

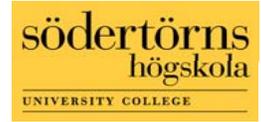
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The City of Sovereigns



Governing Vilnius through *lieux de mémoire*



Goal

The paper discusses the issues of reflexive governance through material mediation and narration of the past. The focus is on two major cultural projects dealing with the past in the Lithuanian capital city Vilnius: reconstruction of the Palace of Sovereigns and the program *Vilnius – The European Capital of Culture*.

Theory & Methods

In line with Régis Debray's theory of mediation (2000) the Palace of Sovereigns and the program *The European Capital of Culture* are interpreted as instruments of governing the population of the city. Here, the emphasis is on reflexivity:

I hold that in knowing itself, the population enters a governmental relation. *To remember thus is to constitute oneself as a particular subject, governable through certain rationales and techniques.*

From this perspective, the strategies of constructing collective memory and its implications for governance in Vilnius were explored with the help of textual analysis of public debate and survey data.

Analysis

Lithuanians in Vilnius make up only slightly more than half of the population (Table 1). Despite the fact that the titular nationality forms a majority, issues of ethnicity dominate the definitions of the subject of governance in the city. The dimension of ethnicity was deeply inscribed in the arguments for reconstructing the Palace of Sovereigns in the heart of Vilnius Old Town. The Palace was seen as a symbol of sovereign Lithuania (the Medieval Duchy) and her independence from Russia (in Union with Poland). Its history stretching back to the 13th century, the Palace was abandoned in the 17th century and destroyed at the beginning of the 19th century. It was not present in collective memory in Lithuania for at least one hundred years. Yet reconstructing the Palace became the largest cultural project of Lithuanian government since 1990. What does this tell us about governance? I compare rebuilding this material architectural structure in Vilnius Old Town, inserted between Gediminas Castle and Cathedral, the dominant symbols of the city (Table 3), with the similar focus on elitist, ethnic and city-centre-located cultural events proposed in the program *Vilnius-European Capital of Culture 2009*. If the government thinks that the Palace and the Old Town are the best sites and symbols of the Lithuanian state and people, what kind of citizen do they envisage? Table 2 shows that the majority of Vilnius inhabitants prefer other forms of leisure than those situated in the city centre. They are further excluded from the public debate in the press, the analysis of which revealed the search for the presence of ethnic Lithuanian rulers in the past (Sovereigns) and a focus on creating an identity for the present elites (intellectuals and politicians).

...using narratives of the past for the new vision of democratic governance?...

Table 1. *The subjects of remembering/governing*

Vilnius inhabitants (16 % of the country)	553,528
Lithuanians	57.8%
Polish	18.7%
Russians	14%
Belarusians	4%
Catholics	80.60%

Source: *Vilnius in Numbers 2001-2003* and Vilnius municipality website www.vilnius.lt

Table 2. *Places where Vilnius inhabitants prefer spending their leisure time*

At home	55.4%
Out of town	47.2%
Entertainment halls	23.4%
Parks, squares	17.2%
City center, city	1.2%

Source: "Rair" survey commissioned for the Municipality of Vilnius (2005:49)
*Results are similar for all age groups

Table 3. *Answers to the question What Is the Symbol of Vilnius?*

The Castle of Gediminas	41.7%
Did not know	20.7 %
The Cathedral	9.2%
St. Christopher, the Patron of Vilnius	5.9 %
The Old Town	5.6 %
The Palace of Sovereigns (<i>Grand Dukes of Lithuania</i>)	2%
Frank Zappa Monument	0.2%
The University of Vilnius	0.2%
"Akropolis" shopping mall	0.2%

Source: *The Needs of the Clients of the Cultural and Art Institutions in Vilnius City* (2004)

Conclusion

Since the 1990s, the symbolic resources provided by the history of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania have been actively used by the ruling elites, regardless of whether they were governing or opposition parties. In the stories told via buildings, events and institutions, the city was not envisaged as belonging to individual citizens, general publics or local communities. Rather, these narratives promoted the idea of Vilnius as the city of multiple *ethnic* communities (but principally Lithuanians) who have their sovereigns. Through strategies of ethnicization, revealed in my examples, I argued that Vilnius came to be constituted as *the city of sovereigns* whose experience, knowledge and governance originated from and was often contained in the centre.

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