

Capitals and capitalness: institutional and symbolic dimensions (comparative analysis of Russian and Italian cases)*

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Capital city is seen as a key element of a state's political and territorial structure. But it is more than merely headquarters for central government bodies or a centre that keeps control over sovereignty; it is also a key element that shapes, reproduces and transforms statehood, affecting primarily its administrative and territorial structure, the relations between the centre and other regions, and a nation's regional policy. The nomination of a capital is the process of self-discovery of a nation, the essence of the people's idea of their past, as well as geopolitical positioning and the vision for a desired future. Capital city can be viewed as a centre and the most typical institutional manifestation of the functions of a political centre as distinct from periphery. The article seeks to sum up the institutional and symbolic approaches to the idea of a capital city.

1. *Institutional idea of a capital city*

Political geographers first started studying the geographic location of capitals back in the 19th century. For instance, in 1874 Johann Kohl studies the location of European capitals by analyzing the aggregation of communities along capital-linked transport routes¹. T. Raimov studied the functions of capitals in Central Asia, while M. Yanishevsky developed a typology of capitals.

According to French geographer Jean Gottman, a capital is first of all the headquarters for central government bodies². In other words, writes his Russian colleague Sergey Tarkhov, the main characteristics that sets the capital apart from any other major economic or cultural hub is the control over a nation's territory and population.

A general definition implies that capital is the municipality used as a seat of government, save for a few exceptions³. Some more important definitions of the capital

city include those by A. Treivish: capital is an important administration and control centre of a mostly national or regional level⁴; and one more: capital is a city that occupies a key or leading position in articulating actions and implementing specific powers at a global or lower level.

Alexander Ovsiannikov defines capitalness as an attribute of a city that hosts national executive, legislative, judiciary bodies, and the presidential residence. According to the researcher, any city has the potential to acquire capitalness, should the above mentioned state bodies be moved there. He also mentions capitalness as a constructed image based on a city's unique qualities and characteristics that distinguish it from others⁵.

An abstract definition of capital city (see Treivish) implies the presence of capital features or qualities in a city or region. In a broader sense (see Treivish) capital is associated with functional leadership in politics, which is compulsory for any capital city, as well as in economy and culture.

2. *Symbolic definition of a capital city*

Vadim Rossman notes that capitals are not only headquarters for government bodies but also involve «representation of a nation to itself and the world around. Capitals are idealized images of the nation and national history, they are nations in miniature of sorts»⁶. Dmitry Zamyatin defines capitalness as an ontological attribute that changes and transforms external, physical and geographical features (hollows, plateaus, endless plains, islands, foothills, riverbeds or confluences of rivers, seashores etc.)

into a powerful singular or sometimes dualistic mythological narrative infused with focused sacral energy that underpins the power discourse⁷.

To prove this idea, a number of facts and arguments can be cited. First, the name of a capital often coincides with the name of the country. In the ancient world, states used to emerge and grow around cities (take the Kingdom of Babylon, the Roman Empire and others), with the name of the metropolis projected to the rest of the country. However, in the 20th century, especially during decolonization, new capital cities were named after states, embodying the ideal image of a nation. Brasilia, for instance, was built as part of the new Brazil. Hitler had a plan to build Germania, capital of the world. Henry Picker wrote that in 1942 Hitler was inspired by the idea to rename the renewed Berlin into Germania, for the city to become the heart of the global Germanic Reich:

Just as in his own time Bismarck would time after time push Bavarians, Prussians and others to the Germanic idea, one has to consistently guide the Germanic peoples of continental Europe to the Germanic idea. He even considered it a good idea to give this activity a strong impetus by renaming the imperial capital of Berlin into Germania. In spite of the major territorial distance from the capital, given its new representative image the name "Germania" can cause the feeling of belonging in everyone who is part of the German racial core⁸.

