

# ONE HUNDRED YEARS OF NATIONAL CAPITAL-MAKING: THE CASE OF BRATISLAVA, SLOVAKIA

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**ABSTRACT:** Although Bratislava is one of the youngest national capital cities in the world, we can observe a much longer process of its capital-making. We document its gradual formation as a centre of national politics and government, as well as the centre of national culture and national symbol. Bratislava confirms the impact of assumptions and experiences as a sometimes-interim capital city and regional capital within Czechoslovakia. Facing a sudden takeover of the national capital function, we document the process of national capital-making from 1993 in more detail. There were various obstacles in key political, governmental and cultural institution-building. They are demonstrated by their headquarters location search and development, as well as in the context of interurban competition. We argue that Bratislava has already concentrated the majority of political and cultural centre functions of the state capital, despite historical turbulences and accompanying constraints. We identify their location patterns and illustrate their impact on the urban physical development of the city.

**KEYWORDS:** capital cities, functions, government, culture, urban development, Bratislava

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## Introduction

Bratislava has been one of the youngest national capital cities in the world since 1993. It is a challenging issue to understand the journey of how the city has become a capital and attempted to fulfil all the needed requirements. For a long time it was the largest city, with the strongest local economy in Slovak territory, but it could not be considered any political or cultural centre of the country, even in the early 20th century. Bratislava is an interesting case combining capital-making with national identity, and later state-building

processes in modern times. We demonstrate and evaluate the development of its selected capital functions from the Slovak stateless period to the present. We argue that Bratislava has already concentrated and completed the majority of political and cultural centre functions of the state capital, despite historical turbulences and accompanying constraints.

Although the issue of capital cities seems very traditional, it is permanently attractive, because it is discussed in numerous articles and monographs (e.g. Claval 2000, Hall 2006, Rossman 2017, Kaufman 2018). They focus, e.g., on their

functions, location or relocation, various development features, symbolic values and so on. In addition to political aspects, what is also important is national artistic and cultural identity and the symbolic dimension of the function of capitals (see, e.g. Miller, Wilson 2022, Knell 2016). However, capital cities receive less attention than other urban studies, compared to global cities, or smart cities, and lack any coherent theory (see, e.g. Mayer et al. 2016, Orttung 2019). Research focusing on capital cities as a category, or from a comparative perspective, is complemented by studies addressing issues of individual capitals (e.g. Cochrane, Passmore 2001, Andrew 2013). Bratislava as a city has attracted many authors. However, studies focusing directly on its capital functions are rare; some of its earlier aspects are reflected in the works of, e.g., Miháliková (2006) or Slavík and Grác (2008). More frequent studies are those focusing on its development, including those emphasising capital city position impact (e.g. Falán 2009, Szalay et al. 2014, Šuška 2014, Korec et al. 2020).

The debate concerning Bratislava's position as a political-administrative centre, or as the 'capital city' of Slovakia has been legitimate for more than 100 years. It is respectful of its earlier experiences as the interim capital of old Hungary during wars against the Ottoman Empire (from 1536 to the end of the 18th century), as well as the capital city of territorially reduced Slovakia as a vassal state of Nazi Germany during World War II. It served as 'the regional capital' of Slovakia during the existence of Czechoslovakia. Its choice as the capital was based on its naturally and historically developed location advantages, combined with state interests to secure access to the Danube river space similar to other Danube states (with capitals on the Danube), already in early Czechoslovakia. It was the only large and more complex urban centre in Slovakia, with good national and international transport links. Other Slovak cities were smaller, less accessible, economically weak, and had insufficient built environment capacity. Their capital ambitions did not have any relevant political support. Criticism focusing on Bratislava's eccentric, border location, more cosmopolitan urban atmosphere and lack of true national character (e.g. Ruppeldt 1926) was less influential and diminished over time. Central political institutions

remained in Bratislava also during the World War II Slovak State, as well as during the first decades of the communist regime. Its position was strengthened when it became the capital of one part of Czechoslovakia as a two-part federative state (Act 143/1968). After 1989 the position of Bratislava as the capital of Slovakia had been generally accepted, so when the processes of the split of Czechoslovakia accelerated, there was no discussion concerning the capital of the country (declared in the Slovak Constitution).

This study aims to outline making Bratislava the national capital of Slovakia within one hundred years perspective. The existence of Slovakia as a state cannot be imagined without developing and completing crucial capital functions in Bratislava. The key issue we would like to contribute is to what extent it already fulfils the usual capital city functions. We try to depict how the Slovak Republic (SR) and Bratislava coped with the sudden role of capital of the independent state and how they needed accompanying institutional and built environment adaptation. Nevertheless, considering the literature review (Claval 2001, Dijing 2001, Van der Wusten 2004, Rossman 2017), we focus only on how selected capital functions are secured, namely the role of the centre of political life and government and the centre of national culture. As indicators, we study location decisions, construction, and stabilisation of seats/head offices of top central institutions. The article does not touch upon other potential issues of the state capital, e.g. national security context, international position, the economic and business centre role, local political and government features, as well as lower-level state agencies' location. More detailed attention is paid to its development as a national cultural centre, which was under discussion during the capital formation history.

This study is based on diverse published sources, legislation, historical documents, personal expressions (interviews, memoirs), registers and map archives (*Register modernej architektúry* 2024, *Staré mapy* 2024), and institutional reports. We focus on the period from the origin of Czechoslovakia in 1918. In more detail, we discuss the recent decades after the origin of the Slovak Republic in 1993.

The structure of the paper is as follows. The first part demonstrates the evolution of the

political and governmental function of the city, focusing on the key political institutions. It is followed by changes in symbolic values represented by Bratislava. Next, the article addresses cultural functions and their development, with special attention to selected top national cultural institutions. In the last section, we discuss these capital functions from an urban development perspective.

