

# Uber in Bratislava

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## Abstract

*The article focuses on sharing economy platform Uber and its implementation in Bratislava. It is analysis of taxi service market and its players in the capital city of Slovakia. The approach is more theoretical and less empirical because Uber is operating in Bratislava only since August 2015. The short time gives only a limited amount of information. Presented article has an ambition to be first phase of serious research of sharing economy (or rather on-demand economy) platform Uber in Slovakia. The article also provides an analysis of Uber's competitor – regular taxi company which is mimicking Uber's strategy to reach customers. Hence, the conclusion rather provides some important questions for further research in this field than final results.*

## 1 Introduction

Uber, Airbnb, or Alibaba are only few examples of innovative platforms of so called sharing economy, or more specifically on-demand economy platforms. These new platforms to certain extent threaten the existing order. Most of the consumers love these innovative ways of producing, consuming, or purchasing goods and services. Contrary, most of the taxi drivers, hotel owners, and retailers hate these new players and accuse them of breaking rules, unfair competition, economic terrorism, or for example a provision of incomplete and poor quality goods and services.

Whoever's arguments are more valid in each particular case, the fact is that sharing economy is here and it grows. Airbnb has a net value 20 billion USD, Uber has a net value about 50 billion USD and Alibaba has a net value about 200 billion USD.

This paper mostly focuses on Uber and its implementation and operation in Bratislava, the capital city of Slovakia. The article consists of introduction, followed by methodology, one chapter devoted to Uber in Bratislava, and other one is devoted to Uber's competitor – Slovak innovative taxi provider Hopin. The final part, conclusion, provides short summary of findings and some important research questions for further research in this field.

### 1.1 Sharing Economy

We can argue what is "sharing" in sharing economy. Dictionaries define "sharing" as using or enjoying something jointly with others. For instance, Belk (2007) sees sharing as "the act and process of distributing what is ours to others for their use and/or the act and process of receiving or taking something from others for our use. In other words, if I have a car which I use on average only few minutes a day but at the same time I love driving a car, why not to offer ridesharing. Or if I have one room extra in my house which I do not need, why not to share the room with a person who is visiting town for couple of days. According to Belk (2014), sharing (of not fully used goods) makes a great deal of practical and economic sense for the consumer, the environment, and the community as a whole. Heinrichs (2013) says that sharing economy can contribute to sustainable development. He sees collaborative consumption as consumption that has cost advantages represented by money or time. Moreover, it reduces overall consumption and often it has also a positive social effects.

New technologies are crucial for sharing economy since they unlock a hidden wealth of underutilized resources. Prior wide spread information technologies and internet, transaction costs, costs for searching potential partner for exchange or sharing, were too big.

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Rachel Botsman defines sharing economy as an economic model based on sharing underutilized assets from spaces to goods for monetary or non-monetary benefits (Botsman, 2013). New platforms such as Uber or Airbnb fit more into Bostman's definition.

Strong criticism applies to on-demand-economy. This economy is defined as the economic activity that fulfil consumer demand via the immediate provisioning of goods and services. These platforms are created by technology companies such as Uber, Airbnb, Alibaba. The problem is that do not follow rules and regulations and despite strong wave of criticism these platforms are not willing to take a responsibility and follow local rules and regulations.

Uber (Uber POP) has caused unrest in several countries. There are ongoing lawsuits in France, Germany, Belgium, and Spain. In France is situation so escalated that also president Hollande stated that Uber is illegal and all Uber partner's cars should be seized (Financial Times, 2015). On contrary, British court is considered Uber to be legal. Uber also filed a complaint with the European Commission against these countries (apart from Belgium). Uber POP is (or was) in many European cities. This service is staffed with moonlighting non-professional drivers, has been banned by national authorities. On the other hand, Uber X is less controversial because the "car-sharing" service is offered by professionally licensed and insured drivers.

