The discursive construction of regional development policy of the North Bačka region, Serbia

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Even though historical circumstances split Bačka region between Serbia and Hungary, its institutions remained determined to implement various policies to strengthen its regional identity and re-establish broken links. This research investigates the potential that discourses revolving around regional identity have in order to mobilize actors and institutions in the formulation of regional development strategies. Findings suggest that those discourses play an important role and that they both provide valuable frameworks within which policies were developed and specific issues considered or marginalized, and can guide policy choices and unify different actors under the policy problem.

Keywords: regional identity, discourse coalition, planning, North Bačka

Introduction

‘Regional identity’ became popular in the mid-1980s when Pred (1984) asserted the idea of regions as historically contingent processes, suggesting that regions can be seen as dynamic categories because they are perpetually ‘becoming’ rather than simply ‘being’. He argued that regional formation processes are shaped by the reproduction of social and cultural forms, power, physical environment and individual biographies, all of which could produce narratives, texts and discourses. Consequently, regional identity becomes a social construct, and as long as people associate themselves with the territory, it is produced and reproduced in discourse (Paasi, 2013; Syssner, 2009; Vainikka, 2013). Regions understood as social and discursive constructs in return become important constituents of individual identities and practices, and therefore perpetually subject to political deliberations in development strategy formulation processes.

Regional identity has become well researched in geography focusing on socio-cultural processes and discourses associated with the territory (Paasi, 2013). With ‘new regionalism’ the focus has been shifted on regions as catalysts for planning, economic development and regional competitiveness (Paasi, 2013; Syssner, 2009), whilst omitting to offer comprehensive accounts of links between regional identity discourses and regional development policy. This research aims to rectify this lacunae and advance discussion by arguing that central to understanding the link between regional identity and regional development is not how social dimensions have been integrated into cultural and economic regional development, but what potential regional identity, as a discursive

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construct, has to mobilize actors and institutions in formulating regional development strategies. By so doing, the research examines how policy actors enact discourses of regional identity, and how they acquire wider and deeper meanings by dominating how policy actors articulate and rationalize regional development policies.

The interplay of discourses, institutions and social practices

Explaining how ideas, concepts, and narratives influence social and political processes and their outcomes became a central scholarly task for the field of discursive institutionalism in recent years (Blyth, 2002; Fischer, 2003; Philips, Lawrence, & Hardy, 2004; Schmidt, 2011, 2012). This saw institutional theory move from three older institutionalisms – rational choice, historical and sociological institutionalism – to constructivist approaches that emphasized understanding how ideas are communicated through discourse, allowing explanations of the dynamics of policy change by suggesting that ‘there is no “objective world” out there that exists independently of our manmade ideational and symbolic orders’ (Arts & Buizer, 2009, p. 342). Discourse here denotes ‘a specific ensemble of ideas, concepts, and categorizations that are produced, reproduced and transformed in a particular set of practices and through which meaning is given to physical and social realities’ (Hajer, 1995, p. 44). Following this definition, discursive institutionalism considers how ideas function as forces in discursive interactive processes of policy change by individuals and institutions (Schmidt, 2011). In this context, discourses and ideas cannot be considered in isolation from social practices, power and institutions because the former constitute the latter.

New ideas do not emerge into public policy in a void: they emerge in the context of those pre-existing narratives, discourses, institutional settings and modes of rationality that have already achieved discursive structuration (Atkinson, 2000; Hajer, 1993). Hajer (1993, p. 46) asserts that discursive structuration occurs only ‘when a discourse starts to dominate the way a society conceptualizes the world’. Discursive structuration determines what the legitimate discourses can be, how policy problems can be conceptualized and what the appropriate modes of action are. The institutionalization of such discourses occurs when they begin to dominate institutional practices and influence policy formulation and direction. As actors try to impose their views on others, they form discourse coalitions sharing similar storylines and practices to institutionalize those storylines (Hajer, 1993). Discourse coalitions are formed only when two conditions are fulfilled – namely discourse structuration and discourse institutionalization. In other words, a discourse coalition forms around a discourse represented by storylines, actors who endorse these storylines and discursive practices corresponding to these storylines. In that context, regions, as historically contingent processes, generate discursive practices identifiable via analyses of those discourses that achieved structuration and became institutionalized.

The North Bačka region

The region nowadays known as ‘North Bačka’ is situated in northern Serbia, by the Hungarian border, with Subotica as its capital city (Figure 1). North Bačka constitutes just one-fifth of the historical Bačka region spreading through contemporary Serbia and Hungary, with Serbian ‘Bačka’ now administrated as two regions: North Bačka and West Bačka.