### Bratislava as a centre of Slovak political life

A capital city is typically the seat of the main central state political and governmental institutions (e.g. van der Wusten 2004, Rossman 2017, Kaufman 2018). It is usually the head of a state (president, king), main legislative institutions (parliament, its chambers), executive power institutions (such as the office of the prime minister and ministries), as well as judicial authorities (e.g. Constitutional Court, Supreme Court), and central bank. Capitals are also centres of informal national political life and host the headquarters of main political parties. The position of Bratislava as the seat of the main political institutions of the state is declared in legislation (Act 377/1990). However, we can observe a long process of building various capacities of central state institutions. Although the key political institutions (the president, parliament, and the office of the prime minister) have stable office buildings, their scale and possibilities to serve all needed purposes are questionable. Many central state political institutions still operate in interim conditions, rented spaces, fragmented and dispersed across the city. Even though they have been able to fulfil their main tasks, it is often far from an optimum mode of operation.

The president of the Slovak Republic has an office in the city centre in a historical palace (*Grasalkovič* Palace). However, after establishing the current SR (1993), Bratislava has no immediately available representative seat for it. As a result, the president moved across the city. He started to work in Bratislava Castle (in 1993) and later worked at the city-owned *Primacialny* Palace. Such a situation of a 'homeless' president was embarrassing as no adequate working conditions for the president and his staff were

provided. The President moved to its current permanent office after its reconstruction in 1996 (it served as the seat of the Slovak President also from 1939 to 1945). The original nobility palace was a regional military headquarters in interwar Czechoslovakia and served the youth organisations during the socialist regime. Nevertheless, it is a small palace that does not provide enough space for necessary staff, which are located also in neighbouring buildings, and it is not a residence for the President.

National parliaments are among the most typical demonstrations of both democracy and the capital city. It includes the prestigious aspect of parliamentary buildings confirmed, for example, by new buildings of parliaments in Scotland and Wales after devolution (e.g. Kerr, Robinson 2021, Harbour 2023). Bratislava has a tradition of parliamentary life because the Hungarian assembly had meetings here between the 16th and 19th centuries. In the last period, meetings were held in the palace of the Hungarian Royal Chamber (now the University Library). Later on, meso-level representative bodies with limited powers (e.g. Land Council – *Krajinské zastupiteľstvo* in the interwar period) worked in so-called '*Župný dom*' (building of regional administration from the mid-19th century). It also served the WWII-time Slovak parliament (in Slovak: *Snem Slovenskej republiky*), as well as the highest representative body (*Slovenská národná rada*) during the next decades. The rising emancipation of Slovakia and its manifestation, more powers allocated to the Slovak Socialist Republic and the Slovak parliament (since 1969) and insufficient office space led in 1986 to the decision to build a new Slovak parliament building in the symbolic location in the direct neighbourhood of Bratislava Castle. Societal changes in 1990 led to a discussion concerning the future of this building. The communist-era parliament was a passive representative body. It was not planned for genuine parliamentary activities but only for formal acclamation of communist party decisions. After adjustments needed for a democratic multi-party parliament, it was completed in 1994. For its current functioning, the Slovak parliament uses a full set of reconstructed or renewed buildings (e.g. MPs offices building completed in 2002) in the Bratislava Castle area and the historical *Župný dom* in the city centre. The Slovak parliament administers the whole parliament and the

Bratislava Castle area, which was substantially revitalised during the last decades, as one of the core symbolic spaces of the state.

Not far from the Presidential Palace, the Government Office is located, which is the seat of the Prime Minister and affiliated staff. It is also a historical palace ('Summer Archbishop Palace') that used to serve for military purposes (hospital), surrounded by a palace garden. The need for representative governmental buildings for the wartime Slovak state induced its reconstruction and expansion for the then Ministry of Foreign Affairs. After WWII it served the central state (Slovak National Council), later being the seat of the Presidency of the Government of the Slovak Socialist Republic. The rising powers of the Prime Minister and the need for administrative and meeting capacities led to the construction of a new adjacent modernist pavilion (1979). There are plans for the construction of another larger office building (for about 500 employees) in the near future, also located in the palace garden.

One of the previously non-existent and not essential crucial state institutions was the central bank (National Bank of Slovakia). It was an urgently needed and expanding institution. Initially, it used the National Bank of Czechoslovakia Bratislava branch building, however, there were limited capacities (so other rented spaces were needed). As a result, it was decided to prioritise the construction of a new seat of the central bank, which started in 1996, and a new high-rise building was opened in 2002.

The central state needs a large stock of administrative spaces for its ministries. The most intensive effort to build a complete institutional framework and its seats started already after 1989, but especially after 1993. Federal bodies in Prague previously managed many state responsibilities which eventually should be managed in Bratislava. New ministries, reorganisations and expansion of previous ones, and the foundation of other new state agencies induced a much larger demand for office space. The requirements to solve many ministries' seats could not be managed immediately. Bratislava saw a period of searching for suitable premises, including the exchange of buildings among ministries, the use of buildings of former headquarters of state-owned enterprises (e.g. Slovchemia, SPP - Slovak Gas Industry), buildings serving the communist party

bodies, adaptations of state-owned buildings for new purposes, etc. Among stabilised ministries are those most important and those that could use available buildings and/or had their own 'history' in Bratislava (e.g. as smaller Slovak ministries/agencies within federal arrangement as predecessors). Among them, we can mention ministries (names shortened according to their main activity field) of finance, environment, interior, agriculture, economy (new seat since 2017), and transport. However, there were frequent interim solutions - repeated relocations, and renting spaces in standard administrative buildings. As a result, the central state is active in the property market in Bratislava. The Ministry of Investments, Regional Development and Informatisation was located in rented space in a new downtown area, later also accompanied by the newly established Ministry of Tourism and Sport (2024). The Ministry of Education is also among offices moving into a rented building (a former bank in the *Petržalka* city quarter) to concentrate its dispersed departments and the rising number of employees. The Ministry of Defence plans to reconstruct an unused building in the traditional military quarter in Bratislava as its head office in forthcoming years.