Mexico City, Algeria (Algiers), Tunisia, Belize (after the demolition of Belize Belmopan became the new capital), Guatemala, San-Salvador (Salvador), Kuwait City, Monaco all bear the same names as their respective countries.

Secondly, gaining control over the capital is often likened to victory in an inter-

national war. German military historian Friedrich von Bernhardi wrote: «Time and again war history shows us in its numerous examples the importance of capitals in warfare. The inability of Hannibal to take over Rome took away his glory of a victor. Napoleon would almost always choose capitals as targets for his strategic assaults and crush the enemy by taking over them»⁹. Indeed, in most recent military conflicts we often follow the situation in the capital (Baghdad, Tripoli, Damascus) to understand the state of affairs in the country. Historical events that mark the demise of states and their capitals (destruction, decline or simply a loss of status), or radical state and political transformations that also include the transfer of a capital prove to be a phenomenal “engine” which helps to shape and develop the vibrant historiography of the capitals.

Third, since ancient times capital cities have been traditionally linked to rituals of sacralization of the space of power as a centre. According to Zamyatin,

capital is an image and an idea upheld by the ontological status of the state and statehood. But in a slightly broader context, one can definitely speak of multiple versions of the centre of the world phenomenology. This also implies, *inter alia*, addressing the cosmogonic aspects of the archetypal myth about the foundation of the capital. In one way or another, the capital city myth is an ontological frontier that connects and simultaneously disconnects the phenomenon of divine will and instruction from the noumenon of goal-setting and decision-making¹⁰.

Such sacralization is especially visible in the case of former capitals, which have a unique image of past glory of the nation, its second reflection (compare, for instance, Russia’s Moscow and St. Petersburg). A capital city also hosts the national museum,

theatre, national archives, which reaffirms its symbolic importance for the nation.

Finally, this trend can also be illustrated by diplomatic jargon, where the name of a country is replaced by the name of its capital, e.g. “Moscow stated”, “Washington retorted” etc.

To summarize this area of research, one can say that a capital plays three roles at a time. First, it is a sociopolitical forum serving as a power tool for social education, with the citizens participating in shaping the public discourse. Secondly, it is a hub where production and distribution of public goods and services takes place, which is the initial *raison d’être* for capitals in nation states. Thirdly, it is a configuration of symbolic resources, which is recognized by the citizens and reflects their customs and values. The above mentioned categories seldom come together in one capital city, which means that capitals are more than just the product of targeted modeling by certain forces.

Jacques Paquet states that the importance of the symbolic resource is most evident in the “special life of the capitals”, a cultural artifact in itself. It can be the result of a number of agreements and deals, intentional and unintentional actions of local forces that were, in turn, shaped by transnational flows. The capital as a system of symbols lives a life of its own, one that corresponds to public peace between locals, citizens and inhabitants of the rest of the world. The capital city dwellers gain because of the central location of the capital and material resources redistributed to their benefit. The population of the country consumes the symbolic resource that binds the nation together, whereas the inhabitants of the rest of the world who satisfy their need for travel in unusual places bear

some of the tax burden of the two previous groups.

In this non-zero-sum game each player seeks to maintain the illusion that he is the only winner but conceals his acquisitions from the others. The locals will complain about national and transnational limitations that curb the development of their city, while having at the same time tangible benefits, such as a high living standard. The citizens of the state will criticize the incredible costs that go along with national holidays; but once they leave their country, they start demonstrating national pride. Foreigners will complain about the narrow-minded inhabitants of the capital city and the detrimental exploitation in the capitals, while indulging in all kinds of entertainment in Ottawa or Paris. This disharmony of voices makes Paquet call capitals the places of least sincerity, but this insincerity is stipulated by the need to satisfy very diverse needs while covering up the flaws, which turns capitals into a paradise for all sorts of planners and designers. Whereas it may seem their main instruments are material, they actually have leverage in self-representation and symbolic resources. Consequently, they do not work for locals, but rather for the entire world, which accounts for the low manifestation of national features in capitals.

