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In search of a new identity in Polish mountains: the case of Babia Góra

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August 2013

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Working Paper 2013

Abstract: Since 1989, Poland has been experiencing a revival of local and regional movements rediscovering their traditions. The movements benefited from a reform of the system of local and regional government. The paper introduces a case of one of new administrative unit established at the foot of a southern Polish peak Babia Góra. Regional actors have used the peak's image in building a regional identity. The paper analyses how this mountain and its various representations are exploited in regional narratives. This importantly includes a use of this newly created identity to rally the regional community around common development objectives.

Keywords: mountain(s), landscape, symbolic place, regional identity, regionalism.

Regional identity could be defined "as the specific meanings, including the sentiments and images, that are attached to a region by an actor or groups of actors" (Simon, Huigen and Groote 2010: 410). This identity could sometimes constitute for local and regional communities a factor in their economic development (Raagmaa 2002). Positive representations of one's own territory and of oneself, shared by the local community, may lead to a mobilisation of local and regional resources and stimulate common actions. At the same time external perceptions of a region may affect actions of both local communities and of the outside world. Actors involved professionally in the development of a region have a serious role to play in shaping this external image (Simon, Huigen and Groote 2010; Vainikka 2012). However, their activities may also reinforce certain features of the regional identity.

Thus, questions of regional identity and of the region's perception seem important for both local and regional authorities governing territorial units often established on contradictory criteria and who are faced with the task of running projects for the benefit of the entire community. Political leaders might consider steps to be taken to build a regional community and whether this can help achieving common goals. They might ask themselves whether their region is distinguishable from others and if its perception influences decisions

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of holidaymakers in search for a destination, investors with money to spend and pensioners on the lookout for their retirement home.

In building regional identities decision makers face a choice of employing either old or new regionalist approach (Balme 1996; Keating 1998). Old regionalism involves the existence of a single, strong and historically developed community that provides a core for a regional bond (Paasi 2009). Where this is lacking and a common identity cannot rely on 'blood and belonging' it may instead be built on shared values, a sense of solidarity and mutual trust. Built around such civic values a region may be more open and tolerant (Johansson 2005). While old regionalism, based on a common ancestry, is more past-oriented and defensive, new regionalism is more about here and now. New regionalist tendencies are a result of a belief that in modern capitalism regulations and governance should be directed towards de-centralised sub-national institutional frameworks and supports (Harrisson 2006). "New regionalism accentuates interconnectedness and readiness to face global competition on the sub-national level" (Zimmerbauer and Paasi 2013: 33).

However, both types of regional identity tend to be interwoven with each other. J. Mathias (2005) claims that while new regionalism is largely based on political and economic differences a reference to specific socio-cultural features continues to produce more resonance among the regional community. "New regional democratic or semi democratic organisations (…) need identification among the local population to be successful and enduring. In 'new regionalist' regional development schemes, such 'soft factors' are easily overlooked, and have the potential to undermine the whole project." (Frisvoll and Rye 2009: 189). Therefore, regional authorities, for which economic success and citizen involvement is their *raison d'être*, must be capable of skilfully shaping the region's perception using both types of regionalism.

Similar questions arose when a new administrative division of Poland was established in 1999 (Gorzelak 2009; OECD 2008). Polish regional structure suffers from its complicated history; during last century it was modified several times and every time with a profound impact on people's lives. (See also Obydenkova 2006 and Scott 2009, who analyse challenges involved in the development of regional structures in Central and Eastern Europe during their regime transitions). The lack of stability has resulted in a quasi-absence of regional identity of the newly established voivodships (regions or the highest tier of administrative division) and powiats (districts or the middle tier of administrative division)

Nevertheless, after 1989 democratic change, one can observe a revival of many regional movements (Bialasiewicz 2002), even if still at a limited scales comparing to some

Western European countries. These regions have been able to rebuild their structures in the new situation owing it mostly to the emerging civic society. The regional leaders have been spontaneously rediscovering and embracing regional traditions. In some cases the newly introduced administrative division has strengthened some regional communities and supplied them with more institutionalised forms. But in most of the created regions identities need to be created and negotiated by regional actors (Zhu, Qian and Feng 2011). Two factors shall be pointed out here: firstly, the political discourse as related to regional policies of the European Union (Sagan 2009); secondly, a general attitude in a globalizing world (Raagmaa 2002; Jones and MacLeod 2004), magnified locally by the difficult living conditions at a tumultuous time of the Poland's great social change. In such moments, when people are looking for new answers to fill a void left by a sudden ideological collapse a return to local and regional structures offers a strong potential. This is confirmed by a social survey where Poles asked to choose what they are most attached between town, region, country or Europe chose their local community (61 per cent of responses) and then country as a whole (19 per cent). But when asked about what they identify with as their second choice, 41 per cent of Poles selected their regional community (CBOS 2009).

In Polish regionalist literature much more attention is given to communities with long historical roots, such as Silesians, Kashubians, inhabitants of Wielkopolska (Greater Poland – Poznań region) or Podhale (an area at the foot of the Tatra Mts. inhabited by Górale, or mountain people) (Jałowiecki 1999, Hermanowski and Kosmala 2003). There are much less interest in newly emerging regions and smaller areas of a subregional scale. In near future, some authors claim (Rachwalski, Betkiewicz and Izdebska 2000), a (sub)region of the powiat (district) size around 1,000 sq. km could become the most important level of territorial identification altering in this way the current situation whereby the local and national identities still prevail (Jałowiecki and Szczepański 2001). While the powiat has less powers than both the gmina (or the lowest tier of administrative division) and the voivodship, subregional structures could grow in strength as they encompass those structures of civic society that from an individual point of view are the closest and where the basic personal needs are realised. A similar reasoning considering a (sub)region 'at a human scale' stood behind a French policy of the *pays*, or land, which combines the idea of a strong (sub)regional identity with the implementation of common projects (Portier 2001).

