

## Skopje 2014 - Musealizing the City, Re-inventing History?

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### *Abstract*

Under the headline 'Skopje 2014' the city center of Macedonia's capital is currently undergoing a large-scale, government-sponsored transformation. This apparently political undertaking features numerous monuments depicting historical figures, who are claimed by various nation-states in the Balkans, and a variety of public buildings, whose anachronistic architectural style borrows heavily from long-gone eras. Buildings from the Yugoslav past are being concealed or blocked from view.

This paper aims to go beyond interrogations that are merely centered on the intransparent decision-making processes and the disputable allocation of public funds for a project that ultimately musealizes the city. While such critiques are justified, especially in the light of Macedonia's current economic conditions and its intent to enter the European Union, I will argue that 'Skopje 2014' tries to construct a specific narrative of Macedonian identity by weaving a continuity - from antiquity over the middle ages to the times of Macedonia's struggle for nationhood - into the fabric of Skopje's built environment. The transformation is not only characterized by the new structures and their questionable aesthetics, but also by strategically patterned silences and omissions, such as Macedonia's Yugoslav past and the presence of religious and ethnic minorities such as Albanian, Turkish or Roma, and their cultural and political manifestations.

While the construction works are progressing steadily, the government keeps avoiding any public debate about the goal and the nationalist tone of the project. Resistance by the opposition and civil society actors (scholars, architects, NGOs etc.) is growing but remains fragmented between questions of economic and aesthetic rationales, claims of corruption and minority-nationalist sentiments.

### *Introduction*

"After a devastating earthquake in 1963 Skopje was rebuilt largely according to Kenzo Tange's master plan, which was supported by the United Nations. Today the actual Macedonian government wants to remove all traces of this plan and rewrite the Macedonian capital as a historic city with its roots in antiquity and in the period of Alexander the Great. The futuristic urbanism and architecture in Skopje is now in danger of falling victim to political attempts to fabricate an ideal past." (Jovanovic Weiss, 2010)

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The construction works in central Skopje are well on their way and more and more of the sometimes bizarre new 'old' architecture, monuments and statues take shape, and in the process, hide and conceal the buildings originating from Tange's masterplan.

This paper will raise and discuss the following questions: While Macedonia managed to stay away from the violent break-up of Yugoslavia but still became independent, how is it that the country's current political leadership now tries to assert a nationalistic idea with this seemingly anachronistic project? How do the ongoing internal ethnic tensions between the Macedonian majority and the ethnic Albanian community, which culminated in a violent conflict in 2001 and were ended by the EU & NATO-brokered Ohrid agreement of the same year, play into this project? Why does the government want to replace the country's Yugoslav past symbolized by Skopje's earlier futuristic architecture with an apparently fabricated ideal past with its projected continuity with antiquity? How does Macedonia's political situation, its international relations (political conflicts with neighboring countries, attempts to integrate further into the international community,...) play into this? Do some of the current debates in the Macedonian public and national and international critiques of the project point towards alternative ways in which the past(s) can be represented? The current political climate in Macedonia, domestically and in relation to some of its neighbors, makes it difficult to imagine, but even more so necessary to discuss, if and what kind of a museum, monument(s) or other, more innovative practices of memory could make a significant contribution to reconciling competing claims over cultural and historical heritage, over truth and falsehood of historical inter-communal injustices and over the urban space for the manifestation of diverse and lived identities.

In order to develop answers to these questions and arrive at an analysis, which goes beyond a mere critique of the bizarre (in terms of scale and style) architectural choices, I will attempt to trace and discuss the processes of nation-state formation not only in Macedonia but in the wider region, the role of religion and the treatment of minorities throughout these developments, since these aspects will play an integral role in the following discussion of the Skopje 2014 project.

The very choices of monuments, their aesthetics and the retrograde architectural designs of the buildings under construction and the attempt to conceal and hide the Yugoslav architecture (stemming from the 1960s and 70s and endorsed by the international community) and its political program deserve an in-depth analysis. Notions of musealization, forgetting and fabricating and commemorating an aestheticized version of history will inform the discussion.

