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**Free cycling for everyone? A critical view on the imaginations of the bike sharing system *BUBI* in Budapest**

## 1. Introduction and outline

March 5, 2014 was a day with breaking news for cycling activists in the Hungarian Capital Budapest. The *Hungarian Cycling Club*, the hugest advocacy group for cyclists posted on its Facebook site a photo of two mechanics in green safety vests while installing docking stations for public bicycles.<sup>1</sup> Everybody who was following the cycling news immediately understood what the two mechanics were doing. The location was also easily recognizable because of the yellow tram passing by and the buildings from the end of the 19 century in the background. The photo was taken on the main circular road in the heart of the Hungarian Capital.

The photo posted on the site was the first visible proof that the long expected public bicycle sharing system called *BUBI*, which is a short name for Budapest Bike, finally became reality. The present spread of public bike sharing systems in inner-city districts around the world marks a new chapter in urban mobility services (Fishman, Washington, and Haworth 2013; Shaneen, Guzman, and Zhang 2012).

But for urban cycling supporter groups in Budapest, *BUBI* was more than just a new service in the public space at this moment. In their facebook comments and sharings, they celebrated the event as a symbolic triumph over the car-friendly city and explained the news to be the result of a decade long fight for a dedicated cycling infrastructure.

But the picture was not perfect: besides the excitement of this small group of people, the absence of professional marketing and media campaigns was striking. Those who did not follow cycling news, had no idea what the docking stations and green bicycles were for. The imagination of this new infrastructure as something desired for urban life was obviously only shared by the small community of the bicycle advocates.

This short example outlines the double purposes of this paper. *BUBI* shows that the recent expansion of public bicycle share programs has reached Central Eastern Europe as well. Accordingly, the first aim of this paper is to include this region into contemporary research. The second aim of this paper is introduce qualitative research in this field in order to understand transport choices in a greather depth. Given that the public bike sharing

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<sup>1</sup><https://www.facebook.com/MagyarKerekparosklub/photos/a.157890054036.116205.132720449036/10152056298519037>, 15.08.2014.

system symbolizes a step ahead to improve the quality of life in a city, it is essential to analyze which factors arrange the practices of users and encourage or discourage the use of such services. Meanings, ideas and values associated with these new infrastructures play a key role in the decisions of the users.

How can these be explored? My method of choice is ethnographic fieldresearch and media analysis. Face to face interviews with traffic experts, media contents and new public spheres of urban life such as blogs and social media open up a perspective on the above mentioned aspects, which influence how people make sense of bicycle sharing in the urban context as an everyday mode of transport.<sup>2</sup> Empirical evidence like this gained through qualitative research, complemented by quantitative data analyses about the number, direction, frequency of the trips and the characteristics of the usergroup helps us understanding the phenomenon in a useful way.

My research focuses on two years before the launch of the system in August 2014. The paper is divided into three parts. First, I discuss the importance of research on infrastructures. Next, I will present you details about the public bike sharing system *BUBI*. After that I will give you a “thick description” of the empirical findings with the methods of Clifford Geertz based on semi-structured interviews with experts, on media discourses and web contents. Finally, I will draw my conclusions

## **2. Eastern European transport history and understanding of infrastructures**

The idea of bicycle share programs goes back to the rediscovery and reinterpretation of the bicycle as a solution for the problems of car oriented urban life (Horton 2006). The bicycle is reconsidered as one solution besides others, for environmental pollution, peak oil, climate change, traffic congestions and obesity (Pucher 2012; Parkin 2012). The different social realities of cycling indicate that not only hard facts influence people in the decision for a transport mode. The recent “cultural turn” in cycling research seeks to find out what are the relevancies of these cultural factors (Horton 2006, 2007; Stoffers, Oosterhuis, and Cox 2011). They claim that in procycling campaigns these cultural characteristics are significant “next to or in combination with infrastructures and policies” (Stoffers, Oosterhuis, and Cox

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<sup>2</sup> This paper is part of my dissertation project with the title “I love Budapest. I bike Budapest? A cultural analysis of urban cycling in Budapest, 2004-2013” at the *Graduate School for Eastern and Southeastern Europe Area Studies, Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich*.

2011: 266). Admittedly, publications about cycling in Europe focus on best practice cases in Western Europe and broadly neglect the intertwining developments in Central Eastern Europe.

