

Symbolic Struggles Surrounding the (Re) naming of Urban Public Space: The Case Study of Šabana Bajramovića Street in Niš (Serbia)

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Abstract:

The paper analyzes the symbolic struggles surrounding the (re)naming and the “appropriation” of urban public space from below (from the citizens), which take place simultaneously and outside the official policy of (re)naming from above (by the local government and the state). This is empirically analyzed in a case study of Šabana Bajramovića Street (a world-renowned Roma jazz singer) in Niš (Serbia). The official decision to name this street in the city where the mentioned artist was born, lived, and died as a member of a minority ethnic community brought about opposition from certain citizens and a public debate on the toponymic commemoration and participation of the Roma. The research data were compiled using content analysis of various official documents and media reports, as well as semi-structured interviews with citizens, representatives of the government and various NGOs. The findings indicate a contradiction between strategies and tactics implemented by the government and the citizens, as well as the role of ethnic boundaries as resources of symbolic struggles for and within public space. Connecting the basic arguments and conclusions with the appropriate theory, the paper provides a broad contribution to understanding hierarchical social relations which can be read from street signs.

Key words: Odonyms, symbolic borders, ethnic relations, Roma, civil activism, urban culture

Introduction:

The organization, symbolization, and meaning of physical space have always been the products of socio-cultural activities, experiences, interpretations, and transformations (Soja, 2010). Physical and social space are permeated by networks of meaning and hierarchical networks as well as diverse relations of power. Thus, we could claim that public space shares the fate of society, culture, and politics. This paper deals with the topic of social struggle surrounding the naming

and renaming of streets as the most important aspects of urban public spaces. Thereby, (re)naming streets is seen not as an administrative, but primarily as a deeply symbolic and political act (an important part of modern political culture), which often reflects deeper social processes and affirms significant social divisions and conflicts.

The symbolization of public spaces and their (re)naming are primarily a reflection of collective memory and the dominant values of a community, as well as of political decisions and ideological

interests of smaller or greater social groups. Thus, the policy of (re)naming public spaces in a state shapes the official commemorative culture and supervises (in a formal-legal sense) symbolic designations and names of public spaces which are being introduced into local communities¹. In that way, by means of the names of streets (odonyms), the government establishes symbolic control over a space and performs the legitimization of certain regimes, ideologies, political interests, cultural practices, and values in the context of the (de)construction of the identity of the community and the identity of the city itself (Augustins, 2004; Azaryahu, 1990).

The aforementioned processes, however, are not devoid of tension, struggle, and social conflict. Quite the contrary, the renaming of streets leads to strong emotional reactions among citizens and politicians, as well as fierce public debates about how to interpret the past and how to shape the contemporary identity of the community. In accordance with their own interests, positions, and values, different social groups, especially marginalized ones (such as racial, national, religious, and sexual minorities, women, etc.) lead symbolic struggles to “take over” public spaces. The aim of these struggles is mostly the sensibilization of policies for naming public spaces, that is, the building of an inclusive society in which the process of naming (streets, squares, parks, etc.) would include noteworthy individuals and the cultural heritage of minority and non-dominant groups in the historical awareness and the collective memory of the community. This means that the symbolic takeover of certain city spaces could be carried out in a spontaneous and unofficial manner (outside of the naming policy implemented by the local government, that is, the official creators of the identity of the city), often as an opposition-led or alternative social and

cultural practice (this includes protests, petitions, graffiti, performances, etc.).

The aim of this paper is precisely to empirically research and sociologically analyze the different forms and contextual specificities of symbolic struggles for the (re)naming and “appropriation” of urban public spaces, which were generated *from below* (from the citizens themselves) and were carried out simultaneously but outside the official policy of (re)naming *from above* (by the local government and the state) based on the case study of the Šabana Bajramovića² Street in Niš (Serbia).

Theoretical Framework:

Symbolic struggles and odonyms as “memorial arenas”

The hierarchical structure of society is based on socially constructed symbolic systems of classification and boundaries, which condition within-group integration and inter-group differentiation (“we” and “they”), as well as the struggle of certain groups for participation and domination, for their values, and the interests that underlie them. The struggles we are referring to are “symbolic” because they focus on the meanings which certain social situations have for the actors involved, as well as the ability of the actors to negotiate about the meanings of certain situations, and thus about their own social positions. A significant contribution to the development of the concept of *symbolic struggles* was given by Bourdieu (1984, 2019), who focused on the analysis of fundamental social processes of naming and classifying the world, the ways in which social actors use words and other symbolic resources to (de)construct meaning, social objects, positions, and power, in order to fight for the right to present and impose their own values and interests as the values and interests of the entire

¹ The legal procedure in Serbia requires that the naming and renaming of public spaces be realized in accordance with certain criteria, but only after the competent ministry which oversees local government activities (at the level of the state) gives its acquiescence through general acts of the city assembly which determine the new names.

² Essentially, this is a short street in a part of town in Niš known as Trošarina, about 650 meters long, with no greater importance for the traffic in the city, or of any greater importance in general, and so the term street is frequently used in the paper, even though it is formally a case of the Šaban Bajramović Boulevard.

society. Symbolic struggles, according to this author take place in two crucial fields – the institutional frame (*from above*) and everyday life (*from below*). The aim of such struggles is precisely ‘to change groups and the relations between them, and to change their boundaries and hierarchies by changing the way in which the members of the group perceive their own and the groups of others’ (Bourdieu, 2019: 88). Lamont and Molnár (2002: 168) worked on the concept of *symbolic boundaries* as the conceptual differences made by social actors for the purpose of the categorization of objects, people, practices, and even time and space. These are the tools that individuals and groups use to fight and to show adherence to any agreement on the definition of reality. Following that train of thought, Wimmer (2013) provides an explanation for *ethnic boundaries* and proposes that they be understood as the outcome of political and symbolic struggles and the negotiation process between actors who follow different strategies of creating boundaries, depending on institutional incentives, their position in the hierarchies of power, and networks of various associations. As the main means of drawing and perpetuating ethnic boundaries, Wimmer cites discourse and symbols, everyday or legal discrimination, political mobilization and the like.

