

## “LITTLE VIENNA” OR “EUROPEAN AVANT-GARDE CITY”? BRANDING NARRATIVES IN A ROMANIAN CITY

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**Abstract:** By connecting the literature on urban development processes in post-socialist cities with debates from the area of place branding, this paper critically examines recent narratives of city branding in Timișoara, Romania. The aim is to investigate one specific case in the reproduction and adaptation of global urban development policies and to examine its relevance for the context of post-socialist urban politics. Our findings indicate a specific circularity between city branding and urban development, which is used to align the city to the regional inter-urban economic competition and to promote it as a space of rapid development. The outcome is a *mélange* of different narratives, based on disparate histories and representations of the city, which are assembled in ad-hoc and often contradictory branding discourses.

**Key Words:** *city branding, urban development, post-socialism, Timișoara, Romania.*

### Introduction

This paper examines recent developments in the politics of post-socialist cities. Our main contribution consists in connecting the critical literature on urban development processes, especially regarding post-socialist cities (Kostinskiy 2001, Stanilov 2007, Sykora 2009), with several specific debates from the area of city branding (Morgan and Pritchard 1998, Lucarelli and Berg 2011, Kavartzis and Hatch 2013, Vanolo 2017). Specifically, we look at the production of city branding discourses in Timișoara, Romania, during the period 2013-2017. This paper holds a critical position on the development policies produced by city managers and it highlights the contradictions in the implicit development vision rolled out by urban planning authorities in Timișoara. The second line of critique proposed in our paper refers to the ad hoc construction of a city brand for Timișoara by its authorities. We mainly highlight the use of a highly conventional approach to urban development which is delivered as a competitive advantage of Timișoara in a regional, and even global competition between cities. We examine the efforts of the city authorities to assemble the disparate pieces of urban narratives and to use the idea of rapid and extensive urban development as a central signifier in the city branding discourse.

We start from the construction and reinforcement of specific urban identities through city branding and we explore the ways in which these identities are connected to ideas on urban development. Examining these connections, we note a certain circularity between city branding and urban development discourses in a particular post-socialist context. The analysis is focused less on the relation between branding and urban policies, but rather on urban development discourses which perform the function of city branding targeted mainly to its citizens. In focusing on the case of a medium-size city located in East-Central Europe, we attempt to contribute to the debates on city branding and urban marketization, which mostly focus on large cities in Western Europe and North America (Smyth 2005), and, more recently, in the Global South (Lucarelli and Berg 2011).

*City branding, post-socialist development and urban identities*

In order to understand the relations between city branding and urban development in Timișoara, we need to briefly examine the theoretical assumptions and sources used in this paper. One important trend in urban studies is to examine the so-called “cities in transition” (Blanke and Smith 1999). This usually refers to the urban change induced by the processes of globalization (Schneider-Sliwa 2006). Sometimes, it denotes the ecological transformation of cities. In our case, transition covers two inter-related processes: the post-communist transition per se and the impact of the broader global and European context on the local urban development. The first dimension refers to the complex urban changes resulted from the post-communist political and economic transitions (Kostinskiy 2001, Stanilov 2007). This was especially and symbolically important in the case of Timișoara, given that it was the place where the 1989 Romanian Revolution had started. The second dimension is the impact of global neoliberal trends on post-socialist urban changes. The critical comparative study of post-communist urban development focused on the implications of neoliberalism for the cities of Central and Eastern Europe (Smith 2007, Stanilov 2007, Sykora 2009). The multiplication of actors, the proliferation of urban development discourses calls for a more careful consideration of the type of neoliberal urban development currently unfolding in post-socialist cities. In this context, the contribution of city managers to boosting the global competition between cities plays a key role in the consolidation of a truly global managerial approach to urban development (Leitner et al. 2007, Çağlar and Glick Schiller 2018).

We propose using the term “normalized development” in post-socialist cities in connection to the path followed by the city of Timișoara along the above mentioned processes. The normalization of development is based on ideas and practices pertaining to economic development, spatial politics and social engineering in urban contexts – all leading to more productive, efficient, and predictable spaces for economic growth, and to specific transformations of social practices connected to urban development. This idea resonates with the critical analyses of neoliberal urban development in Western, post-socialist and developing countries (Brenner and Theodore 2002, Stenning et al. 2010). It also echoes the idea of conventional development, the critiques of the hegemony of neoliberal urban politics and the adaptation to various local contexts (Chelcea and Druță 2016).

On one hand, urban development trends in Timișoara follow the general lines observed in the majority of post-socialist cities from Central and Eastern Europe. The multifaceted transformations of urban space as the result of global neoliberalization, together with the alternative urban developments, have been discussed in critical urban studies (Leitner et al. 2007). Several trends have been considered in post-socialist urban studies, ranging from the development of new retail urban landscapes, to de- and re-industrialization processes and brownfield transformations (Smith and Rochovská 2006, Leitner et al. 2007, Voiculescu and Jucu 2016, Tursie 2017). For instance, the growth of ‘out-of town retail landscape’ of post-socialist cities is one of the most visible urban development patterns in post-communism, being widely mentioned in the literature (Leitner et al. 2007, Sykora 2009). Another well-covered direction is the examination of gentrification and socio-economic segregation in post-socialism (Gentile et al. 2012), the case of Romanian cities being relatively well documented (Voiculescu et al. 2009, Marcińczak et al. 2014).