By introducing this region into the research, it is logical to reflect on the different paths of development in transportation. Still in the 20th century most generations in Eastern Europe were mainly socialised with the transport forms of public transport and the bicycle, since the private car trade and distribution were controlled by the state under socialism (Siegelbaum 2011). However, consequences of delayed catch up in car ownership are barely reflected at all in the history of transport in CEE. For example, there is hardly any research on the question of how the generation`s mobility behaviour was shaped by the experience of growing up with the use of public transport and bicycles during socialist times while desiring a private car (Péteri 2009).

To make the relevance of this point more clear, a survey made by the *European Union* sheds light on some tendencies in the field of research in Hungary. The report called *Attitudes of Europeans Towards Urban Mobility* reveals that the rate of using public transport in Hungary is the highest in Europe – with 28 % of the respondents using it on a daily basis (European Commission 2013: 9). More surprisingly, Hungarians stand on the fourth place in the daily use of the bicycle after the Netherlands, Denmark and Finland (European Commission 2013: 10).

Although this survey is not representative, it still highlights some characteristics of the modal share in Hungary after the fall of communism. At the same time, it has to be taken into account that post-socialist transformation, market liberalization and economic globalization (Pucher and Buehler 2005) made a growing number of private car ownership possible (Hefter and Deffner Jutta 2012). This is why cities in Central Eastern Europe are confronted in the present with urban traffic congestions and environmental problems, similar to Western Europe. Different stakeholders and NGOs call for similar solutions as in Western Europe: promotion of public transport, walking and cycling also in the form of urban services like bike sharing systems.

This paper does not recall the developments of three generations of public bicycle sharing programs; instead it focuses on the recent trends. For cities, the investments in public bicycle sharing systems mean political commitment for sustainable traffic policies. The

spread of public bicycle sharing in the present is based on new IT-solutions and involvement of private investments. The *Boris Bike* from London, named after the mayor of the British capital, the huge project called *Velolib* in Paris or *Bicing* in Barcelona illustrate how these services gained success within shortest time and how mass cycling changed the image of these cities. However, public bicycle sharing systems as well as urban mobility services are rooted in the economic and sociocultural life in each of these cities differently.

An anthropological approach on infrastructures (Star 1999; Larkin 2013) can help to explain variances. Infrastructures are not static but dynamic facilities. Bicycle share systems as such are constructed and maintained through local discourses, the urban environment and mobility practices of users and non-users. This constructivist view also highlights, why infrastructures in the understanding of Adonia Lugo and Jessica Lockrem are channels “that enable circulation of goods, knowledge, meaning, people, and power” (Lugo and Lockrem 2012: 1).

With this theoretical understanding of infrastructures, the main research question of the paper is: what are the specific challenges for cycling infrastructures, such as public bike sharing systems, in the contested urban spaces of Central Eastern Europe?

### **3. From the bicycle boom to the public bike sharing programm *BUBI***

One key aspect furthering the introduction of the public bicycle share programm was that the image of cycling in Budapest has radically changed within ten years. In 2004 cycling was still unthinkable in the urban space: it was not regarded as a normal everyday mode of transport. From that year onwards a small group of cycling messengers started a demonstration called *Critical Mass Budapest*, which politized the bicycle and transformed perceptions of safety (Udvarhelyi 2009; Othon-Buckley 2010; Kükü and the Critical Mass Budapest Community 2012). The protest form originated in San Francisco and lead to enormous success in Hungary attracting around 80.000-100.000 people (Kükü and the Critical Mass Budapest Community 2012).

For this reason, the urban cyclists are nowadays perceived as an interest group, which sucessfully created support for a political question through a bottom up movement and by standing up for their rights. Despite public support, the advocates did not achieve the necessary support by city authorities. Although the *Budapest Transport Development*

