 2008: 224–227).

To sum it up, from the comparative perspective post-Soviet capitals of the newly independent nations have all been exposed to the common challenges connected with the shift from the synchronising Soviet cultural code system and the necessity to cre-

ate and establish the new national tradition. In this sense, the change in the cultural narrative of the cities was inevitable. Despite the different ways in which this transition took place, it is the interplay of heterogeneous environments that now creates an opportunity for the production of a new urban culture. The efforts of post-Soviet authorities to create a new historical perspective for the capital city have gone very far and in this aspect remind of the intensity of the struggle for the ideal of the socialist city. One of the embodiments of this ideal became Minsk.

### The battle for legitimacy: competing narratives of Minsk

In this section, we refer to the socio-cultural context of Minsk's last century history in order to reconstruct the city's narrative as a socio-cultural milieu in the region. The theoretical and methodological framework of this analysis can be captured as follows. On the one hand, according to Bourdieu, there is a symbolic struggle concerning perception of the social world, and on the collective level this struggle takes the form of manipulation with the words of naming. Most typical are strategies that reconstruct the past geared to the needs of the present, or that construct the future by creatively interpreting the always open meaning of the present. This is a struggle for the production of common sense, the monopoly of *legitimate nomination* (Бурдьё 1994a: 197–199, italics added). On the other hand, there is a perspective of Baudrillard who conceptualises the modern city as a battle field of signs, media, of the code that destruct any sociality. Any urban form including architecture is then just part of the *operational semiology* (Бодрийяр 2006: 156–157, italics added). In other words, we may contend that the city space represents a competitive power field of legitimacy where signs are widely used, and to some extent nothing is left of the city except for its semiotic narratives.

As Nerijus Milerius points out, the practice of changing names that appeared in the totalitarian society was accomplished when individuals started perceiving the invented past as their own. Under such a condition, however, there was no space left for freedom and social creation (Milerius 2008: 53–56). If such a trend continued for decades, as in the case of the socialist Minsk, then another problem arose. According to Paul Ricoeur, there should be *a subject of memories*, i.e. the verifying subject (Świtek 2008: 77–80, italics added). If there are no witnesses to the legendarized events, then there are no limits to the collective memory constructivism.

To some, Minsk exemplifies the transformation of the Soviet city-builders' ideal of the – 1950s, that of the “system of a closed city” (Bohn 2008) where socialistic city-building and rural milieus intertwined (cf. *Мінск незнаёмы...* 2002). How did it become possible?

Minsk was almost totally destroyed during WWII. It did not have a long record of either being a capital (only since 1918) or a major cultural centre (with a stone castle or the palaces of nobility). Partially for these reasons Minsk was not restored as a historical place (like the city-centre in Warsaw). In fact, after the Second World War Minsk turned into a natural building spot for the realisation of the idea of the “socialist

city” that had already haunted the Soviet architects back in the 1930s (Бочарникова 2006).

The interlocation of the centre and peripheries was not changed because of the geographical position of the city (the intersection of two highways of international significance) and the local landscape as well (the river Svisloch). However, certain areas in the city centre were fundamentally changed by demolishing the old buildings already partly destroyed during the War, by widening and redeveloping the streets. The socio-cultural landscape did not avoid change either: the streets were given new names, and the micro-landscape of the city suffered (Сацукевіч 2005: 84–85). For example, the historical river Niamiha, which featured in the first record of Minsk in 1067, was taken away under the ground level; the Castle Hill where the wooden castle would stand was razed to the ground, while both these features had for centuries been part of the city landscape (Капилов 1995). These actions corresponded to the socialistic ideal of the city, although they destroyed the unique cultural tissue of the city. What is more, manipulation with historical buildings that were treated as outdated and unpractical reminder of life in the old days (and in the Imperium there ought not to be a time dimension for it is meant for eternity (Хардт, Негри 2004)) also carried an ethno-cultural aspect. In the area of Niamiha a whole Jewish quarter was transformed: on the site of the Castle Hill the “Sports Palace” was erected; distinctively “ethnic” names were changed (the Jewish street became Water Collector street, Big Tatar street – Dimitrova street). Thus, *the former cultural layer of Minsk was being washed away* after the War.

At the same time the “essence” of Minsk is possible to describe in terms of cultural theory. In European civilization it is possible to distinguish between the “city-polis” – a fortress, concentric development around common centre that organises the hierarchy – and the “city-cross” of the Roman type where the cross symbolises the urge for territorial expansion and not to keeping one’s limits (Веселова 2000). The cross-like organization of the city dictates its own vision of the world as constant expansion, the dominance of linear movement, and linear idea of existence. This type of cities is also characterised by a specific treatment of time: “By breaking the Greek circle, the Roman principle of linearity tends to balance its irresponsibility towards the past with the detailed design of the future” (Веселова 2000). This is the source of the lack of ascribed statuses and stable social hierarchy, the feeling of nomadism. In relation to Minsk, we interpret these characteristics as *an ability to constantly change its own image*. In our opinion, there is no epoch solidified in Minsk; it changes in accordance with local time. After the War every new building in the city reflected the “will”, if not voluntarism, of the architects. The linear perspective re-organised the city space.