On the other hand, urban development trends in Timișoara follow the specific experiences (already problematic) of the Western urban context. These include the attempt to identify the so-called leading industrial sectors and the prioritization of economic growth over social cohesion and environmental protection. The support for the spatial expansion of the city, known as urban sprawl, is also important. Similar urban growth patterns are found in the majority of large post-socialist urban centres (Sykora 2009). For instance, Ianoș et al. (2016) discuss the mechanisms of the uncontrolled urban space growth, specifically the dynamics of built-up

space in Bucharest, showing how post-socialist transformations create specific divergent patterns of urban growth. Yet, as we discuss later in this paper, the most conspicuous trend in urban development remains that of integration in the urban regional and global competition as urban growth poles and competitive cities. This closely relates to our topic, since competition between cities in the current global context is well reflected by city branding (Vanolo 2017: 53).

The field of city branding studies is expanding at an impressive rate, making available numerous theories and perspectives, through dedicated journals and thousands of carefully documented case studies. The specific contribution of this paper consists in connecting branding and urban development discourses in the post-socialist context. Since the terminology is fluid, similar terms – city marketing, place branding, city branding and others (Lucarelli and Berg 2011: 19) – are circulating in parallel as approximate synonyms. However, we have opted for using the term city branding. In doing so, we seek to make more visible the participation of political actors in the construction of local urban branding discourses. The connection between political power and place branding is often examined in the literature, given that the latter is “an expression of the interest of a particular group, or groups, of imagineers and hence it is always a political act that is intended to produce particular effects” (Johansson 2012: 3613). Such evaluations contribute to the critical orientation of much of the existing place branding studies.

Several directions have been established in the area of place branding studies, the construction of place brands and the uses of branding and the critical analysis of branding (Lucarelli and Berg 2011, Kavartzis and Hatch 2013). In relation to our research area, case studies on Romanian cities are surprisingly scarce (Groza et al. 2010). We position our approach to city branding in the area of critical perspectives on the construction of place branding. The critical dimension usually consists of examining the “positive/negative factor for the economic, social, and cultural environment” (Lucarelli and Berg 2011: 18). Our critical focus is placed rather on the broader political dimension of branding construction. The political dimension of branding is not limited to the participation of local authorities in the production of city branding. It is also part of a more encompassing “politics of place” (Lucarelli 2018), which includes a variety of actors, interests, and ideologies. Together, they account for that fact that “branding is best understood as dialogue, debate, and contestation” (Kavartzis and Hatch 2013: 82).

This critical perspective on branding brings to the fore the contribution of political power in the process of branding construction (Çaglar and Glick Schiller 2018). In close relation to the politics of branding, our interest refers to the construction and the reproduction of specific branding discourses in a post-socialist context. However, city branding is not only about constructing representations of cities, but it is also a process of materialization or material transformations of cities (Lucarelli 2018). City branding is a key component of what we call it “normalized development”. This interpretation is well illustrated by the idea that “place branding is a narrative programme that aims at redescribing place by means of sanitising, obscuring or alternatively emphasizing chosen aspects of reality” (Johansson 2012: 3613).

An important topic in city branding analysis is the correlation between specific branding discourses and target groups. Well-known groups targeted by city branding discourses are foreign tourists and potential investors (Lucarelli and Berg 2011). In our case, however, we have noticed another trend, that of targeting the local population through discourses aimed at constructing specific urban identities. This confirms the function of branding in “constructing and conveying a chosen imaginary of a place and formulating a concept that resonates with a chosen target group...” (Vanolo 2017: 38-39). The targeting of the local population through branding discourses with the aim of reshaping the image of the city and the identities of its citizens is a mainstream manifestation of the politics of branding. Moreover, as we discuss further, city branding is also increasingly involved in planning strategies (Lucarelli 2018), thus becoming a key component in shaping urban development discourses.

## Methodology

We have followed a process-based approach to place identity in which branding is understood as “a facilitator of the identity process” (Kavaratzis and Hatch 2013: 79). The issue of representation and image construction is particularly important for our case, since branding discourses re-activate and re-construct previous representations and histories of cities, but they also construct entirely new images (Johansson 2012). In close connection to branding discourses, we find the more general question of the construction of urban identities for residents. As Vanolo (2017: 54) explains, city branding has an important function for its inhabitants: “infusing a sense of trust” and “creating a strong local identity”. The role of cities in the construction of social identities is widely acknowledged and increasingly important with the rise of global mega-cities (Leitner et al. 2007). Building on this common knowledge, we seek to determine how urban development processes and city branding strategies produce and reinforce specific urban identities.

The methods used in this paper mainly include the critical analysis of local urban policy documents and of the monthly publication of Timișoara Municipality – Timișoara Municipality Monitor (Timișoara Municipality 2017). Examining urban development in Timișoara, we contend that the Monitor performs multiple functions, the city branding targeted principally to the citizens of Timișoara being among the most interesting communication vector. The Monitor is distributed for free to basically all postal addresses, making it the widest reaching print in the city. Its archives are also available online. We focus on the branding discourses and visions of development deployed in the Monitor. We also discuss the visions of urban development articulated in two major official documents, on which urban development policies are based, specifically Timișoara Master Plan (Timișoara Municipality 2012) and the Integrated Development Plan – Timișoara Growth Pole (Timișoara Municipality 2010). These two documents are the main empirical sources for the content analysis of the urban development plans. The online archives of Timișoara Municipality Monitor (2017) are used for identifying the specific representations of urban development which are then articulated to city branding discourses.