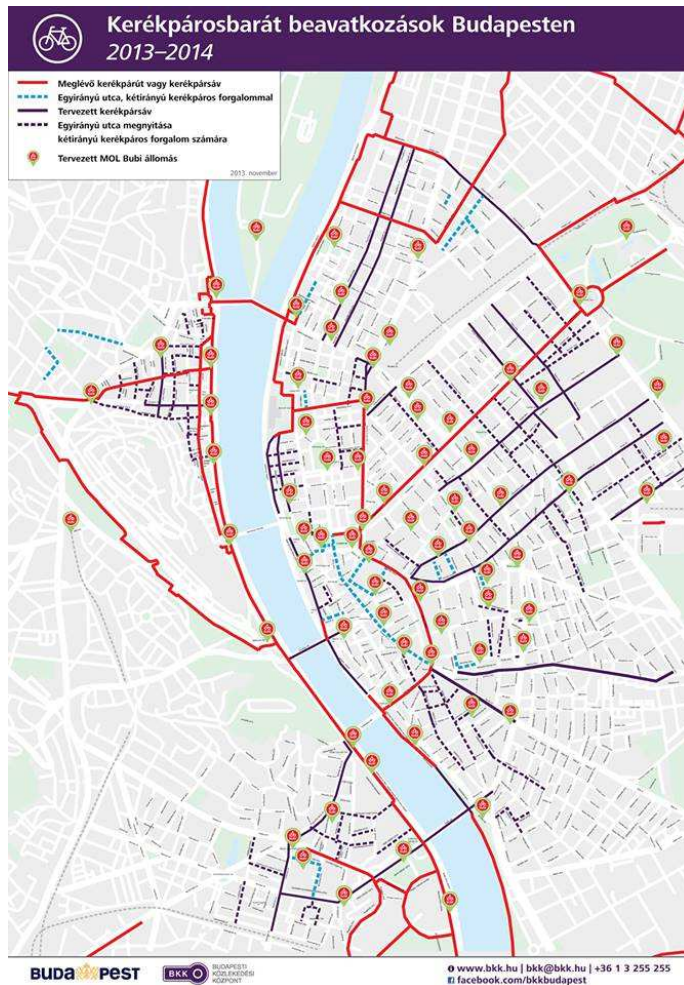
*Masterplan* foresees a policy change with regard to cycling infrastructures, the declared target value is a quite modest ambition compared with other European Masterplans.<sup>3</sup> It declared in 2008 as a goal to increase the modal share for cycling to 10 % by 2020 (2008: III/21).

The bicycle sharing-programm *BUBI* is clearly a step in the city's life towards the realization of this plan. In the following, I present a few details about *BUBI*. The planning of the program started in 2009. It is funded partly by the European Union, partly by the *The Centre for Budapest Transport* owned by the *Municipality of Budapest*. The budget is 3,5 million EUR with 85 % European Union co-funding. The EU covers the cost of implementation and the *Municipality of Budapest* is responsible for the maintenance. The change of the project developer, elections and the complicated process of state procurement and IT problems during the installation and testing phase caused year-long delays in the realization of the project. It will be launched in August 2014.

Some information on the technical build up of the systems: it has 1100 bicycles and 76 docking stations. 1500 docking units are available at the stations for parking. The operational area in the inner city center is about 15 km<sup>2</sup>. The average distance between the stations is 320 m. From the 76 locations 58 are in Pest, on the flat side of the city, 17 in Buda on the more hilly part of the city and 1 on Margaret Island in the middle of the Danube, in the recreational part of the city.

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<sup>3</sup> *The National Cycling Strategy of Austria* set to reach 10 % modal share of cycling by 2015. The Czech Republic aimed in their Cycling Strategy to expand its modal share of cycling by 20% by 2025.



Cycling friendly interventions in Budapest. Published on the November 25, 2013 on the site of *The Centre for Budapest Transport*, <http://www.bkk.hu/2013/11/jon-a-mol-bubi/>, 15.08.2014.

The consortium in charge with executing the program consists of three companies. The local company Csepel produces the bicycles, which is a huge success for the Hungarian economy. The two international companies T-Systems and Nextbike deliver the stations and the software. In addition to that, they are responsible for data communication and IT solutions.

The Hungarian oil company MOL Group took over some of the maintenance costs by sponsoring the scheme with its name. Therefore the official name of the bike sharing system is *MOL-BUBI*. The marketing endeavour was a success for the company: By investing in different environmentally friendly projects, the company won the Central European Sustainability Report Award in 2014.<sup>4</sup> This somehow conceals the contradiction that the region's main private oil company makes use of the bicycle share system for an image

<sup>4</sup> MOL Group Received Central European Sustainability Reporting Award, 13.03.2014. [http://www.mol.hu/en/about\\_mol/news\\_media\\_centre/news\\_releases/2014/mol\\_group\\_received\\_central\\_european\\_sustainability\\_reporting\\_award/](http://www.mol.hu/en/about_mol/news_media_centre/news_releases/2014/mol_group_received_central_european_sustainability_reporting_award/), 15.08.2014.

campaign, one could say for greenwashing. Nonetheless, the *Municipality of Budapest* chose the better option: a system owned by the public, i.e. the *Municipality*, instead of transnational advertisement companies as in other cities like Paris.