One of the best examples for developing the complex of its own administrative buildings is the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. It was a ministry that did not exist during the socialist period, so it started almost from scratch (with a small predecessor in the Ministry of International Relations, established in August 1990). The need to serve the new state led to a rapid expansion of its activity and growth in the staff number. The search for the final location lasted seven years (it changed several times during that period) with the new stable location in 1998. The core is the former building of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Slovakia (originally from 1943, the building was reconstructed and modernised), later supplemented by the neighbouring *Palugyay* Palace (after reconstruction in 2002) and an additional new neighbouring administrative building completed in 2016 (Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the SR, 2022).

Step by step head offices for central justice and judicial institutions were developing. The Constitutional Court started to function in the second-largest Slovak city of Košice as early as 1993 (following the tradition of being located outside



the capital). The set of other judicial institutions has suffered insufficient office spaces for decades (for example, one building completed in 1991 served the highest courts, prosecution, and justice ministry, although it should originally serve only the Supreme Court), with many offices scattered across the city. The General Prosecutor's Office moved to the former central bank building (in 2002). The long-term absence of the head office of the Ministry of Justice was resolved by renting a purpose-reconstructed building in 2020 (with a plan for future purchase). Nevertheless, still many rented office spaces are used across the city for these sectors (e.g. including the Supreme Administrative Court established in 2021).

The central state also needs other service capacities for its activities. Central state (and Bratislava in general) is missing a multipurpose convention centre (e.g. such a need was confirmed during the Slovak presidency of the EU) for large events. There were initiatives planned to combine public (central government) and private developer resources in the project 'National Culture and Congress Centre' (*Bratislavské noviny* 2020), but later the state withdrew from the project and it was postponed. The new representative building is supposed to be a neogothic manor house in the Bratislava city quarter *Rusovce* (in Slovak *Kaštieľ Rusovce*, national cultural monument). After reconstruction, it should provide a missing venue for top state formal events. To date, there has also been a lack of private residences of top political representatives of the state (President, Chairperson of the Parliament, Prime Minister). What is needed are general solutions that could be acceptable in a long-term perspective. Nevertheless, progress in this issue is now more possible, prompted by increasing attention to security considerations (especially after the attempted assassination of PM R. Fico in 2024).

## Bratislava as a national symbol

National capitals are among the main attributes of states and have important symbolic and representative meaning. They represent a state, its achievements and preferred values. These cities are an important part of national identity and pride. There are various dimensions of state symbolic representations by its capital (e.g.

Miháliková 2006, Therborn 2008). Usually, it focuses on symbols such as buildings representing national history, government and culture, monuments, statues/personalities, names (squares, streets), and urban layout, sometimes accenting 'grandeur' or uniqueness. What is important are also their symbolic public spaces – places for citizens' political activities of national importance (public meetings, celebrations), squares or boulevards serving state ceremonial purposes (e.g. military parades).

Bratislava tries to provide and materialise this representative and symbolic role, which is often accompanied by disputes and controversies. Owing to its history, there are no excessive monumental, triumphalist, or imperialistic symbols. However, its urban environment contains various iconic buildings and notable treasures. Among the unique historic iconic symbols are Bratislava Castle (substantially renewed in the 1950s and later after 2000), Devín Castle, St. Martin's Cathedral, and the main governmental buildings. There are also symbols from the second half of the 20th century such as the Slavín monument (Red Army military cemetery), the Slovak National Uprising Bridge, Slovak Radio building. Bratislava as a centre of political life has traditional public places of citizen mobilisation of nationwide importance (e.g. during the Velvet Revolution in 1989). The most typical places of public meetings and protests are Slovak National Uprising (SNP) Square, Freedom Square and *Hviezdoslav* Square in the city centre, as well as the new M. R. Štefánik Square on the new downtown waterfront. Symbolic values have also leading national cultural institutions.

Now Bratislava represents a democratic state. After the political regime change, numerous typical signs of the previous order disappeared or were renamed. There is no longer the Lenin Museum, or streets named, e.g. according to various communist leaders. Monuments commemorating the origins of Czechoslovakia (e.g. T. G. Masaryk, M. R. Štefánik statues) found its proper place. There is a Holocaust Memorial erected in 1996 in the old city. One of the largest ideologically exploited squares in the city centre returned to its original name Freedom Square (in Slovak *Námestie slobody*), which replaced the previous name K. Gottwald Square (according to the first communist president of Czechoslovakia),

and the dominant statue of K. Gottwald was removed. Freedom Square finally became a representative open and popular public space thanks to its reconstruction completed in 2023 (e.g. Kusá 2023). However, rapid urban development led to debates concerning the removal of other symbolic buildings, often with heritage value in favour of new development (including former cultural centres, or various pieces of industrial heritage, e.g. Šuška 2014).

Not surprisingly, new symbols have also been introduced to represent the city. National history milestones and Christian traditions are reflected in recently inaugurated symbols by central state bodies and personal politicians' initiatives. The most notable is the equestrian statue of the Great Morava King Svätopluk (erected in 2010) and the statue of St. Cyril, Methodius, and Gorazd, both on the prominent Bratislava Castle territory (2023). Among the last symbols of a new era is the protocolar Tomb of the Unknown Soldier on the city centre Danube waterfront (opened 2022).