The timeframe of the analysis is between January 2013 and December 2017. Although the Monitor includes multiple issues and sections, we focus on the editorials of the Mayor, which best reveal the marketization of specific urban development visions. This selection of empirical sources thus limits the conclusions of the research, but it also provides a focus on the contribution of a dominant political actor to the production of particular urban development and city branding discourses. In close relation to urban development discourses, we find specific attempts to generate a city branding strategy and to reinforce particular urban identities for the citizens. In examining the case of Timișoara, we follow the trend of a single case study approach, which is the most frequently adopted as methodological option in numerous city branding studies (Paddison 1993, Lucarelli and Berg 2011). At the same time, we consider that our case study is relevant in a comparative perspective for a larger group of post-socialist cities, where the process of city branding construction is unfolding in a perceived environment of increasing regional and global competition between cities.

## Results and Discussion

### *Seeking an urban development narrative for Timișoara*

Like other post-socialist cities, Timișoara is currently struggling to identify itself in the national and in the broader regional, economic and political urban environment. A fundamental process of neoliberalisation, beginning shortly after the fall of the socialist regime, has deeply transformed the urban politics of the city. The Europeanization and globalization of urban

development was generally more accelerated than in other cities of the region. The discovery of global and regional competition brought with it the perception of a much-needed place brand for the city. Older urban narratives (from the pre-communist period) intersected with newer ideas on global competition between cities in the efforts to build new urban development discourses and urban identities.

Timișoara prides itself with a special position in the post-socialist arena. In 1989, Timișoara was widely acclaimed as the city of the revolution against the communist regime in Romania. It has a population of more than 300 000 inhabitants and a diverse ethnic and religious structure (Crețan et al. 2008).

City integration in the regional economy and the cross-border cooperation have been significant factors in post-socialist urban development in Central and Eastern Europe (Ilieș and Grama 2010, Ilieș et al. 2012). The position of Timișoara in the very heart of the Danube-Criș-Mureș-Tisa (DKMT) Euroregion has contributed to its relatively high integration in the regional economy. In the last two decades, Timișoara had one of the fastest growing economies in the region, with comparatively high foreign direct investments, low unemployment rates and high economic outputs compared to the national average (Eurostat 2018a). However, this picture is certainly far from complete and the apparent prosperity and progress of Timișoara conceal various contradictions and inconsistencies, some of which will be discussed later in this paper.

In Timișoara, the dismantling of the former communist urban planning translated into a following less coordinated and integrated urban management. The lack of a clearly articulated development strategy in the 1990 and 2000s is mentioned in many official documents of the city council (Timișoara Municipality 2012). Following the integration of Central and Eastern Europe in the regional and global economy, post-socialist cities sought to elaborate new urban development strategies, mainly to boost growth and to use the new perceived opportunities resulting from this integration (Sellar 2013). After the EU accession in 2007, European integration was an incentive for new urban development strategies. In Timișoara, the most recent efforts of constructing a development vision for the city consists of a plan for a 'regional growth pole', which includes different dimensions, strategies and policies. This situates the city in a competition with other urban centres in the region to attract global investments and it increases the pressure to create 'business-friendly' environments. This dimension is particularly relevant for understanding the pressure to produce a city branding strategy for Timișoara.

The current urban development strategy for Timișoara (Timișoara Municipality 2018) is based on two main official documents. The first document is the newly elaborated Timișoara Master Plan (Timișoara Municipality 2012) by which urban spatial management is regulated. The first new Timișoara Master Plan was released in 1999 and then replaced by the subsequent plans in 2002, 2007 and 2012. The second document is the IDP (Integrated Development Plan, Timișoara Municipality 2010), subsequently updated by the ISUD (Integrated Strategy of Urban Development, Timișoara Municipality 2018), which offer an integrated strategy for the development policies in the area of Timișoara. We note that even in these rather technical urban development policy documents, there are threads and pieces of a city branding discourse for Timișoara, although there are no dedicated frames for this. Timișoara Master Plan and IDP/ISUD include at least three main signifiers which point in this direction: 'competition', 'innovation' and 'multiculturalism'. These three components are used to define the advantages in the marketisation of Timișoara as a key competitor in the region.

Different features of the city are interpreted as competitive advantages – its geographical position, especially its proximity to the European transport corridors, is frequently mentioned and presented as a unique opportunity for locating export-oriented businesses in the area. Timișoara is included in the Pan-European Corridor IV, via the A1 Highway in Romania and

Highway in Hungary. The relatively cheap and skilled workforce provides another economic advantage, which led to the focus on foreign investments and integration in the European economy. In 2015, the GDP of the metropolitan region of Timișoara was of 7 566 million Euro, while in Cluj-Napoca it was of 7 020 million Euro and in Bucharest it was of 44 511 million Euro (Eurostat 2018a). However, productivity measured in GDP/person in Timișoara is more than 30% higher than the national average, while in Cluj-Napoca it is 149.9% higher and in Bucharest is 203.2% higher than the national average (Eurostat 2018b: 198). Regionally, the city entered a competition for attracting international investments and it has started marketing itself as a “growth pole” (Fig. 1). The priority of economic growth in urban development is thus closely connected to the imperative of attracting foreign investments in the city. Prominent examples are production sites and offices opened in the city by multinational companies such as Continental, Nokia, Coca-Cola, Procter & Gamble and other global players in the industrial, retail, and IT sectors. Prioritizing economic growth is a common feature of the reproduction of global neoliberal urban policies at local levels (Leitner et al. 2007) and a marker of a ‘normalized development’.