#### 4. What does BUdapest Bicycle mean for the people?

The qualitative content analyses of the interviews and media discourses show the following picture about the public bicycle sharing programm *BUBI* between November 2012 and Juli 2014.

##### Delay, high fees and fear of vandalism

*The Centre for Budapest Transport* is responsible for the public bicycle share system. *The Centre* is owned by the *Municipality of Budapest* and it was founded in 2010 with the purpose to rebuild, reorganize and manage public transport in the Hungarian Capital. The director of the new organisation criticized not just the corruption in the formal public transport company but addressed also the necessity to catch up with western standards.<sup>5</sup> In this context urban cycling was mentioned — for the first time since the demonstrations of the bottom up movement *Critical Mass Budapest* in 2004 started — as an equal transport form with a great potential for intermodality in urban traffic. The perception of the company is also influenced by the fact, that the young team of *The Centre for Budapest Transport* created a new corporate identity and uses actively social media to communicate changes, developments and archivements.<sup>6</sup>

However, the bike sharing project *BUBI* caused since the beginning only headache for *The Centre for Budapest Transport*. Immediatly after the original deadline for the launch of the scheme was postponed from April until August 2014 because of software problems of the developer T-System, the media started to question the success of the implementation. Since that they focused in the last half year to fend to scandalization of the project implementation. In order to improve its image, the company decided to involve the

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<sup>5</sup>Interview with David Vitézy, the director of The Centre for Budapest Transport, 07.07.2011. <http://www.origo.hu/itthon/20110707-interju-vitezy-daviddal-a-budapesti-kozlekedesi-kozpont-vezetojevel.html>, 15.08.2014.

<sup>6</sup> Facebook site of The Centre for Budapest Transport, 25.10.2010. <https://www.facebook.com/bkkbudapest>, 15.08.2014.



potential users in the testing phase. Since July and August 2014 2000 people are testing the service on a voluntary basis and giving feedback about potential system malfunctions. The company compensates active participants in the test by granting half a year of free access to the sharing system. As for this, due to the delay and the attacks on the project developer, *BUBI* got a lot of publicity.

Another critical point, which appeared early in the public narratives was the fear of theft and vandalism. This opinion was not only shared by experts in interviews but also by the employees of the company itself.<sup>7</sup> In an interview the assistant director admitted: “If they steal only 100 bikes, Budapest will be happy”. Not only in post-socialist Hungary, but also in the USA, low trust in the society has led to a similar kind of a so-called “moral panic” in the past before launching of different public bicycle share systems.<sup>8</sup> However it does not mean that collectively shared fears will come true. In press releases *The Centre for Budapest Transport* repeated constantly what the anti-theft measurements in the system are: surveillance cameras at the docking stations, installed GPS in each bicycle and bicycle parts, which can only be disassembled with special tools. So the argument of *The Centre for Budapest Transport* was that at the end it will be easier and a bigger win to steal a bicycle from another bicycle parking lot.

Nevertheless, the main point of critique besides the delay and the fears about abuse are the high fees. There are two kinds of charges, one for the access to the scheme and one for the actual use. The yearly pass for access converted in USA dollars amounts to 80,52 USD. This is still relatively costly compared with the average monthly salary, which in Hungary in 2013 was only 982 USD.<sup>9</sup> After the first news spread, that the usage of the bikes were completely free, the high fees of access very much disillusioned the public.

*The Centre for Budapest Transport* argues that compared with other municipality-owned schemes, the prices are not high, but acceptable. Similar to other elsewhere, after paying the access fee the *BUBI* is free only in the first 30 minutes of usage. Thereafter, the price goes up, because the usage of public bicycles should be only for short distances. Other

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<sup>7</sup> Lencsés, Csaba: Interview with László Somodi, assistant director of The Centre for Budapest Transport, 20.03.2014. [http://www.vezess.hu/kerekpar/bubi\\_kerekpar\\_kolcsonzo\\_bkk/50804/](http://www.vezess.hu/kerekpar/bubi_kerekpar_kolcsonzo_bkk/50804/), 15.08.2014.

<sup>8</sup> Kazis, Noah: Theft and Vandalism just Not a Problem For American Bike-Sharing, 29.11.2010. <http://www.streetsblog.org/2010/11/29/theft-and-vandalism-just-not-a-problem-for-american-bike-sharing/>, 15.08.2014.

