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'We can't just put any belly-dancer into the program': cultural activism as boundary work in the city of Bratislava

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ABSTRACT

Festivals are an increasingly more popular form of contemporary cultural activism. Countering prejudice through arts, using culture as a tool of communication, and creating an opportunity for marginalised groups to participate in public life, they represent a specific and novel means of civic activism. In this paper, I introduce a case study of the multicultural festival [fjúžn], aiming to enhance the public visibility of 'new minorities' and bring attention to the ethnic and cultural diversity in the city of Bratislava, Slovakia. Building on a festival ethnography and drawing on the perspective of boundary work [Jaworsky, B. Nadya. 2016. *The Boundaries of Belonging: Online Work of Immigration-related Social Movement Organizations*. Palgrave Macmillan], I show how the festival organisers work towards crossing and blurring symbolic boundaries in society. I offer a close interpretive reading of their attempts at capturing public places and cultivating a diverse language-scape, while showing how they simultaneously maintain, solidify, or even inscribe new boundaries. I conclude by raising critical points about the potential of activist cultural festivals to shift symbolic boundaries in the long run and serve as tools of social inclusion.

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Introduction

We now meet thousands of people, who found the courage to wear out their shoes, to climb over the fences, to sail the uncertain sea, all of this with hope for a better tomorrow. It seems that Europe comes into motion. Yet, not just in the physical sense. Our heads and minds are also busy. We started to clean, to tidy up, to move our thoughts. We started to sort, to categorise, to divide and to exclude. Our society, the minorities, the newcomers, basically all the people. This is clean and that is dirty. This is ours and that is foreign. This we protect and that we don't want here. We started to believe it is again the time to build barriers, fences and walls out of prejudices.

(Opening words from the festival newsletter, Milan Šimečka Foundation [2016])

Civil society actors are often expected to embody the capacity for generating solidarity and promoting a more inclusive society (Putnam 2000; Alexander 2006). Although the idea of civic associations as the sole promoters of 'civility' has been recently strongly contested (Lichterman and Eliasoph 2014), non-governmental organisations remain among the most common actors committed to the long-term goal of fostering better

representation of marginalised groups in public life. NGOs often undertake the responsibility to empower a specific group of citizens, to emphasise the ethnic, cultural, or social diversity of a society, and to steer public dialogue on these issues. Doing so, they perform a specific form of civic action, one which is inclusive in its aims and thus oriented toward shifting symbolic boundaries in a society. However, boundary-shifting processes are often complex, not always successful, and, therefore, the specific strategies the NGOs utilise when they follow their goals deserve closer scrutiny.

Although efforts at inclusion can have many faces, recent years have seen an increase in cultural activism – a form of action ‘that calls upon art and creative practices to disrupt commonly held assumptions and expectations often by forging alternative [spatial] imaginaries of meanings’ (Buser et al. 2013, 607). This paper focuses specifically on activist cultural festivals,¹ which are increasing in prominence with every year. Their influx is in line with the wider trend of the ‘festivalization of culture’, which is typical for contemporary urban metropolises (Bennett, Taylor, and Woodward 2014) and which also raises the question of how festivals can help to accommodate ethnic, cultural, and social diversity in a society (European Commission 2011).

Existing studies on festivals document their potential to serve as political instruments (Jeong and Santos 2004), strengthen local identities and a sense of place (Buser et al. 2013; McClinchey 2015), trigger political participation (Martiniello and Lafleur 2008), and provide a source of empowerment for minority communities (Jepson and Clarke 2015). Yet, a more critical stream of studies emphasises also the problematic aspects of festivals as forms of civic action. Promoting ethnic diversity as an exotic spice (hooks 2015), ‘selling’ ethnic neighbourhoods (Aytar and Rath 2011), or consuming perceived ethnic authenticity (Zukin 2008), cultural festivals often contribute to essentialisation and reification of cultural differences. With respect to their capacity to promote ‘inclusive togetherness’ (Citroni 2015), festivals clearly represent not only a sphere of opportunities, but also a sphere of risks.

This paper builds on a case study of the multicultural festival [fjúžn], which is organised annually in the Slovak capital city of Bratislava. Previously also known as The Week of New Minorities, the festival aims to ‘connect people from a great variety of cultures, enhance awareness about new minorities living in Slovakia, present the life of foreigners, and make the public more sensitive towards issues of migration and multiculturalism’ ([fjúžn] 2016). The festival’s name derives from the English word ‘fusion’ and refers to the coming together of people with various ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Although the festival aims to thematise an all-encompassing cultural and ethnic plurality, it focuses specifically on ‘new minorities’ – a category constructed by festival organisers to refer to people of non-Slovak ethnic origin, who at the same time do not belong to the so-called ‘old’ or ‘traditional’ ethnic minorities, such as Roma, Hungarians, or Jews. It encompasses all types of foreigners, including refugees and expats.² The festival is organised by a local non-governmental organisation focusing on human rights advocacy and education. It takes place in a variety of public and semi-public places in the city centre and includes a wide range of events – concerts, discussions, artistic performances, and exhibitions.