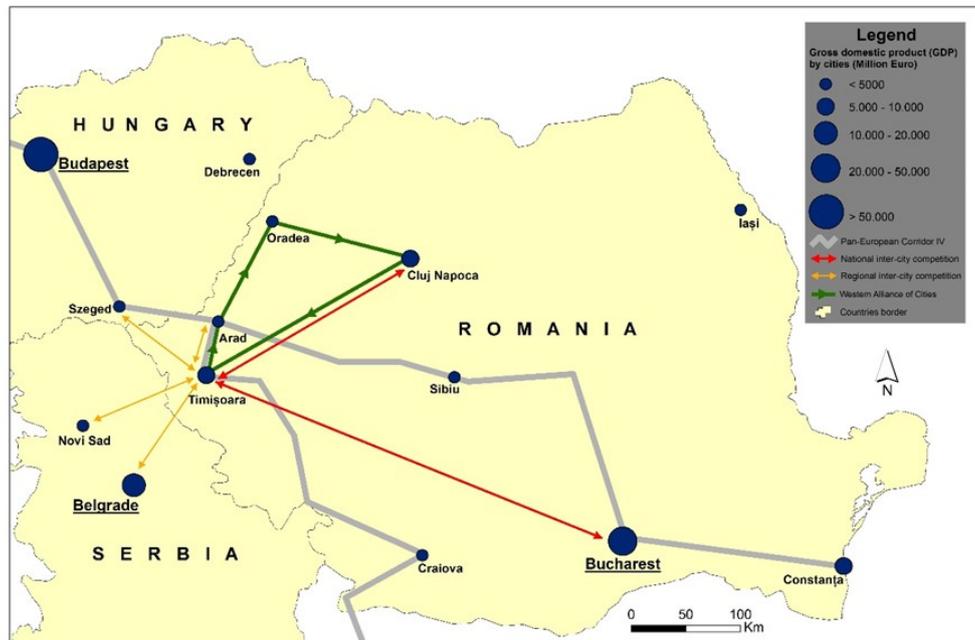


Fig. 1 – Timișoara – competition and cooperation in the regional context  
 Source: Eurostat (2018b). Map implemented in GIS by Fabian Timofte,  
 based on content provided by the authors

The rush for foreign direct-investment (FDI) was always central to the management of post-socialist cities and in national economic policies (Crețan et al. 2005, Sellar 2013, Choromides 2018). The prospects of accelerated economic growth is connected not just to foreign investments and the location of cities, but also to the dimension of the national economy (Yao et al. 2018). The FDI rush in the entire post-communist space is well reflected in the development discourses of the city authorities. For instance, Timișoara Master Plan mentions how “Financial Times journalists have praised Timișoara for its rapid development and the attraction of 8 000 foreign companies” (Timișoara Municipality 2011: 80). Similarly, the IDP

constantly reproduces the image of Timișoara as a pioneer in economic development, internationally and regionally integrated (Timișoara Municipality 2010: 136, Timișoara Municipality 2018: 2-6). The focus of urban development policies on attracting FDI is in tune with the mainstream policies adopted by the majority of post-socialist cities and also with city branding strategies (Metaxas 2010). As we will see in the discussion of the Monitor, the representation of Timișoara as a business-friendly environment is a key dimension in the city branding discourse and one of the reasons for considering its urban policies as a form of 'normalized development'.

'Innovation' is the second core signifier in the urban management discourse. The city's research and innovation sector is used as an urban marketing 'selling factor' and it is defined as an engine of economic development (Timișoara Municipality 2010: 135, 147). In the growth pole strategy, there is a focus on high-tech, communications and "creative services" as development opportunities. This reflects the connection of local politics with the broader concept of "creative cities" and its correlative notion of "creative class", topics heavily discussed in urban studies in connection to Western cases, but being almost absent from the literature on post-socialist cities (Borén and Young 2013).

The third signifier in the urban development policy documents is multiculturalism. The Growth Pole strategy is suggestively named 'Integrative and avant-garde multicultural space'. The urban management discourse is rich in references to the image of multiculturalism, for instance in referring to Timișoara as a "symbol of freedom and of tolerant multiculturalism" and as "one of the most cosmopolitan cities in Romania" (Timișoara Municipality 2010: 139, 239, Timișoara Municipality 2018: 2). Timișoara has a relatively rich ethnic diversity, with more than 15 ethno-cultural groups (Romanians, Hungarians, Roma, Serbs, Germans, Italians, etc.). The city praises itself with a multicultural setting, reflected in diverse multi- and inter-cultural institutions. This ethno-cultural landscape is used to produce or reinforce the representation of a unique multicultural city. The use of multiculturalism as a key component in the unfolding of neoliberal urban development framework and initiatives was already noted for the case of Timișoara (Mădroane 2012). Particularly interesting is the use of the multiculturalism in connection to the urban development strategies and discourses. In various contexts – entrepreneurial, academic, cultural, scientific – the multicultural background is presented as a main comparative advantage for urban development. For instance, the existence of a German minority in the city is used to account for the presence of relatively large investments by German companies in the local economy. Important in our analysis is how the image of multiculturalism is presented as a unique facilitator of economic development. The urban management discourse explicitly connects multiculturalism, social stability and economic growth, by stating: "ensuring an intercultural, cohesive and stable environment, favourable to progress is a sine-qua-non condition for development" (Timișoara Municipality 2010: 138-139). The correlation between multiculturalism and competitiveness is also explicitly formulated: "[Timișoara's] open, tolerant, multicultural character brings important advantages in the international competition" (Timișoara Municipality 2010: 134), being an "intercultural and economic bridge between the three neighbouring countries" (Timișoara Municipality 2018: 11).