<sup>9</sup> Press Release from the Newest Data of the Federal Statistics Office, Hungary, 21.02.2014. <http://www.ksh.hu/docs/hun/xftp/gyor/let/let21312.pdf>, 15.08.2014.

possibility for access is the use of a credit card and to pay a deposit of 106 USD. After returning the public bicycle, the system refunds the money, in case of longer usage it subtracts the fee. Permanent discounts are connected to public transport passes.

The fees of public bicycle share really decide, who has access and who not. But critical voices do not mention that lower prices in other cities like in Paris or Lyon are the result of public-private partnerships, which are less profitable for the general public interest. The advertisement corporations, which are maintaining the systems, get free access to public spaces for commercials.

Surprisingly, one of the real obstacles potential users might face, is never addressed: namely, the digital divide in the Hungarian society. An EU survey about e-communications in 2013 showed that in Hungary only 28 % have smart phones which is under the EU average of 44 %.<sup>10</sup> Also this user group complains about the high charges of mobile internet. Smart phones are not requirements of the usage of the public bicycle sharing systems, but they make its use a lot easier with the help of just-in-time informations about available bikes and free docking stations. Older generations are, as elsewhere, not familiar with IT-technologies and devices, such as the user screens at the docking stations. They would require assistance at the stations, a service which is not foreseen.

#### Justifying a cycling friendly city: bottom up promotion

Since the new awareness for cycling in Budapest was a result of a bottom up movement, the strongest voice about cycling issues still rests in advocacy groups, mainly represented by the *Hungarian Cyclist Club*. Their traffic experts not just consulted the preparations of the project, but also took over the mission of promotion. In cooperation with *The Centre for Budapest Transport* the volunteers of the *Cyclist Club* held cycle trainings for beginners with the green coloured bicycles of the system in April and Mai 2014. The motivation for that was to reach the target groups. A survey conducted during the preparation of the project showed that the potential users would like to cycle but were unexperienced and afraid of cycling.<sup>11</sup> The blog *Hungarian Cycle Chic* also pushed a positive

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<sup>10</sup> Special Eurobarometer 396 - e-Communications Household Survey, HU, 13.08.2013.

[http://ec.europa.eu/information\\_society/newsroom/cf/dae/document.cfm?doc\\_id=2541](http://ec.europa.eu/information_society/newsroom/cf/dae/document.cfm?doc_id=2541), 15.08.2014.

<sup>11</sup> Survey about Public Bike Program, Budapest, 2009.

[http://kerekparosklub.hu/files/HR\\_piackutatas\\_A1435\\_Publicbike\\_report.pdf](http://kerekparosklub.hu/files/HR_piackutatas_A1435_Publicbike_report.pdf), 15.08.2014

image of the public bicycle share system by posting fotos of young, fashionably dressed women riding a public bicycle in traffic with the title “The newest attraction of Budapest”.<sup>12</sup> Another example for the immediate appropriation can be found in the blogging sphere on urban trends and lifestyle. For instance, the blog called *Urbanista* posted the results of their own survey among their followers about their expectations and plans for using the scheme and ideas, in which part of the city more docking stations would be needed.<sup>13</sup>

In the eyes of the advocates, one thing related to the public bicycle share system was particularly welcomed: the plan of *The Centre for Budapest Transport* to connect the stations with a new cycling infrastructure which was seen as a promise for a really cycling friendly innercity center. According to this plan, cycling lanes are painted, one-way-streets for two-way cycling traffic as well as bus lanes are opened for cyclists. Ever since the so called cycling revolution took place the cycling community is in a desperate need of more infrastructure.

To round it up, for cycling advocates the public bicycle share system *BUBI* symbolizes the achievement of their goals: more cyclists on the streets, more awareness and more safety for cyclists within the standards of a more European city. That is why several blogs about urban lifestyle and culture welcomed the system and appropriated it immediately. Even though Budapest doesn't have a mayor similarly committed to sustainable transport policies like Boris Johnson in London and the system was pushed mainly from the bottom and the civil society. In this point, I see also the main difference compared to other bicycle sharing systems like Paris, Vienna, Barcelona, London, Brussels or Lyon, who were installed in a top-down way and accompanied by professional marketing.

