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AN ALTERNATIVE VIEW ON POLISH CITIES

Abstract: This text represents an attempt to capture the qualities of Polish cities from alternative perspective. Methodological approach presented in the framework of this article strives for the reconciliation of traditional disputes between nomothetic and ideographical perceptions of the space. Commonalities among Polish and European cities depicted in this article concern both tangible and intangible domains.
Key words: Commonalities, European cities, Polish cities.

1. Instead of introduction

Space, which surrounds us, is constantly changing. It becomes increasingly complicated task to grasp its qualities in a satisfactory manner. Moreover, space on our Earth can be analyzed from at least two perspectives related to anthropogenic dimension of the space: material one and intangible one.

Generally, our Earth contains five groups of qualitatively differentiated but mutually interlinked spheres [Matlovic 2007, pp. 3–23]:
- material geosphere of inorganic nature (*i.e.* litosphere with georelief, atmosphere, hydrosphere),
- material geosphere of both organic and inorganic character (*i.e.* pedosphere),
- material geosphere of organic nature (*i.e.* biosphere),
- material geosphere of anthropogenic character (*i.e.* socioeconomic sphere and technosphere),
- intangible geospheres of anthropogenic character (*i.e.* noospehere and cybersphere).

While the phenomena, which are related to first three groups of geospheres bear a physiospheric components, the fourth and fifth groups are related to the society and its both material and immaterial activities. May be, this approach is not in consonance with prevailing positivist conceptions but allows us to express more dimensions of space, we live in [Sucháček 2008].

Spatial sustainability and balance reflect material, intangible as well as societal attributes of the reality. While in the sphere of material components of the world we are talking primarily about eternal moves of the mass that usually follows spatial distribution of the population and natural developmental potential of individual territories, intangible-spiritual domain concerns namely the creation of noosphere, *i.e.* collective consciousness of human beings that follows after the organisation of inanimate matter, *i.e.* geosphere and biological life, *i.e.* biosphere. Society plays a specific role in the middle of these subsystems as it influences both material and intangible parts of the reality [Sucháček 2008].

From a chronological perspective, the relation between society and environment has undergone a very important historical transformation. At the beginning, the society in relation to its environment was relatively static and externally directed by natural conditions. But concurrently with the emergence of industrial revolution the relation of the society towards the environment has altered and nowadays is relatively dynamic and internally actively conditioned. Society thus influences and forms the environment and orients itself primarily towards material and technical components of the expansion of civilization. However, intangible parts of our lives should be taken into account too.

The legacy of physical artifacts and intangible characteristics of communities and societies inherited from past generations, maintained in the present and donated to the benefits of future generations forms the heritage in the broadest sense. Layers of the history thus co-form the present. Naturally, space represents a pivotal category from the perspective of both physical-material heritage as well as intangible one.

"Spatial entities and their appropriation have recently gained a major importance in the explanation of social phenomena and that of social change. Many scholars speak about spatial turn referring to space as a container of continuity in the era of multiplied temporalities. In this sense, spatial entities appear to be the conveyors of identities rooted in the past. Linking identities to places happens through the appropriation of space by a society or a community" [Sonkoly 2012, pp. 81–89].

Subsequently, for the purposes of our article, we will deal with three-dimensional conception of the space:
– material dimension (*i.e.* physiosphere and technosphere),
– societal dimension,
– intangible dimension (*i.e.* noosphere and cybersphere).

The essay is dedicated to the search for a compromise between idiographic and nomothetic spatial approaches to the reality. Spatial scientists traditionally dispute about nomothetic and idiographic approaches to the reality. While the proponents of nomothetic conception believe that there are certain spatial regularities and rules related to the characteristics of the territory, other spatial scientists underline unique

and unrepeatable qualities of individual territories and places. While the first group in a way tends to the universal conception of heritage, the latter rightly underlines its inimitability.

Contemporary, post-modern era is sensitive to the differentiation of all kinds; thus, it seems idiograpic approach has a room for its development. However, proponents of idiographic conception are often being criticized by their nomothetic counterparts that they merely depict the reality without endeavoring more systematic approach to the reality. That is why there appears a distinct need for a third spatial approach to the reality that would contribute to possible reconciliation of two previously mentioned poles and would draw on the logos of the space.

Thus, methodological approach in this article is based on an assumption that certain (societal, material and intangible) elements, structures and phenomena are similar within the space of the European Union. These internal similarities distinguish the European Union from other territories and cultures. Actually, these commonalities constitute one of the reflections of both tangible and intangible heritage. At the same time, our approach allows for the connection of the past and the present, which brings benefits also to the future generations.

2. Case of Polish cities

Poland, an important country, which is located in Central Europe and which has some similar characteristics also with other countries in Europe can serve as an excellent empirical material for the verification of afore mentioned methodological concept.