Multiculturalism and innovation are thus closely connected to the idea of regional competitiveness. Both Timișoara Master Plan and IDP/ISUD advance the idea of a 'dynamic' city situated in a regional and global competition for economic growth. Such policies demonstrate the increasing adoption of "globally-circulating policies" in the Eastern European urban development context (Çaglar and Glick Schiller 2018). From this it follows the perceived need of an integrated urban branding strategy to promote the city as a unique competitor in the region: "Timișoara lacks urban marketing strategies to encourage new initiatives and to contribute to the coordination of public, academic and private, national and international sectors" (Timișoara Municipality 2011: 8). Following the imperative of economic competitiveness, city authorities therefore proposed a new city marketing strategy, as an effort

to discover or define the “city’s own style” (Timișoara Municipality 2011: 18) and eventually to “highlight the identity of the area” (Timișoara Municipality 2010: 146). As we see in the following section, the Monitor provides a complementary, albeit unsystematic and ad hoc urban branding discourse, by developing and contextualizing several representations of the city.

*Branding Timișoara: ‘Little Vienna’ or ‘in-force development’ ?*

In this section, we shift the analysis towards the ways in which urban development discourses establish a circular relation with city branding narratives. We use the hypothesis that city branding in Timișoara is predominantly targeted to its own citizens, thus achieving specific functions, and less towards external actors: tourists, foreign companies, other cities etc. (Vanolo 2017). In the absence of a coherent and innovative urban development vision, city authorities struggle to produce a city branding discourse through which various disparate elements of urban development are put together. The resulting assembly is an important piece in a broader scenario of post-socialist urban politics.

As in the case of all post-socialist cities, a plethora of economic and social processes have shaped the urban geographies of Timișoara after the fall of communism. We have mentioned political change, transition to capitalism, gentrification, urban sprawl, and segregation as key dimensions of urban transformation. Urban development processes followed a similar pattern in Central and Eastern Europe (Stanilov 2007), generally determined by the guidelines provided by the neoliberal model (Pickles and Smith 1998, Smith and Rochovská 2006).

To understand the “normalization of development” in urban context, we examine the construction of city branding in the monthly Monitor edited by Timișoara Municipality (2017). The Monitor has multiple functions. At its most evident level, it informs the citizens and it describes the activities of city authorities. It routinely includes inventories of administrative accomplished tasks, various achievements of city authorities and discussion of everyday issues. Besides these functions, we bring to the fore another important role, that of constructing an urban development discourse, which articulate specific visions of urban development. These discourses then serve to legitimize public policies, to gain electoral capital for the Mayor and his party, to advertise for city hall initiatives, and to personalize the political power. As it was recently noted, place branding is closely linked to the capacity of political actors to control the political environment (Lucarelli 2018). And, it also signals how public input and the citizens’ participation to the process of brand construction become more limited, despite the inclusion of formal consultation in the very definition of place branding (Kavaratzis and Hatch 2013: 72).

The Monitor is used to forge a representation of the city and to fix an urban identity mainly for its citizens. The result is an unsystematic and hybrid branding construct, based on many of the previous elements of political communication, oral histories, local cultural stereotypes, to which several newer components from the city administration and the Mayor’s rhetoric are added, and which are put together in an ad hoc branding discourse. A key dimension is the personalization of political power and of the development and branding discourses in the Monitor. The first page of the city Monitor typically includes the Mayor’s editorial, a key component which covers recurrent references and inventories of various development projects, usually delivered as city hall success stories. The Mayor of Timișoara, Nicolae Robu, is a leading member of PNL (the National Liberal Party) and he began his electoral mandate in 2012.

The Monitor has important political functions, serving as a political communication platform for the Mayor and for the City Council. We often find local authorities involved in political debates and tensions with other political actors, such as the central government and in struggles between political parties. The tensions with the central government intensified after 2014,

when the coalition with the governing party, PSD (the Social Democratic Party), to which PNL took part, had disintegrated (The Monitor February 2014). After the break of the coalition, the Mayor of Timișoara became more polemical in his dealings with the central government than in the previous period. Significantly, the center-periphery tensions were reinforced in the Monitor and it was used to legitimize various policies and specific decisions made by the local authorities, and, especially, to boost the popularity of the Mayor. Given that regionalist attitudes are relatively strong in the region of Banat, regionalist stances and discourses are frequently constructed in opposition to the capital city – not only in political, but also in cultural terms (The Monitor September 2014: 1, October 2014: 1). The tensions between the Mayor and the central government even lead to anti-governmental protest incites: "together we shall succeed!" (The Monitor February – March 2015: 1). The Monitor is even used for the political mobilization of citizens specifically against the central authorities. As we discuss further, such mobilizing messages play a key role in the construction of city branding for Timișoara.