Since 1991 Minsk differs from its own image of the Soviet period: it grows very fast, and its style is eclectic. First, new office buildings arise among older buildings, and then force them out. Second, bronze figures of the persons from the 19–20th cc. appear all over the city centre. Third, the city centre is now being functionally “adapted”, revised in terms of organisation. All this creates an amalgam of styles and epochs

that add to the modern vision of the city. In fact, Minsk is a unique European capital because its centre, not peripheries, is being creatively transformed.

That is why in today's Minsk there is no "Old city", no localised historical centre with the palaces of nobility (there were none in Minsk, in contrast to Warsaw or Vilnius). In other words, there is a lack of significant cultural space that is usually essential to self-representation of the capital and which is typical for many European cities. A tourist walking by or just a spectator "simply does not know how to relate to what one sees" for "very much can hide behind the visible" (Koyн 2002).

At the same time Minsk is unlike the neighbouring capitals. Here the buildings of the last 70–80 years prevail, with all their characteristic features. Moreover, these Soviet buildings are aligned along the spatial order of the narrative common to the whole city. In fact, a massive reconstruction of the city centre has happened in the last years. Functionally, the historical centre is to be modernized, "civilized" and tailored for shopping and entertainment as part of a common process of the post-Soviet space commercialization (Zhel'nina 2008: 166).

The market in the city centre has lost its functions in the European capitals and become a cultural venue. In Minsk, this function is still being realized in the city centre. The façades of historical buildings are built again and then taken under protection by the state, thus creating the immediately accessible *visibility of the presence of history*. The image of the Great Patriotic War as a triumph of justice and victory of heroism has now become the main symbol of the nation. As witnesses of the WWII pass away, it becomes easier to manipulate even with this near past of the country. As a result, the historical memory of the pre-war Minsk has been by far lost now.

To sum up, the main factors that affected modern Minsk in terms of its areas, spatial logic and architecture are:

- 1) lack of status of a historical capital (unlike Warsaw or Vilnius);
- 2) total destruction of the city during the Second World War (unlike Vilnius);
- 3) long-term Soviet policy of building a model socialistic city (including space reorganization);
- 4) modern strategies of authorities orientated to inclusion of the city in the dynamics of globalization.

## Conclusions

1. The symbolic struggle for the legitimate narrative in Minsk has taken a mass scale. Construction of a new nation-state had to deal in Minsk with the dominating legacy of the Soviet epoch and adapt it somehow to the needs of the new political reality.
2. The main strategy adopted by the authorities in Minsk after 1991 included the production of new cultural narrative mainly through the means of visualization and symbolization of the city space. Although new architectural forms (such as new National Library) play an important role in this process, the overwhelming part of the strategy includes focusing on the "intangible" elements such as

- illumination of the streets, certain events in history, or binary organization of the collective memory through posters in the city.
3. The practices of re-organization of the city space and creation of a certain image at the same time push urban public space out of legitimate discourse. The narrative imposed by the authorities is perceived by many citizens as canonical, thus making any cultural production or local initiative suspicious and hostile.
  4. The cultural narrative of Minsk today is based on the Soviet project of the socialist city, but it employs postmodern tools of constructing the nation. The common challenge of post-Soviet nation-building has caused different development in post-Soviet countries. In Minsk, the historical events of the WWII and the collapse of the SU became the defining background for building the new cultural narrative.

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## MINSKO FENOMENAS: MIESTO ERDVĖ IR KULTŪRINIS NARATYVAS

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### Santrauka

Straipsnyje susitelkiama į kultūrinį Minsko, kaip Rytų Europos posovietinės sostinės, tyrimą. Kad būtų galima suprasti miesto dabartį, būtina aptarti radikalias permainas, vykusias XX a., neišleidžiant iš akių kone visiškos destrukcijos, radikalių etninės struktūros pokyčių, sparčios pokarinės erdvės ekspansijos ir galiausiai intensyvios simbolinės gamybos kaip posovietinio kapitalo. Kad būtų nustatyta, kokie bruožai charakteringiausi Minskui sociologinėje perspektyvoje, pasitelkiama kultūros teorija, istorinė rekonstrukcija ir tarpnacionalinis palyginimas. Straipsnyje siekiama reflektuoti erdvės organizaciją ir kultūrinį naratyvą, nūdien produkuojamą Minske, taip pat apsvarstyti bendrąsias šio miesto tendencijas. Kintantis Minsko statusas ir simbolinis jo vaidmuo pastarajame amžiuje reikalauja naujaip ir nuodugnai konceptualizuoti šį miestą kaip fenomeną. Autorės tvirtina, kad vykstantys pokyčiai posovietinėse sostinėse (Europos Sąjungoje ir anapus jos) turi įtakos jų sociokultūrinio konteksto rekonstravimui.

Reikšminiai žodžiai: sostinė, miesto erdvė, kultūrinis naratyvas, Minskas, posovietinis kapitalas, vizualumas.

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