In this respect, co-evolutionary development of capitals is an interdependent socio-material and symbolic evolution in order to ensure balance between the capital and the state, given the existing limitations. This is a coherent process that determines whether the individual or the collective will prevail, but there is always the risk that either of them might want to dominate, so this is where bureaucracy comes at play, sus-

taining the vitality of a capital. Cummings and Price emphasize the influence of separate individuals, practical policies, political willpower and pluralistic geographical basis, as well as the use of specific cultural and educational institutions as the driving forces. However, they do not describe the mechanism of shifting from short-sighted market forces to political and bureaucratic planning and back.

As a result, one may conclude that the institution of a capital in a state has both institutional and symbolical dimensions and is shaped as a result of a certain model of interaction between objective and subjective factors of development.

3. *Using the symbolic potential of a capital for regional consolidation and positioning: the cases of Russian cities*

The symbolic significance of the capital that prevails over the institutional one opens prospects for the use of this capital by local communities located far from the headquarters of government bodies. We identify the following types of using the capitalness narrative in shaping local identities.

First, there is the narrative of a former capital. In the Russian case, this is not only the textbook example of St. Petersburg, but also the more complex cases of Novgorod and Vladimir, which can hardly be described as erstwhile capitals of the Russian state. Another city is Staraya Ladoga, which had given shelter to Rurik before a centralized Slavic state came into being, but has been using this brand since Peter the Great's times to legitimate the shift of the core of Russian statehood to the northwest



Kremlin Landscape, painting by Petr Vereshchagin, 1879

border of Russia. Some more examples would include capitals of states that became part of Russia (Bilyar, Kasimov, Kazan, Astrakhan and others), as well as Alexandrov under Ivan the Terrible, Omsk at the times of Kolchak, Stalin's Kuibyshev and others. This narrative is related to the ideas of the golden age of the city in the local discourse and activates historical memory of the citizens.

Even an unknown narrative may be interpreted by the citizens in this manner. For instance, from October 21, 1654 to February 10, 1655 the city of Vyazma was the de facto capital of Russia, as Tsar Alexis moved it from the plague-stricken Moscow. Or take Yaroslavl that effectively became the capital of the country during the Polish occupation of Moscow at the Time of Troubles. The city became home to the interim government (also known as the Land Council) and its armed forces (the Popular Militia).

Yet another example of a capital's "phantom memory" is Taganrog. The city

was a de facto "capital" of the Russian Empire from September till November 1825, while Emperor Alexander I was living in the city. In 1918-1919 it hosted the headquarters for Anton Denikin, who headed the White Movement in the south of Russia. Finally, Taganrog was initially considered as a Russian capital by Peter the Great, but due to military losses he had to reject this idea and opt for St. Petersburg instead.

Secondly, one can speak of regional capitals of the Urals, Siberia, Volga Region and others. In this case, there is an attempt to transfer the centre-periphery pattern of the state structure to a regional level and build the internal dichotomy of development within a smaller region inside the country. In this respect one interesting case is the regional race for the status of a local capital between Perm, Yekaterinburg and Chelyabinsk, Stavropol and Pyatigorsk, Sochi and Krasnodar, Novosibirsk, Omsk and Krasnoyarsk, Khabarovsk and Vladivostok. There was even a special contest organized

to identify the official third capital of Russia, with Kazan finishing slightly ahead of Nizhny Novgorod. Such positioning helps to build an hierarchic spatial structure, organize and subordinate the spatial units and their local brands.