The very titles of the editorials are often mottos and mobilization slogans aimed at the city's fast development and growth. Even one of the logos of the Monitor is suggestive in this sense, based on the word play included in 'Revolutionary', with 'evol' highlighted and TM pointing both to the idea of a trade mark and the abbreviation of Timișoara (Fig. 2). Timișoara is the revolutionary city because the 1989 Revolution has started here, and it is also 'evolutionary' because of its claimed leading position in urban development, at least in Central and Eastern Europe. And Timișoara is supposedly a trade mark because it provides unique features and great opportunities for urban development. In 2016, the logo was replaced by the tag "Timișoara 2021 European Capital of Culture". The importance of city logos for city identification is a much discussed feature of place brand formation (Kavaratzis and Hatch 2013), and the changes of Timișoara's logos confirm the unsystematic character of its branding strategies.



Fig. 2 – Logos of Timișoara  
Source: Timișoara Municipality (2017)

As we have already mentioned, after the initial phase of urban decline following the collapse of communism in the region, post-socialist cities sought to regain control of urban development and boost city growth (Stanilov 2007). Our finding indicates the construction of a new urban development discourse in Timișoara, based mostly on the belief that the city has to develop in force, fast and through big projects. Moreover, development processes put the city in direct competition, at national and regional level, if not at global level, with other cities. A specific dimension in the urban development discourse is the persistence of a more general feature of the Romanian politics (Vesalon 2010), namely the deployment of a modernization vocabulary. In the context of Timișoara city branding, the language of modernization is effectively wrapping up the urban development. The idea of "in force modernization" is a recurrent communication vector (The Monitor August 2013, September 2015, January 2017). Typical expressions are, for instance: "Timișoara modernizes itself in a sustained pace" (The Monitor March 2014: 13), and: "Yes, Timișoara modernizes itself in force" (June 2014). The idea of rapid modernization is linked to the city authorities' voluntarist approach, which places the figure of the Mayor at the centre of urban development processes.

The idea of urban development through 'big projects' or 'major projects', usually infrastructure projects, is a central dimension and a recurring reference in the Monitor (The Monitor January 2013, April 2013, November 2013). The city administration's 'portfolio of big projects' becomes a core reference in the discourse of the mayor (January 2014). Frequent mobilisation messages are often included in headings such as "...We will make many big things..." (The Monitor June 2016: 1). The Monitor often resemble a 'construction works journal', with a focus on the biggest infrastructure projects, for instance the enlargement of two main roads (Jiul and Popa Șapcă) which drive under railway lines in 2016-2017. Moreover, the year 2017 was, in fact, described as "a decisive year for preparing big projects" (The Monitor January 2017: 1). These projects draw a disproportionate attention in the public's eyes because of the Mayor's insistence on the topic, but also probably due to the rarity of big infrastructure projects at national level and of the high popular expectations on such projects. This illustrates the idea that investments in infrastructure in general are not only part of urban development per se, but they play a significant role in city branding. As Vanolo (2017: 11) explains, "...the improvements surely have to be communicated to an audience of potential external enterprises in order to maximise the effects of investments".

The prioritization of infrastructure works is a persistent dimension of conventional development approaches, both in urban and national contexts. Basically, the improvement and changes in infrastructure (of all types) can be seen as a precondition for the import of global urban policies (Peck and Tickell 2002, Peck and Theodore 2015) and to the participation to inter-urban competition. Indeed, a recurrent idea in the Monitor is that 'infrastructure modernisation' is instrumental to economic growth and to support Timișoara in the competition with other cities in the region. This, in turn, invests city authorities with the main task of facilitating growth. The language of 'modernization' therefore dominates the references to infrastructure works in the Monitor. Such evolutions are neither recent nor regionally specific. Similar trends were present in the early twentieth century in North American cities and in the twentieth century in Europe (Desfor et al. 2011). The priority of big projects and the focus on infrastructure improvements especially in the city centre confirm the fundamental idea that "brands and space mutually constitute and shape each other, how do brands shape the soft and hard infrastructure of urban spaces" (Lucarelli and Berg 2011: 22).

Similarly, the representation of 'rapid development' and accelerated growth is revealed in many editorials. The high speed of city development is typically included in the authorities' vision of governing the city. For example, reminders of "keeping the high pace of city development" (The Monitor editorial title April 2017: 1) are routinely presented in the editorials. The idea of development through 'big projects' is then correlated to the representation of Timișoara as a competitor in the regional and global economic arena. A particular evolution in the case of Timișoara is represented by its link to widespread cultural stereotypes about other regions in the country and mostly about the country's capital. A 'rivalry' with several Romanian cities is often reflected in the Mayor's editorials (The Monitor May 2014). This reproduces and enhances another belief, according to which Bucharest, the "centre", contributes to Timișoara's lagging behind in the pursuit of development. The Monitor even constructs an image of a solitary, heroic city for Timișoara, in the regional and global competition, without any support from the central authorities, left alone on its development path (The Monitor September 2017: 1). However, a recent evolution of events brought together four Romanian cities – Cluj-Napoca, Oradea, Arad and Timișoara – which engaged in a joint initiative, called "the Western Alliance". Its declared purpose is to accelerate and facilitate regional urban development and economic growth, mainly through improving and expanding the regional infrastructure and through attracting EU funds.

