

# **Making Representations of Diversity in Vilnius – Capital of the most peripheral central region in Europe**

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## **Abstract**

One of the most characteristic permanent features of Vilnius city is its multiculturalism. This is the outcome both of its history and geography. The city is located in the conjunction of peripheral zones of Western and Eastern European civilizations, and perhaps can be regarded as one of most peripheral capital cities in Europe, notwithstanding that it is located just 20 km from one of several geographical centres of Europe. The possibility to understand and explain spatial processes shaping the space inside the city during last decades depends on understanding the wider context surrounding the city. This is hardly possible without knowing the history of the city, country and region, without understanding diverse geography of the city and the role it plays in surrounding region. It's very difficult to reveal these processes not witnessing them. All this make huge limitations on possible research methods and suggests that once again the best way to understand the processes is to participate in these processes.

## **Introduction**

Every city is unique. Every city is the same. Both statements have their rationality. Author of this article claims that Vilnius, as a capital city of an EU member state presents a unique field for geographical researches. This uniqueness derives both from its historical and geographical features. The city, which is located in transitional zone of Western and Eastern European civilisations, experienced plenty of political, economic and social changes, all of which left noticeable marks on its physical and social structure. Such complicated history, which of course is very much related to its geographical location, used to form quite complex societies, which created and still creates very different spaces. The ability to understand these processes of creation directly depends on knowledge of the city and cannot be achieved purely by the use of statistical information, which on the other hand is quite poor in this field. The question, “what schemes and methods of study of this city are the best ones?”, is of major importance, because usual positivistic approaches based on “reliable” data very often cannot be useful in these circumstances.

Representation of the city is quite complicated, when one seeks not only to describe studied phenomena (what also is not easy) but tries to reveal main actors shaping these phenomena as well. The logic scheme: context – actors – spatial outcomes is quite simple on the paper, but actually very few researches of post Soviet cities were made using post positivistic approaches. Usual methodological approaches, based on analysis of statistical data, prevail in many areas starting from student bachelor thesis. The aim of this article is neither related to the deep geographical analysis of the structure of the Vilnius nor to detailed presentation of possible methods of such analysis. On the contrary – it is related to the relations between these two fields. Author tries to reveal how the main features of geography – its diversity and accents on context instead of an object, could help understand this and of course other cities.

## Diversity of the city - tracing influence of processes of wider scale

One of the main exceptional features of Geography is its emphasis on the context. Various phenomena studied in geographical researches are also an object of studies of other disciplines, whereas geography should see them in the time-space continuum emphasising interconnectedness of all processes and space. Such a holistic approach is the most appropriate in geography and contextual theory, developed by Swedish geographer T. Hagerstrand also stresses this just using different terminology (Hagerstrand, T.1974). That's why analysis of a city should start from its position in the wider regions. And that's the place, where Vilnius is becoming an exceptional city of Europe.

Two main cultural centres or civilisations used to make major impact on the development of European regions and finally formed two major western and eastern European cultural regions. At present, formally rather strict line, separating dominant areas of these cultures, is an eastern boundary of EU. So Lithuania, being located in the centre of Europe appeared right in the centre of "battle" field of these two "forces" and consequently in the periphery of both cultural regions. Though, perhaps purely incidentally, the influence from the west dominates, the impact of Eastern European civilisation can always be felt here too. In fact one could call Vilnius the capital of the most peripheral central region in Europe (Figure 1). All other peripheral regions are located on the edges of the continent. Such situation has made huge impact on the societies that occupied the city and consequently on the spaces they created.

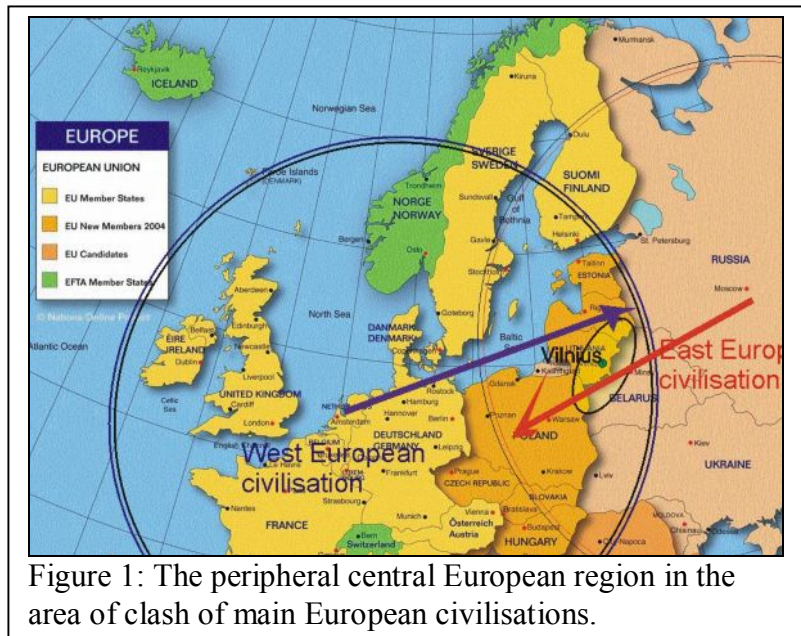


Figure 1: The peripheral central European region in the area of clash of main European civilisations.