In this study, the research area covering the Sucha Beskidzka Powiat and certain neighbouring gminas confirm these tendencies in Poland. In this area of about 800-1,000 sq. km there can be observed a pattern of actions undertaken by local leaders aiming to create

new regional identity during the last 20 years. This new identity is based on one particular place, the highest peak of the Beskidy range (part of the Carpathian Mountains), Mt. Babia Góra (1,725 m) straddling the Polish-Slovak border (Babia Hora in Slovakian). It has become an emblem for the regional movement and a focal point of the regional discourse. Everything that is summed up in the term of the 'memory of the region', including its history, traditions, values, even local economy, is related to this mountain, thus giving the region a reason to exist. It seems that just as there is no place for a 'nation without history' nor is there a place for a 'region without history', thus the need to discover the 'common past' is more and more urgent. This trend of rediscovering local traditions involving the mountain peak is accompanied by more of a civic discourse that uses the mountains as a symbol to mobilise the local community.

Symbols are essential elements of identity as a social construct that could be charted along several axes, such as age, gender and nationality. In the case of regional identity these axes very often involve a specific territory, its typical features, and perceptions of their own territory among the local community (Lussault 2003). The process of spatial identification leads to the determination of boundaries separating the region from adjacent territories and to identify relevant differences (e.g. physico-geographical, historical, social, cultural, political, etc.) setting the region apart. Often, boundary lines may not be as salient as differences between areas they separate (Lévy 2003). "'Identity' is hence basically a form of categorisation, where boundaries are used to distinguish one areal domain or social collective ('us') from others." (Paasi 2002: 139).

The symbolic shape of the regional process (Paasi 2002; Terlouw 2001), including regional names, stereotypes and symbolic places, is very much based on the region's territorial shape (i.e. its physical properties, such as land relief, land use, its boundaries and their historical changes). Further on, a region could be more and more institutionalised by formalized practices and regional institutions (Frisvoll and Rye 2009; Simon, Huigen and Groote 2010).

The regional iconography consists usually of some typical items like flags, coats of arms and, more recently, also involving logos. The space itself, e.g. the region's characteristic landscape features, may also become an essential part of the identity building process (Nogué and Vincent 2004). "The landscape, which can be conceptualised as both 'what is seen' and 'the way it is seen' (...), hosts physical spaces and human actions that may be used to construct the character, or place-identity, of a locale and its representation through visual imagery" (Carter, Dyer and Bishnu 2007: 755). If this symbolic value of space is centred on

one 'symbolic place' it gives the region's inhabitants a more tangible evidence of their regional community. There are some similarities in the use of the symbols, such as flags or coats of arms and symbolic places as all could be a sign of internal recognition of the community and serve as its identification for other regional groups outside its territory. An act of aggression against one of them, whether it is flag burning or an occupation of a symbolic site, is equivalent to an aggression against the whole of the regional community and its territory. Sacrificing for a symbolic place may be a sign of the strongest sense of place (Shamai 1991; Shamai and Ilatov 2005).

The role of the symbolic place is a very important one, as in this one place the whole region is represented and all group values are attributed to that place. The symbolic place must not be confused with a mere, but very popular, landmark immediately associated with a particular city, region or country. The symbolic place emanates a message involving emotions and values and therefore that is more profound. Moreover, it is an object of certain rituals that sustain its importance and provide a bond between the place and the community (Debarbieux 2003). Thus, one may well notice that for the *homo regionalis* space is not homogeneous, i.e. in some places other symbolic layer of emotions and values may be discovered. In these places community members demonstrate by individual actions their attachment to the whole region and meet fellow community members, thus recognising their regional values and strengthening their identity. Therefore the emotional message helps convert such places into useful tools for building of a regional identity, as well to use their images in regional marketing and image building (Paasi 2003).

Regional marketing and regional visibility policies could also create new symbolic places meeting demands laid by professionals. Mountains may be a landscape feature that is well adaptable for this role, as they convey a wide range of meanings that could be used in aforementioned regional activities. Historically, mountains played very often the role of a symbolic place for regional or national communities in different cultures. The French use the term *haut lieu*, or a 'high place' to say 'symbolic place'. Because of certain characteristics like height, inaccessibility and climate, mountains were perceived as special places. On every continent one can find holy mountains and religious cults located on mountaintops, allowing the faithful to unite during the pilgrimage to them (Debarbieux 2003).

These representations laid out as a foundation for religious beliefs continue to affect the perception of space, even though they have survived to our times only in some degraded forms. E. Bernbaum (1999), in his considerations on the holy mountain phenomenon throughout the world, proposed nine recurrent visions of mountains in various communities

and some practical consequences of these mental patterns while undertaking any actions. Perhaps some of these aspects could still be true even in modern societies. In sections below, an attempt to draw a parallel between these visions and the situation in the research area will be provided.

Bernbaum's typology of holy mountains includes: (1) a mountain as a centre (of the universe, world or region), standing for a landmark, not only in the space, but as well in the system of values, each place and event is located in relation to the mountain-centre; (2) a mountain as power, place where concentrate power and the might of the gods; (3) a mountain as a god itself or place where gods dwell; (4) a mountain as a temple or place of a cult; (5) a mountain as a garden or paradise; (6) a mountain as a collective ancestor or a place where they stay; (7) a mountain as an element of the collective identity, when a mountain becomes a tribal totem, ensures unity of a people; (8) a mountain as a source, a place where god's grace descends from, but also a source of water, food, life, fertility, peace, and prosperity; (9) a mountain as an inspiration – a place where peace reigns, thus standing for the most suitable place for meditation or spiritual transformation.

