



## Community Gardening As a Means to Changing Urban Inhabitants and Their Space

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**Abstract:** *Community gardening has become a new phenomenon in Slovakia. The evolution of community gardens has been enhanced thanks to the various motivations of the people involved: to grow and share fresh and healthy vegetables in unused urban spaces adjacent to their homes, to build a sense of community and strengthen social relations, to use and cultivate vacant urban space and to contribute to a more sustainable urban environment. This paper discusses the case of community gardening in the medium-sized city of Banská Bystrica in Slovakia. It analyses the growing popularity of community gardening as a result of the emergence of grassroots activism, a sign indicating the development of civil society. Using an ethnographic approach of participant observation and interviews, this paper also looks at community gardening as a non-political collective action addressing broader global issues.*

**Keywords:** community gardens; activism; Banská Bystrica, Slovakia.



## Introduction

Community gardens are generally defined as unused urban spaces often located adjacent to people's houses and housing estates. They are cultivated by a group of people who seek to grow their own fruits and vegetables while building a healthy community and reinforcing interpersonal relationships. They use empty or neglected spaces (ownership is a matter of negotiation); the gardens can even be mobile, which means that if the garden site is sold, the garden moves to another place. The concept of community gardens is a familiar one which has been successful in many countries for several decades.

The phenomenon of community gardening as part of urban agriculture and urban planning has attracted the attention of scholars from diverse disciplines: environmental studies, social geography, sociology, food and health studies, agriculture, political sciences and social anthropology (e.g. Clayton 2007; Nardahl 2009; Cameron et al. 2010; McCormack et al. 2010; Guptil et al. 2013). In this paper I will discuss the case of community gardens in the medium-sized city of Banská Bystrica, Slovakia. The objective is to demonstrate the growth of community gardening as a result of the emergence of a new type of grassroots activism and other movements in Slovakia during the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Following Putnam's and Coleman's understanding of social capital that includes the capacity of social networks in facilitating collective action (Putnam 1993; Coleman 1990), I will also examine the role these gardens have played in strengthening social capital and building communities – an overlooked and understudied phenomenon in post-socialist Slovak society. Can community gardening be considered a non-political or political action when analysing these motivations? What is the relation between the location of a community garden and the activism of the people involved? This paper is based on socio-anthropological qualitative methods of participant observation, interviews conducted in 2013-2016 and textual analysis of media articles. Brief ethnographies of activism related to community gardening aim to contribute to the literature that uncovers diverse, multidimensional, complex and vital processes and forms of newly emerging urban grassroots activism in the region of Central and Eastern Europe.

## Community Gardening in Slovakia: Historical Context

Community gardening in Slovakia has been developing since 2012, although allotment urban gardening used to be highly popular for many decades during socialism (e.g. Beňušková 2016; Gibas et al. 2013; Duží et al. 2014). The main reason for this popularity was massive urbanisation and rural-urban migration along with a constant shortage of vegetables and fruit in shops; however, it was also an opportunity to escape to a private “unpoliticised” zone. After 1989, the interest in gardening declined for at least a decade and began to experience a revival in new forms at the turn of century. A number of articles published in popular media since 2010 demonstrate that an interest in community gardening has increased in many Slovak cities including Banská Bystrica. The diverse nature of community gardens reflects the various motivations of the people involved: although growing fresh vegetables is an important motivation in terms of health, equally important seems to be a sense of working together, sharing (knowledge, products of the garden, joy of gardening, experience, feelings), belonging to a local community, building intergenerational and neighbourly social ties, cultivating vacant



urban space and contributing to better housing and urban environment. Unlike other countries, the trend of community gardening programmes for marginalised or socially excluded people established in impoverished neighbourhoods or migrant centres or the trend of community gardens catering to a hipster lifestyle has not been evident in Slovakia. Nor has community gardening attracted the attention of urban planners and decision-makers. The establishment of community gardens in Slovak cities is predominantly initiated by young urban activists without (or with very limited) involvement on the part of the municipality.

## **Social Movements and Activism in Central and Eastern Europe: Theoretical Background**

Social movements and activism in Central and Eastern Europe have not been extensively studied. Early post-1989 literature on the region was rather critical and described the weakness of civil society and its lack of capacity, all of which was indicated by low membership in voluntary organisations, limited civic participation or lack of trust in institutions (e.g. Rose et al. 1995; Sztompka 1998; Howard 2003; Wallace, Pichler and Haerpfer 2012). In the first decade of the post-socialist transition, civil society was mainly comprised of non-governmental organisations supported by foreign funding (e.g. Císař 2010, 2015; Fabian 2015). Bottom-up-driven grassroots activism in cities across the region has been one of the most notable developments only during the last decade as is shown in publications edited by Jacobsson (Jacobsson and Saxonberg 2013, 2015; Jacobsson 2015) or in papers written by scholars from the region (e.g. Císař 2013a, b; Navrátil 2013). Evidence of vivid urban mobilisations in the region challenge these earlier statements about the weakness of civil society in Central and Eastern Europe. They demonstrate the changing nature of civic activism in Central and Eastern European cities as a sign that a new phase of civil society is developing. Contemporary urban activism in the region takes various forms and addresses various societal challenges. It reflects the disillusion of (mainly young) people with electoral politics and their desire to take matters into their own hands. Activities organised by activists are often small-scale, grassroots and sometimes are co-created with local non-governmental organisations. This type of activism is often rarely studied because it is not based on any official indicators, such as legal status of an organisation, membership or funding; it was the lack of these indicators which was behind the statements regarding a weak civil society in Central and Eastern Europe in early scholarly papers. Instead of formal membership, activists in the region prefer using the term “initiatives” when participating in local activities such as community gardening.