Drawing on the ethnographic observation of selected festival events, interviews with organisers, and analysis of festival-related documents, I aim to refine our understanding of the capacity of activist cultural festivals to alter symbolic boundaries in society. By

bringing the findings into conversation with the scholarship on boundary work (Zolberg and Long 1999; Jaworsky 2013, 2016), I contribute to the body of knowledge on cultural festivals (Quinn 2005; Bennett, Taylor, and Woodward 2014) and culture-led social inclusion (Martiniello and Lafleur 2008; Martiniello 2015) by showing how the decisions taken by the festival organisers influence the possibilities and limits of the festival's capacity to blur, cross, or shift boundaries, sometimes also reinforcing them along newly emergent lines. With respect to the so far under-explored relationship among the arts, culture, and social inclusion (Martiniello 2015), this perspective allows me to raise important points regarding cultural activism as a means of enhancing the civic and cultural participation of people with a migration background.

I first introduce the reader to the underlying theoretical concepts of this study and discuss the specific position of new minorities in Slovak society. I then comment on the way the empirical data were collected and interpreted. In the two analytical sections, I first show how the festival helps new minority representatives to cross a boundary and become more visible and/or active on the local civic and cultural scene. While the festival arguably succeeds in assisting some individuals to cross, its scope remains limited and a new boundary of cultural competence is inscribed. Second, I examine how the organisers engage in boundary-blurring processes directed at the audience and try to make the presence of new minorities in the public space appear more natural and accepted. I describe in greater detail two modes of boundary blurring I identified during the 2016 edition of the festival, which I call *capturing public places* and *cultivating a diverse language-scape*. While the former involves helping the representatives of minority communities to enter symbolically significant places associated with the dominant culture and legitimise their presence there, the latter refers to their attempts to blur the exclusivity of Slovak language in public spaces. I conclude by discussing the problematic points related to cultural activism as boundary work, which are mainly associated with selective representation, lack of active participation, and (re)production of new symbolic boundaries.

'Although they are inhabitants of the city, they are almost invisible'³

Many scholars have looked at the symbolic boundaries that prevent some people from accessing public goods and becoming full members of the society (Lamont and Fournier 1992; Zolberg and Long 1999; Alexander 2007; Jaworsky 2016). From the perspective of cultural sociology, these boundaries are imagined cultural fences constructed around the key characteristics expected from the 'rightful' members of the core societal community (Alexander 1988). They take the form of conceptual distinctions developed by social actors themselves, further serving to categorise living beings, material objects, and social practices (Lamont and Molnár 2002). They define which characteristics of a person are recognised and valued by the dominant group in a society and which, on the contrary, prevent them from being included in the sphere of societal solidarity (Alexander 2007). Symbolic boundaries can become more substantial and solidify into social, spatial, institutional, or legal boundaries, yet the symbolic aspect nourishes them all (Lamont and Molnár 2002). The main focus of this article is on the attempts of festival organisers to shift symbolic boundaries, although their spatial (access to places), social (relationships and networks), or institutional (access to information and services) forms are also thematised.

Symbolic boundaries are not static; they are always created and re-created by social actors. In the case of the well-sedimented social categories of ethnicity, race, or nationality, they tend to be more stable and appear almost 'natural'; yet they can still be contested. This feature of boundaries is often put to use by new social movements calling for social change and seeking to alter the boundary status quo (Cherry 2010; Jaworsky 2016). In the context of media discourse on migration, Jaworsky (2016) talks about five different types of boundary work utilised by the immigrant rights and immigration control movements in the United States. These entail crossing, blurring, shifting, maintaining, and solidifying. Crossing allows a member of an excluded group to cross the boundary without its substantial change, blurring makes it less 'bright' (Alba 2005) and thus, more permeable, and shifting finally leads to its relocation, so that excluded individuals can become a part of the in-group (Zolberg and Long 1999; Jaworsky 2016). The latter two processes hinder inclusive efforts by maintaining already existing boundaries, or even solidifying those that had previously allowed some mobility (Jaworsky 2016). Together with Cherry (2010), I understand boundary shifting as a long-term goal the festival organisers aim to achieve and which must be preceded by 'substantial boundary crossing and boundary blurring' (Zolberg and Long 1999, 9). In line with this framework, social inclusion is understood as an ongoing process of negotiation of greater openness of symbolic boundaries.

Coming back to the context of this study, in Slovak society, the symbolic boundary dividing those who belong to the core-group of the nation (Alexander 1988) and those who are symbolically pushed to its periphery runs mainly along the lines of ethnic and religious identity (Vašečka 2009; Kisošová 2018). Like other Central and Eastern European countries, Slovakia is an ethnically defined nation state with a relatively low percentage of foreigners living in its territory.⁴ The narrative of a coherent nation, long oppressed and having the experience of a struggle for recognition, creates an influential and widely shared sentiment, in which the rightful defenders of what is presented as typically Slovak culture (understood mainly in terms of 'traditional', primarily Christian/Catholic values) can meet. In this respect, Androvičová (2015) talks about mainstream conservatism, which is actively promoted by the nationalist and conservative parties but also finds mass support in Slovak society. In political discourse, culture, language, and origin represent meaningful and frequently mobilised categories in the processes of ethnic othering, to which foreigners and ethnic minorities are subjected (Lajčáková, Chudžíková, and Gažovičová 2011). Inability to speak the language, cultural otherness, and affinity to another country thus serve as the basis for symbolic exclusion. Furthermore, in periods such as the recent 'migration crisis', in which the movement of people becomes politicised, symbolic boundaries become more pronounced (Kisošová 2018). As numerous studies document, migrants have been discursively securitised and portrayed as a cultural threat and security risk (Androvičová 2015; Holková Chudžíková 2016).⁵ This symbolic exclusion not only bears direct consequences in terms of the approach of state institutions towards migrants and refugees, but it also influences public attitudes and sets the tone of their perception and acceptance in public spaces.