These visions are a legacy of the times when mountains were relatively isolated from other territories, evoking complicated and ambiguous relations of fear and admiration (Nogué and Vincent 2004). A gradual integration in terms of accessibility and development observed since the nineteenth century has led to a change in the representations of the mountains. They have lost some of their mythical constructions, but very often are only perceived by most people from the perspective of a holiday experience (David 1990; Nogué and Vincent 2004). At the same time, mountains are becoming more significant in self-identification of local communities. While previously mountains were merely their natural habitat, now local communities have to confront their perceptions of the mountains with perceptions of outsiders, including tourists, environmentalists and decision makers (Debarbieux and Rudaz 2008).

At the time when modern nations took shape, they built their national mythologies using specific places and landscapes. Mountains featured strongly in this process, such as in Catalonia (Nogué and Vincent 2004) and Switzerland (Berthoud 2001; Debarbieux and Rudaz 2008) where they have become part of the national imagery. It is also present in the national discourse of the Lega Nord, the party that proposes the independence of northern Italian region of 'Padania' (Huysseune 2010). Many national and regional narratives involve a notion that a wild mountainous landscape shapes the character of 'mountain people' that value liberty, individualism, and at the same time the sense of community (Debarbieux and Rudaz

2008; Huysseune 2010). Beliefs about landscapes and values of mountain people persist even when the people themselves move and join urban communities (Wrazen 2007). Indeed, the same stereotype has developed in Poland where people living in the Podhale region at the foot of the Tatras, 'free sons of the mountains', were extremely popular in both the local and national culture at the beginning of the twentieth century. Following Poland's regained independence in 1918, national authorities supported the Podhale regionalism using it as a pillar of a state-building ideology (Kroh 1999). This is when the Podhale region expanded incorporating other mountain areas while the culture of the Podhale people seemingly superseded traditions of other ethnographic groups. This also happened around Babia Góra and the paper deals with it in subsequent sections.

Perception of mountain areas may also have an economic aspect. What seems to be a great advantage for tourism could be perceived differently in other areas of mountain economy. Experts tend to underscore that mountains continue to be perceived as less accessible, with harsh climate and difficult living conditions, associated rather with traditional industry than with modern high-tech factories. However, the admiration for their beauty persists and they could serve as an excellent decoration for the industry evoking in the subconscious the concepts of strength and stability (Debarbieux 2001).

In this paper I shall explore how these representations of mountains are used in a particular case of regional identity-building and how it affects the chances of stimulating local cooperation and accelerating regional development. The presence of Mt. Babia Góra in the regional discourse and the actions of regional actors will be analysed.

Babia Góra in the regional discourse

There are two main regional actors who deal with the regional identity building, or the intentional symbolic actions aiming to produce a sense of belonging and attachment to this particular area. These are the Association of the Babia Góra Gminas (Stowarzyszenie Gmin Babiogórskich, or SGB) and the powiat (district) authorities of Sucha Beskidzka. In their actions Babia Góra is particularly often used as an element of the regional iconography: it is present in proposals for the region's name, it appears in names of local institutions, enterprises, cultural and sport events, and features on their logos or is promoted as a brand of local products.

Though the regional actors agree that the region should include Babia Góra in its name there is no one well-established name, an evidence for the region's relatively short history. Two of the most common proposals are the 'Region Babiogórski', or the Babia Góra Region,

and 'Podbabiogórze' which roughly translates as the Sub-Babia Góra (area). 'Ziemia Babiogórska' (the Babia Góra Land) is another term currently in use, which has evolved form denoting a small area around the peak to a larger area reaching up to the boundaries of the powiat itself.

None of these names has gained any substantial popularity with an exception of 'Podbabiogórze', but this is due to its recent inclusion in the title of EU-funded projects. In November 2004, a Google search generated just above one hundred results for both names combined (102 for 'Region Babiogórski' and 38 for 'Podbabiogórze'). By November 2011, the first remained relatively flat (183), while the second one produced a considerably higher response (79,200). The same query made for the names of neighbouring regions such as 'Podhale', 'Podbeskidzie' or 'Żywiecczyzna' produced between 200 thousand and 8 million hits. Beside this lack of one common name, the region's geographical coverage varies depending on who defines it (fig. 1). These problems are typical for the 'young' regions and will probably be solved later in the debate between regional actors.

Several dozens of different institutions such as local authorities, cultural and sport events, and even local companies and associations also use the name of the mountain in their names. Its number in the area of Sucha Beskidzka Powiat is comparable to the number of other 'regional' names of the older regions that have some influence in this area, namely Podhale in the east and Podbeskidzie in the west.

Some of these institutions placed Babia Góra's unique outline on their logos. Two of them, the Babiogórski National Park and the Gmina of Zawoja, on whose territory the summit is located, operate at a smaller scale, but they are both actively involved in the regional discourse as members of broader cooperation bodies. The other five organisations cover the wider area. The first one, the already mentioned SGB, adopted its logo in 1995 when this socio-cultural organisation was established. Later, in 2000, the same did the newly established administrative unit – the Powiat of Sucha Beskidzka (Polish 'powiat suski'), choosing a silhouetted logo of Babia Góra and the name of 'Podbabiogórze'. Also the Lokalna Grupa Działania „Podbabiogórze" (Local Action Group), established in 2006 as part of the EU Leader+ programme, took a similar decision. Three other bodies that have adopted the mountain peak on their logos also see their main purpose in promoting and developing the local economy (agrotourism, local traditional handicraft, local entrepreneurship). On its website the Babiogórskie Stowarzyszenie "Zielona Linia" ('Green Line' Babia Góra Association) states: "The Association runs projects based on the local culture and tradition, which are often used to develop and promote the region" (http://www.zielonalinia.org.pl/;