## **Community Gardens in the City of Banská Bystrica**

Banská Bystrica is a medium-sized city located in the mountainous region of Central Slovakia.<sup>1</sup> It is the administrative centre of the Banská Bystrica self-governing region. The city has witnessed the collapse of a handful of industries which previously played a major role in the local economy before 1989; the city, therefore, had to find new ways to grow. Due to a rich medieval mining history and an attractive geographical location near the Low and High Tatras,

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<sup>1</sup>In 2015 the population of Banská Bystrica was 78,000.



the city newly brands and markets itself as a centre for tourism and sports. I chose to study community gardening in Banská Bystrica for three reasons. First, it is my hometown so I know it well, and it is also a place where I have lots of contacts with local activists through my own engagement in a number of civic initiatives. Second, the city is nationally recognised as being rich with local activism. There are different types of community gardens in the city, which is unusual for a city of its size.<sup>2</sup> Third, little attention has been paid to research of small and medium-sized cities in urban studies.

## Ethnographies

The first community garden in Banská Bystrica was established in 2013 as part of the activities of *Záhrada (The Garden)* - The Centre for Independent Culture. *Záhrada* began as an informal cultural movement initiated by young activists. It is located in a building situated in the backyard of a historic house in the city centre. During communism the building was a storage place and was in a desolate state after 1989. A group of young people came across this vacant space in the heart of the city and after negotiations with the owner, a local businessman, they were offered the space for free for a period of ten years. Within two years the *Záhrada* building was reconstructed with the help of dozens of volunteers and with the financial support of individual and corporate donors and EU projects. Since 2012, *Záhrada* serves as a popular multifunctional meeting place. It offers artistic performances, informal education, workshops and seminars on social, political and environmental topics.

The *Záhrada* building is surrounded by a large green space that was unused and hidden behind houses and walls. The *Záhrada* activists came up with the idea to turn the space into the first community garden in the city. The group of enthusiasts met for the first time in April 2013 and mainly consisted of young professionals, students, singles or married and unmarried couples, some with small children. Saška, the initiator, had fresh in her mind an experience of community gardening in Prague. She stressed that “My engagement in building a community garden was not only about the garden itself, but about the social aspect of it. It is important that people get out of their gated communities and do something useful and enjoyable together, meet and talk to each other.” The community garden now contains 15 permaculture garden plots (for about 50 people) including a plot cared for by a nearby kindergarten. The members created a communal composting pile and herbal spiral and exchange the fruits of their labour when possible. However, after three years of observation and a number of interviews, it seems that despite the success of the existence of the community garden in terms of cultivating the vacant space and growing of vegetables, most of the contact between the community gardeners remains at a virtual level through emailing and social networks. The members always meet at the beginning and end of the season. During the season they look after their gardens, but they do not meet regularly. The main reason is the fact that the garden is situated in the city centre, far away from their homes. It seems that the proximity of the garden to the housing estates has an impact on the success of gardening as a community activity.

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<sup>2</sup>I will focus on two community gardens with a history spanning several years. In addition, there are two new gardens in the city – a school garden at a primary school in Sásová and an educational herb garden in a community centre in an old neighbourhood called Fončorda.



The second community garden in Banská Bystrica was opened in 2014 in the neighbourhood of Sásová, the largest concrete housing development in Banská Bystrica built in the 1970s-1980s. About 23% of the city's population lives here. The density of the neighbourhood combined with a lack of public space makes Sásová one of the least desirable places to live. The community garden in Sásová is a "child" of the Community Centre Sásová – the first neighbourhood centre supported by the municipality. The centre is situated in a former primary school in the middle of a concrete jungle. It aims to mobilise local citizens including young people and members of the Roma community living nearby and to build a sense of community. The idea of creating a community garden started with the vision of transforming an unused former school garden into a green area to be used by the local community as a meeting place. As the initiator Stanka said: "We do it because we can. We have the space, a vision, willingness and enthusiasm. It is a creative process... If you create something nice, it makes people happy and brings about positive energy."<sup>3</sup> Gardeners include local inhabitants, primarily professional young people, couples and families - most of them have a university education and some experience from community work in other countries. Thanks to local foundations, they were able to build seven wooden garden boxes for "carers" who would look after the plots. Since there were more people who would like to become carers than there were plots, the community has decided to use "the institute of public deliberation" in order to determine best and fairest way to allocate the garden plots. Despite the fact that the community garden in Sásová is still relatively young, it demonstrates a strong sense of community and high rate of interaction, likely due to the fact that all of the people involved live in close proximity to the garden. The green space with garden boxes, a communal barbecue area and a "living library" (a box with books to share) attract mainly young families and couples. During the popular annual ECODAY, lots of activities, such as a potluck lunch, communal healthy cooking (mainly vegetarian or vegan), a barter fair, gardening workshops (e.g. how to build an insect hotel) and eco-activities for children are featured on the programme for the day. Sharing and doing things together is the main driving force of this garden.