Furthermore, I consider it useful to discuss the various stakeholders in the project and how the narrative of the construction spree is being negotiated between the decision-makers and sponsors of Skopje 2014 (i.e. the country's current nationalist-conservative government), the Macedonian public, domestic and international political opponents.

### *I. Nation-State Formation in the Balkans*

“Over the long nineteenth century, which stretched from the French Revolution to the final collapse of the Ottoman Empire in 1923, the political map of the Balkans emerged. [...] The triumph of nationalism was partly due to the efforts of the Balkan peoples themselves, who had helped to shake off the Ottoman rule through their uprisings and resistance. But their efforts alone were fruitless until Europe's Great Powers intervened in their favor. The First World War was the culmination of this entangling of Balkan liberation struggles with the European state system.” (Mazower, 2000)

Mazower's summary of the period points at the conjuncture between local pre-national initiatives and the interventions by the Great Powers (Russia, the Habsburg and Ottoman Empires) in the fate of the region. The nineteenth and its preceding centuries in the Balkans can thus be understood as the latest phase of what Balibar calls 'pre-history' of the nation-form, which encompasses multiple, qualitatively distinct events, which neither follow a linear sequence nor do they belong to the history of just one nation-state, but rather to other rival state-formations. While the communities inhabiting the region were all linked together by larger trade networks and caravan routes which crisscrossed the region, and were subject to the administrative structures and institutions of the Ottoman state and the

Orthodox Church, these formations were only temporary products of historical processes and contemporary circumstances, frequently disrupted and continuously subject to change. (Balibar, 1991; Karakasaidou, 1997)

That is to say that in the Balkans (as elsewhere) the history of the nation-form is neither founded on a linear development scheme towards a certain destiny nor on a nation-state formation presenting the self-manifestation of the national identity. But this kind of representation is a myth and an ideological construction, „in which the imaginary singularity of national formations is constructed daily, by moving back from the present into the past.“ (Balibar, 1991)

#### A. *National Awakening in the Balkans*

During the Macedonian Struggle and the Balkan Wars large parts of the populations were concerned more with regaining some social and economic stability than with dying for nationalism. „Ethnicity was as much the consequence as the cause of this unrest; revolutionary violence produced national affiliations as well as being produced by them.“ (Mazower, 2000) Throughout the Balkan Wars and for the first time in the history of the region, modern states pursued long-range demographic goals in the course and as a consequence of the military conflict: Forced conversions, mass executions and the flight of tens of thousands of refugees were a result of the attempt to liquidate the remaining Ottoman provinces in Europe in accordance with the principle of nationality.

The Balkan Wars and the First World War had destroyed the empires which had governed the Balkans for centuries. Despite the wide-spread demographic homogenization measures, all the new states had ethnic minorities whose existence undermined the claims to rule in the name of one Nation and most national borders in the Balkans remained heavily contested. The Great Powers themselves had not managed to overcome the differences, which had originally led them into war.

“On the contrary, their rivalries were now sharpened and intensified by ideology as fascism and communism took hold. Thus the twentieth century, like the nineteenth, was scarred by the bloody intersection of regional Balkan quarrels and Great Power

competitiveness. The era of religion was over; that of ideology lay ahead: nationalism spanned them both.“ (Mazower, 2000)

Before I turn to the events in post-WWII Yugoslavia and in the almost two decades after the break-up of Yugoslavia, I want to briefly discuss two aspects which have played a central role in the nation-state formations in the Balkans: the role of religion in general, and of the Orthodox Church in particular, and the question of the treatment of minorities.