Here we can see a struggle between new business models versus traditional models. Taxi drivers, hotel owners and retailers working in traditional way feel threatened. Russell Belk (2014) calls this development and replacing traditional model by innovative one "the creative destruction of old business models and the adoption of new creative ways of participating".

Wikipedia, Couchsurfing, or freeware programs are also example of collaborative consumption. However, in contrast to Uber, Airbnb or Alibaba, they are non-profit, based on non-reciprocal enthusiasm from community work. Like Yochai Benkler (2004) defines very shortly the meaning of sharing as non-reciprocal pro-social behaviour. The question is whether this for-profit sharing will strengthen the economy, or conversely it makes the economy less secure and vulnerable.

One of the most common complains about ridesharing company Uber is the safety, or rather lack of safety. There are not sufficient researches done yet in this area, however, rating system may be effective way how to exclude bad and dangerous drivers from ridesharing. Since drivers rate their customers, this mechanism also works vice versa. There is interesting point made by Matthew Feeney from CATO Institute about safety of ridesharing via Uber or similar platforms, although it is important to stress that CATO Institute is think-tank dedicated to the principles of individual liberty and limited government. However, Feeney says that the fact that ridesharing is cash free and the service is used by self-identified consumers substantially mitigate one of the worst risks associated with traditional taxi service - the risk of violent crime (Feeney, 2015). Moreover, Uber demands from Uber X partners to have insurance and is also checking whether Uber partners have not had serious car accident under influence of drugs.

Also quality of service is doubt. Taxi companies complains that Uber drivers do not follow strict quality and technical rules, and also Uber partners did not go through training, so they are not professionals and many Uber partners do not have sufficient driving experiences. Uber says that they do check potential drivers and requires not older than 10 years old cars. However, since taxi drivers are obliged to pay for licence and training (in order to get the official status of taxi driver) it is questionable whether this is not unfair competition advantage.

Another very salient complaint is evasion of taxes. Uber company keeps 20 percent of fare; Uber partner keeps the rest. Uber partners have to tax their income from transporting customers from the point A to the point B. In other words, Uber partners have the same obligations as taxi drivers. However, Uber partners perceive ridesharing as their hobby or some kind of irregular part-time job and many of them do not even think about taxing their extra income from ridesharing. Uber company is not registered in Slovakia. Hence, Slovak Uber partners are registered in Uber based in Netherlands. Uber is not responsible for Uber partner's behaviour and do not check whether Uber partners fulfil their tax duty. These facts make Uber drivers obliged, due to Slovak law, to pay also VAT tax. Here we can talk about willingness to pay taxes and administrative capacity to collect and enforce taxes. Since

all transactions are exclusively through IT system (bank transactions), every single transaction is registered. Finance administration just need to get bank information and enforce the law. Even the best tax law or regulation (formal institution) is not always sufficient because of informal institutions (habits, perceptions, trust, etc.) which play very important role here. This may partly be related to low willingness to pay taxes and contribute to social system in particular country. According to the study of VAT Gap, Slovakia is the second worst in collecting VAT in Europe when the VAT Gap is 37 percent (European Commission, 2013). More than one third of VAT taxes is not paid.

Elzbieta Bienkowska, industry commissioner, says that European commission has to look at constructive ways to fill the regulatory gap and at the same time allow new business models to appear in Europe. (Euobserver, 2015). And this “regulatory gap” is about paying taxes and provision of consumer, health and private information protection. Industry commissioner stresses that sharing economy products such as Uber or Airbnb will grow, whether we want it or not (Euobserver, 2015).

Uber provides two things – technological infrastructure and diminishing of uncertainty. The first is obvious – smartphone or tablet app. Uber app provides transparent information for consumers about length of trip, route, name of driver and price. A consumer also knows that the system will eliminate bad performing and behaving drivers. The uncertainty level is much higher in traditional taxi companies. On the other hand, since Uber company has access to personal data (ride history, bank accounts, name, telephone number, official document’s numbers) of Uber users, protection of personal information is valid issue. Especially after information that Uber did fail to protect the personal information of its US drivers and exposed the Social Security numbers, tax information and drivers license numbers of hundreds of drivers (Forbes, 2015).