The primary setting for this case study is the city of Bratislava. Historically, it had been a cosmopolitan and multi-ethnic town of Germans, Hungarians, Slovaks, Jews, Roma, Czechs, Serbs, and Bulgarians. This fact used to be clearly demonstrated by the multilingualism of the town – the occasional presence of dilapidated Hungarian–German–Slovak

signs in the old-town's shop displays being a rare reminder of those times. Yet, besides a few multilingual inscriptions, there is little from the cosmopolitan urban memory to be found in the city's contemporary urban landscape (Nižňanský 2011). The cultural armature of the city (Jaworsky et al. 2012) has been heavily shaped by the project of Slovak nationalisation, which since 1918, has led to continuous ethnic homogenisation and naturalisation or expulsion of ethnic others (Miháliková 2006). Despite currently having one of the most diverse ethnic compositions in the country,⁶ the city has only slowly adjusted to the needs of its increasingly diverse population. A lack of translated documents or the inability of public officials to speak English often puts foreigners into difficult situations (Tužinská and Voľanská 2016). After clicking on the English or German versions of the official Bratislava website (<http://bratislava.sk/>), which also serves as the main information portal of the city, one is immediately redirected to the visitors' page, where tips for sight-seeing, rather than civic information, are provided. Participation in local public life thus presupposes a certain linguistic and cultural competence. In day-to-day interactions, symbolic boundaries often materialise into institutional, legal, or spatial boundaries. Existing studies signal that new minorities are generally underrepresented in the public space and they lack supporting mechanisms to become more actively involved in civic matters (Hlinčíková et al. 2014).⁷ If they participate in the civil sphere, it is typically through ethnic-based associations, such as the Union of Vietnamese Women or the Afghani Union (Hlinčíková et al. 2014). Any attempts by the festival organisers to make new minorities more visible in public life should thus be understood in this context.

Methods

This study draws on ethnographic research of the 11th edition of the festival [fjúžn] organised by the Milan Šimečka Foundation (hereafter Foundation), which took place in Bratislava in April 2016. Data collection entailed participant observation (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007) at selected festival events and the evaluation team meetings, both in the narrow circle of the main festival organisers, as well as in the wider circle of the Foundation team.⁸ I also conducted two in-depth qualitative interviews with the festival manager Brixo, whose primary responsibility was festival production and logistics, and Laco, the programme manager of the Foundation, who was mainly responsible for the dramaturgy. The festival stretched over 9 days and consisted of more than 30 events of different cultural genres taking place at 20 different localities. Following the strategy of theoretical sampling, I chose seven programme blocks of different types, where I conducted participant observation. These included a community event organised by members of the Islamic Cultural Centre, an artistic exhibition with the topic of social exclusion, a theatre performance of an international improvisation group, a stand-up comedy performance in English, a concert by a Slovak singer of Ukrainian origin, and two markets, one organised in co-operation with different associations of foreigners living in Slovakia with the aim to create a space for presentation of their communities through food and culture, the other following similar ends on a smaller scale as part of a regular monthly urban street market. Furthermore, I studied the official festival newsletter, the festival Facebook page, articles about the festival published in the media, and documents made available to me by the organisers, such as the festival development goals. The data were transcribed and analysed with the help of Atlas.ti. In the analytical

stage, I first subjected the data to close interpretative reading typical for engendering thick description (Geertz 1973). I focused on identification of the meanings the organisers attributed to their actions in relation to the festival. When their aim to dismantle boundaries between the majority and new minorities became apparent, I decided to continue my interpretation using theories of boundary work, drawing mainly on the work of Jaworsky (2016). I then proceeded abductively, following the strategy proposed by Timmermans and Tavory (2012) and searching for surprising and novel aspects of the observed case that did not fit my pre-understanding of the situation. These I found mainly in the role of culture, which appeared to serve not only as an underlying structure through which symbolic boundaries were expressed, but also as a specific medium creatively utilised by the festival organisers to trigger intercultural encounters and spread their message. In the following analytical chapters, I provide an interpretive account of the organisers' attempts to alter symbolic boundaries in the public space of Bratislava through cultural activism.

Between visibility and participation: new minorities and two modes of boundary crossing

Since the inception of the festival in 2006, the Milan Šimečka Foundation team has followed the specific goal to make new minorities more visible in the public space of the city. According to the festival manager Brixi, they want to 'show the majority that there are also these kinds of people among us, how they live, how their culture is'. As he further adds, they try to 'sensitise the public to the issues of migration, foreigners, and refugees'. [fjúžn] is thus more than a festival presenting the cultures of different ethnic groups. The organisers emphasise the political intention of the festival, which in their eyes clearly distinguishes it from other cultural events taking place in the city, such as the Francophone Film Festival, or the Gypsy Fest. While the former is in the understanding of the programme manager Laco 'a matter of mere culture, single-genre, and a pure cultural uplift', the latter succeeds in making the marginalised Roma minority more visible, but it is too centred on mere presentation of Roma culture and 'does not seem to be aiming for any [activist] overlaps'. The organisers thus want to distance themselves from events mainly featuring national or ethnic cultures. The declared goal to sensitise the public, to educate, and to make the people more open to ethnic diversity makes [fjúžn] a fitting case for studies of cultural activism (Buser et al. 2013) and culture-led social inclusion (Martiniello and Lafleur 2008).