In multicultural conflict societies, in which symbolic struggles are virtually incessant, the names of streets represent a reflection of political and cultural tension, but are also their generator. That is why Alderman (2002) refers to toponyms as “memorial arenas”, explaining that they are problematic places of symbolic recognition, discursive rivalries, and commemorative struggles to define the cultural meaning and importance of specific historical figures. Alderman’s research indicates that racism has for a long time had an impact on the naming of public spaces based on the members of a hegemonious group (the white Anglo-Saxon race) in the context of establishing the dominance of white people in the multicultural space of North America. Streets named after

African-Americans are mostly smaller in size and spatially insignificant, they are not located in city centers, but instead in parts of the city mostly inhabited by this population, whereby traditional racial boundaries are spatially strengthened (Alderman & Inwood, 2013). Also, in order to build a more inclusive society in Australia, over the past few years a lot of effort has been put into certain streets and parts of the city being named based on the culture of the original inhabitants, members of the Aboriginal ethnical group virtually forgotten and spatially marginalized in toponymic memory (Gnatiuk & Glybovets, 2020: 142).

It is therefore quite clear that selective value and arbitrariness in determining what and how will be considered the relevant heritage of a society in a particular historical period, which also determines the choice of street names, indicate that this heritage is the outcome of social construction which is subject to change and different discursive interpretations. It happens that individuals and communities in multicultural societies provide different identifications and interpretations, or add contradictory values to the same (shared) cultural heritage. Quite often, symbolic struggles over the naming and “appropriation” of public space emerge precisely when the members of the majority population do not experience the cultural heritage and achievements of the members of minority communities (ethnic and other) as their own or as worthwhile, which results in their marginalization or exclusion from the naming process and the symbolization of public space (Petković, 2019: 122). In that context, the naming of Šabana Bajramovića Street in Niš (Serbia) could be analyzed as a very specific example.

Conceptual framework:

The policy of (re)naming public space in Niš and the position of the Roma

Niš is an administrative, cultural, and economic center of South-East Serbia with a population of 250.091 (Statistical Office of the

RS, 2023: 21). The contemporary identity of Niš was built by intertwining historical narration and cultural potential, and so today Niš is known, among other things, as the “imperial city” (the birthplace of the Roman emperor Constantine the Great) and as the “city of jazz” (the international *Nišville Jazz Festival* has become the most frequently attended festivals of this kind in South-East Europe).

The streets and other urban public spaces in Niš have been named and renamed with various dynamics, in accordance with local and broader socio-political circumstances that the Yugoslav and Serbian societies found themselves in. Today, there is a kind of ideological-symbolic ambivalence in the toponyms of Niš, which reflects the non-homogeneity, inconsistency, and confusion in terms of the values and formulation of the inclusive policy of commemoration (Božilović & Petković, 2023). Following the downfall of socialism, the policy of (re)naming public spaces in Niš focused primarily on the symbolic deconstruction of the communist and the Yugoslav past, with the simultaneous installation of national symbols (symbols of Serbdom). The gender analysis of toponyms indicates that streets which commemorate women are very few (10%) and that even fewer of them are located in the strict and extended center of the city, which additionally increases the impression of the marginalization of women when it comes to commemorative practices in public spaces (2023: 187). In addition to the gender-discriminatory symbolization of toponyms in Niš, research findings also indicate a kind of personification of the ethnocentric cultural narrative. Most of the toponyms in Niš which bear cultural features celebrate artists, scientists, and professionals from Serbian culture (81%), while the names of streets bearing religious symbols are dominantly linked to the Serbian ethnos and Orthodoxy (2023: 150-151).

Therefore, even though the members of numerous peoples have over the centuries contributed to the shared heritage and cultural

diversity of the city, the policy of (re)naming toponyms over the past few decades in Niš did not successfully integrate ethnocultural diversity into the current culture of remembrance. What also testifies to this is the position of the Roma, who are the largest national minority in Niš.³ The traditional understanding of the Roma cultural identity, and thus the recognition of the special status of the Roma community, is usually based on specific music, language, and customs (Тодоровић, 2014: 61), even though the contribution of the Roma to the society and the culture of the people of Serbia is far more complex and richer (Варади, Ђорђевић & Тодоровић, 2022). Despite that, the naming of public spaces in honor of renowned Roma is a very rare and virtually negligible practice both in Niš and in Serbia. These streets are usually small, insignificant in terms of traffic, often lacking in tarmac and taking the form of blind alleys, located virtually almost always in Roma settlements, not infrequently on the outskirts of the city. We can also note that outside of the official policy of naming public spaces, among the local population in everyday life we come across colloquial names for certain Roma settlements or streets. That is why the unofficial names of streets are often derogatory, in general alluding to some identity characteristic of the Roma, further strengthening the symbolic boundaries between the Roma and non-Roma population. Such is the case with the Roma settlement *Šljaka* in Niš, whose inhabitants are primarily involved in gathering secondary raw materials and who live in temporary houses, also known as The Cardboard City (in Serbian *Karton siti*), while the street which leads to one of the largest Roma mahalas in Niš (*Stočni trg*) has for generations been alluded to as *Crni put* or The Black Road.