## 5. Conclusion and outlook

Following the understanding of Adonia Lugo and Jessica Lockrem infrastructures are channels “that enable circulation of goods, knowledge, meaning, people, and power” (Lugo and Lockrem 2012: 1). Based on this definition the realization of *BUBI* shows, that urban cycling is accepted enough in the Hungarian capital to be represented with its own

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<sup>12</sup>Cycle Chic: Budapest newest attraction, 29.07.2014.

[http://cyclechic.blog.hu/2014/07/29/budapest\\_legujabb\\_latvanyossaga](http://cyclechic.blog.hu/2014/07/29/budapest_legujabb_latvanyossaga), 15.08.2014.

<sup>13</sup>Dobó, Géza: What do you want from BUBI? What do our readers want from the new public bicycle program? Is it worth? 17.04.2014.

[http://index.hu/urbanista/2014/04/17/mit\\_akarsz\\_a\\_bubizastol\\_mit\\_varnak\\_olvasoink\\_a\\_budapesti\\_kozosseg\\_i\\_berbringaprogramtol\\_kinek\\_eri\\_meg](http://index.hu/urbanista/2014/04/17/mit_akarsz_a_bubizastol_mit_varnak_olvasoink_a_budapesti_kozosseg_i_berbringaprogramtol_kinek_eri_meg), 15.08.2014.

infrastructure in public space. However, the question of access reveals social inequalities otherwise less apparent along a generational and an income divide. The *BUBI* is an urban mobility service designed for internet-affine people with high income, who are already experienced cyclist in the urban environment or not afraid to give it a try. These are not explicitly the target audiences of the project developer, but these characteristics are inherent to the logic of this infrastructural system.

Young, educated, environmentally-conscious people, who made the cycling revolution between 2004 and 2013 in Budapest happen with the help of cycling demonstrations, will probably mostly use the new bicycle sharing system. The bottom up organization of the cycling movement was made possible mainly by the outreach of the internet. Young urban classes are familiar with the necessary technological devices such as smart phones and user screens at the docking stations, and are also willing and already convinced to integrate public bicycle use in their everyday mobility practices. The rising number of visitors and tourist from Western Europe are also a user group, for who the barriers connected with the needed technological devices might be lower than in the Hungarian society as a whole.

To include other user groups, such as elderly people or groups with lower incomes, the *Municipality of Budapest* and *The Centre for Budapest Transport* should make a bigger effort. Unfortunately, there seems to be only a small chance for change, since the mayor of Budapest, István Tarlós, in 2013 criticized the cycling and public transport friendly actions of *The Centre for Budapest Transport* in an open letter because they hinder car traffic.<sup>14</sup> This declaration made it more than clear, that for the mayor his potential voters driving a car and their interests come first.

Earlier the president of the *Hungarian Cycle Club* asked ironically, whether the *BUBI* will ever get the name of Tarlós Bike like Boris Bike in the British capital?<sup>15</sup> In the near future, *BUBI* will probably stay as it is right now: an infrastructure build with the money of the EU and serving only young, urban and a well-earning minority in the capital, promoted by cycling advocates, as the *Municipality of Budapest* is not convinced of the benefits of cycling. The green bicycles of *BUBI* will for sure become part of the image of Budapest, but not

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<sup>14</sup> Tarlós gave 20 points to-do-list for David Vitezy, 06.11.2013. <http://www.origo.hu/itthon/20131106-tarlos-20-pontos-feladatlistat-adott-vitezy-davidnak.html>, 15.08.2014.

<sup>15</sup> László, János: Will the BUBI ever get the name of Tarlós Bike? 30.10.2013. [http://kerekpárosklub.hu/tarlos\\_kozbringaja](http://kerekpárosklub.hu/tarlos_kozbringaja), 15.08.2014.

shared by everyone. Furthermore, it is a comforting fact that four middle-sized cities in Hungary copied the capital's approach and launched their own public bicycle share programs even earlier than in the capital.<sup>16</sup>

With my analyses of *BUBI* I wanted to highlight, what kind of challenges public bicycle sharing in the Central East European region can face. In the case of Budapest, the main ones lie in the little support of the political authorities and the high fees, which exclude possible users. The lesson to be learned from Budapest is that the funding and launching of the bicycle share program is less effective in the case of a missing awareness campaign. Urban cycling advocates can help to clean up, but without a real commitment from the political leadership, a cycling friendly city will not happen.

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<sup>16</sup> These cities are Szeged, Győr, Esztergom and Hévíz.

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