### **The capital city: Centre of national cultural institutions**

Key arts and culture institutions of a state, as well as high-class non-public cultural facilities, are among the most typical features of a capital (see, e.g. Logan 2005, Redaelli, Chiasson 2021). Their leading position is frequently described as 'national'. It means, that in many countries, these are also cultural capitals, with permanent central government support (e.g. Rius-Ulledemolins et al. 2021). Cultural institutions are also significant political institutions (often influenced by actual political power distribution); they are part of a nation and state-building processes, identity-sustaining activities, and symbols for its own citizens and for the rest of the world. These establishments are usually under the auspices of central governments, they obtain central state funding, have professional staff and bureaucracy, are subject to state legislation, and are important parts of state cultural policy. Cultural capitals often host cultural events of national and international rank (festivals, exhibitions). Although being national capitals, they are getting closer to the meaning of international and cosmopolitan cities, combining national and global cultural trends.

At the beginning of the nation's formation in the 19th century, the role of Bratislava in national culture was marginal. However, such a situation was difficult to accept and it had to be changed given the city's aspiration. As a result of long-lasting numerous activities, it was transformed into the undisputable cultural life centre of Slovakia. We document this process in detail by addressing the history of location decisions and development of key national cultural institutions of modern states – national museum, national theatre, national gallery, and national library. Of course, Bratislava hosts many other national cultural institutions such as the Slovak Philharmonic (founded in 1949), or the National Archive (a new building opened in 1983) as well as two main permanent professional folklore ensembles (*SLUK*, *Lúčnica*), as the city is also strongly involved in Slovak folklore art. Although Bratislava is the centre, many national cultural institutions have branches spread across the country. There are also specialised museums and regional/local cultural units (linked, e.g. to local and regional self-government).

The capital-culture linkages appeared as early as during the strengthening of Slovak national emancipation in the 19th century. Inspired by many other nations, the Slovak elite started to think of the centre of Slovak national life (not immediately about the capital). Ambitions were modest, with 'calls' for a cultural (language, literature) and education urban centre, a centre of 'Slovak intelligentsia' (e.g. Štúr 1842, Záborský 1851 in: Bokes 1962). Later, the city of Martin (in Central Slovakia) emerged as the centre of Slovak culture, where such activities in 1860–1870s were concentrated. In the late 19th century, the discussion moved forward under the influence of the expanding economy, industrialisation, and railway network development. The more pragmatic discussion was reflected by Štefanovič (1898 in: Bokes 1972) in his comment that under suitable conditions the 'capital' of Slovakia would be Bratislava or Košice, as the largest cities with significant Slovak population but both multicultural and multilingual at that time (Bleha et al. 2013, Chloupek 2019). Strengthening of Slovak and Czechoslovak grounds of Bratislava based on language, education and culture was an important task (including geopolitical context) after 1918. Therefore, the existence of the Czechoslovak

Republic brought a strong impulse to Slovak cultural institutions' expansion. Their position had often been emphasised by adding 'Slovak', because there were top 'national' institutions located in the Czechoslovak capital Prague (in Czech, for example, *Národní Muzeum*). The first official legal document addressing Slovak cultural institutions adopted by Slovak legislative bodies mentioned that they closely cooperate with top institutions in Prague (Act 109/1961). It concerned especially those in Bratislava, as a quickly expanding political, economic and intellectual centre of Slovakia.

In addition to the step-by-step formation of the cultural institutional environment in Bratislava, what was also a sensitive issue was the search for the proper role of older 'founding' national institutions (and their cities). It concerned their often unclear and changing status and conversion from non-governmental traditional cultural institutions into state institutions. It was primarily the case of Martin, where *Matica Slovenska* has been located (1861–1875, renewed in 1919). This traditional national institution was formed to balance missing national representative cultural, educational, and scientific institutions at that time (like some other Slavic nations under the Austro-Hungarian monarchy). Although part of its activities had later been marginalised and fragmented, some successor institutions remained active and served as a base for state culture institutions. The role of Martin has been recognised by unique legislation on Martin as a centre of national culture (Act 241/1994).

## National Museum

For centuries, national museums have been one of the most classic expressions of national ambitions. They play a prominent role in representing national history, culture, science and technology being part of the nation-building and nation-legitimation process (Aronsson, Elgenius 2015). The establishment of such institutions was typical of many nations seeking statehood (Berger 2015). This activity was also undertaken as part of the rising Slovak national consciousness as early as the second half of the 19th century. After the foundation of the Museum Society of Slovakia (1895), permanent exhibitions and the first museum building opened in 1908 in

the city of Martin. It remained an important competitor of Bratislava also thanks to the opening of an additional new museum building in 1933. One significant difference was that the museum in Martin lacked incorporation into the system of interwar Czechoslovak state museum institutions (Václavík 2019). The Museum in Martin remained autonomous by 1961 but it had been a state museum since 1948 when it was integrated into the Slovak National Museum in Bratislava. It serves as a specialised national ethnographic museum, including a set of smaller specialist museums in its region.

On the other hand, as early as 1924, the Slovak Homeland Museum (in Slovak *Slovenské vlastivedné múzeum - SVM*) was founded in Bratislava. The role of the museum in the Bratislava increased with the completion of a new monumental-style museum building in a prime location in Bratislava (1928, now the headquarters of the Slovak National Museum), which was intended as an agricultural museum (in Slovak *Zemедelské múzeum*), a branch of the Czechoslovak Agriculture Museum in Prague. It covered also other fields later (e.g. Forestry and Hunting Museum), including collections of SVM. A larger integration of museums in Bratislava happened in 1940 into the Slovak Museum (e.g. Machajdíkova 2015). At present, the Slovak National Museum is now a system of specialised museums scattered across Slovakia, with main exhibitions in Bratislava – the Natural Science Museum (the head office building), Historical Museum, and Archaeological Museum (located at the Danube riverbank and Bratislava Castle).