In connection to its European ambitions, Timișoara has applied to host the 2021 European Capital of Culture (ECOC) and it won the title in 2016. This victory was rapidly incorporated in the discourses of urban development in Timișoara. The candidacy and the subsequent winning

of the ECOC title provided a new opportunity for the city authorities to develop their city branding discourses. Indeed, similar evolutions were noted for other post-socialist cities, mostly in connection to the changes in urban development policies in connection to their ECOC status (Lähdesmäki 2014). After winning the ECOC title, the marketization of the city as a rapidly developing urban centre gained momentum. The first Monitor of 2017 read that "Timișoara will shine in 2021" (The Monitor January 2017: 1). The preparations for ECOC provided a new sense of urban development mission for the city authorities and a civic mobilization for the citizens. The projects and works for the 2021 ECOC became a pillar of the urban development discourses. It is important to highlight a significant shift: if until 2016 the ECOC was used as a means to attain development goals, after winning the title, ECOC became itself the goal for which urban development is deployed. Even from the stage of ECOC candidacy, this was used to mobilize the citizens' support for multiple projects proposed by the city authorities. A parallel is drawn to the 1989 Revolution: "gaining the [ECOC] title is an objective which could make us find again that extraordinary solidarity from December 1989" (The Monitor April 2014: 1). Currently, ECOC is used as a strong mobilizing argument for rapid urban development in tandem with its inclusion as an element of city branding (Timișoara Municipality 2019), such evolutions being reported throughout Central and Eastern Europe in the past two decades (Lähdesmäki 2014).

The 'return to Europe' is one of the most enduring political myths in Central and Eastern Europe, frequently reproduced after the fall of communism. Eurocentric discourses are widely used for political and cultural purposes in the region, more often so after the fall of communism in 1989. Timișoara as a 'European city' and its 'European belongingness' represent fundamental pieces both for the construction of an urban identity and for the urban development discourses. Timișoara is traditionally referred to as 'Little Vienna' in various contexts. For instance, we find that the city administration has opened up "70 construction sites for Timișoara to become 'Little Vienna' again" (The Monitor October 2013, November 2013) or that "the Central Park will become a beautiful Viennese garden" (The Monitor January 2017: 7). Symptomatically, such references are usually produced in connection to infrastructure works. Such comparisons are not new and not specific to Timișoara only as the comparison of Eastern European cities with other Western and Central European capitals is very common – for instance, Bucharest is called 'little Paris' and Sankt Petersburg is also known as 'the Venice of the North'.

Multiculturalism is one of the key elements in the representations of the city within the local culture, in urban management and branding discourses. Soon after 1989, multiculturalism was offered as a possible thread for reconnecting Timișoara to Europe. In fact, as Mădroane (2012: 36) shows, multiculturalism is an ingredient in (re)constructing the city history after the fall of communism by "a strategy of recovering its (utopian) past". Indeed, multiculturalism is reinvented as a distinctive feature of the city, based on the perception that Timișoara is unique in respect to its ethno-cultural diversity and on deliberately obscuring the fact that numerous other cities in Romania have a rich ethnic, religious and cultural diversity. Well-known examples include Constanța, București, Cluj-Napoca, or Sibiu.

The political myth of the glorious past of Timișoara is also recurrent in the Monitor. It is based on multiple elements, ranging from historical and political events, cultural and architectural heritage, to technological premieres. The 1989 Revolution is a core signifier incorporated in the local branding discourses. The historical and political condition of the 'city of the Revolution' is easily connected to the neoliberal competition between cities. In fact, the very idea of place branding in the region was linked to ideological elements, i.e. explicitly neoliberal and implicitly anti-communist positions (Szondi 2007). References to the Revolution as a part of city's identity are numerous, typically stating that "Timișoara has won for the Romanian people the right to dignity and it has become the nation's consciousness" (The Monitor November 2014: 1). The idealization of the past leads to the previously discussed idea of rapid development, as

one could note in the following phrase: “we are changing the city, developing it in force, and restoring its past glory” (The Monitor July 2015). The image of a glorious past is then deployed to mobilize the citizens’ support for various urban development initiatives through slogans such as: “Let’s give back to Timișoara its deserved charm and glamour” (The Monitor July 2013: 1, June 2014: 10). Such examples confirm a popular idea in branding studies, namely that “the rebranding of a place often leans on reinvoking a nostalgic past, pointing to cultural or historical circumstances which are seen to lend to the place a desired aura” (Johansson 2012: 3615).

The idea of “past glamour” (The Monitor December 2013) is used in connection to various achievements in the history of the city. In close connection to the image of a glamorous past stands the representation of Timișoara as the “the city of European premieres” (The Monitor April 2013: 12). Timișoara’s ‘firsts’ include the first urban hydropower plant in Europe, the first electric tramway, the first city with street electric lightning, and other achievements less mentioned or known, such as the city where non-Euclidian geometry was discovered by János Bolyai. Other examples are Timișoara’s ‘traditional brands’ (The Monitor May 2013), such as Timișoreana local beer factory, built in 1718, Guban shoes factory and Kandia chocolate factory.