## Conclusion

Community gardening is one of the newly emerging forms of grassroots activism in Slovakia and focuses on the informal production or reinvention of public space. It builds on the engagement and enthusiasm of a young generation of (some) citizens who want to transform temporarily unused spaces, grow fresh food, build a sense of a community, strengthen social ties, forge identity along with solidarity and belonging, and thus, contribute to social change. The activists are for the most part younger, university-educated, motivated and experienced professionals active both in local and international networks. There are almost no senior people involved in these activities, although many of participants have gardening experience from allotment or home gardens. The reason for this might be found in the communist past. The notion of a community based on shared values and on working with and for others was not supported by state ideology. This new generation of young activists does not carry the burden of the past. They hold similar values that are driven by a genuine interest in the place where they live and a willingness to build a community. This corresponds with Diani's definition of

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<sup>3</sup>(dm). 2014. Čarovné miesta v Sásovej. *Komunitné noviny Sásová*, September 2014, p. 2.



social movements as a collective action of diverse players with shared identity and concerns (Diani 1992).

The first conclusion to be drawn from this article is related to the nature of community gardening as a collective action. The interviews demonstrated that even though community gardening is rather non-political in nature, its essence can be considered highly political since motivations behind gardening are closely connected to global political issues. The interviewed activists were rather critical of governmental and municipal neoliberal policies and were aware of the apathy of many citizens who often do not voice their concern against such policies. They stressed that growing vegetables was important for them not only for economic reasons but mainly for “political” reasons (i.e. growing fresh food that is local and not imported, food safety, sustainability of urban lifestyle and climate change). These statements confirm that community gardening can be considered a part of alternative agrifood movements. According to Allen, this kind of activism takes on the form of social and opposition movements which share a political agenda to “econstruct the agrifood system to become more environmentally sustainable, economically viable, and socially just” (Allen et al. 2004: 1).

At the same time, community gardening is a non-political action constructed as a community building activity that functions like social glue for the residents in the neighbourhood. Sociability of the gardening experience, working or spending leisure time together and sharing or swapping food and recipes has turned out to be an equally important motivational factor as the “global” issues. Community gardening contributes to building interpersonal ties and relationships, enhances a sense of belonging, leads to social cohesion and strengthens social capital, all of which are important aspects of well-being based on local identity, trust and solidarity. As Guptil et al. argue, gardening projects “promote face-to-face connections through production, distribution, and consumption of food in an effort to balance, or even replace, economic values with social ones” (Guptil et al. 2013: 168).

The second conclusion to be drawn from this article points out the importance of the relationship between the spatial proximity of the space of activism (community garden) and the place where the activists live (their housing). Two major community gardens in Banská Bystrica are located in different urban areas – in the city centre and in the largest neighbourhood. They both contribute to the improvement of the urban environment by turning unused spaces into green areas that have a positive impact on the aesthetics of urban space and on the urban climate. However, due to different locations (one far away from residential areas, the other in the close proximity to housing estates), they illustrate very different dynamics of community participation. It appears that the level of engagement and collaboration is much higher when the garden is situated close to the home of participants and when it provides an open space as an extended area of local people’s homes for leisurely activities and for children to play. This demonstrates that spatial urban planning (informal or formal) cannot be separated from the politics of community development.

Unlike some other places, in Banská Bystrica the right of access to space or the problem of politically-contested spaces such as when municipalities have to choose between a community garden or a new profitable development (e.g. Schmelzkopf 1995) is (so far) absent. Due to the communist past when public space “belonged to the state”, there are still many areas of urban



space with unknown or unresolved ownership, potentially providing an opportunity for those who would want to use it for various activities. This situation, however, might not last long.

To summarise, community gardening in Banská Bystrica encompasses numerous benefits both for the community and the urban environment; however, it is critically important to realise that this is only a very small segment of the overall social and political movements which are addressing global issues, such as sustainability, climate change, food safety, inequality or poverty, and alone it cannot make a big difference. Despite the small scale of this phenomenon, this kind of activism, non-existent merely five years ago, indicates that civil society is changing. This trend, therefore, should not be overlooked as merely an insignificant collective action – namely because such activism can lead to other activities. As Allen stresses, alternative agrifood movements possess potential to develop into broader movements for social and environmental change (Allen 2004: 3-4). One young activist's statement supports this theory with her motto: "With carrots towards civil society."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>Gehrerová, I.: Buduje v meste záhrady: Naše heslo bolo „Mrkvou k občianskej spoločnosti“. Denník N, 1. 5. 2015.



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