## National Theatre

National theatres are also often considered catalysts for national identity and emancipation as well as noticeable expressions of national culture and language, contributing to the integration of the entire nation and being part of national revival and state foundation activities (e.g. Imre 2008, Wilmer 2009). The symbolic role of national theatres has been well documented in the history of many states' formation in Northern and East-Central Europe since the mid-19th century. It still has an important representative role for a nation in both art performance and architectural symbols. It is usually linked to the national cultural

metropole (Nekolný 2010). In many states, national theatres are considered the most prestigious institutions in the art of drama, opera, and ballet (including the so-called 'high culture').

Although there were various experiences with theatrical performances (volunteer theatres, invited and travelling ensembles), Slovakia had not had the permanent professional theatre until 1920. Not surprisingly, one of the first initiatives in the emancipation process in newly formed Czechoslovakia was the decision on the foundation of the Slovak National Theatre (SND) in Bratislava. As its base, the invited theatrical company of East Bohemian Theatre (e.g. Podmanková 2010) was used as well as the Bratislava City Theatre building (completed in 1886, now so-called 'historical building of SND'). The first performances were in the Czech language, and later performances in Slovak were added. It expanded quickly into the theatre with drama, opera, and ballet. A new drama house opened in 1955 and an additional 'Small Stage' (in Slovak *Mala Scéna*) in 1962 (both in multi-functional buildings in Bratislava). The historical SND building underwent more reconstructions (one of the largest in 1969–1972, including a modern extension that significantly improved theatre operation, e.g. Theatre database 2024), and is again waiting for new large-scale reconstruction. However, a crucial role in supporting SND's solid role in the Slovak cultural environment was the decision to build a new building that could host all three main ensembles (with increased auditorium capacities). The idea has been more frequently mentioned as part of the national cultural institutional expansion since the 1970s (e.g. Podmankova 2015). Although construction works started already in 1986, the new building was opened as late as 2007. It is a symbolic building located in a new commercial, administrative, and leisure area on the Danube waterfront. The position of the Slovak National Theatre in Bratislava is guaranteed by legislation (Act 385/1997).

### National Library

Another usual expression of a capital city's role is a national library, often in very representative buildings (see, e.g. the neighbouring state capitals – Budapest, Vienna). Some states also

extensively invested in new national library buildings (or their extensions) reflecting new needs and approaches to the preservation of printed and electronic resources and related public services (e.g. the British Library St. Pancras building in London, the new Israel National Library in Jerusalem, etc.), or intended to do so (e.g. Prague). Despite the traditional role of the city of Martin (*Matica Slovenská*) in national library activities, the University Library in Bratislava was formed in 1919 as a national library in the Slovak territory (based on short-term existing Elizabethan University library, located in an old city centre cloister building 'Klariseum'). It has been operating as a separate, scientific library not affiliated with any university being considered the state institution. In response to the growing demand for library funds, a political decision was taken to provide the University Library with additional two neighbouring historic buildings – The Palace of the Hungarian Chamber and Leopold De Pauli Palace (reconstructed in the 1950s–1960s), when plans for new university library building after WWII were abandoned (Trgiňa 2005). This position of the University Library in Bratislava was challenged in 1954 when part of the tasks of the national library was transferred to *Matica Slovenská* in Martin (related to the search for the meaning of its existence in modern times, e.g. Androvič 1997). This trend was later confirmed in 1959 (Act 53/1959) when major functions of the national library was transferred to *Matica Slovenská*. Later on, it obtained significant support for the construction of a new, large national library building within the *Matica Slovenská* institutional structure in Martin (completed in 1975, Daibau 2024).

After 1989, there were intense efforts on the part of the librarian community in Slovakia to establish the National Library as an autonomous institution. The post-socialist transitional period ambiguities reflected central state decisions. The National Library was confirmed as part of *Matica Slovenská* in Martin in 1997 (Act 68/1997). However, at the same time, a new foundation decree of the University Library in Bratislava was adopted, expressing its role as the National Library Centre (e.g. serving as a methodological centre of international cooperation). Nevertheless, the existence of the National Library within *Matica Slovenská* as a non-state institution, including limited direct influence over



its activities, was not satisfactory (e.g. librarians' community petition calling for change, Stasselova 2014). As a result, the Slovak National Library was established in Martin but as an autonomous state institution linked directly to the Ministry of Culture (Act 183/2000). However, the role of Bratislava remained also very important, especially in the field of scientific information. The University Library in Bratislava is also an autonomous state institution funded by the Ministry of Culture. Large-scale revitalisation and modernisation of its historic buildings was implemented in 2002–2006 (Bahna 2009). A few years later, a new building of the Slovak Centre of Scientific and Technical Information was opened in 2008 in Bratislava as well (serving as a national centre under the Ministry of Education).

### National Gallery

For many countries, it is hard to imagine a capital city without a representative art gallery, usually under the label 'National Gallery' (or using its traditional name), in some countries administered by national museums. Originally focusing on paintings, they now represent a large variety of artworks. As mentioned by Knoll (2015), national gallery artworks are the property of the nation. They present national art in particular complexity (all periods, various kinds of artworks, key artists) as well as other significant collections and foreign art in their universalist role.