The festival does not aim to represent any specific group of foreigners and their culture but to raise awareness about ethnic diversity in general. Nevertheless, a clear boundary is drawn between ethnic minorities, mainly Slovak Roma and Hungarians, and so-called new minorities, the term festival organisers generically use to address communities of Iranians, Afghanis, Ukrainians, and other groups moving to Slovakia from other than neighbouring countries. As Laco explains, the rationale behind this narrowed focus relates to the fact that while 'old' ethnic minorities have access to official grants for support of cultural activities, the new minorities are 'completely falling out of the scope of institutions' and thus lack any kind of representation and support. The goal of [fjúžn] is to compensate for this perceived injustice and to help the new minorities cross the symbolic boundaries of civic and cultural participation.

Despite the claimed prominence of the festival mission, it is at this point that the criteria of cultural quality and taste come into play and inform organisers' decisions on who will be included in the festival programme and who will not. As Laco explains, the festival is deliberately designed as a multi-genre event to 'balance between entertainment and expertness' and to 'accommodate a wide range of formats, including discussions', potentially giving space also to foreigners, who have a strong story, but are not artists or performers. The ability to fit the festival dramaturgy and to demonstrate skills recognised in the local cultural field is, however, paramount.

Simply, we want foreigners who are active also artistically and in such a way, that it is worth it, because we can't just put any belly-dancer into the program, or any cook who makes pizza, just because they are foreigners; so we are trying to find also artistically valuable things. (Laco)

With the choice of festival protagonists, the question of who is represented and who is not grows in complexity. It is not any foreigner living in Slovakia who can be invited to the stage during the festival; it is only those who can express themselves artistically or have interesting stories to tell. The conditions of the local cultural field (Bourdieu 1996) intermingle with the festival mission and inscribe a new boundary of cultural competence. This boundary remains firmly situated in the local symbolic structure – it is the reflection of the anticipated taste of the audience mediated through the taste of the festival organisers.

On the other hand, within the wider group of artistically active foreigners, the festival's focus on cultural diversity can help to justify the presence of those individuals who might otherwise not qualify to perform publicly. While under normal circumstances, the status of a foreigner could be uninteresting or even disqualifying, during the festival, it serves as an entrance ticket to institutions willing to temporarily lower their criteria of cultural selection and help foreigners to cross the boundary.

To the stage of KC Dunaj, or of any other institution [we cooperate with], only those people can go who meet certain criteria of [artistic] quality ... although maybe still somehow lower than [under normal circumstances] ... because the status of a foreigner plays a role. Because we will give them a chance. (Laco)

Yet, the nature of such crossing should also be problematised. The involvement of new minorities in the overall festival dramaturgy lies mainly in them being cast as respected guests, inspiring talkers, musicians, or performers. Their active engagement in shaping the festival's form and content is relatively small, though – as the organisers point out – slowly increasing. An example of the latter would be a discussion organised by Nasi, a young Iranian woman.

... she has been studying here, living here already for five years, and wrote a very nice essay for the festival newsletter about the crisis of identity. And she had been carrying an idea in her head for a long time, to organise informal discussions with foreigners, with migrants, about where they come from, why they came, how their identity changes. We just basically gave her cover, helped her to add some guests; she had an idea, we tuned it together. (Laco)

Aware of their own limits in orchestrating the festival in a more participatory way, the organisers often discuss the possibilities and barriers to more direct involvement of minority communities in festival dramaturgy. In this respect, certain symbolic boundaries are perceived from both sides and the communication between the organisers and new

minorities is framed as ‘sometimes difficult’, ‘requiring special skills’, and a ‘long-term process presupposing relationships and trust’.⁹ On the other hand, as one member of the Foundation team suggests, the difficulties in reaching an understanding with the minority communities can be partially caused by a lack of awareness about the festival goals on the side of the foreigners. In other words, a multicultural festival might not be automatically understood by new minorities as a boundary-shifting instrument of social change.

We assume it has a benefit, and I am sure it has one, but to them it might not be clear that perhaps some environments are changed; if nothing else, certain moods are amended and balanced. [...] I think this might not be clear to them and therefore, they are not motivated [to participate more actively]. So, we probably must think about how to communicate to them also this sort of less visible and more difficult to grasp messages. (Lepo, full team evaluation)

This contribution immediately gives rise to a controversy in the debate. After a minute or two of a turmoil – the Foundation team trying to support or dismiss the importance of greater involvement of foreigners in the festival dramaturgy – Laco offers an alternative framing. He proposes that a lack of minorities’ active participation does not hinder festival’s ability to reach its higher ends in terms of making the public more open to diversity.