### *B. Nation and Religion*

In the process of nation-state formation the relationship between the state and the church is marked by a transition from a competitive stage between church and state (in a rivalry between the ecclesiastical state and the secular one) to a situation, in which the two were complementary and, ultimately, to a phase where nationalism and patriotism were seen by some to become the religion of modern times. (Balibar, 1991) In Christian Orthodoxy, the independence of the Orthodox Church is closely connected to the recognition as a nation. Until today, the Greek, Bulgarian and Serbian Churches do not recognize the Macedonian Church and thereby question the existence of a Macedonian nation. (Behringer, 2008)

After the liberation from the Nazis, an independent Macedonian Church was proclaimed under the leadership of the archbishop of Ohrid and Macedonia. Since the Republic of Macedonia became independent in 1991, the struggle between the Orthodox Churches has continued, often with the support of the secular governments. (Shea, 1997)

### *C. Nation Building and the Consequences for the Treatment of Minorities*

The aforementioned ethnic homogenizations and repressions caused by violent conflicts, such as the Balkan Wars and World War I, need to be viewed together with the broader governing practices of the twentieth century in the Balkans. After these wars and despite the efforts towards demographic engineering, the Balkan states were still home to sizeable ethnic and religious minorities. The states were made to sign minority rights treaties by the Great Powers which were monitored by the League of Nations. These treaties went beyond the old nineteenth-century protection of individuals to cover collective rights, whose importance the

results of war had underlined. Still, the new system satisfied neither minority nor majority and the treatment of minorities remained arbitrary, partly because some of the minorities harboured revisionist sentiments against the new rulers. (Mazower, 2000)

As the region lagged behind in terms of almost all socio-economic indicators, the political elites embarked on policies of state modernisation, in which a strong central power planned to drag their countries into the twentieth century by means of social and economic reforms. They were against the cultural fragmentation produced by allowing minorities their own schools and in favor of building more state schools, so that they would learn the majority language. Modern state-building, in other words, was unsympathetic to minority aspirations. „Repression was often not so much the ultimate goal as an aspect of the modernisation of the state.“ (Mazower, 2000)

Etienne Balibar argues that no modern nation possesses a given ethnic basis, even when it is founded on the events of a national independence struggle. Therefore, he suggests, the fundamental problem is to „produce the people“ or, even more precisely, „to make the people produce itself continually as a national community“ in order for them to perceive themselves as members of a single nation. This is neither achieved by conquests, population movements or practices of territorialization alone, nor by suppressing all differences, „but by relativizing them [...] in such a way that it is the symbolic difference between ‚ourselves‘ and ‚foreigners‘ which wins out and which is lived as irreducible.“ (Balibar, 1991)

Similarly, Mark Mazower concludes that „as in the rest of Europe, then, the Balkans were seeing issues of nationalism and minority rights turning from a question of war and peace to one of borders, policing and urban coexistence.“ (Mazower, 2000)

#### *D. Macedonia in and after the World War II*

Total war not only swept away the former political elites and forced some heads of states into exile (as in Greece and Yugoslavia), but also resulted in genocide and large movements of refugees which further increased the ethnic homogenisation in all Balkan states. The occupation of the Balkans by Nazi (and Axis’) forces was

undermined by mainly communist-led mass-resistance movements in the second part of World War II. Upon German withdrawal from the Balkans, Great Britain and the Soviet Union agreed on post-war spheres of influence in the region. (Mazower, 2000)

By 1945, the government of Yugoslavia was formed with Tito as premier, and the various parts of Yugoslavia, including Macedonia, were reconciled into one country. Tito's government was the first to recognize Macedonians as a distinct ethnic and political entity. (Mazower, 2000; Shea, 1997)

The political motivation for the recognition of the People's Republic of Macedonia by Tito and his Communist Party of Yugoslavia was a pragmatic one, since Macedonian national consciousness had shown to be a powerful force that might be difficult to suppress. Over the decades following WWII, Tito attempted to solve Yugoslavia's deeply rooted national rivalries by establishing a multi-national rule through a single dictatorial party. Federalism remained the communist strategy for handling nationalities within Yugoslavia. 'Brotherhood and Unity' may not have been a reality but it was more than a slogan; it helped to ensure that minority issues and competing territorial claims, while never entirely absent, would not disrupt relations between states in the way they had before 1940. But the tensions had not vanished and would re-emerge when Yugoslav communism collapsed. The economic crisis of the 1970s together with the ideological and leadership vacuum after Tito's death in 1980 eroded the strength of the federal government and opened the way for nationalist struggles at the regional and republic level over economic resources and political power. (Mazower, 2000; Shea, 1997)