The National Gallery was among the later ambitions to complete the top cultural institutions in Slovakia. The first real attempts were made in the 1930s and were partially implemented within the framework of the Slovak Museum in Bratislava as its specialised department in 1943 (e.g. Vaculík 1983). Reflecting the expansion of the visual arts community, final visions were developed after WWII, when the idea of the Slovak National Gallery (SNG) obtained political support (Act 24/1948). The historical baroque building on the Danube riverbank was selected as its seat (in Slovak *Vodné kasárne*). After inevitable reconstruction, the SNG started to function in 1955. However, the facilities available in these premises were insufficient, and the decision to enlarge was adopted during the 1960s. The construction of a new extension was completed in 1977, accompanied by controversies over its modernist

architectural style. The SNG was converted into a larger complex of buildings by adding the neighbouring *Esterházy* Palace in 1994. Maintenance complications of selected SNG buildings caused its partial closure and the need for reconstruction. Renovation works and further expansion (e.g. new deposits) of SNG were carried out from 2016 to 2022, respecting previously accepted architectural principles and applying actual gallery exhibition trends (costs exceeded 70 mln EUR, e.g. Kotláríková, Kusá 2024). The result attracted a lot of attention and was among the structures shortlisted for the EU Prize for Contemporary Architecture – Mies van der Rohe Award 2024 (Slovak Spectator 2024). SNG's leading role in this field is backed by legislation, with the Ministry of Culture as its founder (e.g. Act 206/2009).

### National capital-making in spatio-temporal urban development perspective

Bratislava is the capital of a younger and smaller state without inherited larger-scale (imperial) governmental buildings and with fewer resources for immediate short-term massive development needed for capital institutions (e.g. lack of resources for investment for most of its history – after establishing Czechoslovakia, war period, postwar and the post-socialist period). Therefore, it lacked space for institutional purposes at the national level for many decades. However, the expansion of capital functions contributed to the urban physical development of Bratislava. It is well visible in the long-term accumulation of buildings directly serving and/or initiated by the central government. It means that the central state participated in key Bratislava urban development areas even if we take into account only top institutions and their head offices (including the Bratislava Castle area, the Danube waterfront and the new downtown). They also have symbolic value and often are deeply embedded in citizens' minds.

Government-related activities influenced the development of the Danube waterfront area and adjacent streets southeast of the historic city core already in the 1920s–1930s. Use was made of the existing building of the former 'Korpskommando' as a seat of central administration for Slovakia

from 1919 (now serving the Philosophical Faculty of Comenius University). Among newly built were, e.g. the buildings of the current National Museum and the current Ministry of Interior. Later, the attention was transferred to the area around the current Presidential Palace and Office of the Government in the 1940s–1950s. Slovak WWII state also suffered a lack of office buildings. For governmental purposes older palace buildings available in the city were used (e.g. current seat of the Prime Minister served at that time as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs), as well as other buildings with primarily different purposes (on a temporary basis also the current National Museum building). It included the idea for a governmental quarter elaborated during the Slovak WWII state, demonstrated by an international urban planners' competition (e.g. Kováč 2006), with some ideas used also later (e.g. in Postal Palace, now the Ministry of Transport completed in 1952).

During the socialist period, a limited number of governmental buildings were built predominantly in the city quarter of *Staré Mesto* (Old City). Especially after 1969 there were built offices for a growing number of central institutions, but with a smaller capacity. The most typical was the 'multi-ministries' building completed in 1978. While at that time it hosted a group of ministries and judicial bodies, now it serves only one, the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs, and Family. The governmental decision also influenced the formation of a new Danube waterfront development zone with one of the crucial buildings, the new Slovak National Theatre. It was the key development impulse of the public sector into this area that expanded further during the post-socialist period (forming the new 'downtown'). It contributed to its deindustrialisation, high profile, and attractiveness, respecting the now widely recognised role of cultural institutions in urban development (see, e.g. Hofseth 2008). We cannot underestimate the presence of many diplomatic missions and their role in the physical development of the city. They are located in numerous reconstructed historical buildings, or new office buildings (including plans for the new US Embassy building in the new downtown area). We cannot observe any realistic effort to form a 'government quarter', or dense cluster of government offices, as it appeared in some capitals (Cochrane, Passmore 2001, Meyer et al. 2015).

As a result, in Bratislava's urban physical environment, we can see the concentration of government offices and leading cultural institutions on the wider outskirts of the historical old city core (Fig. 1). In a more detailed view, they constitute two main clusters. The first cluster is located near the Presidential Palace and Office of the Government, with quite close ministries of finance, transport, foreign affairs, and the central bank. The second cluster closer to the Danube includes the 'culture axis' (national gallery, museum and theatre) and a set of ministries including some relocated and those in rented office buildings in the new downtown area (ministries – interior, agriculture, economy, investments and regional development, tourism and sport, education – the first ministry on the right side of the Danube). As 'outliers', we have located the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Defence close to the cluster of institutions of their sectors, and the Ministry of Justice. The future location and stabilisation of missing governmental head offices will be complicated because of the lack of state-owned land and suitable buildings in a more central location. It will require larger costs or their spread to locations distant from the city centre (e.g. Ministry of Justice).

There is a considerable 'indirect' impact of the capital function on urban development in Bratislava. Its dominance in the Slovak urban system is growing. While the rest of Slovak large cities face the problem of shrinkage (including the second largest city Košice), Bratislava is growing (1996 – 452,000 inhabitants, 2023 – 478,000 inhabitants). Bratislava's position as a gateway city on the western border (attracting e.g. foreign capital), with faster post-socialist transformation, and expanding capital functions, influenced its different development trajectory compared to other Slovak cities. Such a status confirms its economic dominance when regional GDP per capita in the *Bratislavský* region is close to 40,000 EUR, while in other regions it is below 20,000 EUR (2020). The employment structure in Bratislava has substantially changed and it is now a strongly service-based economy when industry and construction employ only 15% of all employees (2022). There remained only highly competitive pieces of industry, including VW car manufacturer and Slovnaft oil refinery. Bratislava as the capital city is attractive for business services, shared services

centres and business processing outsourcing of large multinational companies (mostly absent in other Slovak cities). Local economic development is accompanied by permanently low unemployment rates (usually between 2–4%) and by the highest monthly average salary in Bratislava compared to the rest of Slovakia (*Bratislavský* region 2077 EUR, Slovakia 1637 EUR in 2023, ŠÚ SR 2024).