Though from the first sight of an ordinary visitor Vilnius does not seem to be very multicultural city, because racial differences of its residents are very small, but in fact, it was never throughout the centuries dominated by a single ethnical or religion group. This is not a proper place to discuss complicated history of the city but one analysing its spaces should have in mind this context, which has always shaped and still is shaping the space of the city. The mixture of eastern and western European cultures is evident everywhere in the city both in its historical and modern parts. This mosaic wouldn't be complete without mentioning the influence from Jewish and in lesser scale Muslim cultures, which lasted for around 6 centuries. Different groups have different priorities and try to produce different spaces, though quite similar constraints often reduce these differences in practice. Understanding this mutual dependence between actors and space or structures, which limits their choices, is always of major importance in geographical researches. One can't understand processes ignoring space and vice versa, though it is quite common even to geographers to lose this focus in their representations. This need to escape from the dualism, which almost always exists, when one analyses human activities or structures, which make influence on them, separately, was the main goal of structuration theory, developed originally by T. Giddens (1979). Later, the famous geographer Gregory emphasised that this is the most appropriate

approach, when social systems are seen together as milieu and as a consequence of activities, which form them. (Gregory, 1987). This is important both when analysing phenomena at wider scale (for example the city as a part of wider region) and researching phenomena inside the city.

Such a clash of these two cultures in central Europe made remarkable footprints in Vilnius architecture, when different parts of the city have different dominant features. The Middle Ages created the downtown of the city. In many cases guides of the city proudly state that Vilnius has the largest downtown in Eastern Europe, but in fact it was formed mostly under the influence of the western civilisation. Notwithstanding dominating influence of western culture, the Russian Orthodox churches are located between the oldest buildings of Vilnius landscape situated in the downtown for centuries. But once again, very seldom, if ever, Russian orthodox churches are built with the elements of “gothic” style as one can find in Vilnius (Figure 2).

The second major part – so called “Newtown” was formed during the Russian empire period mainly in 19th century and is dominated by the structures, styles and forms common for the Russian empire, though the main catholic cathedral church of Lithuania was built during this period. The third major part of the city – Soviet areas. The growth of the city was fastest during that era and consequently vast territories of boring soviet towers of blocks dominate here as in majority of soviet cities. But on the other hand, planning structure, green spaces and even a style of the blocks are different from those in Russian cities, cause they are created by local architects.

Though it may sound strange, but Vilnius was being presented as a case of good planning for Soviet architects. The fourth, the newest part of the city, was formed during last 2 decades of deep economic depressions and especially fast growths. City gained structures common for western civilization – dominating centre (Figure 3) and suburbs. Commercial, entertainment centres appeared instead of factories in the central parts of the city. On the other hand, chaotic style, infill developments, lack of planning and social infrastructure is more common for post-soviet Russian cities than for western ones.



Figure 2: Sent-Nicolas Orthodox Church with gothic elements, built in 1350.