Employment condition are also problematic. Uber POP or X partners are supposed to work only a couple of hours a week in order to supplement their existing main income. Head of Public Policy at Uber MacGann says that if taxi laws are deregulated enough to allow competition, Uber could be able to generate tens thousand full-time jobs - self-employed drivers on a full time basis (EurActiv, 2015). And that is not negligible number in European Union where almost than every fourth youth is unemployed (Eurostat, 2015). So maybe re-definition and re-drawing current European social model is needed.

Last but not least, the status of Uber is at issue. Uber considers itself a technology company, and not a transport operator. However, in most of the EU member states, also in Slovakia, Uber is considered as a transport service.

Slovakia is small market for companies like Uber, Airbnb or Alibaba. However, statistics shows that population is technology friendly. According to Google ranking Our Mobile Planet based on date from 2013, smartphone penetration in Slovakia is 46 percent. In other words, almost every second mobile user has a smartphone. This number is higher than in France (42 percent) or in Germany (40 percent) (Our Mobile Planet, 2013). In following parts, the article focuses on Uber in Bratislava.

## **2 Methods and Data**

This article is more theoretical and less oriented in the empirical research. That is also reflected in the methodological approach as the methodology for following parts is secondary literature review is mostly represented by newspaper articles (electronic and also print) with the combination of the inductive analyses of the secondary literature on sharing economy.

One part of the paper is the analysis of references of on-demand online platforms in Slovak online and print media. For this purpose, the NEWTON media database is used. Via NEWTON media searching tool it is possible to search an occurrence of key words in articles published with a one-day delay. The searching was made in 47 relevant electronic and print media for each platform and also Hopin company (Uber’s competitor). All media are listed in Annex 1.

## **3 Uber in Bratislava**

Uber X has begun its operations in Bratislava in August 2015. In comparison with other capital cities in Central Europe, the introduction of Uber was one year later than in Prague, almost two years

later than in Budapest, and approximately one and half year later than in 60 kilometres distant Vienna. Uber runs the UberX service in Bratislava that provides a car-sharing service - a type of normal model vehicles for hire driven by professionally licensed and insured drivers for very moderate prices (compare to taxi drivers). However, UberX provides trial three months' period also for non-licensed drivers. After this period, Uber will demand from Uber drivers so called "partners" not only driving licence but also taxi driver licence. The fact that Uber partners may offer rides through Uber without licence for transporting people is one of the reasons of strong taxi drivers' opposition towards Uber X.

However, taxi drivers complain about Uber for other several reasons. All reasons are applicable also in other countries. Most of the complains about ride sharing company Uber were listed in the chapter 1.1. Here are listed the most salient complains in Bratislava and taxi driver's argumentation.

Cars of Uber partners are not labelled so it is impossible to recognize Uber partner's car in traffic, and therefore, it is also almost impossible for local authorities to check whether the Uber partner has a compulsory licence and if not to charge driver up to 15 thousand euro (Law on road transport). The law does not recognize car-sharing.

Taxi drivers say that low prices for fares offered by Uber partners is unfair because it is not the result of innovation, but rather breaking rules. Official taxi drivers have to be obliged to buy a licence, go through training, medical and psychological screening, they are obliged to check their cars more often than regular drivers, and have to pay income tax. These are expenditure more than thousand euro. According to Financial Bureau, Uber partners are obliged to pay income tax, but also VAT tax. The law recognizes Uber partners as road transport operator (Financial Bureau, 2015). Since all transactions within Uber are via internet and are stored, financial administration should be able, with cooperation with Uber, to enforce the law.