While the citizens themselves were unofficial naming of public spaces *from below*, a process which involves the spontaneous creation of names

³ The unofficial estimates of Roma non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are that there are anywhere between 25.000 and 30.000 Roma living in Niš, which amounts to 10 and 12% over the overall population of the city.

by the citizens themselves, the city government of Niš on May 5, 2009 officially made the decision to rename a small street with a neutral-sounding name (*Južni bulevar*, or The Southern Boulevard) in honor of Šaban Bajramović, one of the most famous and most influential Roma from Niš. Soon after that, 153 citizens signed a petition against this decision and initiated protests, so the designations and street signs bearing the first and last name of their Roma co-citizen have still not been put up. For 15 years symbolic struggles have been ongoing regarding the (re)naming of this street, which has sparked a serious public debate regarding odonymic commemoration and the social participation of the Roma.

Šaban Bajramović (1936–2008) is known as the king of Balkan soul and blues and the global king of Roma music. He authored more than 700 compositions, 20 albums, and almost 50 singles. At the World Romani Congress in 1971 his performance of the song “Gelem, gelem” was voted the hymn of all the Roma in the world. *Time* magazine named him one of the ten greatest blues singers in the world, while one of the American jazz associations declared him among the top three jazz singers of all time (Здравих Михаилловић, 2019). In 2024 the world-renowned New Orleans Jazz Museum in the USA inducted Bajramović into its permanent exhibition as the number one Roma musician in the world.⁴ During the *Nišville Jazz Festival* in 2006, he received a lifetime award and a bronze statue was modelled after him, which is today traditionally awarded to performers at this festival. Despite numerous offers, Bajramović stayed in Niš where he had been born until his death, where he was also buried in 2008. Beginning with 2009, *Nišville* has included as a fixed staple of its program *Prijatelji Šabanu* (Saban’s friends perform for him), and also in 2010 a monument was erected in his honor. The monument has, however, been vandalized on numerous occasions, it has been covered in paint,

and racist comments and nazi symbols have been written on it. More information on the rich professional biography and turbulent life of Bajramović can be found in sociological (Ђорђевић, 2018) and other studies, as well as numerous journal articles and documentaries. With his cultural creativity and temperament, Bajramović enriched the spirit of Niš, made his birthplace known the world over, and became one of its symbols, which is why the director of the *Nišville Jazz Festival* submitted a proposal to the competent Committee to have some street named after him.

Methodological framework:

The symbolic struggles surrounding the (re)naming of urban public spaces are empirically analyzed based on a case study analysis of the Šabana Bajramovića Street in Niš. Relying on the Bourdieusian (1984, 2019) theoretical approach, in combination with the concept of symbolic (Lamont & Molnár, 2002) and ethnic boundaries and classifications (Wimmer, 2013), the analysis presented in this paper takes into consideration both fields of symbolic struggle: everyday life and the institutional framework. The study relied on qualitative methodology, applying the mutually complementary analytic, descriptive, interpretative, and explanatory sociological approaches.

The basic aim that directed this research was to identify the importance of ethnic boundaries as resources of symbolic struggles for and within urban public space. According to that, we wanted to determine the main actors and basic features (contextual specificities) of symbolic struggles regarding the (re)naming of the Šabana Bajramovića Street in Niš, as well as analyze the most important symbolic resources, tactics, and strategies used in that struggle. In doing so, the main lines of conflict were tested, including support for or rejection of the renaming of Bajramovića Street, as well as ethnocentricity or social inclusion in the context of the perception of the Roma and their social participation. We were interested in how the main actors interpret

⁴ New Orleans Jazz Museum, <https://nolajazzmuseum.org/events/2024/6/13/new-orleans-jazz-museum-amp-nisville-jazz-festival> (last access 02/10/25).

(reproduce, negate, or change) the establishment of symbolic boundaries and ethnic divisions and how that impacts their social practices. Therefore, we conducted a discourse analysis, identifying the importance of ethnic boundaries as discursive constructs, which provide taken-for-granted frameworks of meaning within which the main actors involved in these symbolic struggles construct their understanding of everyday relations.

The data were systematically and selectively collected using different methodological techniques and instruments from January 2020 to October 2024. The major events which either directly or indirectly referred to the (re)naming of Šabana Bajramovića Street (from 2009 on) were monitored. The method of content analysis was applied and the various documents were analyzed – decisions made and statements issued (by the local government and groups of citizens), as well as to news (the info portals of daily newspapers). Also, the data were compiled by means of individual semi-structured interviews conducted with the main actors in the symbolic struggles (proponents of various views on naming a street in honor of Bajramović), in direct (personal) or online contact, from March 2022 until October 2024. The sample included 20 citizens who reside on the street, six representatives of the government⁵ and 10 members of NGOs.⁶ For the organization, coding (the creation of codes and subcodes, recoding, the introduction of text, image, video material etc.) and analysis of the compiled data, the QDA Miner software for qualitative data processing proved useful.

⁵ The interviews were conducted with three representatives of the former city government, who held public office in 2009, and who took part in the decision-making process regarding the naming of Šabana Bajramovića Boulevard, and three representatives of the current city government (from the ruling coalition and from the opposition parties).

⁶ There were four representatives of Roma NGOs (Roma Word production, the Association of Roma Women “Osvit” and the Association of Roma Students) and six representatives of non-Roma NGOs (the former Alternative Cultural Center of Niš, the Indigo Organization and the Committee for Human Rights Niš).