Such a shift in favour of services is well visible in the rising demand for office space. There is more than 2 mln sq.m of office space available (see, e.g. Cushman & Wakefield 2024). Office development is concentrated primarily on the new CBD on the left side of the Danube (former industrial and port areas close to the old city centre) but stimulates also locations along the old city core, as well as ‘South Bank’ on the Danube right bank (opposite CBD). It is changing the previously large socialist housing estate (*Petržalka*) into a more diversified urban structure. Capital function, the rising population and workplace numbers, combined with higher salaries also generate a rising consumption that induced large-scale

retail development. New housing development also by far exceeds the share of Bratislava in the population number of Slovakia. During the period of 2010–2023, more than 13% of new housing in Slovakia was built in Bratislava, and more than 27% in the *Bratislavský* region, also thanks to the impact of suburbanisation (population share of the *Bratislavský* region in the total population of Slovakia is 13.4%, ŠÚ SR 2024). An important feature is that most of the new development areas (including the new CBD) are modelled as multi-functional. Among other significant investments completed within the last two decades, we can mention, e.g., the new Bratislava airport terminal, new bus terminal (with shopping mall), new national football arena, new bridges across the Danube or new outer circle motorway (except for the northern part).

## Conclusions

Bratislava is a latecomer to the system of capital cities. As a result of an unexpected development

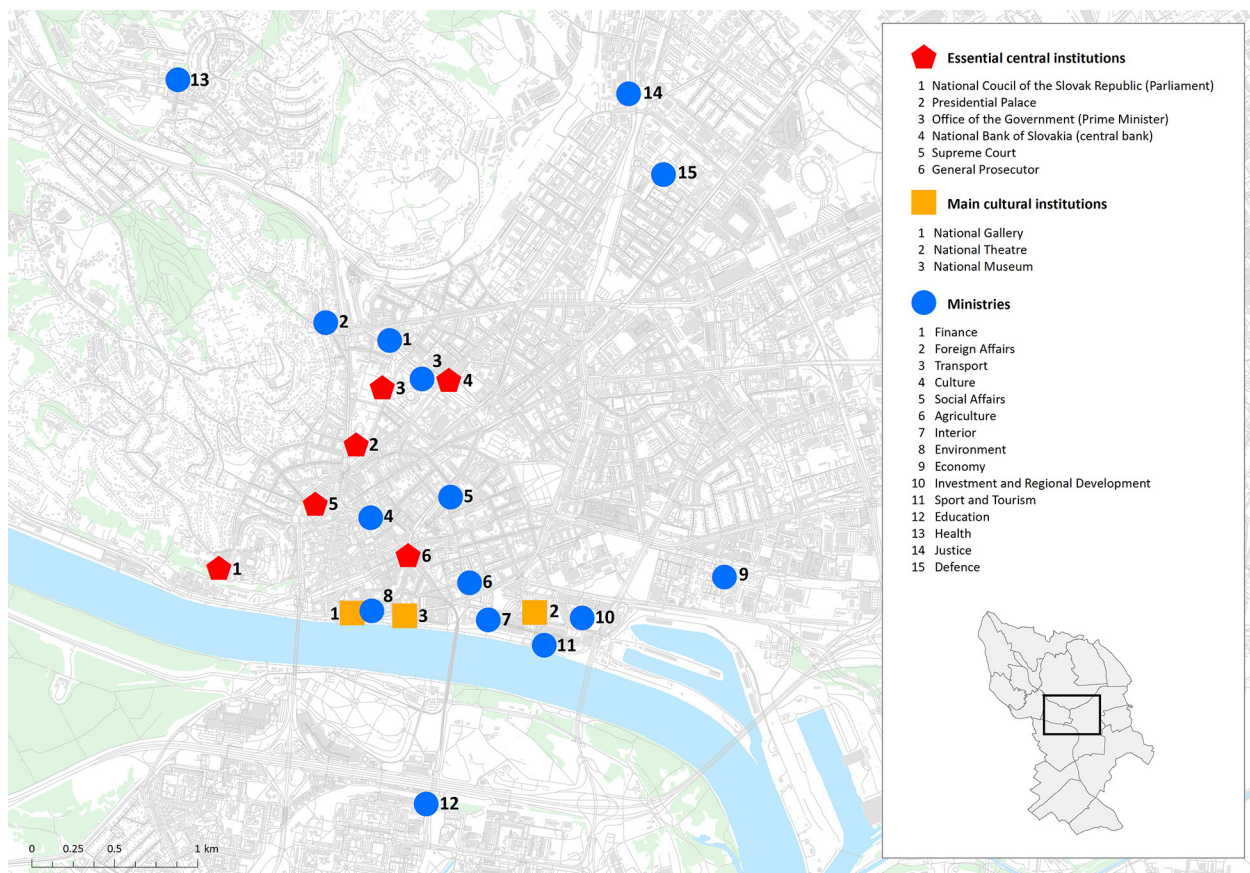


Fig. 1 Location of main Slovak central state institutions in Bratislava.



of Czechoslovak internal policy in the early 1990s and the splitting of the country, it became a capital of the independent state in 1993, for which the city was not well prepared. Throughout decades, we can observe the process of the adaptation of various aspects of the nation's life centrality in Bratislava. While for business and economic activity it was a more natural process, in the political and cultural sphere it was a managed process that depended on various stages of the state-building. Bratislava is now a solid part of national identity and state representation, and years with capital status confirmed that its capital position in Slovakia is quite resilient. From the point of view of central institutions' needs, it is an almost finished national capital, with some additional effort required. Nevertheless, we must be aware that the capital-making process is never-ending as new expectations will always appear for various reasons.