I don’t want this to sound weird, but we have 30,000 foreigners living in Bratislava. I don’t think we’ve ever wanted to pretend [the festival] should work on the individual level. I rather think we have always wanted to stay within the borders of social mind-set and mentality. It would be good to create an opportunity for them to get something out of this, to participate. I just don’t think this path should be straight. (Laco, full team evaluation)

The lack of more active involvement by new minorities is not perceived as a major problem, as the festival’s primary goal is in fact not enhancing participation, but visibility. Although more active involvement of foreigners, mainly in terms of articulating their needs and visions for the festival, is desired and has been a part of the festival development goals since 2015, the capacity of the festival to fulfil its role towards the public is in the eyes of organisers not disqualified by a lack of their active presence. In their understanding, a multicultural festival can serve as a tool of communication and raising awareness even when the individual participation of foreigners is lagging.

We can sense a certain tension between the two modes of boundary crossing brought about by the festival: the first organised around the idea of visibility and secured by the casting of new minorities in the festival’s programme following the criteria set mainly by the organisers, and the second drawing on their own voice and inviting their own ideas of active participation in the civic and cultural life of the city. Although the festival reality does not treat these as ideal types – if the [fjúžn] organisers didn’t like Nasi’s idea of a public discussion she might not have been given an opportunity to realise it, while also foreigners who are ‘simply cast’ typically have some manoeuvring space for inventions – these two modes represent distinct processes in terms of the distribution of power and the extent of empowerment brought about by the festival. With respect to fostering long-term civic and cultural participation of the marginalised (Martiniello 2015), they might produce different outcomes – a research area which remains beyond the scope of this paper but deserves further attention.

The case of [fjúžn] also reveals that in an attempt to shift symbolic boundaries they are often initially made ‘brighter’ (Alba 2005) to emphasise the specific situation of the

excluded group. The boundary separating new minorities from their 'old' ethnic minority counterparts is solidified to allow the festival organisers to target them more directly. Yet also in relation to new minorities, the boundary work is not straightforward. While the festival effectively assists some individuals to cross a boundary and become more active in local cultural and civic life – even if not on equal terms – others fall out of the scope of its interest due to the lack of recognition of their cultural capital. A new symbolic boundary of cultural competence is thus inscribed. Although opening the festival to a multiplicity of genres can help to diversify the criteria for qualification, the emerging boundary remains permeable only to certain individuals – mainly those already possessing competences recognised in the local cultural field (Bourdieu 1996). The activist mission of the festival and the criteria of cultural production intermingle and together with other aspects, such as festival budgetary limitations or social networks between the organisers and new minority communities, lead to the construction of publicly more visible, yet still selective image of ethnic diversity in Bratislava.

Festivals as a medium for boundary work: boundary blurring and a redefinition of belonging to the public

After outlining how [fjúžn] assists individuals in crossing boundaries, let us now focus on how the festival organisers engage in boundary work directed at the audience. The primary target group of the festival is the Slovak ethnic majority; this fact is emphasised by the festival organisers on different occasions.

... the festival is definitely for the public, not so much for the foreigners, although we want them to take part. We always tell ourselves that a Vietnamese would hardly come to see the African dances and vice versa, so it is primarily for the majority. (Brixo)

By putting the equal sign between the 'public' and the 'Slovak ethnic majority' the organisers unconsciously maintain precisely the same symbolic boundary they aim to shift. Yet despite this contradiction, in relation to the audience (even if narrowly defined), the festival shows signs of boundary blurring. Often tightly interwoven with boundary crossing, and thus drawing on the enhanced public presence of new minorities during the festival, this form of boundary work goes a step further. Not only does it encourage the physical presence of foreigners in public space, but it also aims to redefine this space in such a way that ethnic belonging would not be the main fault line of symbolic exclusion, and topics related to migration, refuge, social inclusion, and ethnic diversity would become more legitimate and less polluted (Alexander 2007) points of discussion.

In this section, I focus on two modes of boundary blurring which I identified during the 11th edition of the festival. First, I show how the festival organisers creatively work with symbolic meanings of different festival locations when they work at *capturing public places* and, second, I show how they engage in *cultivating a diverse language-scape*. Although these modes of boundary blurring reflect a long-term activist signature of the festival, they are far from fully rational actions. Never fully planned but triggered by the festival, they often crystallise only through interaction between festival organisers, new minorities, audiences, institutions, and the places where festival events take place. Once recognised as meaningful, the organisers embrace them and utilise them in their attempts to shift the boundaries of public perception of ethnic diversity in the long term.

Capturing public places

[fjúžn] is not strictly bound to any specific locality and it takes place at several venues in the greater city centre. Although Bratislava has almost no localities that could qualify as 'ethnic neighbourhoods' (Lin 2011) and which often stage similar festivals, the decision to organise the festival across various locations cannot be fully attributed to the lack of spatial segregation.¹⁰ In the understanding of the organisers, the spatial dispersion of festival activities allows them to target a larger and more diverse audience. For example, staging the multicultural market Sunday Parade in the Old Marketplace in the city centre helps them to reach out to some 1500 regular visitors over the weekend. Introducing [fjúžn] to places as diverse as music clubs, theatres, galleries, a high-brow bookstore, an Islamic Centre, and a chapel also helps to reach different communities.¹¹ This bears consequences for boundary work as it allows the organisers to gain access to specific 'micro-publics' (Amin 2002, 959) and thus work towards blurring the symbolic, social, and spatial boundaries directly 'on site'. Through the act of bringing migrants and refugees to places otherwise not easily accessible to them, and by letting them legitimise their presence through their cultural competence and/or personal narratives, such places are symbolically captured and the boundaries are temporarily blurred.