#### E. After the Break-up of Yugoslavia until Today

"But it is very customary in those countries where there are different communities. You have these critical two words – 'ours and theirs'." (political scientist Jusuf Islami in a commentary in: Beringer, 2008)

After Macedonia split peacefully from Yugoslavia in 1991, the ethnic communities in Macedonia<sup>2</sup> remained quiet, and, at first, tensions did not surface. The danger rather came from the outside: In Croatia and Bosnia, later in Kosovo, there was war, in neighboring Albania anarchy. In the north, on the border with Serbia and Kosovo, the United Nations intervened and closed the borders, but still, thousands of people sought refuge in Macedonia. In the south, Greece imposed a blockade due to the name Macedonia<sup>3</sup>. From the mid-1990s Macedonia's economy collapsed and tensions between the ethnic groups, which had hardly been noticeable before, emerged. Ethnic communities had to compete over diminishing public resources and minorities had been unequally represented in the labor market and significantly underrepresented in the public administration, first and probably most problematically, among the armed security forces. (Beringer, 2008; ESI, 2002)

Most people including politicians believed and made the public believe that the erupting violence between Albanian guerillas and the Macedonian army was just a spill-over from neighboring Kosovo and thus the conflict, which started in January 2001, might be over in a week. But the fighting soon gained momentum and force and turned into a civil war, moving from the border regions in the north-west of the country to the vicinity of the capital Skopje. When the atrocities escalated, NATO intervened and temporarily stopped the fighting, but the tensions between the parties to the conflict and between the population, the armed forces and the government continued. In the summer of 2001, representatives of NATO and the European Union brokered a compromise between the political parties referred to as the Ohrid Agreement, which resulted in cease-fire and a disarmament that ultimately, if not immediately, ended the conflict, which could have otherwise further escalated. Furthermore, the Ohrid agreement installed further-reaching minority rights and political representation, but is frequently seen as a compromise which left

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<sup>2</sup> Of the 2mn people living in Macedonia today about two thirds are ethnic Macedonians and one quarter Albanians. Other communities are Roma, Serbs, Vlachs and Turks.

<sup>3</sup> Since Macedonia's independence Greece opposes the use of the constitutional name 'Republic of Macedonia' for territorial and historical reasons; instead 'Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia' is frequently used in international relations. This footnote should be moved to page 8



both sides unsatisfied<sup>4</sup>. (Beringer, 2008) On the level of international relations with its neighbors, the dispute about the country's name with Greece, which is threatening to block both, Macedonia's membership in NATO and its accession process to the European Union, represents a major concern. In an interview, Nikola Gruevski, Macedonia's current prime minister and leader of the nationalist VMRO-DPMNE (Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization – Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity) party, stated that his government and the population are not willing to tolerate 'blackmailing' by their Greek neighbors and perceive their request for a name-change as a threat to Macedonian identity. (commentary by Nikola Gruevski, in: Beringer, 2008)

This conflict is not only being negotiated and fought over on the political level; in the scientific and academic field the poles of contest have been realigned from their nineteenth- and early twentieth-century south-northeast (Greek-Bulgarian) confrontation to a new south-northwest (Greek-Macedonian) conflict through constructions of history and claims advanced by scholarly advocates of nationalist causes on all sides. "It is no accident that both sides have been equally committed to the rhetoric of truth and falsehood; neither can encompass the contingent view of national identity that emerges from ethnographically informed analysis of the region's history." (Karakasidou, 1997; see also Herzfeld, 1982)

Based on this inquiry into the processes of nation-state-formation in Macedonia and the Balkans, I will now try to discuss the Skopje 2014 project, as what I assume to be an attempt at constructing a belated and highly problematic manifestation of nation-hood.