Results and discussion:

The main actors in the symbolic struggle and their positions in the conflict

By analyzing the compiled data we determined, first of all, who the main actors are in the symbolic struggle surrounding the naming of a street in honor of Bajramović, what positions they hold, that is, which side of the struggle they are on, and which symbolic resources they relied on. Three main actors in the symbolic struggle emerged:

a) *A segment of the citizens* – most of them are residents of this street and predominantly belong to the non-Roma population. Struggling for years against the street they live on being named after a Roma artist, they use numerous symbolic resources in everyday life, such as: discourse (construction of meaning, the classification and categorization of people/the Roma, practices and spaces), political mobilization (the petition, protests, and the like), even the use of force (physical assaults on Bajramović’s widow, preventing utility workers from attempting to change the street signs, etc.).

b) *Representatives of the city government* – both former and current members of the competent *Committee for Street Names of the City Assembly of Niš* and members of the City Assembly of Niš who, in accordance with the set criteria and after obtaining support from the competent Ministry of Public Administration and Local Self-Government (the state), made the decision to rename the given street. They predominantly use institutional resources in this symbolic struggle, such as legal regulations, decisions made by official bodies, discourses on inclusive policies of the naming of public spaces, and the like.

c) *Members of Roma and non-Roma NGOs* – representatives of civic society, social and cultural activists and enthusiasts. They are critically predisposed both in relation to the segment of the citizens who are protesting, as well as in relation to the city government since they did not bring about the realization of the decision they had

made in a timely fashion. They are in favor of naming the street in honor of Šaban Bajramović and of the participation of the Roma and other minority communities in the naming and symbolizing of public spaces and society in general. In the struggle for these goals, they use some of the most important resources such as discourse, symbols, and performances.

It is important to point out that in this case, the Roma and non-Roma NGOs were part of the traditionally understood field of the political state in the process of interpreting the policy of (re)naming urban public spaces. Thereby, through the cooperation between the civic society and the state (the government) the initially set boundaries between them were erased, which in theory is known as the *paradox of civil society* (Foley & Edwards, 1996). That is why in this paper NGOs, as actors in the symbolic struggles, are classified and analyzed alongside representatives of the city government, with which they in this case share the same goals aimed at the toponymic commemoration of the Roma artist, as well as the ethnic sensibilization of the policy of (re)naming streets and other public spaces.

Thus, we can in general say that with the implementation of various resources, symbolic struggles surrounding the naming of the street in honor of Bajramović are being led between citizens who oppose this decision on the one hand, and representatives of the local government and NGOs which support this decision on the other. What we are in fact referring to is a conflict between the aforementioned groups regarding the “perception and definition of the situation” and the mobilization of those practices which the involved groups use to establish symbolic boundaries, as types of typification systems which are used to identify and categorize mutual similarities and differences (Lamont, Pendergrass & Pachucki, 2015: 853).

The analysis determined that ethnic classifications, whether explicitly or implicitly stated and prescribed, predominantly presented the positions and lines of conflict of the main actors –

a) *opponents* of renaming the street in honor of Bajramović, who by constructing and strengthening ethnic boundaries and negative ethnic classifications (“we”/the non-Roma population and “they”/the Roma) legitimize and justify their own position in the conflict and b) *advocates* of the naming of the street, who while attempting to deconstruct the established ethnic boundaries are struggling for inclusive policies in the naming of public spaces, with the connotation of the need for a general democratization of physical and social space. After ethnicity, it emerged that categorizations based on the evaluation of the personal life of Bajramović were to a lesser extent present even though strongly emphasized among the protesting citizens, while questions regarding his faith, profession, education, gender, and class were virtually not included as arguments in the struggle.

Types of discourse and practices of the main actors: (de)construction of ethnic boundaries

By analyzing all the compiled data, we determined the different tactics and strategies which the main actors use to legitimize their actions, providing them with a certain sense and meaning depending on their positions in the struggle and the aims they would like to achieve.

The citizens' tactics

Among the most important *citizens' tactics* (CT), used to oppose the realization of the decision of the city government regarding the renaming of the street, the following stand out:

• **CT1: Relocating the problem** (*dissimulation ethnic boundaries*) – the citizens attempt to shift the argumentation and to manipulatively control the situation using indirect narrative means:

a) They indicate that their opposition to the renaming of the street is not generated by ethnic reasons (a lack of tolerance toward the Roma), or personal qualifiers (opinions of Bajramović), but is initiated by administrative and economic reasons:

It does not matter who the street we live on would be named after, we don't want its name to be changed. We will all have to change our personal documents, and that requires not only money, but also additional time and effort, and all that to be actually done. They say it's going to be free of charge. We don't want the city's help with the costs of changing documents, since they can't compensate us for our lost time and the hassle. (G.3:6)

b) They oppose the renaming of the street, citing as their argument the lack of adequacy of the toponymic location, alluding to the fact that some other, greater, and more important street in the city should be named after Bajramović. What this actually is, is a tactical turning of tables, considering that such an attitude is mainly (except in the case of two of the interviewed citizens) accompanied by a disparagement of the figure and work of the Roma artist:

If they love and respect Šaban that much, why don't they (the representatives of the city government – author's comment) give him some larger street in the center of town, instead they want this "alley" named after him. Almost no one passes here anyway. (G.5:2)

c) On the other hand, the lack of adequacy of the toponymic location is also presented as an argument in the case when the citizens in principle are in favor of naming the street after a Roma artist, but are insisting that the street be located in one of the Roma mahalas. This segregationist tactic is used to cover up the evident establishment of ethnic boundaries ("we" – the non-Roma and "they" – the Roma), which is accompanied by an implicit desire for social/ethnic segregation to additionally gain a foothold even as spatial segregation:

What are they doing here? Why don't they let him have a street in the Roma mahala. Everyone knows him there are they're all his people. (G.11:6)

• **CT2: Open stigmatization** (*emphasizing ethnic boundaries*) – the second tactic of the citizens which can be noted are the completely openly conveyed negative ethnic classifications, whereby the divisions and asymmetries of power in the social space are strengthened. Thus, the implementation of symbolic power by the citizens, as the ability to define meaning and the creation of a context of domination (Bourdieu, 2019), results in this case in the open stigmatization of the Roma identity on a personal and collective level.

a) The citizens emphasize the negative personal qualifiers which are used to describe Bajramović, applying an explicit manner of discursive problematization of his ethnic origin and way of life:

Šaban wasn't just the king of Roma music, as they call him, he was also the king of gamblers, everyone knows that. He'd go to Germany to sing to his Gypsies and would come back here and gamble away his money. And he liked to drink, he spent his whole life in taverns. He also liked women. He wasn't that reputable a man and that respected a singer for him to have a street named after him in the city. Don't we have (the non-Roma population – author's comment) someone (whom the street could be named after – author's comment). (G.10:1)

b) We can also note discourses which are used to express explicit intolerance, even hatred towards the Roma as an ethnic group, whereby on the collective level the discrimination against them is affirmed and ethnic divisions and tensions strengthened:

Many people on this street actually hide the fact that they don't like Gypsies. I don't hide it, I don't like them (...) I don't want them for my neighbors, nor do I want my street named after some Gypsy. They have their rights and let them live in their mahalas. (G.15:4)

• **CT3: Political mobilization** (*the formalization of ethnic boundaries*) – the first two discursive tactics of the citizens are complemented by various practices, the most important of which is the organization of the petition and protests against the decision of the city government regarding the renaming of the street in honor of Bajramović. This is an attempt to use institutionalized but also alternative forms of resistance to prevent the realization of this decision, by establishing a negotiation process with the city government as actors who adopted the opposing position in the struggle. The media coverage of one of the instigators of the citizens' protest further testifies to this:

There were ideas to block the railway line Niš–Piroć (parallel to which the street extends – author's comment), or to boycott political parties which took part in this decision-making process. However, we decided to for now express this protest by changing our addresses. We will switch to the side streets, and so Šabana Bajramovića Boulevard will be left without any residents. (according to Ђорђевић, 2018, 121)

This statement, among other things, confirms the tactic of Relocating the problem (CT1a). Specifically, a change of address clearly was not a problem for the citizens or at least not all of them (since they, as a form of resistance, were ready to change their addresses to that of one of the nearby streets), even though that was one of the main arguments outlined in the petition against

renaming the street and was used in negotiations with the government. Through political mobilization, as one of the main means of establishing ethnic boundaries (Wimmer, 2013), the citizens affirmed the right to self-organization in order to manage spatial resources in accordance with their own aims. Not only did they attract the attention of the local politicians, but also of the population at large which started a heated debate and the polarization of the public regarding the odonymic commemoration of Šaban Bajramović, as well as the perception and social participation of the Roma. It turned out that this polarization confirmed the existence of symbolic boundaries and followed the lines of division of the public regarding egalitarian and democratic values on the one hand, and the ethnocentric, conservative values and non-inclusive practices on the other.⁷

• **CT4: Privatization and the control of public space** (*"drawing" symbolic boundaries in space*) – the discursive tactics of the citizens are complemented by practices which are used to present symbolic struggles for public space also as struggles in space:

- a) The citizens closed down the street for traffic so the petition could be signed, privatized public space by taking out tables and chairs, as well as providing coffee and juice to those who signed the petition, not allowing them at the same time access to Bajramović's widow, or other Roma and non-Roma citizens who have a different opinion (thereby "drawing" boundaries in space between the protesting citizens and other non-Roma citizens);
- b) In addition, after the official order regarding the renaming of the street came into effect, the citizens did not allow utility workers of the city to, on several occasions, replace the old street

⁷ The results of the sociological analysis of public discourse which accompanies these symbolic struggles, with a particular view to how these struggles on the micro level impact the structure of the social field in which they are taking place, that is, how they contribute to the discursive (re)shaping of the system of classification in the broader public, fall outside of the scope of the current paper.

signs with new ones. This included both their homes, when they denied utility workers access to their yards, as well as the street, when they removed the newly established street signs, posts, etc. (thereby “drawing” boundaries in space between the protesting citizens and the representatives of the government).

- **CT5: Revolt against not participating in the decision-making process** – As a special tactic employed by certain citizens, we noted strong revolt against the fact that they in no way took part in the decision-making process regarding the renaming of the street they reside on. This is understandable considering that issues of civic exclusion from the creation of public policy in the broadest sense refer to a sense of exclusion from certain spaces/content, and even the alienation of people from the space itself, due to which the local population often feel like strangers in their own cities (Lefebvre, 1991; Barnett, 2014).