According to the president of Taxi Unions, there are 3000 licensed drivers working for several taxi companies in Bratislava. This number represents approximately one taxi driver per 200 inhabitants. For instance, there is one taxi driver for 400 inhabitants in Vienna (Trend, 2015). It is highly likely that the market was already oversaturated already prior Uber. Majority of taxi drivers work as tradesmen for traditional taxi service companies. Traditional taxi companies operate via telephone dispatching. According to several taxi drivers, traditional taxi companies forbid its taxi drivers to join Hopin platform. Traditional taxi companies keep distance from Hopin and they want rather invest in development of their own applications (SME, 2014).

The president of Taxi Union says that the market must be regulated and every single car has to have its driver and concession. He also calls for price regulation, basically for fixed price per kilometre. He adds that it will fix 90 percent of problems in this sector. However, Slovak Ministry of Finance refuses that low prices fulfilling any legal reasons for regulation. The solution should be found in development of competitive market environment (HN, 2015b).

Uber, Alibaba and also Airbnb are operating in Slovakia, or at least in the capital city Bratislava. Uber has caused unrest in several countries, while Alibaba or Airbnb generally activate peaceful opposition from more traditional retailers or hotel owners. Media coverage says a lot about importance and urgency of issues. An occurrence in media is also important for marketing. Therefore, it is useful to look at this aspect (see table 1). Uber has been mentioned in Slovak relevant media (print and electronic media) nearly three times more than Alibaba retailer and more than six times more than Airbnb. What is even more important out of the 341 articles with a reference to Uber, nearly half of them had the name of the company "Uber" in headline. Majority of articles were devoted to unrest in European countries, articles about arguments of Taxi Union, and information about protest against Uber in Bratislava. On contrary, Alibaba has got headline in a quarter of cases. Most of the articles were about performance of the company and about new record in profit. Last but not least, Airbnb has got headline only in one tenth of cases. The majority of articles presented the project purpose and its offers. The first place for Uber is not very surprising, however, we could expect that the second

could be Airbnb. Sharing private rooms or apartments sounds more controversial and intimate than purchasing goods via internet.

**Table 1: Number of references in Slovak media**

		Uber	Airbnb	Alibaba	Hopin	Hopin 2013 - First year*	Hopin 2014 – Second year*
<b>6 months: April 29, 2015 - October 29, 2015</b>	Headlines	169	7	32	1	-	-
	All articles	341	55	76	37	-	-
<b>12 months: October 29, 2014 - October 29, 2015</b>	Headlines	201	7	38	3	0	3
	All articles	422	78	153	52	3	33
<b>Headlines/All articles</b>		47,6%	9,0%	24,8%	5,8%	0,0%	9,1%

Source: author based on Newton media data (\* data only for 12 months)

#### 4 Uber's competitor

In fact, taxi service market is strictly regulated without a real competition in proper sense of the word. In most of the cities the price for one kilometre is regulated, so companies and independent taxi drivers have a limited room for price competition. Taxi companies occupy the whole market, basically shielded from competition. New players have limited possibility to enter the market due to strict regulation of quality, technical requirements, number of taxi drivers, price for kilometres, etc.

Uber X works in Bratislava since August 2015. The first news about Uber coming to Bratislava were in October 2014. The Uber international expansion manager for Eastern Europe Lokman Kuris said in the interview that it was maybe a mistake to wait too long for launching Uber in Bratislava, in last capital city in Central Europe. He also added that there is high ratio of people who own and use smartphones in Bratislava (Trend, 2015a).

So, the question may be whether local taxi service provider which is more pro-consumer oriented than traditional taxi providers and works within existing regulation can keep up with huge international company Uber, which in certain extend circumvent the rules (maybe even wrongly set rules). In other words, whether demonstrating taxi drivers and taxi companies which called Uber economic terrorist and unfair player, are only (or mostly) inadaptable drivers and companies only willing to maintain and protect its market position, or they are really suffering due to unequal treatment under rules.