In the context of boundary work, some places can be understood symbolically as majority places. Strongly imprinted by the dominant culture, language, and practices, such places might not be easily accessible for members of out-groups. On the other hand, places frequented by members of minority communities can acquire a strong symbolic connotation related to minority cultural practices, which can evoke hostility, fear, or simply disinterest on the side of the majority and thus, also invoke boundaries. These do not necessarily need to prevent access physically; they can be much subtler, making people feel they do not belong, they are not welcome, or they do not know how to behave 'properly'. The symbolic meaning of more than twenty different [fjúžn] localities can be in some cases understood as strongly imprinted by the majority culture (such as the Slovak National Theatre), more or less open and neutral (music clubs), or marked by the cultural practices of new minorities (such as the Islamic Centre Cordoba).

Although [fjúžn] brings the topic of diversity to all its venues, in the eyes of the organisers, it is mainly the symbolically powerful majority places that are worth capturing, and where the presence of new minorities makes the biggest impact in terms of boundary blurring. In 2016, the organisers attributed a major achievement in this respect to the performance of the Czech theatre group Archa. The ensemble, including two Belarusian refugees, was invited to introduce a satiric play on inter-ethnic relations in a small Czech town. The performance took place on the stage of the Slovak National Theatre, a place symbolically and institutionally so powerful, that the organisers would hardly imagine accessing it unless the idea had been offered to them by an acquaintance.

... to arrange the Slovak National Theater is not difficult, but to dare to approach the Slovak National Theater, that is difficult for someone who does not have experience with it. And the consequences can be unintended. I had an idea what the performance was about, but I did not know there were going to be two refugees right there. So only during the performance, as I was sitting there, I just realised the historicity of the moment. (Laco)

Although the significance of this act was not fully envisaged, capturing the Slovak National Theatre is something the festival organisers consider to be a great success. As Laco

repeatedly underlines during both team evaluations, the historicity of the moment lies in the fact, that 'it is probably for the first-time that refugees were admitted to the stage of the Slovak National Theatre to share their stories'. A combination of their cultural expertise, which makes them active protagonists delivering a message to the audience, their physical presence, and the symbolic identity of a captured place (highlighted by the adjective 'Slovak National'), is understood as an important precedent challenging the boundary status quo.

Simply, on the symbolic level, the consequences [of refugees' presence on the stage of the Slovak National Theatre] might only be revealed in ten years. But, I believe that we are helping a greater process, of which we are only a small drop, but a meaningful one. (Laco, Full team evaluation)

By 'a greater process' Laco refers to enhancing the presence of new minorities in public space. Unless they have a chance to become more publicly present in society, in other words, to cross a spatial boundary, the symbolic boundaries could hardly be blurred or even shifted over the long term. In this respect, the spatial boundaries of bodily presence and the symbolic boundaries of belonging are closely interwoven. This applies even more to refugees, around whom the boundaries of exclusion have been recently the brightest (Alba 2005).

A complementary process takes place when festival visitors belonging to the ethnic majority cross the boundaries of minority places. In the 2016 edition of [fjúžn], such an opportunity arose during the community event organised by women for women in the Islamic Centre Cordoba. This event included a brunch consisting mainly of Middle-Eastern food, networking games, and artistic workshops, such as henna tattooing. Although at least one third of the visitors were socially networked to the event organisers and another third belonged to local human rights non-governmental circles – implying a certain familiarity with the environment – for the other visitors, coming to the Islamic Centre likely entailed crossing symbolic and spatial boundaries, and exposing oneself not only to the culturally unfamiliar materiality of the place (such as the equipment in the Islamic prayer room) or social practices (such as taking off slippers prior to stepping onto the carpet), but also symbolic meanings (in terms of acknowledging the presence of Muslims in Bratislava). In contrast to the capturing of majority public places, however, this sister strategy has not received any special attention in any of the festival evaluations or reflections, somehow emphasising the one-sided focus of the festival.

Cultivating a diverse language-scape

The second mode of boundary blurring concerns language and its use in the public space of the city. Language is a powerful symbolic instrument, which in relation to minorities can function as a 'democratizing tool of cooperation' as well as a 'cryptic code of exclusion' (Sidiropulu Jankú 2014). [fjúžn] organisers are aware of the symbolic power of language and call for a more diversified language-scape in Bratislava. Yet, it is also the festival itself which undergoes a transition towards greater language openness – the language practices have been reflected upon only recently. While during the preceding editions, communication had been almost exclusively in Slovak, this is now changing and other languages are being introduced. The former practice is retrospectively evaluated with a certain

sense of self-sarcasm, Laco commenting that in 2016 ‘the foreigners probably understood for the first time what the festival was about’.

Although the festival organisers are declaratively willing to blur the symbolic boundaries of Slovak language exclusivity, the specific ways in which this is achieved still emerge from the situation rather than being deliberately planned.

