

Banknotes and National Identity in Central and Eastern Europe

Professor Tim Unwin, Head of the Department of Geography at Royal Holloway, University of London, has been undertaking research on rural change in central and eastern Europe since the early 1990s. Struck by the diversity of images appearing on the banknotes of the countries that he visited, and the very different ways in which these appeared to represent their emergent national identities, he was determined to examine the artistic and political processes involved in their creation. Research grants from the British Academy have enabled this initial fascination to be turned into a detailed banknote database, as well as an absorbing account of the very varied processes that led to their creation.

Professor Unwin received research funding through the Small Grants scheme, and the Academy's Exchange Agreements with central and eastern European Academies.

The designs on banknotes are among the first images that foreign visitors gain of a country. Often, these symbolic representations are studied and examined even before the visitor touches foot in the country, the crisp new notes being received over the counter of some glass fronted foreign bank. However, for the so-called transition economies of central and eastern Europe, new currencies are very much more than mere pictorial representations of their break with almost fifty years of centralised planning and a command economy. As Dalibor Brozovic, writing about the National Bank of Croatia's efforts to create a new monetary system, has commented, 'Money is the foundation of the national economy, but also the mark of national sovereignty and it mirrors the State which issues it. The symbolic role of money is one of its essential characteristics, and the name of the currency is its salient feature'. Moreover, for those states that aspire to join the European Union and subsume their currencies within the Euro, this is but a brief moment of national expression, which provides a fascinating

opportunity to examine the very varied ways in which identity is inscribed and symbolically represented.

Research visits to Estonia, Poland and Georgia (in large part funded by the British Academy) in the mid-1990s had provided me with a wealth of information about the very different state-building processes that were emerging in central and eastern Europe during the 1990s. Particularly concerned as I was with the significance that rural life played in Estonian identity, and the way in which this was represented on the republic's banknotes (see Figure 1), I thought that a broader examination of the social and political processes creating such imagery would have much to tell us about the ways in which other states were seeking to represent themselves not only to their own peoples, but also to the wider international community.

However, as a geographer with relatively little knowledge about graphic design, let alone the enormous complexity of banknote printing, there



Figure 1. The image which helped inspire this research: a swallow (Estonia's national bird) flying above a typical rural landscape from the south of the country, as depicted on the back of the 500 Kroon banknote.

was a real question of where to begin with this exploration. A quick bibliographical survey indicated that there were indeed a few other people who had begun to see the potential significance of this source of empirical information concerning the shaping and reproduction of national identities. One of them, Virginia Hewitt, was Curator of Paper Money at the British Museum, and had already written a classic text, entitled *Beauty and the Banknote* (London, 1994), which examined the way in which women have been portrayed on banknotes in the 19th and 20th centuries. Both of us look back with some amusement at the very tentative 'phone call that ensued, and which eventually led to the development of this research project. The benefits of collaboration between two people from such different disciplinary and practical backgrounds, however, have been enormous, not least in terms of the combined expertise that we have been able to bring to our interviews of the politicians and artists involved in creating these everyday works of art.

The research has essentially involved two stages. First was the creation of a database of all of the new banknotes issued in central and eastern Europe since 1989. Remarkably, there are no generally recognised ways of classifying the images on banknotes, and so the first part of the research involved the construction of a classificatory system through which the banknote images could be examined. This was then incorporated into a *FileMaker Pro* database, which records a range of information about each note, including pictures and text descriptions of each side of the banknote, information about its colours, the images represented thereon, the designers, the printers, watermarks, languages used, the size of the note, and where to get further information about it. The database is now available to researchers on a CD, and will soon be accessible via the web. The authorities of almost all of the states examined so far have chosen to represent their national identities on the fronts of their banknotes essentially through images of famous people, usually male, and most often either artists or scientists. This male dominance is also evident throughout the whole process of the selection and design of the images, with all of the designers being male, and most members of the panels chosen to select the images also being male. On the few occasions where women are depicted on the notes, they are usually artists or images of female saints. The Czech Republic is thus highly unusual with three of its eight notes illustrating



Figure 2. A portrait of the Czech opera singer Ema Destinnová (1878–1930) on the front of the 2000 Koruna banknote.

women (see Figure 2). The dominant period represented on the notes is the 19th century, which accords well with wider theories concerning the importance of this century in the construction of national identities throughout Europe (see Figure 3). However, not all states have chosen 'heroes' from this period, and several countries such as Poland and Macedonia (see Figure 4, overleaf) have gone back much further in time in search of their symbolic identities in periods of past greatness. The backs of the notes almost always represent a place or landscape associated with the person depicted on the front, and it is remarkable how many of these images in some way reflect aspects of an urban and Christian Europe.

The second part of the research has been to try to understand the processes that led to the choice and actual design of the images and the banknotes as artistic works. This has involved us interviewing a wide range of people, from politicians and central bank officials, to graphic artists and designers, in a



Figure 3. Front of the 20 Lari note from Georgia illustrating the poet, writer and statesman Ilia Chavchavadze (1837–1907), an example of the portrayal of 19th century men as symbols of the national identity.

Figure 4. Front of the 5000 Denar note from Macedonia representing the Tetovo Maenad, a bronze figurine in a rich grave discovered in Tetovo and constructed in the last decades of the 6th century BC. The figure represents a character playing and dancing with her partner, a satyr, in honour of the cult of Dionysus.



selection of states across central and eastern Europe. These interviews have been by no means always easy, but they have provided interesting insights into the serendipitous character of political decision making, and the great un-certainty involved in artistic design. A very wide range of decision-making processes were adopted in determining the images to be portrayed on the notes, from competitions, through committee decisions, to the simple allocation of the process to designers in the state printing works. Among the most inspiring of the interviews we have undertaken have been those that we have been privileged enough to gain with the artists themselves, many of whom have provided fascinating insights into the processes of design that they went through in creating the images that eventually appeared on the notes. In the future, we also intend to interview staff in the various printing companies in north America and Europe who also contributed to the design process.

In concluding this short review, it is very appropriate to acknowledge not only the financial support from the British Academy which has made the research possible, but also the network of collaboration provided through their International Relations Department which has enabled us to meet colleagues in the various Academies of Sciences in the countries visited.

Any enquiries about this research, or the banknote database should be directed to Professor Tim Unwin (email: t.unwin@rhul.ac.uk)