Despite Bratislava being in various forms the political centre of Slovakia for about a century, advancement in addressing 'governmental infrastructure' needs has been more related to the state-building process since 1993. Previous Slovak central institutions' needs were smaller and depended on powers distribution within levels of government (for a long time the national capital was Prague, which naturally concentrated central Czechoslovak institutions). Of course, there have always been minor improvements in governmental infrastructure since the origins of Czechoslovakia and following periods of societal development. Since independence, priority in government infrastructure development has been given to the most prominent ones and previously absent. It was the primary seat of the President, the democratic Parliament, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the National Bank of Slovakia (central bank). The needs of other ministries and central institutions have been solved subsequently, depending strongly on the public finance situation. Some future governmental construction activities or purchases to complete central state head offices are inevitable.

Over a longer period, Bratislava also successfully took on the role of a cultural centre of Slovakia. It developed national-level cultural institutions in successive steps during the last one hundred years and in various political and administrative contexts. In the interwar period,

it was mostly an adaptation of older institutions (e.g. university library, city theatre) and the development of some new buildings (museum). Postwar development was characterised by the foundation of other institutions (e.g. gallery), including clarification of their status and location (mostly in historical buildings, their reconstruction, including Bratislava Castle and its incorporation into national symbolic places). Since the late 1960s, the process has been speeded up by decisions on their improvement (new buildings, extensions) within the new federal state arrangement. Post-socialist development focused on completing unfinished buildings (SND), their sustainability, and later, on a wave of reconstruction and modernisation (SNG). This process was accompanied by reducing the role of the city of Martin as a national culture centre competitor (now only with the National Library), as well as its traditional institutions in general (e.g. *Matica Slovenská*). As a midsize city (with less than 60,000 inhabitants), it could hardly compete with the rapidly growing Bratislava (now almost a half-a-million city) and its vital intellectual life. The main institutional framework in culture and its headquarters location were decided and mostly completed already before achieving independence, and they were visible expressions of the nation-building process (not stopped during the communist regime). It is a matter of discussion if some new flagship development or generous reconstruction (e.g. with extensions into neighbouring spaces) will be undertaken in the next decades (for instance, the national culture and congress centre, new more complex national museum, philharmonic buildings). The expectation of their impressive appearance means large financial resources and dependence on the availability of state financial resources. We also can observe a trend to have 'national' institutions outside Bratislava (e.g. National Theatre Košice, previously State Theatre Košice).

Within the international framework, Bratislava entered the dense environment of larger, well-established, not-so-distant capital cities such as Vienna, Budapest, or Prague, not so easy to compete, being smaller in size and the centre of a smaller national economy. Especially the impact of Vienna's 'shadow' is significant but double-faced. It gives opportunities because of its unique proximity, unusual among capitals,



but such cooperation potential is not sufficiently exploited. On the other hand, it limits development, for example, of highly concentrated, specialised and high-end activities (e.g. Bratislava airport competing with nearby Vienna airport). Bratislava is also among new post-socialist capital cities in Europe. Most of them had governmental experiences as 'regional capitals' (in some cases also as historic capitals of independent states) with some governmental infrastructure and cultural institutions built during earlier periods. There are rare more detailed analyses focusing on their capital function development. More frequently attention is paid to their role in building national identity, or presenting new states by massive 'westernised' urban development well visible in new CBDs', waterfronts, and old cities restoration, accompanied by economic restructuring (e.g. Kolbe 2007, Burneika 2008, Babic 2021). For many of them, it is a strong new development impulse, a new kind of central position and attention. In more cases, it is strongly influenced by central state-initiated development projects, like in such capitals as Skopje, Sarajevo, or Belgrade (e.g. Grubbauer, Čamprag 2019). Specifically, Skopje (e.g. Graan 2013, Pojani 2017) is mentioned as a showcase of exceptional monumental development, usually associated with a less liberal and more authoritarian approach to capital cities, or their relocation. Bratislava never obtained this kind of central state intervention in its urban development during the post-socialist period.

Finally, if we would like to place Bratislava into the known typologies of capital cities (see, e.g. Hall 2006, Kaufmann 2018, Rossman 2018), it is a younger multifunctional capital city that is in the late stages of completing its capital city function base. Reflecting upon the process and arguments for its selection, it is a natural capital city, with not-so-good other options for Slovakia. Geographically, it can be considered also a forward capital city, which is confirmed by its location on sometimes contested territory (after WWI) and exploiting its indisputable advantages. It can be already included in the category of hegemonic capitals (based, e.g. on Carmel, Miller 2019), combining the role of the political, administrative, economic and cultural centre of the state. We cannot consider Bratislava as a case of secondary capital, and it is also not the case of a divided

capital. Besides the constitutional court (Košice), the significant majority of main central state institutions are anchored in Bratislava. Although some additional central state institutions can be deconcentrated outside Bratislava in the future (e.g. to the second largest city Košice, or other regional centres), owing to, for example, the search for more efficient operation (lower labour costs, office space costs) or political will (e.g. based on support of their regional political strongholds, or aversion against Bratislava in parts of the political spectrum), it is already a stable capital, with no intentions or serious reasons for relocation.

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### Legislation (available in Slovak or Czech):

- Act 24/1948 on Slovak National Gallery  
 Act 53/1959 on a unified system of libraries  
 Act 109/1961 on museums and galleries  
 Act 43/1968 on the capital city of Slovakia Bratislava  
 Act 143/1968 on Czechoslovak federation  
 Act 377/1990 on the capital city of Bratislava  
 Act 460/1992 Constitution of the Slovak Republic  
 Act 241/1994 on the city of Martin as a centre of national culture of Slovaks  
 Act 68/1997 on *Matica Slovenská*  
 Act 385/1997 on Slovak National Theatre  
 Act 183/2000 on libraries  
 Act 206/2009 on museums and galleries