Last but not least, the idea of capitalness can be transferred to the narrative of exclusivity. From this perspective, almost every city positions itself as the capital of Russian gingerbread, cucumbers, aircraft engineering etc. Here is a list of important Russian capitals in this particular understanding of the word:

Abrau-Dyurso - Champagne City
 Alexeyevka - Sunflower Oil City
 Balabanovo - Match City
 Verkhnyaya Salda - Titanium City
 Lukhovitsy - Cucumber City
 Kamyshin - Watermelon City
 Kotlas - Logging and Paper City
 Kungur - Tea City
 Rostov the Great - Enamel City
 Rybinsk - Barge Hauler City
 Saransk - Lamp City
 Suyda - Potato City
 Syzran - Tomato City
 Uryupinsk - Peripheral City

Some more examples would include Veliky Ustyug as home to Father Frost or Gorokhovets, domain of Tsar Pea, a fictional character in Russian folklore.

In all of the above cases the concept of capitals does not create centre-periphery relations, but rather allows local communities to activate synchronized mental oppositions in certain identity clusters, which is required to stand out from the rest of the crowd.

To summarize, it is obvious that the presence of symbolic capital in the idea of capitalness makes it possible even for local

communities devoid of access to state administration functions to incorporate the concept into their narratives. This provides them with the opportunity to strengthen their local identities and, provided that their potential is used effectively, to engage in their own professional branding.

4. *Use of symbolic potential of capitalness for regional consolidation and positioning: the cases of Italian cities*

The entire concept of capitalness is no less complex on the Italian soil. It took a long time before Rome, the true civilization-centre of the Italian nation, became its capital. Besides, being the centre of the Papal States, the Eternal City inadvertently impeded centralization of the Italian state. Rome was excluded from the unification of Italy and even opposed to it. At that time, the true centres of the country were Turin, Milan and Florence. During World War II, the capital city was Brindisi, followed by Salerno. Even after Rome had joined the Italian Republic and gained an official capital status in 1871, the Vatican issue long prevented the city from fully perceiving itself as the symbolic core of the Apennine Peninsula. While Rome has always been and will continue to be part of Italy, the city exceeds its symbolic content. Formerly the centre of the Roman Empire, these days it is the hub of Catholicism, an international city, and uniquely enough, the capital of three states at a time (Italy, Vatican, and the Sovereign Military Order of Malta). As a consequence, the symbolic meaning of Rome overlaps, but is not reduced to, the semantic signif-

icance of Italy: Rome is bigger than Italy. Rome is anti-Italy and yet, Rome is Italy.

This complex symbolic content, in the case of Rome, naturally found its manifestation in the aspirations of other cities to become capitals. Many Italian cities were not only the capitals of sovereign states (and have accordingly retained the memory of their capitalness), but they were also the centres of states that in territorial, political, economic and cultural terms transcended the borders of Italy. Some of the examples may include the Republics of Venice and Genoa, the Kingdom of Two Sicilies as colonial proto-empires, or the Tuscan city-states as leaders of the European Renaissance. Another graphic example would be the Free City of Trieste.

An additional phenomenon that complicates the configuration of capitalness in Italy is the infamous disproportion of social and economic development between its regions. The dominance of the North over the South in both parts of the country leads to stronger regional identity, which pushes the development of the narrative of regional capitals. Milan and Napoli can be cited here as two vivid examples.

Finally, there are the Italian capitals outside of Italy. These include the San Marino castello, Bellinzona, capital of the Italian-speaking region of Ticino in Switzerland, and Little Italy in New York City.

As a result, the multiple statehood in the Apennine Peninsula (these days as well as the past in particular) has multiplied the symbolic capital of capitalness in many Italian cities and, ironically, has slightly complicated the symbolic connotation of Rome as the core of the Italian nation.

One can conclude that capitalness in both Russia and Italy is characterized by

complex symbolic configuration. While the key cities in both countries, i.e. Moscow and Rome, are bigger than the semantic meaning of capitalness, in a certain way they are also opposed to it. Moscow does not equal Russia, just as Rome does not equal Italy, which engenders a plethora of capital city narratives at both the regional and local levels in both countries. However, this semantic configuration of capitalness apparently serves to strengthen the cultural potential of both states.

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