Hopin is a start-up founded in 2011 and starting its operations in Bratislava in 2013. So, two and half years prior Uber. Hopin business model is very similar to Uber. It also provides technology, basically smartphone or tablet application, for both taxi drivers and consumers. A consumer is able to choose via user friendly application a car and also price level, and application calculate approximate price for a trip. Lighting Beetle, expert group of developers and designers, organized comparison of Uber and Hopin applications in laboratory. Respondents were asked to work with applications. In this test Hopin application gained more points in all aspects (Lighting Beetle, 2015). Hopin application also won a competition for the best Slovak smartphone and tablet application in 2014 (AppsRulezz, 2014). In sum, applications, system of connecting drivers and consumers, and paying method are very similar. However, there is one very important difference. Hopin has in its database only licenced taxi drivers (some of them also working for traditional taxi companies), while Uber partners very often do not have taxi licence. As it is mentioned above, Uber partners offer rides as part time job or hobby and we can assume that most of them do not tax their activities as Uber partners. That is the main reason why Uber is slightly cheaper than Hopin. This may be seen as unfair comparative advantage. However, Hopin says that they are not afraid of Uber coming to Bratislava. The reason is that Hopin has already one fifth of the whole taxi market, about 600 taxi drivers and their goal is to have one third of the

market (HN, 2015a). Hopin asks from taxi drivers only 20 euro per month. More than 70 thousand people have downloaded Hopin application and more than 70 percent of them use the application regularly. These numbers are from November 2014. Bratislava has about half a million inhabitants, so every seventh inhabitant has Hopin application in his or her smartphone (SME, 2014).

It will be definitely interesting to study progress of Uber in Bratislava or in Prague. There were no violent and mass protests against Uber in both cities. However, one protest against Uber was in Bratislava but only 500 (out of 3 000) taxi drivers took part (Dennik N, 2015). Both consumers as well as producers has an opportunity to use Hopin and professional drivers for fair fares instead of still unknown Uber. The question however is, who are Uber's potential customers. What group remain to use Hopin or traditional providers and what group will use Uber. As it is mentioned above, this is not only price issue, it is rather trade-off between price and trust.

Application called Liftago, which is similar to Hopin, works in Prague. Also Hopin announced that will expand to Prague in 2016. It may be very interesting to study how small start-up from Slovakia and Czech Republic will perform against large international company Uber. Or other very similar to Uber called Haxi in London, Didi Kuandi in China, or Lyft in US.

## **5 Conclusion**

Uber is very controversial on-demand economy platform that is causing unrest around the globe. Analysis of references in Slovak media shows that in comparison with Airbnb or Alibaba is the most often occurring in media. In several countries Uber has competitors who are as innovative as Uber. Specifically, there is Slovak start-up called Hopin in Bratislava, which already seized more than one fifth of the taxi service market and is also expanding abroad. In contrast with Uber, Hopin in works only with professional taxi drivers with valid licences. It offers rides for lower prices than traditional providers, but for still higher prices than Uber. One of the reasons is that Uber partners do not follow the law and majority of them do not tax their additional income. Interestingly, Uber did not cause significant unrest in Bratislava like in other European cities. The questions are as follows. Can taxi service platform Hopin survive the competition against huge international company like Uber? Are Uber's customers the previous taxi service consumers, or has Uber mostly made the market available for new and specific group of people?

For better understanding what is really going on in Bratislava, two-case analysis could be very helpful. It seems that Bratislava significant number of taxi drivers who use Hopin copied and adopted the Uber system. In other cities (i.e. Paris) taxi regime revolted. Two-case analysis may provide different angles to this issue.