Some politicians or other, ones we don't even know, decided to change the name of our street. I'm against it. Why? Well, because no one asked us what we thought of it, whether we agree with such a decision or maybe how we would like our street to be named. That just won't do, I've been living here for almost 50 years and I have the right to decide about it. (G.7:3)

This tactic implemented by the citizens cannot be linked to the negative ethnic or other categorizations ascribed to Bajramović or the entire Roma population (because they were mostly not to be found in the case of citizens who expressed themselves in such a way), nor is there any basis on which to claim that they belong to the tactic of Relocating the problem (CT1). This is important because it indicates the problem of reduced possibilities for the development of participative urban policy of the city, equally so for the majority (non-Roma) and minority (Roma) population. The development strategies of the City

of Niš are formally-legally socially inclusive, and thus sensitized to solving the problem of the Roma. But there are no institutionalized procedures and mechanisms which facilitate the access of the Roma and other populations to the local government, and so there are no Roma, or non-Roma representatives of the citizens in Committee for Street Names of the City Assembly of Niš. If the total local population had been included by the government in the public debates and processes which preceded the decision-making process regarding the (re)naming of the street in honor of Bajramović, it could be assumed that solutions would have been found which might have contributed to positive changes in the symbolization and production of space, whereby more significant social divisions and conflicts might have been avoided or at least mitigated.⁸

The tactics of members of NGOs

On the opposite end of this symbolic struggle, *the tactics of members of NGOs* (TNGO) can be noted, that is, of civic society groups which, through the network of civic engagement, are generally oriented toward a critique of the existing social (ethnic) inequalities and the mobilization of social changes:

- **TNGO1: Creative subversion** – This is a tactic of implementing ways of symbolic expression for the deconstruction of ethnic and other boundaries and the indication of social injustice and administrative errors in the symbolization and naming of public space. Considering that one year after the official decision regarding the renaming of the street by the city government of Niš the old street signs were not replaced with new ones (and have not been to this day), the activists of the Alternative Cultural Center of Niš, which predominantly include the majority Serbian population, on the International Romani Day in 2010 they organized

⁸ Normatively it is possible for the citizens to take part in the (re)naming process of public spaces only by providing suggestions, with a written explanation which is addressed to the competent Committee, but not participate in the activities of the Committee or the public debate on the proposed solutions, since they are usually not organized.

a kind of protest performance. It included improvised street signs, which were actually printed posters bearing the name of Šabana Bajramovića Boulevard, which were pasted onto available surfaces such as fences, street posts and traffic posts which still bore the street signs *Južni bulevar*. Two basic aims initiated this tactic of alternative activities on the part of the members of NGOs:

- a) criticizing the government for their lack of responsibility and for not carrying out the decision on renaming the street in a timely manner and
- b) criticizing the citizens who are protesting with the intention of disputing their perception of the situation, overcoming ethnic and other divisions, and encouraging the public to the development of critical thinking to build an open society and democratic public policy.

Bearing in mind that the citizens who were protesting had a tendency toward the tactic of privatization and the control of public space (CT4), and in certain situations even physical violence, this performance was carried out with a police presence, which suits the shared goals and cooperation of the civic society and the state in this specific case.

• **TNGO2: Proactive changes in the stigmatized identity** – This tactic in the struggle for presence in the public space of the city was implemented by most of the members of the Roma NGOs, which can be interpreted as one of the ways in which stigmatized people can manage their identities in society (Goffman, 1963).⁹ Generally aware of their marginal social positions and the absence of social power, and as a response to the tactics of the protesting citizens, the Roma activists by means of the media harshly criticized

⁹ The other means in this case would be: *masking stigma* (hiding one's Roma origin), *withdrawal* (avoiding social interaction with the non-Roma population) *internalization of the stigma* (accepting the negative self-image or difficulty with self-acceptance), *minstrelization* (a humorous reflection and playing with the Roma identity so as to mitigate the negative perception of the society).

subtle but also openly stereotypical discourses of the residents of the street focused on Bajramović as an individual and the Roma as an ethnic group. By qualifying them, among other things, as a form of “suppressed racism”, such opinions and behavior are considered by society to be dangerous, which was indicated by one of the better-known Roma leaders:

This uncontrolled small-town mentality promotes inside of itself the cult of an ethnic, and in this case an urban purity, which in later phases becomes a mania and a safety risk for anyone who is different. Anyone. Not just the Roma. It's only a question of time. (Balić, according to Radovanović, 2024)

In cooperation with other organizations, especially with numerous cultural enthusiasts, members of Roma NGOs use this to openly face stigma, trying to actively have an impact on the perception of society, the dissolution of prejudice, the relativization of boundaries, and an increase in the possibility for an equal and just social treatment of the Roma in every segment of social life, including symbolization, denotation, and organizing public spaces in the city.

*The strategies and tactics of representatives of the city government*¹⁰

Conversations with the representatives of the city government indicated to us at least two crucial strategies which determined the government's decision to name a street in honor of Šaban Bajramović in Niš.

The first strategy is related to the construction of the identity of the city by means of cultural references, as well as by means of the current

¹⁰ What is meant by a *strategy* is the more long-term and more broadly encompassing plan of development, a vision and activity in accordance with certain social aims and available resources, while what is meant by a *tactic* are contextual responses (discursive and practical) in a certain situation in response to the current challenges.

attempts to brand Niš as the city of jazz. Considering that Bajramović was undoubtedly one of the best known and most deserving local individuals in the cultural life of the city, and that he became a symbol of the international *Nišville Jazz Festival* (which rendered the city recognizable in Europe and beyond), the representatives of the city government believed publicly honoring this artist to be a justifiable choice. The naming of a street after Bajramović as well as erecting a monument in his honor are often also viewed by the city government in the context of neoliberal urban policy, indicating that ‘these practices could increase the visibility of Niš as a destination and could therefore contribute to the development of the local economy, especially in attracting a larger number of tourists’ (V1: 8).

The second strategy refers to the long-term and more encompassing need for the development of interculturalism and the creation of inclusive public policies, which would render ethnic and other diversities recognizable in the decision-making process, which refers to the various segments and levels of city management. This, among other things, also includes the sensibilization of the policy of naming public spaces in the city, whereby we can symbolically recognize the importance of the minority Roma community, that is, famous Roma individuals in the current culture of commemoration and the social tissue of the city.