accessed: 15 February 2013). The organisations and initiatives mentioned here share leaders who participate and cooperate in many of these activities. Some of them are active mostly in NGOs, others are also involved in local politics for the practical effectiveness' sake.
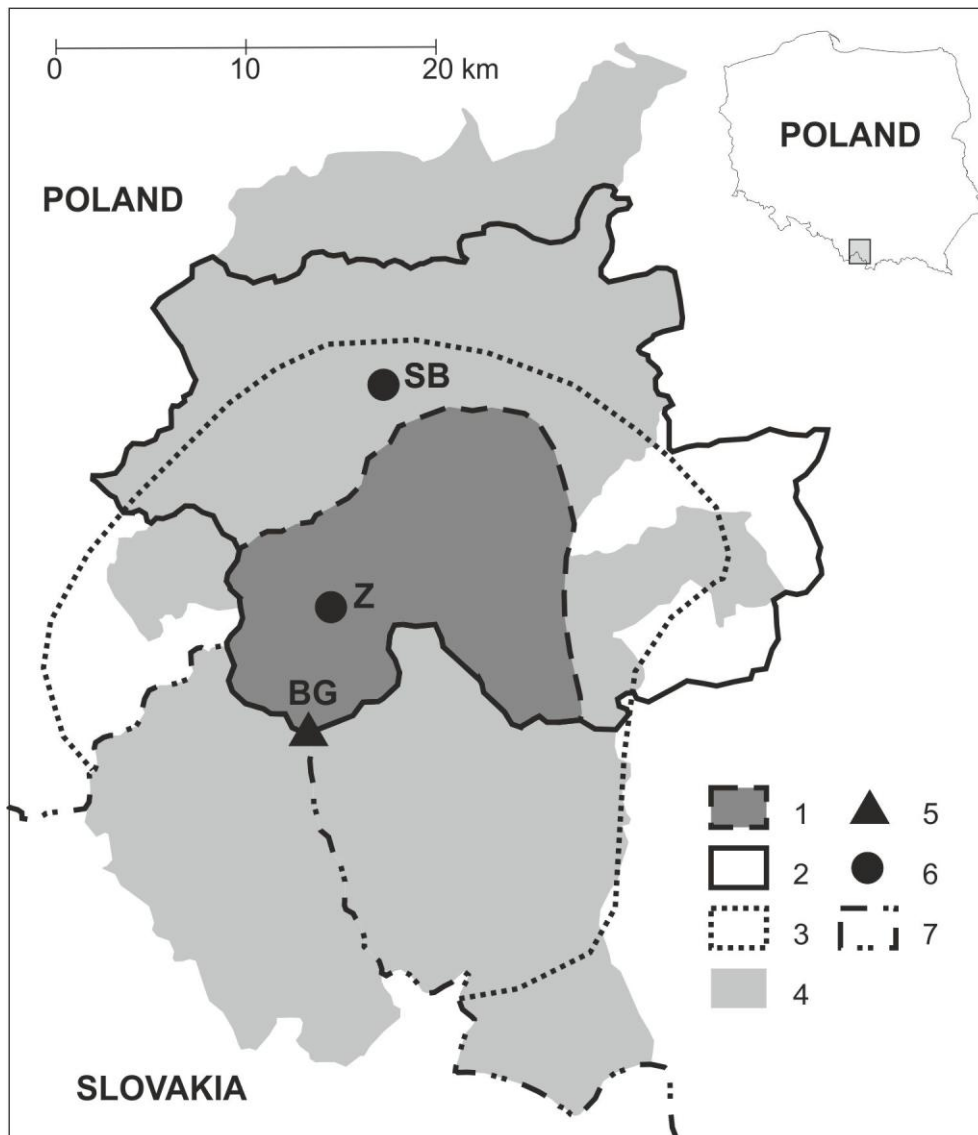

Fig. 1. Babia Góra Region – overlapping areas

Key: 1. Territory populated by Babia Góra mountain people at the end of the 19th c. (based on Janicka-Krzywda 2000); 2. Boundary of the Sucha Beskidzka Powiat and of the 'Podbabiogórze' Local Action Group in 2011; 3. Perceived extent of the Babia Góra Region in 2004 (in Poland only; author's own survey); 4. Territory of the Stowarzyszenie Gmin Babiogórskich (in Poland) and of the Združenie Babia Hora (in Slovakia) in 2011; 5. Summit of Baba Góra; 6. Main sites of the Babia Góra movement: Zawoja (Z) and Sucha Beskidzka (SB); 7. National border.

Source: author's own elaboration.

What were the reasons that may have convinced the regional actors to choose Babia Góra and how do they explain this decision? It seems that there is no clear answer, as to most

of them this choice is so obvious and natural, nor can they find any other object that could replace Babia Góra. "As Babia Góra is the most expressive reference point for the powiat, it was only natural to use it in the [promotional] name […]" (Podbabiogórze… 2000). Some, however, try to give some explications: "Babia Góra has for ages been the landmark attraction, possessing a wealth of natural values and constituting the symbol of regional autonomy and cultural identity. It has an influence on inhabitants' living conditions. Once dividing it now connects the Polish and Slovak communities" (Partnerstwo... 2002). They are mostly stressing that this is the most interesting and distinctive place of that region, as equally shown in local opinion surveys. In my 2004 survey of over 300 inhabitants of the powiat of Sucha Beskidzka, half of the respondents pointed to Babia Góra as the most emblematic place with other sites scoring barely 10-20 per cent. Another survey (Projekt Babia Góra... 2002), in two SGB gminas, shows that their inhabitants similarly find it as the greatest value of this area, representing such positive emotions like beauty of landscape, contact with nature or clean environment.

The way the mountain is being used, whether intentionally or not, in the regional discourse connects to all of the nine visions of mountains mentioned above, influencing, as we suppose, ways of thinking and acting both as their inhabitants and people from outside. An efficient policy has to cope with this variety of representations, select and promote those interesting from the regional point of view.