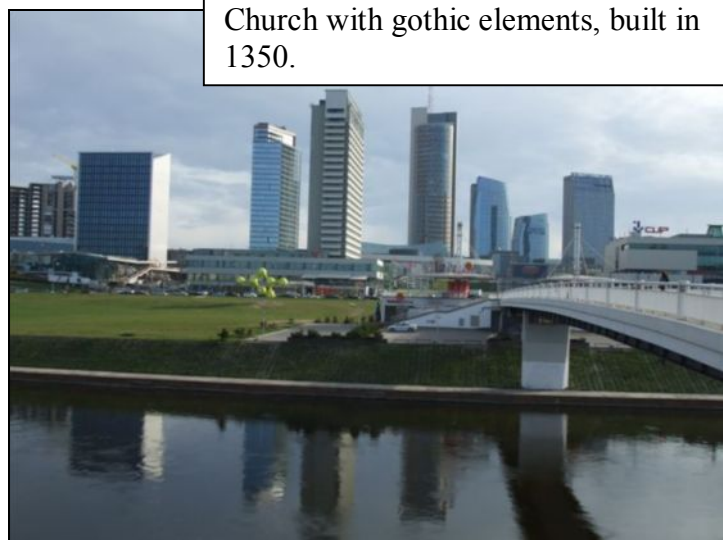


Figure 3: Part of new centre of Vilnius developed in the 21<sup>st</sup> century

The long lasting multiculturalism is a one dominant feature, which was shaping Vilnius city throughout the ages. Its location inside the area of clash of European civilisations is responsible for this. Another similar force, which was always shaping the processes inside the city, is its location in peripheral. There are many different definitions describing the meaning of the word “periphery”. The most common and wide meaning of the term ‘periphery’ is distant from the centre, edge territory. In some cases the concept of periphery is linked to the concepts of province and provinciality – periphery and province are being understood as synonyms. However, the meaning of these words differs a lot. Province should also be understood as a distant from a centre territory, but main idea of the term – economic and especially cultural backwardness. The encyclopaedia Encarta describes a peripheral region as a territory located outside boundaries of economic centre, which is dominating territory in the country (Encarta.msn.com). Such popular definition and understanding is most widespread. The concept of periphery is often linked to the dependence from the centre – centre creates and periphery accepts. Consequence of such relations are permanent conservativeness, lagging behind, slow development, passiveness, closeness. The marginal zone of transition is unimportant, a bad place to live and do business, though sometimes periphery is even romanticized and becomes a cultural category. On the other hand features of traditional culture survive in the periphery, while centre loses them and periphery of traditional culture appears. A researcher trying to develop representations of the city must have these things in mind.

The fact, which always used to make influence on this city, is its location in the periphery of the Europe or in fact in the peripheries of two “Europes”. This central and peripheral location inevitably has a big influence on whole surrounding region, which, stretches far beyond the boundaries of Lithuania. It’s a very big probability that this big trans-national problem region appeared due to such location. The eastern parts of Lithuania, Latvia, northeastern Poland, and western Belarus together forms big problem region, with slow economy, high mortality rates, low density of population, slow growth of GDP etc. The paradoxical situation when Lithuanian core Vilnius region is located in countries biggest periphery can be related to the fact that causes of this peripherisation are linked to the processes of higher rank than Lithuania. It is hard to believe, but according to the official data of statistics, the density of rural tourism enterprises in near Vilnius region was one of the lowest in Lithuania notwithstanding that Vilnius was the richest potential market, which waits nearby and picturesque landscape, which gives fantastic opportunities to attract tourists. This quite exactly illustrates the backwardness and conservativeness of local population. And in the middle of this region stand Vilnius, the fastest growing and the richest city in the Lithuania. This huge contrast also makes influence on the city and its development. The migrations, commuting scales between the city and the city region expands. This once again changes residential structure of the city. Perhaps this location is a reason why huge spaces of cultural and natural heritage were preserved in the city, while they were demolished in many other cities. There were simply no need for fast changes – city grew wider, while inner transformations were small. So peripheral location is one of the reasons, why Vilnius became perhaps the greenest European capital city.

Its peripheral location is a reason, why many cultural processes, making huge impact on the development of the space of the city, used to reach Vilnius later than many other cities. Almost all architectural styles came here with a substantial delay, the same as city planning ideology. At present, when the world becomes much smaller place, this delay is not so evident. On the other hand always exists some exceptions. For example an opera was put on the stage in Vilnius earlier than in France or England. This, of course, only once again proves that sometimes personal factors are more important than structural ones and one studying

social processes must have this in mind. Somehow many cultural phenomena, which depends more on personalities than on economy (for example theatre, classic music or some other arts) tend to evolve differently. Notwithstanding poor economy, cultural life in Vilnius has always was very active. That's probably why (together with great historical heritage) Vilnius became a cultural capital of Europe in 2009.

Notwithstanding new geopolitical, economic and even cultural processes, which started after collapse of Soviet Union, the main geographical features of location of Lithuania and Vilnius city remains the same. Its located in the middle of transition zone of western European and Eastern European civilisation. This transitional location marks and determines development of Vilnius city throughout the centuries making the inevitable impact on the inner structure of the city in various ways.

But all these major processes of higher scale only permits us to create a generalised picture of the development of the spatial processes inside Vilnius. It connects major cultural influences, "major structure" and the main trends of city development and permits to create only very generalised representation of the city. One, trying to understand more precise phenomena needs to go into more detailed scale (though keeping in mind these "global" forces).

### **Closer analysis – creating representations of present changes inside the city**

As it was stated earlier, classical positivistic approaches are not fully suitable for researching phenomena taking place in Vilnius, at least for the reason, that there is no reliable information about inner diversity of the city. There are no data illustrating spatial pattern of cultural and social variety of the city. There is no data about differences of income between citizens in different parts of the city. Data about ethnic mosaic in the city doesn't exist also. Making very sincere efforts author was able to receive only information about permissions for construction of new buildings in different districts of city but this information also is not widely available. This could help understand where main changes in the city are taking place but could only very little help to explain them or to find out who are responsible for these changes, what actors play decisive roles (Burneika, 2008).