"Poland, officially the Republic of, is a country in Central Europe, bordered by Germany to the west; the Czech Republic and Slovakia to the south; Ukraine, Belarus to the east; and the Baltic Sea and Kaliningrad Oblast, a Russian exclave, and Lithuania to the north. The total area of Poland is 312,679 square kilometres, making it the 69th largest country in the world and the 9th largest in Europe. Poland has a population of over 38.5 million people, which makes it the 34th most populous country in the world and the sixth most populous member of the European Union, being its most populous post-communist member. Poland is a unitary state made up of 16 voivodeships.

The establishment of a Polish state is often identified with the adoption of Christianity by its ruler Mieszko I in 966, over the territory similar to that of present-day Poland. The Kingdom of Poland was formed in 1025, and in 1569 it cemented a long association with the Grand Duchy of Lithuania by signing the Union of Lublin, forming the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth. The Commonwealth ceased to exist in 1795 as the Polish lands were partitioned among the Kingdom of Prussia, the Russian Empire, and Old Austria. Poland regained its independence as the Second Polish Republic in 1918.

Two decades later, in September 1939, World War II started with the Nazi Germany and Soviet Union invasion of Poland (Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact). Over six million of Polish citizens died in the war. The People's Republic was declared in 1952 although Poland was a client state of the Soviet Union from 1944. During the Revolutions of 1989, the communist state was overthrown and democratic rule was re-established in the form of the current Poland, constitutionally known as the "Third Polish Republic".

Despite the vast destruction the country experienced in World War II, Poland managed to preserve much of its cultural wealth. There are currently 14 heritage sites inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage list in Poland. Since the end of the communist period, Poland has achieved a "very high" ranking in terms of human development" [*Poland* 2013].

Poland constitutes an inseparable part of Central Europe. The notion of "Central Europe" has traditionally attracted significant attention. Naturally, numerous issues connected with this enormously complex and appealing entity go beyond the scope of this article. It should be stated, however, that, as defined by Milan Kundera, the area was "geographically in the Centre, culturally in the West, and politically in the East" [Tomaszewski 2003, pp. 131–135]. Central Europe can be also grasped as an interface between East and West, which reinforces its peculiar character.

Various cultural and political currents, often almost antagonistic but at the same time intensely interconnected, shaped the character of this territory. Before 1989, political arguments that stressed the absurdity of two separate Europes were widespread in the context of the idea of Central Europe. Since 1989 we have observed a slow return of the common pluralistic values so typical for Central European culture. In the most recent years, we have witnessed the rebirth of the idea of Central European partnership, which can be perceived also as a process of positioning in the context of the whole European Union [Sucháček 2006, pp.12–19].

After 1989, the region of Central Europe underwent a dual transformation. The first element was a spontaneous process of economic and social transformation involving the whole Central European space. The second was a specific transition process in East-Central Europe, which includes a major part of Central Europe. This consisted in the transformation from totalitarian to democratic political system and from centrally-planned to market economies.

Generally speaking, Central European history and development were of a turbulent nature. The peculiar character of Central Europe embodies both the historical and territorial dimensions of the norms and values that have regulated the human activities and shaped the essential elements and interactions in the framework of this entity as well as its relations with the other socio-cultural systems. Historical and present-day physical and social structures give us ample evidence of Central Europe as a forum of dialogue and conflict and a territory of borders, memory and traditions [Sucháček 2011, pp. 442–449].

There are no doubts about growing role of cities in contemporary society [Sucháček 2008]. From the global point of view, for the first time in history, more people live in cities than in rural areas.

Polish society since World War II has been transformed by two interrelated great movements: the growth of a dominant urban industrialized working class and the continuing drift of peasants from the rural areas into towns and cities. Whereas in 1946 there were nearly twice as many people in the countryside as in towns, by the late 1960-ies the two numbered equally. About three-fifths of the country's population is now urban [Wandycz 2013].

Thus, further text will focus mainly on important nodes of Polish settlement system. It has to be stated that albeit positioning is often treated as a must for contemporary cities, our approach offers a different perspective; we are going to disclose a lot of commonalities between Polish and various European cities, which may enhance the attractiveness of all cities involved.

A great body of research is currently centered on towns and cities. Ironically, there are no generally accepted definitions of towns and cities so far. Town is a general name for an urban place, usually a settlement exceeding a prescribed minimum population threshold [Johnson *et al.* 1994, p. 636].

A city can be comprehended as a relatively large and permanent settlement. The term generally applies to large urban spaces. The difference between towns and cities is differently understood in different parts of the world and there are no agreed on technical definitions distinguishing a city from a town. Many languages other than English often use a single word for both concepts [Sucháček 2010, p. 13]. However, there are some generally accepted features of urban structures.