Despite these formal strategic focuses of the city government, the analysis of all the compiled data (numerous official documents – decisions, reports, as well as media statements) indicates certain contradictions which refer to the *tactics of the government* (TG), applied in the symbolic struggle surrounding the renaming of a street in honor of Bajramović.

- **TG1: Transfer of responsibility** – the representatives of the city government quite frequently use this tactic as a response to the received criticism related to the lack of any realization of the official decision brought by the city regarding the naming of the street. The

responsibility for the old street signs not having been replaced by new ones is transferred to:

- a) *Protesting citizens/street residents*, who through privatization and the control of public space (CT4) are opposed to the initiative of utility workers to gain access to their houses and change the street signs;
- b) *Certain economic subjects*, which transfer responsibility due to the emerging organizational and financial problems related to the realization of the open call for the procurement of new street signs;
- c) *Other levels of government or other institutional subjects*, whereby practical coherence and consistency is brought into question in the realization of political decisions, primarily due to the lack of coordination between various political subjects on the local level. A politician who as a representative of the City Assembly of Niš took part in the decision-making process regarding the renaming of *Južni bulevar* to Šabana Bajramovića Boulevard had the following to say:

I would not like to comment why this decision has not been realized completely. By making the decision, the Assembly actually completed all its tasks. (V3: 6)

This tactic of the government often causes dissatisfaction of the civic society since it creates a sense that the government, by avoiding responsibility, does not actually convey honest interest in resolving conflict and overcoming divisions regarding the renaming of the street.

- **TG2: Delayed increase in the participatory approach** – it turned out that the participatory process regarding the realization of the naming policies of public space in Niš is only in principle supported, and is reduced to procedures without any essential inclusion of the citizens as the end users, who as a result have

expressed revolt (CT5). The explanation offered by the president of the competent Committee for Street Names that the ‘law on the local government of the Republic of Serbia does not require that citizens be questioned on an issue when making decisions regarding the renaming process’ (RTS, 2009) indicates that one part of the responsibility in the decision-making process is transferred from specific political actors and bodies to the legal framework. In any case, in order to reduce the heated tension among the citizens, the representatives of the government resort to a delayed increase in the participatory approach of the public to questioning the decision made regarding the renaming of the street in honor of Bajramović. At the same time, they use discursive, institutional, and normative responses in the negotiation process with the representatives of the protesting citizens, offering the possibility of inclusion in discussion and the work of the Assembly bodies. Even though that might increase the effectiveness of communication and the possibility of overcoming the conflict between the main actors of this symbolic struggle (the government and the citizens), Šabana Bajramovića Boulevard still exists only on paper as an official decision of the city and on Google maps, while in the everyday life the residents of the street, limited by symbolic (ethnic) boundaries, have never accepted this name.

• **TG3: Withdrawal** – 15 years after the naming of the Šabana Bajramovića Boulevard and the formal efforts at an inclusive policy of (re)naming urban public spaces, the current city government to a certain extent withdrew before the demands of the protesting citizens, attempting to “take back” the street from Bajramović and “relocate him” to a part of the city inhabited by the Roma. This tactic on the part of the government is in stark contrast with their formal strategic decisions to develop Niš as an intercultural city, and is in direct agreement with the segregationist tactic of the protesting citizens for whom social/ethnic boundaries would additionally be strengthened as spatial ones. Specifically, upon obtaining support of the

competent Ministry, the Assembly of the City of Niš was supposed to make a decision on April 25, 2024 regarding the proposal of the Committee for Street Names to rename the Šabana Bajramovića Boulevard to Saše Savića Švabe Boulevard¹¹ and to rename the Roma mahala *Stočni trg* Šabana Bajramovića Square.

Stočni trg, as the unofficial name of the Roma mahala, does not exist as a square in that run-down part of the city, and instead is a small, winding alley which includes about a dozen houses. The message we are sending the public is that Šaban belongs among his Roma in the devastated Stočni trg. (Blagojević, according to Radovanović, 2024)

The quoted director of the *Nišville Jazz Festival*, Roma activists from Niš and all of Serbia, as well as other civic society actors responded with determination, believing it to be an attempt to ghettoize and humiliate the Roma musician, reducing his artistic importance and merit for the cultural development of the city and country. Considering that with such a decision the city government itself strengthened the ethnic boundaries and symbolic divisions in the society, the representatives of the opposition in Niš were opposed to the renaming of the Šabana Bajramovića Boulevard, which led to a division within the city government itself regarding this issue¹². Following a sharp reaction of the part of the government and part of the public, this controversial proposal was temporarily withdrawn, which means that the symbolic struggle and divisions have not come to an end, and instead are continuing with the same main

¹¹ In the explanation of the proposal of the new street name it is stated that the individual was a late leader of the Serbian branch of the Night Wolves (which have close ties with Vladimir Putin – author’s comment), the organizer of numerous get-togethers promoting Serbian-Russian friendship, a fighter for Serbdom and Orthodoxy, etc. The proposal was made by the members of the Night Wolves with the support of the residents of Šabana Bajramovića Boulevard.

¹² When naming the street in 2009, both members of the government and the opposition were in agreement when it came to making a decision regarding the the ononymic commemoration of Bajramović (two votes abstaining).

actors under changed circumstances. The final outcome will be seen in the coming period.