## *II. Skopje 2014 and its Aesthetic and Aestheticizing Program*

After the massive earthquake which hit Skopje in July 1963 and killed more than 1.000 people, injured further several thousands and left around 200.000 people homeless, the United Nations led efforts to reconstruct the city in close collaboration with the Yugoslav government under president Tito. Japanese architect Kenzo Tange

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<sup>4</sup> commentaries by Jusuf Islami, Radmila Shekerinska, of the Social Democratic Party, Ermira Mehmeti, of the Democratic Union for Integration (the largest Albanian political party

won a competition for the masterplan for the reconstruction of the city and received the commission together with the Town Planning Institute of Zagreb. Tito welcomed the UN's funds and renamed Skopje as the 'City of Solidarity', for which not only financial aid and construction material were donated from abroad, but also ideas and planning expertise. (Jovanovic Weiss, 2010; Bugjevac, 2010)

Tange's masterplan and its subsequent, if only partial execution did receive a lot of criticism as it was perceived by some, who favored an at least partial reconstruction of the old city, as a radical top-down experiment with little bottom-up participation. But the plan also foresaw a series of architectural competitions, which were open to Yugoslav architects only and which resulted in iconic buildings such as the main post office by Macedonian architect Janko Kostantinov or the National Opera by Slovene architects Biro71. In this sense, Yugoslav and Macedonian architects were inspired to build and contribute to their city their own aesthetic voice and architectural ideas, which are now recognized as Macedonian within a larger territorial system of the Western Balkans. Furthermore, the masterplan implied that all ethnic groups share and use the same infrastructure and urban space. With the announcement of the plans by the Macedonian government – under the title Skopje 2014 - to refashion the city to look as if it sprang directly from antiquity, the legacy of Yugoslavia's city of solidarity is now under threat to disappear. What has itself become a kind of open-air museum for the sculptural rough-edged brutalist architecture of that time, and which was produced under a Socialist political system that is now defunct, will have to give way to a different kind of musealized city, with a very different aesthetic program. (Jovanovic Weiss, 2010)

In 2009, a project called Skopje 2014 was announced by the Macedonian government, by publishing a virtual tour of the city as it is supposed to look like until the year 2014. It consists of numerous monuments and statues of historical and religious figures, three additional pedestrian bridges over the river Vardar, which divides the Old Muslim Quarter from the rest of the city, and various public buildings, resembling neo-classical or neo-baroque architectural styles, as well as the decoration of existing structures with 'classical' facades. While the initially published figures of an investment of eighty million Euros until 2014 seem rather low for a

project of this scale, critics predict a total of up to 500 millions, if all parts of the project are to be completed. Although the VMRO-DPMNE-government, the initiator and sponsor of the plans, has kept mostly silent about the rationale behind the project, which has commenced almost immediately after the launch of the virtual plan, the rare comments by government officials point to why this is happening now and in this very form. Whereas the Minister of Culture, Elizabeta Kanceska-Mileska has downplayed any grand pretensions behind the project, the chairwoman of the state commission for relations with religious communities, Valentina Bozinovska, was more outspoken about the government's motivation: "[...] the Skopje 2014 project is a statement of all that we have had from the ancient period until today. For the first time we have a chance to create a tangible manifestation of Macedonian identity. [...] Civilization practically started here." According to her, Macedonia has yet to assert its cultural identity 20 years after gaining political independence. (Dimishkovska, 2010)

By highlighting only a few of the monuments and buildings which are already completed or are currently under construction I want to argue that here, indeed, a narrative is being constructed, which claims a linear development of Macedonian identity stemming from antiquity. A mythical representation of an imagined singularity of Macedonia's formation as a nation state is being engineered by moving back from the present into an idealized and selective version of the past. (see above: Balibar, 1991)

On the main square, two horsemen, Goce Delchev and Dame Gruev, are guarding the Stone Bridge, which leads into the Old Muslim Quarter of Skopje. They are facing towards the center of the square, where a giant statue-cum-fountain of Alexander the Great is being erected. Goce Delchev and Dame Gruev were instrumental in the struggle for Macedonian autonomy from the Ottoman Empire. The presence and sheer size of the statue of Alexander the Great on Skopje's main square presents just one more reason and extra fuel for the diplomatic and political tensions between Athens and Skopje and another example of the countries' competing claims over a common history. Recently, Skopje's football stadium had been renamed after Alexander's father Philip II. and both airports in Skopje and Thessaloniki are named after Alexander. (Shea, 1997)

On the other end of the Stone Bridge two pairs of Orthodox saints, Kliment and Naum on the left of the bridgehead and Kiril and Metod on the right, are facing the the Old Muslim Quarter; less than 50 metres away, the Museum of the Macedonian struggle is being built. The two brothers, Kiril and Metod, were missionaries in the ninth century and played an important role in the christianization of the Slavic peoples.