"For the city is the fruit of protracted processes, the product of a convergence of many different phenomena. The form and the shape of the city are, in a way, the sum of the development of its civilisation, and this is why urbanisation is so often cited as a symbol of Europe's cultural advancement […] what makes a place a metropolis, or a centre of any kind, is not only its size, strength and reach, but also the complexity of the function it performs. Hence truly worthy of the title of metropolis are "diversified cities" – cities with complex functions and more sophisticated functions with a higher complexity factor" [Purchla 2013, pp. 56–94].

"The city […] does not tell its past but contains it like the lines of a hand, written in the corners of the streets, the gratings of the windows, the banisters of the steps, the antennae of the ligthning rods, the poles of the flags, every segment marked in turn with scratches, indentations, scrolls" [Calvino 1997, p. 9].

We find ourselves at the beginning of our journey: in the heartland of the Masovian Plain, we can find a spectacular capital city of Poland. Warsaw was often perceived as a "Phoenix City" as it recovered from extensive damage during World War II, during which 80% of its buildings were destroyed.

After the fall of the Iron Curtain in 1989, as an investment-friendly city, Warsaw has developed into a financial hub of Central and Eastern Europe. The city is now considered to be one of the most attractive business locations in Europe. The Warsaw Stock Exchange is according to many indicators the largest market in the region.

The vivid character of the city is based on business expansion and interconnectedness with other business hubs. Stock exchange works on a similar principles as these in Frankfurt or London (although on a much smaller scale).

That is why part at least a part of people in Warsaw has a similar patterns of thinking as these in Frankfurt or London. Subsequently, economisation and efficacy penetrate also the city life.

Apart from similar intangible elements, phenomena and patterns, there is also ample material evidence on the resemblance of these cities: skyscrapers or modern/post-modern business buildings alongside fine restaurants, clubs and other enterprises where money can be spent. Warsaw respects traditions but is galloping to the future at the same time.

While Warsaw acts as political and administrative capital of Poland, Cracow is often called spiritual and cultural capital of the country. In contrast to the dynamism of Warsaw, Cracow represents conservative, traditional and somehow introvert city.

"Cracow is intriguing and inspiring. It has become our observatory of the world not so well visible from Warsaw. The Polish capital is situated between Berlin and Moscow. The view from Cracow is different. One can see the mountains and the Slovak border. Civilisation came to our city from the south, through the Moravian Gate. Therefore from Cracow it is easier to see not only Prague, Vienna, Budapest, Zagreb and Trieste, but also Silesia, Moravia, Spisz, Styria and Transylvania. This produces a twofold difference in perspective, not only geopolitical, but also civilisational: centralism, or perhaps unitarism, of the state is opposed here to the Europe of regions. And so the Polish presence in Mitteleuropa becomes the responsibility of Cracow" [Purchla 2011, pp. 500–502].

Let's go to St. Mary's Basilica adjacent to main market square! It is particularly famous for its wooden altarpiece carved by Wit Stwosz. Or Veit Stoss? Born in Swabia, he was a leading Bavarian sculptor, mostly in wood, whose career covered the transition between the late Gothic and the Northern Renaissance. Materialised spirituality touching both Poland and Bavaria.

And what about Cracow's coffee houses! In Cracow a meeting over a cup of coffee is one of the most popular social occasions. Chating, discussions or even slanders over a cup of coffee. Well, the similarity with Viennese or Central European culture is apparent. And it includes not only behaviour or way of thinking, on the contrary it is projected also in many tangibles. Not surprisingly, there are virtually no changes in Cracow's appearance over years and from this point of view, the city bears a great resemblance with Vienna again.

But let's go ahead on our Polish spatial spiral! Next stop is Katowice. It is not so usual city. With its surroundings it forms large, chaotic and overcrowded conurbation. Evolution of Katowice area as well as that of Ruhrgebiet in Germany or Nord-Pas-de-Calais in France were driven by industrial monostructure, lack of innovative milieu, culture of dependency, rigid institutions, as well as limited social and environmental attractiveness.

Organizational and technical discipline is symptomatic for people in these areas. Their milieu was traditionally dominated by industrial giants, new spheres of industry were developing rather slowly and with big difficulties. When these areas declined, their environment was penetrated by the feelings of vanity, helplessness, apathy and resignation. Not surprisingly, their position on mental maps was and often still is far from favourable.

From material point of view, their landscape was dominated by large complexes of coal mines, steel mills and brownfields of all kinds. Public spaces in these areas are rather functional, simple and somehow reflect traditionally uneasy life in these territories. In spite of official proclamations, their contribution to the culture but also civilisation development in general is enormous.