Sometimes, different representations of the city are thrown on paper in an effort to demonstrating the strengths of the city. One good example is labelling the city as “the most powerful economic pole in Romania, after Bucharest”, the “most dynamic city”, “a strong cultural pole”, a multicultural city living in “peace, harmony and synergy” (The Monitor January 2015: 1, 5). As a former Rector of the Polytechnic University, Nicolae Robu often speaks about Timișoara becoming “a university and research pole” (The Monitor April 2014: 3). Other references to the identity of the city recall the image of Timișoara as the “city of flowers” and as the “city of roses” (The Monitor July 2013). All these representations converge to boost the confidence of citizens and local authorities in the capacity of the city to become a strong urban centre in the region and thus to reconnect to its much celebrated past: “together we will make Timișoara glow again” (The Monitor July 2017: 1).

We conclude that the core dimension in the city branding discourse of Timișoara is the representation of a city in constant and strong regional, national and global competition. Symptomatically, the Monitor insists and it reiterates the information related to any inclusion of Timișoara in various economic and business rankings and prizes, which are presented as extraordinary achievements. The most invoked is the Forbes (Romania) prize for “the most dynamic city”, awarded to Timișoara in 2014 and 2016. Forbes has also evaluated the business environment in 40 Romanian cities, and it awarded Timișoara for the position of best city for business (Forbes 2015). Another “vanity prize” was the title of priority destination city for investments offered by the European Business Assembly. The surprising influence of such rankings is visible in how the representation of “the most dynamic city” was widely circulated as a branding label in the Monitor (February 2014, March 2014, February 2016) and put in relation with other similar labels, such as the “engine of economic development”, “healthy business environment”, “locomotive of economic development” (The Monitor February 2016: 1-2). It is suggestive that business newspapers and various business organizations are used as authoritative and legitimizing sources for the urban management policies of the current city administration, leading to the representation of Timișoara as a “European avant-garde city” (The Monitor February 2016: 1).

We have seen that the Monitor performs various functions and we have highlighted its use for the purposes of particular and ad hoc city brands. The attempt to produce representations of the city and then combine them in a city branding product is largely based on the tricky assumption that almost “anything goes” if it is constantly repeated. Branding studies illustrate how the process of image construction for cities faces counter-discourses, scepticism, but also

the sheer ability "to convince people that these messages are true" (Kavaratzis and Hatch 2013: 74). In the case of Timișoara, branding discourses encapsulate the ambitions of post-communist cities to become economic growth poles and urban centres integrated within the regional and global capitalist networks, in parallel with consolidating a local urban identity for its citizens. At the same time, such branding discourses are vulnerable not only to the so-called 'reality checks', but also to the specific contradictions of urban development in the regional economic and political context.

### **Conclusions**

The development of post-socialist cities followed a path of economic growth in a regional context. The general perception that the break with the socialist past would somehow naturally imply the idea of neoliberal competition between cities in the region also led to the mimetic efforts of translating urban policies from the global level, often in an unsystematic and contradictory manner. We have called this process 'the normalization of development' and we have documented how it connected with the production of ad hoc branding discourses in Timișoara. One core idea in this framework is the marketization of the city as space for free market economic initiatives. At the global level, and mostly in the developing countries, rapid economic growth and friendly business environment are heavily used for city branding purposes (Vanolo 2017), symptomatically imported in post-socialist cities, as the case of Timișoara shows.

This paper is based on a single-case study approach. Its theoretical contribution mainly consists in bridging the gap between the literature on city branding and the critical study of urban development. Our findings could contribute to further empirically oriented research on the consequences of branding discourses on urban development and city management. We have seen that many disparate elements are used to construct the branding identity of the city. The result is often an unstable, even contradictory *mélange* of images and representations of Timișoara, which result from the ad-hoc production of branding discourses. These discourses are open to adaptation, but also to contestation, showing signs of disruption through the contact with the concrete experiences provided by the city. Such cases signal how urban identities are transformed by global and regional economic and political fluxes and how specific urban identities are forged as a response to globalization and embedded in particular regional and local identities. Nevertheless, globalization (and Europeanization) does not always weaken local spatial identities, but it also tends to reinforce some forms of localism. Despite such possible evolutions, the norm in branding remains the seeking of a monolithic place identity, in which "place branding not only disregards the complexity of place identities but also disregards its own influence on identity formation" (Kavaratzis and Hatch 2013: 74).

What catches the attention in the case of Timișoara is how the narratives of urban development are produced in the monthly publication of the city council and especially the ways in which city growth is used as a branding tool. This paper sought to reveal the articulation of branding and urban development discourses as this operates in the case of Timișoara. At the same time, this case is also relevant in a comparative perspective for a broader category of post-socialist cities, especially for those which have adopted an urban development and city branding discourse linked to the idea of a regional and global competition between cities. On one hand, we demonstrate that the urban development discourse is played along the conventional line of development followed by the majority of post-socialist cities. We have called this process 'the normalization of development'. On the other hand, we have pointed to specific contradictions and incoherencies which undermine this discourse. By seeing branding as a "politically constituted practice" (Johansson 2012), we have connected branding practices to specific development visions produced by city authorities. We have illustrated how branding is used in a post-socialist city and we have indicated how a circular link between development and branding is produced, with the idea of rapid urban development standing as its main signifier.

### Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the three anonymous reviewers and the editors of JURA for their helpful suggestions for improving our paper.

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Initial submission: 04.01.2019  
Revised submission: 29.03.2019  
Final acceptance: 06.05.2019

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