Among the buildings, probably the most remarkable in terms of layout and positioning, architectural style and future usage is a narrow structure directly on the river-front which resembles an ancient Greek temple. It will house the Constitutional Court, the State Archive and an Archeological museum, putting ‚justice‘ and ‚historical facts‘ under one roof. As the building is still under construction it is too early to speculate, if and how the contents of the archive and the exhibits of the museum will support, enforce or maybe even challenge the narrative of the built environment. But what can be already anticipated is that the building and the neighboring structures will almost entirely conceal the National Opera building and thus block the view on one of the most prominent examples of the architecture of the 1960s and 70s.

Equally question-provoking is a triumphal arch, called ‚Porta Makedonia‘ in close proximity to the main square. As art historian Konca Pirkovska asks: „I do not see the point of building a Triumphal Arch, in aesthetic, conceptual or spatial sense. [...] What is our triumph – does it lie in Macedonia’s independence?“ (Bugjevac, 2010)

With a lot of buildings still under construction, and others still awaiting their final designation or their future use not being entirely clear (which is also a result of the government’s silence about the project), it would be too superficial of a critique to dismiss the entirety of the project as a bizarre megalomaniac undertaking. But certain aspects of the overall project are already visible enough to deserve further thought and analysis:

(I) One of the remarkable characteristics of Skopje 2014 is the concentration of the building spree in the compact center of Skopje and the subsequent spatial proximity of monuments and monumental buildings. Architect and academic Mishko

Ralev explicates it as follows: „They [the project’s initiators] see no need to extend it to other parts, because the central area is the strategic point they need. Here, they seek to be ever-lasting and ever-present. This is the entire purpose of the construction of such monuments.“ (Bugjevac and Ralev; 2010)

In addition, I would argue that the spatial proximity quite obviously imposes a continuity on the viewer between the individual statues and between the statues and the buildings; a continuity which is impossible to ignore. In the absence of an official narrative by the project’s sponsors, besides the rather explicit statement by Valentina Bozinovska (see above), the fact that the statues range from antiquity (Alexander the Great) and the Roman-Byzantine Empire (Justinian I.) to Christian missionaries of the first millennium and revolutionary figures of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, suggests a linear trajectory towards a national destiny.

(II) The implicit narrative of Skopje 2014 is as much shaped by what is put in the foreground as it is by what is being pushed into the background, completely left out or forgotten. Thus it fabricates an idealized, aestheticized version of Macedonian history, by selectively transforming the world of experience into a representation of an ideological tendency and by erasing others - by history being aestheticized. (Smith, 2002) Emperors of ancient and medieval empires, heroes of national struggles for independence, religious leaders of Christian Orthodoxy all will feature prominently in the new city-scape, regardless of whether they are ‚borrowed’ from other nations, stem from shared histories or earlier, rival forms of state-formation. At the same time, Macedonia’s (Socialist) Yugoslav past, during which a Macedonian ethnic identity was politically recognized for the first time, will have no place at all in the project. On the contrary, the architectural heritage from the period will be concealed by the new structures. While one might think that the civil war of 2001 between the primarily ethnic Macedonian armed forces and the Albanian guerilla, too, would deserve a space or symbol of reconciliation in the built environment, the strategic positioning of some of the religion-inspired statues rather appear as a provocation of the predominantly Muslim Albanian community.