This year, I opened the festival in English for the first time. We hadn’t planned that; I did not know I was going to do that till the moment I was on the stage of KC Dunaj. Only then I realised there was a guest from Syria and a moderator, who was going to talk to him in English, so that I probably should not open it in Slovak, but in English. (Laco)

What is remarkable in this quotation is the emphasis on the moment of interaction – also for the festival organisers, exposure to ethnic diversity gives rise to situations in which they must decide how to negotiate boundaries. Although a need to communicate in different languages had been discussed before, it was not until they reached a concrete situation that this mode of boundary blurring acquired concrete shape. Being aware that using English as the official language of the festival opening might in fact relocate the boundary and exclude other groups – for example, non-English speaking visitors – the organisers still consider this practice to be one of the 2016s major developments in terms of the festival’s impact. As Laco emphasises during the full team evaluation: ‘six events in English plus the opening and closing of the festival – no one else does such a thing!’

Although it might seem that with this move, the organisers shifted their primary orientation away from the Slovak audience in favour of lowering the threshold for minority representatives taking part in the festival, this is only partially so. The public remains firmly in the grip, recipients of a specific cultural performance which should help to override the ‘Slovakness of the public space’,¹² understood by the organisers in terms of cultural reticence and unwillingness to switch to other languages.¹³ The introduction of English is thus an effort to blur the boundaries and challenge the symbolic exclusivity of the Slovak language in public space.

Yet taking into account the language diversity of foreigners living in the city, introducing English can be viewed as a rather basic step towards cultivation of a diverse language-scape. A symbolically more powerful decision in this direction was the introduction of the Arabic word *habibi* (written in Arabic script), which appeared on all festival-related materials, including the title page of the festival newsletter, the programmes, the badges, and the posters in the city. It was also used in the festival video teaser ‘Arabic for the self-taught’, which featured members of the Slovak ethnic majority learning how to pronounce the word correctly. The word was deliberately chosen to alleviate othering and evoke familiarity.

Habibi is a familiar name for someone you already know. It can be a husband, a friend, a buddy. Because it is often used in the Arabic community, it appeared to us as a good sort of word to break the ice with the majority. As if the Muslims were calling us habibi, as if we were to become friends. (Laco)

Although in this context, Arabic represented a specific theme rather than an actual language spoken at the festival, the wide use of the word written in the original script carried a strong symbolic message, even more so given the strong anti-Muslim societal moods at the time. It not only played a role in blurring the boundaries of language use



Figure 1. The festival newsletter featuring the word ‘habibi’ and a portrait from a festival photo series on Muslims living in Slovakia.

in the festival setting, but it also reversed the symbolic hierarchy turning the inferior and feared into the familiar and the aesthetic (Figure 1).

Discussion: redefining symbolic boundaries through cultural activism

At this point, I would like to raise a few critical remarks related to activist cultural festivals as mediums for efforts at inclusion. The modes of boundary work introduced in this article represent certain traits in [fjúžn]’s activist signature, which are, however, acquiring varying prominence within other means and ends of festival production. Organisation of a festival is by no means free from negotiation among different guiding principles typical for the field of cultural production (Bourdieu 1996). Anticipation of the audience’s taste, budget limitations, or the possibilities and limits of artistic co-operation side with the desire to send a specific message. The choice of the festival dramaturgy is thus never a pure reflection of organisers’ ideas about how inclusive society should be, but rather a result of multi-level and pragmatic decision making.

Nor are activist cultural festivals free from drawing symbolic boundaries of their own. As was shown in this text, the cultural form of an event can on the one hand serve as a catalyst for enhancing solidarity; on the other, it establishes new criteria for qualification, which in turn can create new boundaries. The same applies in relation to potential festival

visitors. Cultural consumption always requires certain forms of capital (Bourdieu 1996) – the cultural capital needed to understand coded cultural messages in the arts, the economic capital to secure entrance to the event or purchase artistic goods, and/or the social capital to first find out about the happening and then to possess the necessary skills to socialise and perform satisfactorily while attending. The question concerning whether festivals do not simply relocate the symbolic boundaries drawn around ethnicity to those separating members of different classes or worldviews thus emerges. The festival then naturally attracts educated liberals able to consume the multicultural goods, rather than people lacking either the resources or the cultural capital to become interested in this kind of event. Those who take part in maintaining and solidifying ethnic boundaries the most, can thus easily remain unaffected.

The last problematic point concerns participation and representation. One might pose the questions: whose culture? and whose festival? [fjúžn] organisers understand the festival to be directed primarily at the ethnic majority public. Through this framing, however, they also symbolically separate foreigners from the majority group. Where are the borders between the audience and the performers, the ‘known’ and the ‘other’, those who should be included and those who should include? Moreover, when representatives of minority communities are involved, whether as artists, protagonists, or collaborators, their image produced by the festival can easily become a part of their public portrayal. Thus, the way in which new minority communities are involved in the entire process of festival production is crucial and deserves special attention.