It is undoubtedly very important to study sharing economy from social science perspective. Sharing economy or collaborate consumption are to certain extent about trust among people. According to PWC survey, about 70 percent of responders will not trust sharing economy companies until they are recommended by someone they trust (PWC, 2015). Hence, quality of informal institutions may as important as quality of formal institutions. Researchers should also take into account that the perception of owning (and also sharing) something may vary across countries and continents.

Sharing economy provides many complicated questions to be answered. How to deal with losers? Is this an inevitable change caused by evolution in production and consumption of goods and services? Uber has an ambition to introduce self-driving cars in 10 or 15 years from now. So, are taxi drivers predestined to extinction (such as decay of blacksmiths, tinkers, or miners)? Should or should not we compensate them (or artificially maintain sector like in many countries hard coal mining)? What should we do with people who are not willing to take part in sharing economy? Does Europe legislation have to recognize new type of labour force based on micro-jobs (platforms like TaskRabbit, Postmates, or Handy)? How to re-regulate or rather deregulate the economy, the existing order? Who should do that - local, national or subnational level? Are sharing economy platforms a threat to the European social model?

In order to answer these complicated or even philosophical questions we need answer simpler questions. Are there any losers? If there are some, how big is this group? What is the regulation in taxi sector in particular country? How is Uber and its competitors performing in time? Does Uber more contribute to the economy and social system or disproportionately use the system?

There are reasons why it is necessary to regulate – information asymmetry, market failures, externalities, standards, etc. Many of these reasons were described above. The European Commission is aware of the importance of this issue. In October 2015 European Commission announced that the guidelines on how the EU should deal with the so-called sharing economy sector, exemplified by online platforms such as Uber or Airbnb, will be published in 2016.

Very important is to collect hard data. However, there is a problem of a lack of data available. Uber, Lyft, Hopin, or Lyftago are private companies which are not willing to share their data. In this case researchers and analysts may collect official numbers about taxi licences, approximate number of passengers or rides and compare it with estimated data from car-sharing providers. However, it will be almost impossible to collect data about Uber partners whatsoever.

Interestingly, hotel owners, retailers, and taxi drivers, all of them are threatened by sharing economy platforms. Taxi drivers and taxi companies inveigh against Uber, in many cases violently, all over the world. On contrary, hotel owners and retailers are definitely not excited about companies Airbnb or Alibaba, but there is not as tough and violent response as against Uber. Is only reason level of regulation and a failure of effective re-regulation in the sector? Therefore, not only quantitative methods but also qualitative research may help to understand the topic. In this regard, analysis of statements and actions of relevant actors (politicians, lobby groups, producers, consumers, etc.) is highly desired.

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## Annex 1

For the purpose of this paper words “Uber”, “Airbnb”, “Alibaba”, and “Hopin” were searching in Slovak electronic, print media listed below. Duplicate references were not counted.

aktualne.sk,  
aktuality.sk,  
24hod.sk,  
bbonline.sk,  
bleskovky.sk,  
blog.etrend.sk,  
blog.sme.sk,  
cas.sk,  
csr.etrend.sk,  
dennikn.sk,  
dnes24.sk,  
dnes.sk,  
ekonomika.sk,  
echoviny.sk,  
energie-portal.sk,  
energia.sk,  
enviroportal.sk,  
eprofit.sk,  
etrend.sk,  
euractiv.sk,  
europskenoviny.sk,  
europrofit.sk,  
finance.sk,  
hlavnespravy.sk,  
fwd.sk,  
hnonline.sk,  
jetotak.sk,  
markiza.sk,  
medialne.sk,  
noviny.sk,  
omediach.com,  
openiazoch.zoznam.sk,  
parlamentnelisty.sk,  
podnikam.sk,  
podnikajte.sk,  
pravda.sk,  
postoy.sk,  
siit.webnoviny.sk,  
sme.sk,  
spectator.sme.sk,  
spravy.pozri.sk,  
spravodajstvo24.sk,  
teraz.sk,  
tlacovespravy.wordpress.com,  
tyzden.sk,  
webnoviny.sk