Throughout history, Bačka regularly changed hands between Austria, Hungary, Serbia and the Ottoman Empire (Aladžić, 2010; Pušić, 1987). In 1743, Subotica – then
a Austrian–Hungarian monarchy territory – acquired a status of a Free Treasury Town from Maria Theresa, and in 1779 became Free Royal Town. In the 1918, Bačka was split between Hungary and what would later become Yugoslavia, giving birth to the North Bačka region. During the Cold War, North Bačka became even more separated from the rest of Bačka: cross-border linkages were broken and regional networks of actors became split as the Yugoslav–Hungarian border also became an Eastern Bloc border, resulting in the North Bačka region becoming economically peripheral within Yugoslavia (Aladžić, 2010; Pušić, 1987).

In the 1990s, Yugoslavia slid into a war that resulted in a break-up into six new countries with Serbia being one of them. After the tremulous 1990s, with the political elections in 2000, Serbia entered a new period of stability providing institutional and political consolidation.

For North Bačka, political changes in the early 2000s created opportunities for opening cross-border cooperation with Hungarian regions. The 2006 Spatial Development Plan (SDP) set out the main regional development strategic framework, critically identifying cultural heritage, ethnic diversity and traditions to be vitally important for breaking new ground in regional and transnational development. That triggered a series of projects aiming to improve regional competitiveness and distinctiveness based on the region’s diverse cultural heritage. These included the projects ‘Cultural Trail – Architecture at the Turn of 19th to 20th Century’ and ‘Intercultural Cities’ with the support from the Council of Europe. A series of projects was also directed at supporting cross-border cooperation between actors to enhance regional competitiveness, facilitate economic growth and create jobs, alongside reinforcing physical links including road and waterways between the two countries. Yet, the most important such project was the extension of the National Theatre in Subotica.

This research takes the North Bačka region in Serbia as a case study drawing data from relevant policy documents, 12 in-depth interviews and a decade of press coverage.
The interviews were conducted during three study visits – in October 2009, February and November 2011 – covering relevant policy actors ranging from local government, think-tanks organizations and academics. The region was chosen because of the vivid political debate along cultural and ethnic identity, something evident in press coverage even at the national level.

**The National Theatre: discursive construction of a flagship project**

Listed as a cultural property of exceptional interest, the National Theatre (Figure 2) built in 1854 was before reconstruction one of Serbia’s oldest theatres, and the second theatre built in Hungary after Budapest. That last was of immense importance for Subotica’s development, as marked a progression from simply being a town to becoming the regional main centre.

Although the idea of its extension originated from the 1980s, the decision to proceed with works was made only in 2007, to create a building that reusing authentic elements of the previous building constitute a new, modern building to accommodate the contemporary theatre’s needs. Political elites advocated it as a project with the potential to be a driving force for North Bačka’s regional development, comparable with the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao. Yet quickly it became a political issue contained much disagreement.

The decision to start the works was made quickly and without any public consultations amid petitions and a huge public campaign against it, both at locally and internationally. Those who campaigned against it considered the project to be counterintuitive and an act of vandalism, seeing most of the protected cultural property demolished and replaced with a new modern building. Despite this, the local government proceeded with the works. Announcing the start of the project, the Serbian Secretary of State for Culture highlighted the importance National Theatre would have in strengthening the links between Hungary, Croatia and Serbia by asserting that it would be ‘the only theatre where actors will create and work in three different European languages, which will make it unique in all of Europe’. Taken as a pride of the region, the ‘new’ National Theatre soon became the biggest investment ever funded from the National Investment Plan. Although financial problems due to the recession led to temporary pauses in the project, there remains strong elite support for the project as it enters its final phase.

![Figure 2. The National Theatre before (2007, left, photograph by Saša Stefanović) and after the works started (2009, right, photograph by Milomir Stanković).](image-url)
Emerging discourse coalitions

The discursive construction of the ‘new’ National Theatre project was situated within a raft of policy discourses related to the (re)construction of regional identity. Although they were relatively recent in the public realm of the North Bačka region, they did not emerge in a void. This research identified two groups of discourses whose interplay helped new regional development policy to emerge and which were supportive of the need for cross-border cooperation to help re-establish the links lost or suspended as a result of historical developments.