The Association of Babia Góra Gminas (SGB), founded in 1995 by the authorities of fourteen gminas around the Babia Góra, has its offices in the village of Zawoja, at the foot of the mountain. It is noteworthy that the initiator of the association, Andrzej Pająk, having served as the elected head (*wójt*) of the gmina authorities in Zawoja in 1990-1998 continued his political career as the *starosta* (head) of the powiat in 1998-2010. This means that the two main institutional actors were also personally linked. More than half of the current SGB member gminas are now part of the Sucha Beskidzka Powiat, except of six that belong to three neighbouring powiats. However, one gmina of the Sucha Beskidzka Powiat is not an SGB member. The SGB's main purpose is to preserve the local culture and folklore, or in other words to revive the memory of the region. "Among the important issues undertaken by the SGB are efforts towards preserving indigenous culture and folklore and cultivating centuries-long traditions," says the organisation's website. "The Association invites all lovers of Babia Góra and those who cherish the idea of maintaining the cultural heritage of our forefathers, conserving the natural features of our land and promoting our homelands." (SGB website, http://sgb.zawoja.ug.pl/, accessed: 15 February 2013).

They publish leaflets and books, including the most popular *Kalendarz Babiogórski* (*Babia Góra Calendar*) that (re)discovers different regional traditions every year (tab. 1). The calendar reflects the association's mission. Seven out of the total eleven calendars published to date are dominated by the religious traditions that bind the local communities, including religious sanctuaries, parishes, churches, wayside shrines and crosses, patron saints of local villages and trades and saints coming from the area. The second important group of topics (five issues) is ethnography, including typical trades, regional dishes, legends, etc. Other topics may be classified collectively as related to cultural heritage, historic events, natural environment and activities of local citizens. On the whole, the calendars cover predominantly the dimensions of identity typical of old regionalism. Only recently, issues linked to the new regionalism made their way into the calendar. In 2009 and 2010, it featured SGB member gminas and their achievements, a fact linked with the twentieth anniversary of the local government reform in Poland and with local elections in autumn of 2010.

Table 1. Topics of Kalendarz Babiogórski

Year	Topic
2000	The ritual year; parishes, town and village members of the SGB
2001	Patron saints; folk costumes from around Babia Góra
2002	Wayside shrines and crosses from around Babia Góra
2003	Traditional trades and occupations around Babia Góra and their patron saints
2004	Traditional dishes and drinks from around Babia Góra
2005	Folk artists from around Babia Góra; saints, blessed people and servants of God from around Babia Góra
2006	Historic monuments around Babia Góra; sanctuaries and sites of worship within the SGB area
2007	Wildlife and wildlife conservation around Babia Góra; plants with Christian symbolism and plants with magical and healing properties
2008	Cemeteries, graves, sites of commemoration, monuments, obelisks and memorial plaques around Babia Góra
2009	Member gminas of the SGB; legends and folk tales from around Babia Góra
2010	Achievements of gminas associated in the SGB over the last 20 years
2011	History and activities of the Voluntary Fire Brigades around Babia Góra

Source: author's own elaboration.

The organisation concentrates mostly on the folklore of the Babia Góra mountain population (Górale Babiogórscy or Babiogórcy), a small ethnographic group limited actually to few villages directly at the foot of Babia Góra. This group featured a number of characteristics of a separate folk culture, including dress, construction style, dialect and music. While regional activists are aware that different ethnographic groups used to inhabit the current SGB territory, they unwittingly push the perceived extent of the Babia Góra group's ethnonym to the whole SGB territory. Thus, in their eyes, the culture of the Babia

Góra mountain people is becoming the core of the cultural values and their purest example that emanates to the rest of the area.

The SGB decided for example to strongly promote the traditional Babia Góra folk costume reconstructed in the 1980s (Janicka-Krzywda 2000). This may be regarded as an interesting example of a 'rediscovery of traditions'. What is also quite revealing is how the very reconstruction came about. It had to be based on descriptions and photographs left behind by Austrian ethnographers and geographers who worked here in the late nineteenth century, at a time when the area belonged to the Austro-Hungarian Empire. During the one hundred years that followed the material culture was all but obliterated. By the mid-twentieth century, use of the traditional costume in daily life had been gradually abandoned in favour of modern dress, while the Podhale costume was adopted for festive occasions (Kroh 1999; Janicka-Krzywda 2002). Traditional Babia Góra costumes kept at a local museum perished in the Second World War (Janicka-Krzywda 2000). It is interesting to note that the SGB's leaders are building Babia Góra regional identity in the opposition to the better-known and stronger culture of the adjacent Podhale region.

In its activity, SGB refers to the local dialect, and in one of its publications it explicitly states "we are bound primarily by speech" (Fitak 1999). Isolated dialect words are found in SGB publications, which are generally written in the standard Polish language. The local dialect is also used to denote official functions, including *krąg gazdów* instead of the management board – *krąg* is standard Polish for circle, but *gazda* (male) and *gaździna* (female) are dialect words for wealthy farmers (Brückner 2000). The dialect words *pisac* and *piniondzorka* replace secretary and treasurer. Even if the use of these words may sound slightly humorous, they constitute a significant reference to the local tradition.

It can be said, therefore, that regional activists working with the SGB stress the importance of consciously remembering their own culture and its roots, which very often are associated with the culture of the Babia Góra countrymen. Though limited in area, it is perceived to be the purest form of the regional culture and Babia Góra seems to be a treasure-vault where the ancestors leave these values as a legacy. It seems to me that the SGB's most significant message, according to Bernbaum's typology, is that of a mountain as a place where their ancestors and their values stay.

Other images presented by SGB leaders include their vision of Babia Góra as a connection linking lands of this region, a meeting point for its inhabitants. "For four centuries Babia Góra was a symbol with which people living at its foot identified, including indigenous Babia Góra communities on its northern slopes and the Orava people on the southern slopes"

(Omylak 2002: 158). An original motto was coined 'Connected by Babia Góra' ('Łączy nas Babia Góra' in Polish) which fully exemplifies this symbolic figure. SGB leaders contrast the past of the region, when the local inhabitants from on both sides of the mountain were divided (by the heavily guarded national border and by negative stereotyping of other ethnic groups), with its future when everybody will cooperate. This vision refers to the times when forbidding mountains made it difficult to communicate with each other, which now should change, partly as a result of SGB activities. The SGB is pursuing this through having forged a partnership with its Slovakian counterpart Združenie Babia Hora, an organisation grouping seven municipalities on the southern side of the mountain peak. The Slovakian association also has among its goals "a comprehensive development of the Babia Góra region", as is stated in its motto.