Conclusion

How can cultural events contribute to making the symbolic boundaries in a society more permeable for those discursively portrayed as ‘others’ and excluded from participation in the civic and cultural life of the city? In this article, I have introduced a case study of the multicultural festival [fjúžn], whose main aim was to raise awareness about the presence of new minorities in the city of Bratislava. The festival ethnography provided compelling insights into the specific ways the organisers use the festival in their attempts to shift symbolic boundaries and sensitise the public to issues related to migration and ethnic diversity. I first showed how the festival helps some representatives of new minorities to cross the boundary and partake in the cultural and civic life of the city. I identified two modes of boundary crossing – one organised around the principle of visibility and drawing mainly on the dramaturgy prepared by festival organisers, and the other drawing on minorities’ active participation, including the articulation of their ideas about desired public involvement. Although the festival assists some individuals to cross successfully, the newly inscribed symbolic boundary of cultural competence orients the choice of people who attain voice through the festival and those who do not, and thus, restricts its inclusive reach. Second, I described two modes of boundary blurring that capture organisers’ attempts to work with the festival audience and make them more accustomed to new minorities’ presence in the public space of the city. In 2016, the most prominent modes of boundary blurring included *capturing public places* – an attempt to blur symbolic and spatial boundaries by assisting members of out-groups to enter symbolically strong majority places and legitimise their presence there; and cultivating a diverse language-scape – blurring

the symbolic exclusivity of the dominant language by introducing other languages into festival communication and materials.

Although these modes of boundary crossing and blurring reflect the long-term direction of the festival, at the same time, they are highly situational and partially emerge out of interactions between the festival organisers, new minorities, and audiences, as well as the institutions and localities where the festival takes place. This finding emphasises our need to understand boundary work not as a fully rational set of actions, but rather as highly situated and interactional process in which festival organisers often negotiate symbolic boundaries directly on-stage. Moreover, as the data show, this process is far from one-directional. During a single festival, the organisers often engage in multiple types of boundary work at the same time – not only do they cross and blur boundaries with the idea of shifting them in the long run, but through some of their decisions, they also maintain them, solidify them in relation to other social groups, or inscribe an entirely new boundary. With these findings, I aim to contribute to the discussion on the role of arts and culture in the social inclusion of minorities (Martiniello and Lafleur 2008; Martiniello 2015) and the inclusive potential of cultural festivals and events (Bennett, Taylor, and Woodward 2014; Citroni 2015). By emphasising the situational and interactional moment of boundary work, its often discrepant character, as well as by bringing attention to different modes of boundary crossing and blurring, I also aim to further develop this analytical toolkit to make it more suitable for the analysis of activist cultural events and inclusion oriented initiatives of social movements.

Notes

1. I use the term ‘activist cultural festival’ as an analytical category in this study, aiming to emphasise the socially and politically engaged orientation of the studied festival. As opposed to conventional, i.e. non-activist cultural festivals, these events aim to bring attention to social problems and steer public debate as one of their main goals. When reproducing the discourse of my communication partners, I also use the category ‘multicultural festival’, as this is how the organisers define the festival.
2. Slovak legislation does not recognise the category of new minorities. The closest official category related to the term used by the festival organisers is the general designation ‘foreigner’, which is defined as ‘anyone who is not a citizen of the Slovak Republic’ (IOM-SK). This includes people of migrant origin without Slovak citizenship residing in Slovakia for various lengths of time with different legal statuses. It also includes asylum seekers and people with subsidiary protection. It does not include ethnic minorities, who have a distinct legal status. Although the two categories do not overlap completely, reflecting the vocabulary of my informants in the text, I use the categories of foreigners and new minorities interchangeably.
3. Quote from the interview with Laco, the program manager of the Milan Šimečka Foundation.
4. According to the official statistics, in 2016, there were 93,247 foreigners legally residing in Slovakia, which constitutes approximately 1.72% of the population. More than half (55.8%) are citizens of other European Union countries, including the neighbouring Visegrad countries. This number, however, does not include naturalised Slovaks of migrant origin or the second generation of immigrants (IOM-SK).
5. Although, as Androvičová (2015) points out, there is an important distinction between the perception of migrants coming from countries understood as ‘culturally close’, and those understood as ‘culturally inferior’.
6. An estimated 30,000 foreigners with different forms of legal status reside in the Slovak capital.

7. Naturally, the group of foreigners living in Bratislava is far from homogenous and their (un)successful participation in cultural and civic life is determined by many intersecting factors, including class, gender, education, ethnic origin, or legal status. More detailed study of the needs and forms of participation of different ethnic communities and social groups is lacking. While keeping in mind the differentiated position of individuals resulting from a complex web of intersections, in this study I follow the perspective of my informants and understand the category of new minorities relationally, as all ethnic others, but ethnic minorities, living in Bratislava.
8. In the remainder of the text, the designations *small team evaluation* and *full team evaluation* are used.
9. Excerpts taken from the full team evaluation.
10. A notable exception is the neighbourhood surrounding the former factory Dimitrovka, which is highly populated by Vietnamese families (see Hlinčíková et al. [2014]) and numerous low-income housing developments inhabited predominantly by Roma, such as Pentagon or Kopčany, which are in the eyes of many Bratislava dwellers perceived as 'Roma neighbourhoods'.
11. My observation of the audiences for respective events suggests a variety in terms of age, gender, class, education, and interest in the topic of ethnic diversity and multiculturalism.
12. From the small team evaluation.
13. This attitude has sedimented also into a figure of speech, the saying 'Na Slovensku po slovensky', which loosely translates as 'In Slovakia, speak only Slovak'.

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