Discourses of regional and cross-border development

Analysing the press coverage and interviews revealed that regional and transnational discourses drew on different ethnic groups’ association with their territory creating a sense of regional identity. That resulted in transnational collaboration and reestablishment of cultural, economic and political links with Hungary becoming a dominant discourse after the fall of the Iron Curtain. That was also reflected in policy documents: the analysis showed that two policy objectives – ‘enhanced regional identity’ and ‘regional competitiveness’ – often paralleled and were further advanced by the sub-objectives including ‘maintaining and improving cultural identity’, ‘enhancing transnational collaboration’ and ‘establishing transnational cultural trails’. With Hungary joining the European Union in 2004, and Serbia becoming eligible to use the IPA (Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance) of the European Commission’s ‘Cross-border Co-operation Programme’, the interest in initiating cross-border development projects was boosted. As a result, most of the funding allocated by the Hungary–Serbia IPA Cross-border Co-operation Programme for 2007–13 was directed at supporting interactions between actors on both sides of the border to enhance regional competitiveness, facilitate economic growth and create jobs, alongside reinforcing physical links between the two countries, including road infrastructure and waterways. Notably, some of the vivid political debates on regional and cross-border development included the National Theatre and its assumed potential to act as a dynamo of development in the region.

Discourses surrounding heritage and development

Analysing the interviews and policy documents revealed that over the last decade, the professional approach to heritage in North Bačka shifted from being characterized as an act of preservation towards being characterized as an instrument of urban regeneration and development. That shift was especially important because it changed the perception of what heritage was considered to be, gradually changing its definition to encompass not only physical artefacts but also events, personalities or identities.

This research identified that discourses surrounding heritage in relation to regional development policies were fourfold. Firstly, heritage was regarded as a source of identity and belonging and therefore a potential policy instrument. The analysis showed that discourses of identity, ethnicity and cultural belonging were linked with territory and were reflected in political discussions leading to their further institutionalization through various policy documents. One of the SDP’s six operational goals – ‘strengthening the identity of the Municipality’ – provided a direct link between heritage, identity and territory.

Secondly, heritage was used as an instrument of political legitimization and promotion, with the most important example of this being the National Theatre project.
This project conveyed many conflicts and compromises during the political struggles to establish a shared vision, which emerged from a process of establishing collective identities based on regional belonging, ethnicity and shared cultural values. In this process, the National Theatre became the symbol of the region, a place where different identities came together and confronted one another.

Thirdly, heritage was considered as a resource for sustainability and sustainable development, which appeared to reflect mainstream debates in spatial planning where special attention was given to the role of heritage. Finally, heritage became regarded as a resource for heritage development, introducing an economic use of heritage as an instrument of urban regeneration and development. In both cases, heritage was seen as central for any regional development. Moreover, the press coverage analysis revealed that the National Theatre project was thought to play a central role in city marketing and promoting urban regeneration, representing a spectacular and fresh flagship development capable of repositioning the region internationally.

These findings showed that not only that discourses of regional identity matter, but also that they alter the perceptions of policy actors and influence the way regional development policies are formulated. Political deliberation is a context-specific and it reflects issues of local importance, such as here the re-establishment of broken links with Hungary. Furthermore, these findings suggested that it was not that institutions deeply affected policy formulation; instead, discourses that achieve structuration and became institutionalized had a power to influence policy formulation. These discourses drew from ideas, storylines, identities or individual biographies already present in the process of political deliberation. Planning process and policy formulation is contingent upon context- and history-specific elements. That is important because it allows us to observe how discourses become institutionalized and translated into policies, consequently producing new social practices of regional development.

Conclusions

This research analysed the potential that discourses of regional development have in order to mobilize actors and institutions in formulation of regional development strategies and the use of discourse coalitions as a conceptual tool here provided a useful approach for analysing the strategic actions in their unique socio-historical and institutional context. The research showed that discourses of regional development have two kinds of potential in terms of these mobilizations. Firstly, discourse coalitions centred on the policy issues related to the (re)construction of regional identity helped in crossing not only institutional but also national, boundaries. In this case study, discourses of regional identity helped actors navigate across institutional jurisdictions in order to achieve common goals. Secondly, regional identity has been used as a form of a ‘commodity’ in city-branding and repositioning the Region of North Bačka internationally. The National Theatre reconstruction represented the attempt to redefine the city’s image through this flagship project.

These insights contribute to the growing body of knowledge on the interrelatedness of regional planning and identity as regions – understood as social and discursive constructs – in return become important constituents of individual identities and practices, and therefore perpetually subject to political deliberation via development strategy formulation processes. ‘Regional identity’ in North Bačka served as a paradigm that united different actors and institutions into joint endeavour without requiring them to share similar sets of values or work together in a partnership. Policy-makers should take note
of these findings as discourses embedded in the becoming of the region have an immense potential in mobilizing actors and institutions in formulation of the regional development strategies.

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