The SGB leaders are expecting that the sense of attachment to the highest peak common for the population on both its sides could facilitate building of a regional identity. This motto is not just an empty platitude, but the words are followed by actions. For example, every year school students meet and compete in regional knowledge competitions. The most symbolic activity, however, is an annual hiking trip where representatives of local authorities climb mountain peaks. The tradition was established in 1996, and five of the last fifteen hikes targeted Babia Góra itself. This joint undertaking exemplifies the idea of a new regional identity and builds a regional community.

Finally the idea of connecting together was turned into a more practical shape with the establishing of a new organisation aiming to promote the region and its products. Founded in 2001, the local partnership 'Łączy nas Babia Góra' gathers thirty regional actors: NGOs, gmina authorities, schools, entrepreneurs and national park authorities. Its main objective is to promote local products, including local cheese, honey, nettle soup, wooden toys, glass painting and many more under the brand name 'Łączy nas Babia Góra'. The organisation also supports the development of sustainable tourism. In 2002, the organisation was renamed as Grupa Partnerska 'Łączy nas Babia Góra'.

The second important regional actor is the Powiat of Sucha Beskidzka, a subregional government authority at the foot of Babia Góra. The powiat authorities have chosen to promote the name of 'Podbabiogórze', or the Sub-Babia Góra (area). This somehow awkward name tries to follow other similar geographic names in Poland like: Podhale (historical nineteenth century name of a region centred on the towns of Nowy Targ and Zakopane), Podbeskidzie (coined in 1980s with Bielsko-Biała as capital) and Podkarpacie (the name of a new voivodship adopted in 1999, strongly criticized, with Rzeszów as capital). The main aim

to give this name was to underline its mountainous location that evokes the word *góra* or 'mountain'. This location is perceived as very attractive, especially in the context of tourism development (Program rozwoju… 2003).

The powiat authorities also aim to distinguish the new region from the neighbouring regions popular for their tourist facilities and which are often quoted in guidebooks with reference to the Babia Góra area. The authorities note that "this ['Podbabiogórze'] area is found in media reports, in studies and in publications devoted to other regions. It never appears as a separate region. We stand to lose much by being incapable of determining where we belong and nobody will do it for us" (Podbabiogórze… 2000). Hence "a need to create a name (a marketing logo) of 'Podbabiogórze', that would help the region in better identification and to underline its attractive location in the mountains." (Program rozwoju… 2003: 75).

The new name is supposed to create a new and more identifiable quality (Podbabiogórze… 2000). Some may wonder why not use the Powiat's official name of 'powiat suski' ('suski' is an adjective form for Sucha Beskidzka). The main reason is that outside the powiat area very few people correctly identify the very unusual adjective with this area. And unlike the name relating to the Babia Góra Mountain this name doesn't evoke any positive emotions. One side effect of this promotion is that certain components of the integration policy inside the powiat itself have appeared. Again, these actions seem still to be rather intuitive than a well-prepared communication policy, a typical trait in a majority of the local governments in Poland.

The first activity of the authorities that took into account the powiat's new brand was the launch, in 2000, of the free newsletter *Biuletyn Podbabiogórski* (*Sub-Babia Góra Newsletter*), which is still published today. In 2006, a new initiative was established under the name Stowarzyszenie Lokalna Grupa Działania (Local Action Group, LAG) 'Podbabiogórze', which started as part of the Leader+ rural development programme (2004-2006) and then continued as part of the EU-financed operational programme (2007-2013). The association was established as an initiative of the Sucha Beskidzka Powiat (*Lokalna Strategia Rozwoju Podbabiogórza* 2006) and included representatives of 28 organisations, including gminas, schools, culture centres, NGOs, sports clubs and private companies. The main objective of the 'Podbabiogórze' LAG is to promote the development of tourism, culture and local products by leveraging the local environment and traditional crafts (e.g. blotting paper art, embroidery, glass painting, straw decoration, wooden toy making, etc.) practised in the powiat's seven rural gminas. They perceive Babia Góra as the area's main tourist attraction: "Our area is

particularly attractive to the tourist because of Babia Góra, while the landscape and climate provide an excellent leisure environment" ('Podbabiogórze' LAG website; http://www.lgdpodbabiogorze.pl; accessed: 15 February 2013). From the very beginning, LAG initiated projects and organisations aiming to promote social and economic activity in the region. Importantly none of these enterprises include in their names the official name of the powiat, but use the word 'Podbabiogórze' instead. Examples of these organisations include Podbabiogórska Rada Młodych Aktywnych (Sub-Babia Góra Council of Active Young People) and Podbabiogórskie Forum Organizacji Pozarządowych (Sub-Babia Góra NGO Forum).

Among the various projects the most visible and important for the regional identity are three projects started in 2007:

- The on-line shop 'Sklepik Podbabiogórski' offering traditional local products and building on the experience of the earlier organisation Grupa Partnerska 'Łączy nas Babia Góra' responsible for certification of local products.
- The tourist path 'Podbabiogórskie Ekomuzeum' which links 56 local cultural sites accessible by foot, on bicycle and horseback.
- A 'Sub-Babia Góra' tourist information network.

It seems that the powiat authorities have concluded that its official name has less potential to integrate its community than a reference to the peak of Babia Góra. The official name tends to appear cryptic to outsiders, while to insiders it may convey an excessive domination of the capital town. The mountain peak, on the other hand, is more recognisable externally and more neutral internally. As a result, the authorities are moving towards new regionalism while maintaining certain aspects of an old regionalist approach. The religious and ethnographic aspects tend to be less important than in the SGB, while the practical dimension is more highlighted, though it is based on the local environment and traditional skills respecting the principles of sustainable development.