If we move more to the West, we can find a next city that was heavily hit by World War II but finally manage to adapt and refurbish itself. Wrocław, Breslau, Vratislav, Boroszlo or Vratislavia. Many cultural influences reflected in many languages. Contemporary city of Wrocław offers history wrapped in a modern fabric.

The Oder river goes through the city. There are also 4 other small rivers which connect with the Oder River in the territory of the city: Bystrzyca, Oława, Ślęza and Widawa. Before World War II there were 303 bridges in the city; now their number reaches some 220. Not surprisingly, the city is called Polish Venice.

Bridges that connect people created this meeting place for Poles as well as many other Europeans. The city is forward looking and is extrovert. The city overflows with energy, business and culture. A unintended effect of war disaster perhaps.

Let's move to Wielkopolska, historical capital and currently the trade centre as well as the city of prosperity. Yes, we are in Poznań. The city enjoys diversified and mixed economic functions, which are an efficient defence against decline.

One of the city's nicknames is "Polish Antwerp" just for the sake of the presence of jewellery industry. However, there is also large exhibition site, so the routines may be very well similar to those in Leipzig or Dusseldorf. Poznan has larger socio-economic potential than Brno, one of its twin cities, yet did not reach the level of Antwerp. Strike of industrial workers in Poznań in 1956 embodies the first mass protest against totalitarian regime.

Many Western European companies have established their Polish headquarters just in Poznań. Most foreign investors are German or Dutch enterprises. So, Poznań headquarters influence not only Poland but sometimes also Central Europe. Berlin-

Warsaw axis causes that the city is exposed to the flows of goods, energy and information.

After travelling through Polish hinterland, we are reaching the sea, the Baltic. Look Neptune, the god of the sea, in the eye and wave at the lady in the window. Yes, we are in beautiful port of Gdańsk.

In its "golden age" the city enjoyed the specific status of a municipal republic that stands behind the autonomy and openess somehow present in the city's DNA. Bruges, Amsterdam, Hamburg or Lubeck? Gdańsk! A League of Hanseatic cities.

The religious freedom gained in the 16th century turned the city into a true melting pot of nationalities and denominations that concentrated on a relatively small territory. It was one of the few such places in the world at the time. Put succinctly, a little Europe.

Once again it drew the attention of the world community, when the city became a symbol for the liberation aspirations against totalitarian regimes. The tragic December 1970, and then August 1980 and the martial law period are the successive dates symbolizing the fight of the citizens of Gdańsk. It was Gdańsk where "Solidarność" was born. Contemporary Gdansk, it is openness, freedom and vibrant and sparkling life.

And what about Lodz? In Polish, the name of the city means a "Ship". However, this Ship was once treated as Promised Land (*Ziemia obiecana*), where immigrants came from all over Europe.

They arrived mostly from Southern Germany, Bohemia and Silesia but also from countries as far away as Portugal, England, France and Ireland. The first cotton mill opened in 1825, and 14 years later the first steam-powered factory in both Poland and Russia commenced operations. A constant influx of workers, businessmen and craftsmen from all over Europe transformed Lodz into the main textile production centre of the Russian Empire.

That is why we are entitled to talk also about "Polish Manchester". Not surprisingly, multifunctional centre Manufactura, once a textile producing plants, drives the developments in contemporary Lodz.

Well-known Piotrkowska street represents one of largest shopping strets in Europe. But isn't it also an attribute of, say, Stroget in Copenhagen?

To complete Lodz's peculiar mosaic, we must mention famous National Film School as well as large collections of modern art. Is it then surprising to talk about "Holly-Lodz"?

And we find ourselves at the end – or possibly at the beginning – of Polish territorial spiral. Gniezno. As for population potential it is currently much weaker than previously described metropolises, however, its history is of great importance. Actually, it is treated as a cradle of the Polish state. Gniezno remained the centre of worship and today is still regarded as Poland's ecclesiastical capital!

Figure 1. Territorial spiral in Poland

Source: Author's elaboration.

Concluding remarks

We completed our tour through important nodes of Polish settlement system and found out their commonalities with other European territories. A brief look on the map reveals that our journey actually had a spiral pattern. It is worth noticing that due to its mysterious resonance, spiral was an inseparable part of human culture and civilisation from the very beginning.

However, spiral pattern can be found extensively also in the nature, and is encoded into plants, animal, human beings, the Earth as well as galaxies around us. Let us have a look at shells or spiral galaxies! This pattern generally allows the organism to grow and develop without the need of the change of its shape.

Key nodes of the Polish settlement system, which evolved as an organism of higher rank, *sui generis*, also approximately bear the shape of territorial spiral. May

be, the inherent qualities of spiral that occur both in nature and human culture and civilisation that also stem from the nature, represent the possible way to the reconciliation of traditional disputes on nomothetic or idiographic nature of the space. This territorial spiral also embodies the heritage of the past in a relatively synthetic form.

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