The best way to track these processes, from the point of view of author, is to employ actor network approach combined with the case-study approach. The latter becomes more and more popular in geography at the beginning of XXI century. Social scientist Flyjberg considers that case studies useful both for empirical and theoretical sciences (Flyjberg, 2006). Finish geographer Jauhiainen demonstrated its suitability for tracing actor networks in Baltic Sea region (Jauhiainen, 2007). The author of this article considers, that this kind of method is especially effective in the times of such crisis, which are taking place at present. Bankruptcy problems in banking and the construction sectors receive a lot of attention from the media and reveal a lot of actors who are involved both in city creation and consumption. Roles that these actors play also become evident. Representation, as states Jauhiainen (2007) is about networks, how humans and non humans come together as hybrids in networks. Trying to stress the importance of both types of these actors, their combination sometimes is called "actants" (Latour, 2005). In fact its much easier to expect that space creation processes would be understood much more correctly if one does not exclude from them such objects as buildings, money, equipments, machinery or elements of landscape. Most important for a researcher is to "open" these networks so that these "actants" would be visible.

A part of an old residential building in downtown of Vilnius collapsed in 2005. Later it seemed that this happened because of another company, which was building a new residential

development nearby. All the mess that started afterwards presented a good opportunity for a researcher to draw a picture illustrating complexity of city creation processes. It became clear who gave a permission for a new building in protected downtown area, who invested money, what role legal institutions play here, how can geologists help to establish who is guilty, how people can or cannot protect their interests concerning new developments near their homes, how the loan was received and even what probable profit the company would have had if the project was successfully fulfilled. The same situation appeared due to the crisis in real estate market. The huge demand for residential property raised the volumes of construction very high, cause this was the most profitable investment area, but it wasn't completely evident why these new development received such a strange spatial characteristics. For example the most densely many-storey buildings were constructed on the edge of the city (Figure 4).

It is very hard to expect that ordinary people would prefer

to live in such new buildings of a poor quality on the outskirts of the city, when the prices of older ones located closer to the centre are similar. When this system of making fast profit started to collapse, and banks started to suffer from bad loans, it appeared the role city managers, as they were called by R. Pahl (1970), played here. Banks, trying to earn as much money as possible created a rules, permitting to receive a loan up to 95 % of flats price if it is a newly built house. If it's an old building (notwithstanding that quality of these buildings was higher in much cases) you could only expect 50 % loan. Very seldom a young family, which presented the biggest segment in the market, could find some 50 thousands euro, so they had to buy a cheap new one. So the system of fast construction on a cheap land at the edge, loaning of big loans, selling of poor quality houses and further construction was created. The city planners gave permission for this type of developments though probability that these areas very soon will become a zones of social exclusion is very high. Well, who holds money, holds power and one may state that these developments are standing evidence of uneven distribution of power in the city. Anyway, it is evident that at least in some cases not a demand or preferences of population is driving force determining spatial structure of transformation of city space but supply side factors. In this case these are managers that hold one or another kind of power. None of these networks and processes could be found in usual statistical data. Even most evident changes in the city could be easier noticed simply going with camera through it than analysing cold statistical figures.

A simple visit to Vilnius central market place gives better understanding of variety of cultures in the city and surrounding region than long work behind your computer or with statistical books, what also sometimes is inevitable and in some cases even more effective. One could very seldom expect to meet an ordinary elder women or man without any higher education speaking fluently in four different languages as most of sellers of Vilnius market place do. Very often they can't tell exactly, which one of these languages is their native, but this only once again illustrates the actual spirit of the city.

## Conclusions

There are many ways to create representations of the city, but its inner diversity often could be best understood using actor network and case study approaches having in mind the complex context in which they are taking place. The location of the city in peripheral zone of several civilisations makes both negative and positive impacts on its development cause beside of lagging behind it helps to create interesting variety of spaces, preserve natural and cultural heritage. The location of the city creates multicultural society and is responsible for complicated history, what creates variety of various structures and phenomena in the city.

Actual processes shaping the city at present depend on structures, which exists throughout the ages. One, trying to research these phenomena, should take into account not only context in which they are taking place but also all human and non-human actors involved. The best way to notice complexity of these networks or “open” them is to involve oneself in them, to participate as a actor of the network. When it is not possible, cases study approach is the best one in many cases, especially when things are starting not to go in their ordinary ways.

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