Following this line of thought the powiat inhabitants were asked if they would agree to change the official name from the 'Sucha Beskidzka Powiat' ('powiat suski') to 'Babia Góra Powiat' ('powiat babiogórski'). This would follow in the footsteps of two other powiats, i.e. Tatrzański and Bieszczadzki, whose names come from the names of mountain ranges (Tatra Mts. and Bieszczady Mts. respectively) rather than from capital towns. 38 per cent of the respondents agreed and 42 per cent rejected the proposal. The supporters underlined their identification with mountains and Babia Góra in particular comparing it with some of the new names given to the voivodships and powiats in 1999 derived from the names of historical

regions or geographical features. It proves that people are sensitive to this kind of names and they may well influence the process of regional identity building. The opponents of the proposed change argued that they were accustomed to the current name and were concerned about the possible costs of this change. It is worth consideration what would be the possible consequences of this change to the regional identity. Perhaps the institutionalised name would be more efficient, naturally provided it would be accompanied by more coherent and consistent actions.

Conclusions

Two main actors, Stowarzyszenie Gmin Babiogórskich (SGB) and the Sucha Beskidzka Powiat, have been instrumental in the creation of the new region and its new identity built around the peak of Babia Góra. These activities were clearly in response to opportunities that opened up as a result of several external stimuli (fig. 2.). The first of these was the fall of communism followed by the democratic change and the return of the locally elected government (initially at the gmina level only). Newly acquired democratic freedoms lifted previous restrictions on individuals and communities pursuing their own identities. This included building of an identity in confrontation to the previously overwhelming and indulged territorial groups, such as, in this case, the Podhale mountain people. On the other hand, elected authorities engaged themselves in the identity discourse to prove to their constituencies that they cared about the community values. This had led to the establishment of the SGB, bringing political activities beyond the gmina level.

The SGB's activity anticipated a reform of the national administrative system, which inserted the powiat between the gmina and the voivodship in 1999. This move provided yet another stimulus for seeking an identity at a higher-than-local scale, despite the limited powers of the new tier of administration. The activity manifests itself, among others, in a competition between the main national political parties and local powiat groupings in the elections to the powiat authorities.

The most recent important stimulus was Poland's accession to the European Union, in 2004, as it opened new sources of financing of local and regional-scale projects. At the powiat level an important development is the operation of the Local Action Groups, which aim to spur the activity in rural areas in accordance with the principles of sustainable development.

The regional process has a number of parallel strains. The SGB, located in the village of Zawoja, a core territory of the Babia Góra mountain people, draws deep on religious and

folk traditions. It strives to discover local traditions and puts at the forefront the somewhat forgotten ethnographic group of the Babia Góra mountain people, differentiates them from the Podhale group, promotes the reconstructed folk costume and, to a lesser extent, the local dialect. In doing so, the SGB refers predominantly to the area of values and spirituality.
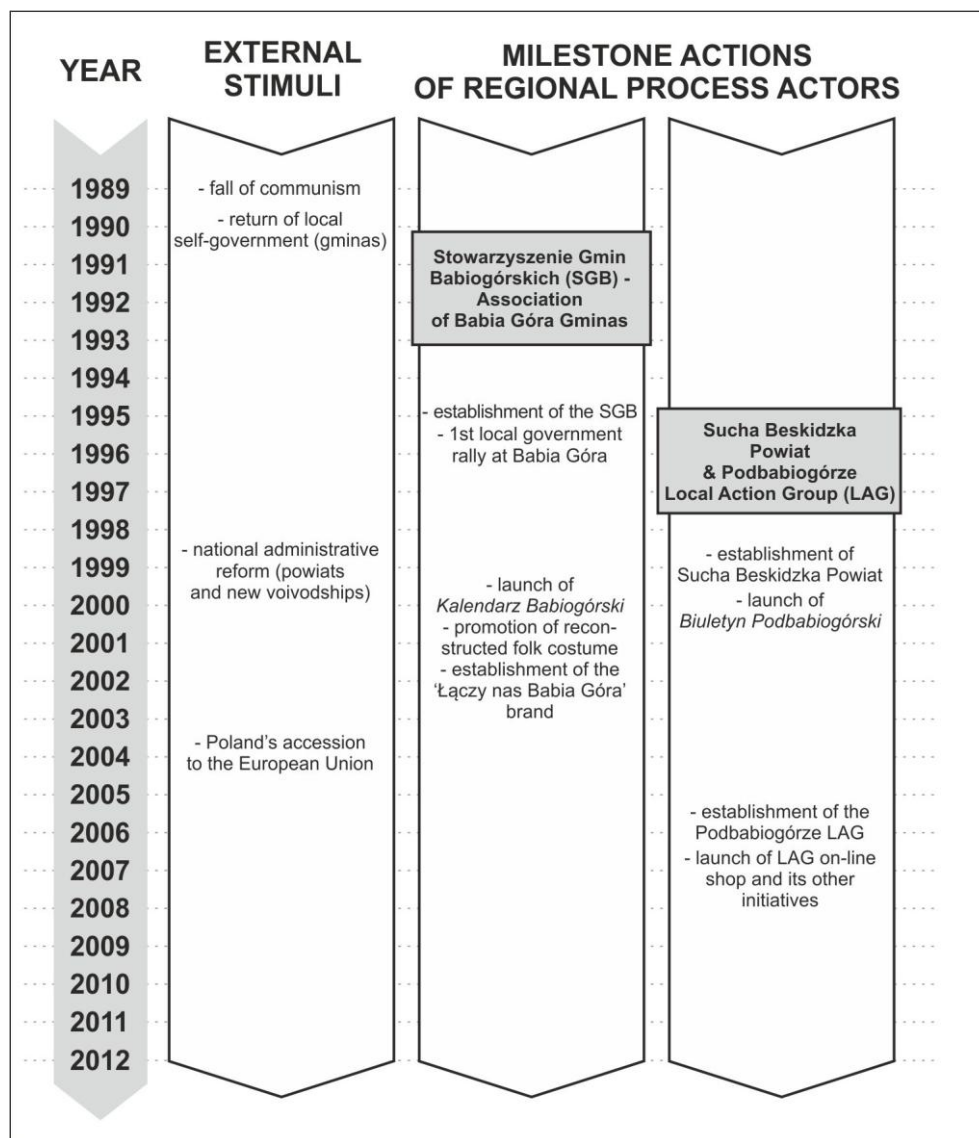