Conclusion:

The dominant symbols in the names of streets, that make up the official (political) culture and the “city text” (Azaryahu, 1990), do not represent necessarily unquestionable values regarding which there is a social consensus. Even though political elites (representatives of the government) exert the greatest controlling power over public space, that power in certain social contexts is limited and hampered by the symbolic power of the citizens themselves, which is indicated in the case study of (re)naming Šabana Bajramovića Boulevard in Niš. The results of this study indicate that the range of potential actors involved in (re)naming streets, certainly, is broader than the strictly political ones, considering that the interests and capacities of power of diverse socio-cultural groups are undoubtedly different and very pronounced in the processes of negotiation regarding the (de)construction of meanings which are written into the public space.

This study shows how on the symbolic level there are struggles taking place among various social groups for appropriating public spaces by naming them, providing a broader contribution to the understanding of complex cultural practices and discourses which are implemented in that struggle by means of legitimizing symbolic boundaries. It turned out that the established ethnic boundaries in the process of (re)naming a street in Niš after a member of the Roma community are present and relevant, that they testify to more serious divisions in society and make achieving cohesion between the majority (Serbian) and minority (Roma) population more difficult. In a broader sense, this points to the conclusion that the (re)naming of public space even based on cultural references, in this case based on a local and world-renowned Roma artist, is not a value or ideologically neutral act.

Roma ethnic membership which intersects with negative personal qualifications ascribed to

Bajramović has proven to be the most relevant factor in the creation and shaping of symbolic boundaries regarding the naming of the street, while the questions of his religious denomination, education, gender, class did not emerge as a more significant argument in the conflict. At the same time, the protesting citizens as the actors in this conflict use various tactics in both the explicit or implicit construction and affirmation of ethnic boundaries such as the relocation of the problem, open stigmatization, political mobilization, and privatization of public space. Such civic activism, even though predominantly reactive, fragmented, and symbolically mediated by strengthened ethnic boundaries, is not assessed as being unsuccessful. On the contrary, it turned out that it has a corrective effect compared to the realization of the decisions of the city government, even though contrary to its formal inclusive strategies of naming public spaces and the development of an intercultural society. The actions of the city government are closely related to populism, „which is inherently tactical and chameleon-like, blending both progressive and conservative elements“ (Anselmi, Diletti & Mongiardo, 2024, 596). Since it turned out that what is at work is clearly a permissive relationship on the part of the government towards the tactics which the protesting citizens implement in this symbolic struggle (by withdrawing before their demands and avoiding responsibility), this strengthens the role and importance of the civic sector, and members of the Roma and non-Roma societies. They are inclined towards assuming a more medial position in this conflict – criticizing the ethnocentric demands of the protesting citizens (who are standing up to their street being named after a Roma artist), as well as the government for its lack of timely activity and lack of responsibility in carrying out an official decision made by the city to name a street in honor of Bajramović.

If the city government in the near future adopts the decision to rename Šabana Bajramovića Boulevard and name a square after

him, that is, a small street in a Roma mahala, this will not only be a victory for the residents of the street as actors in this conflict, but also a direct response to the question which was discussed by Lamont and Fournier (1992) and which refers to how classifications and categorizations on a symbolic level are transformed into lines of inequality and social exclusion and how they manifest in physical space.

Also, the use of negative ethnic classifications can also be interpreted inversely, following the example of Mijić and Parzer (2024), as a reaction to changes in the social structures or the transformation of existing social boundaries. Attempts to affirm the identity of the Roma minority in the symbolization of Niš, where ethnocultural diversity has not successfully been integrated into the current culture of memory, testify to an attempt at the relativization of the existing rigid social boundaries.¹³ That is how the naming of a street after a member of the Roma minority in one part of the majority population, can be perceived as a threat, to which they react by strengthening ethnic boundaries in the symbolic space to “defend” public and social spaces of the city. This points to the most recent initiative of the protesting citizens whereby they would like to replace the name of the Roma artist in the toponym of their street with the name of a person who symbolizes Serbdom, Orthodoxy, and other ethnocentric values. An important finding of this study is precisely the fact that general interest concepts and shared goods do not always and everywhere emerge as the key or self-identifying concepts of citizens as direct actors in symbolic struggles for and within public space, but that the positions and tactics of the citizens can be initiated by partial, ethnocentric, and essentially hegemonic interests.

Ultimately, an approach worth mentioning is an interesting one based on which in multicultural

¹³ Despite ethnic-cultural diversity, in Serbia there are lines of cultural and political divisions which contribute to a high ethnic and religious distance, low intercultural empathy, and especially value-based discrimination of the Roma (Bašić & Stjelja, 2021).

community’s street signs can be used to read social hierarchies which stem from the language the street name is written in, or the order of the languages on the street sign, in the case of multilingual environments (Azaryahu, 2012). Following this line of thought, we would like to point out that hierarchical social relations can be read from street signs also by means of analyzing the presence of well-known figures and symbols which belong to minority or marginalized groups, as well as by analyzing the toponymic locations assigned to them. Specifically, the commemorative naming of peripheral parts of the city does not have the same potential to convey social and political messages as central parts of the city which are location-wise more important and socially more frequent. Thus, naming a street after the artist Šaban Bajramović, whose musical merits do not correlate with the existing ones, and especially not with the newly-proposed toponymic location in the Roma mahala, is another example of the fact that spatial marginalization by means of naming streets is at the same time an indicator of social and cultural marginalization. This certainly does not promote a sense of tolerance, cooperation, and belonging to a community.

Confirming the role of ethnic boundaries and the way in which they can structure the allocation of public resources (Wimmer, 2013), the findings of this case study provide a broader analytic contribution to the concept of symbolic struggle and socio-spatial inequality.

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