Figure 2. Milestones in the development of the Babia Góra Region
Source: author's own elaboration.

The powiat authorities are focusing on the extended region, rather than the core-region identity. This difference (which is particularly subtle in the Polish language, where the switch from the core to the extended identity is denoted by the mere addition of the prefix 'pod', or 'sub', changing 'babiogórska' into 'podbabiogórska') shifts the centre of gravity away from the actual peak, while still leaving the community in its shadow. Due to the fact that the powiat is the organiser, the identity-building process has that self-government and civil

dimension and involves multiple public and private organisations in the activities. It refers to the local environmental and cultural resources (such as traditional crafts), but in their practical and economic aspects.

The 'patron peak' has proven to be a sufficiently spacious and universal symbol to contain both the message of the old (a community of values, a striving to maintain traditions, support the community based on the 'ties of blood' of one ethnic group, involving a strong religious aspect) and certain elements of the new regionalism (common objectives, organised around the local government, aiming for joint activities while retaining traditional crafts and landscapes).

The universality of the mountain symbolic is not limited to Babia Góra. Examples include cooperation programmes involving 'mountain people' from various countries of the globalising world. This cooperation is based on self-identification with the mountain environment that is supposed to have an influence on the mentality of people living in these areas and puts them in opposition to the 'people in the plains' (Debarbieux and Rudaz 2008). Interestingly, idea of the mountains (e.g. of a specific peak) may both serve to differentiate from other mountain peoples and, depending on the need of regional actors, can also be used as a platform for cooperation. At Babia Góra the idea has served to differentiate from the Podhale people, but also to unite with the Slovaks living across the ridge.

Mountains, therefore, show a wealth of possible meanings, but this diversity could be inconvenient. However, if dealt with properly, it gives a range of message-altering opportunities depending on who is addressed. In the case of the described region the landscape feature was used to both promote this area outside and to develop regional identity inside.

In the regional narratives the most popular image of Babia Góra is that of a mountain as a centre of a region. It seems that in the context of regional identity building it is one of the most fertile visions out of the E. Bernbaum's typology. For the regional actors the mountain of Babia Góra is supposed to constitute a focal point for the regional community; it connects the powiat's member-gminas, the adjacent gminas outside the powiat and similar authorities from across the Slovakian border. This is a place where local populations can meet with each other, as is already happening under certain activities of the regional government and school authorities. Thus, it is not only the best-known place in all of the powiat, but something that can be called a 'symbolic place'. Nevertheless, since the region in question is *in statu nascendi*, the same reservation is valid for this 'symbolic place-to-be'. And if nothing changes

in the regional policies, the region's role should continue to grow in significance, its image accompanying an ever-increasing number of common events.

The dominant vision of Babia Góra is completed by some additional representations that strengthen this idea of the mountain as central place. It resembles the vision of a mountain as a place where gods and ancestors' spirits dwell, but in this case it could be rather described as a dwelling place 'region's spirit'. As mentioned above, for many regional actors it stands for a 'memory of the region' where their shared experience and values are laid down. And here two greatest regional resources: clean environment and cultural heritage, have been preserved, what evokes again Bernbaum's typology of a mountain-garden and mountain-ancestors. But these two ideas are here to support the principal one of the mountain-centre. Thus, the mountain peak constitutes a repository of the regional cultures, its traditions and values. Dominating the region the peak plays the role of a sentinel, so that the whole region located, as it is often described, 'at its foot' does not betray these values. It resembles very much the role of the mountains for the Padanian nationalists – the Alps stand for authenticity and they guarantee the preservation and transmission of the regional identity and the moral virtues of Padania (Huysseune 2010).

The mountain of Babia Góra was also an important element in promotional strategies where the image of a mountain was treated more pragmatically, mostly to attract visitors. The proposed vision of the mountain is supposed to attract them with its beauty, impressive landscapes and clean environment, where they can take a rest or enjoy themselves skiing. The regional leaders have not utilised the vision of the mountain as a force, potentially attractive from the business point of view, in avoiding development avenues other then tourism.

Finally, to sum this analysis up, it would be useful to look at the development of the institutions making use of the highest peak in their policies. At the very beginning, in the mid-1990s, it was only the Babia Góra Gminas Association that appeared as an important actor of the regional discourse. They also attracted many different institutions that began participating in the region building. Their cultural and ecological ideas were evolving towards more practical questions and served as a basis to some political and economical actions. It would not be possible without growing a regional consciousness among the regional leaders and later among the local population. The questions of the regional identity in this area remain vital as there is still a certain degree of mistrust between inhabitants of the local gminas. The regional actors are still facing an enormous task ahead, but it is indispensable to prepare more adequate and consistent actions if results are to meet the expectations. If that should happen we will probably observe more examples of successful regional cooperation heading towards a faster

regional development in this area. Currently, it is still difficult to establish clear links between the regional identity and effectiveness of the development activities, mostly because of the short history of the phenomenon in the area. The above-described processes are usually longwinded and their consequences might be shifted to the future, meaning that this area gives more opportunities to follow research on their evolution and mutual relations between them.

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