This very specific narrative of Skopje 2014 leads me to suggest that it invokes different but complementary acts of forgetting: First, as a form of repressive erasure, it denies the fact of historical ruptures and the citizen, the Macedonian public might

be prompted to internalize the values and beliefs written into the architectural script. Secondly, it might also represent a form of prescriptive forgetting by an act of the State, in which the forgetting of a previous rupture or conflict is thought to be in the interest of all parties (although the abovementioned Museum for the Victims of Communism would most likely prescribe a very particular kind of remembrance). Thirdly, it might be seen as a kind of forgetting which is constitutive of a new Macedonian identity, being manifested through a set of newly shared memories and a series of patterned silences. (Connerton, 2008)

(III) Andreas Huyssen describes a trend emerging in the 1970s in Europe and North America towards the historicizing restoration of old urban centers, towards museum villages and landscapes and national heritage and patrimony enterprises. A desire to pull certain pasts into the present has also become a dominant concern in post-communist countries in Eastern Europe after 1989. In the case of Skopje 2014, too, the process of musealization is not bound to the institutional site of the museum but spills out into the wider city-scape and miniature copies of the new buildings and monuments have become available as merchandise. But whether a national memory debate in Macedonia will arise and whether it will address issues of concern in the global discourses on memory and, since recently, in other states of the former Yugoslavia, such as ethnic conflicts, forced migration and minority rights or victimization and accountability, remains questionable.

(IV) Another aspect of the aesthetic program of Skopje 2014 is the awkward alliance of artistic representation, religious symbolism and political patronage. As I have noted earlier, the independence of the (Macedonian) Orthodox Church is closely interconnected to the recognition as a nation. Even though there is a sizeable non-Christian community in Macedonia, the government has shown very little hesitation to exploit the symbolic alliance between the majority religion, artistic representation and nationalist and religious connotations in the urban space.

(V) According to Balibar, national ideology involves ideal signifiers, of which the most prominent is the name of the nation (Balibar, 1991). It is the first of two more symbols of national identity, which - while not being part of the Skopje 2014 project - deserves mentioning: The name chosen by Macedonia (see also above) in its

post-independence constitution is contested primarily by its neighbor Greece, which is apparently a reason for frustration on the side of the Macedonian government and of some parts of the population. The conflict over the name delays Macedonia's further integration into the international community, namely the European Union and NATO. Secondly, the Macedonian flag is another symbol the two neighboring countries want to use exclusively to tell the world something about themselves, and through which they want to claim the same history.<sup>5</sup> Both political symbols intersect permanently with the construction works of Skopje 2014. The "naming issue" has become a topic of constant debate in national and international media and is loading additional meaning on the project. At the same time, the number of national flags in Skopje's urban space has increased significantly over the past year. Thus the new monuments and buildings, together with the omnipresence of the flag and the name dispute, create a system, which serves the manifestation of national identity not only towards its citizens but also vis-à-vis its neighbors. (Shea, 1997; Rihtman-Augustin, 2004)

### *III. Current Debates and their Stakeholders*

In the following, I will turn my attention to the ongoing debates and controversies accompanying the progress of the construction works for Skopje 2014. Opinions are sharply divided between support and dismissal. While there has been severe criticism and opposition since the announcement of the project, it seems necessary to separate the various stakeholders and their voices in the debates along their focus of critique (or endorsement).

The first strand of criticism is primarily concerned with the costs of the project and the flow of funds, which the government is determined not to comment on.<sup>6</sup> Some commentators would have preferred to see these funds being invested into the urban infrastructure, as Skopje has to cope with continuous rural-urban migration. Traffic and pollution have become major problems for the city and its

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<sup>5</sup> The flag is based on the Star of Vergina, and said to be a symbol from the era of the ancient Macedonian empire.

<sup>6</sup> Supposedly the project was exempt from budgetary cuts, a reaction to the recent economic crisis, which affected most other areas.

inhabitants. A related line of critique addresses the intransparent commissioning and approval processes. Furthermore, no international competition has preceded the commissioning, which a project of this scale and investment would have justified. Instead, the individual works went to local architects, none of which seems to have a local or international track-record to speak of. (Bugjevac, 2010; Dimishkovska, 2010)

In comparison, the critique of the aesthetic program and the architectural quality of the project has remained rather weak and fragmented. This might have to do either with the fact that numerous architects are directly or indirectly involved in the ongoing works or that some architects refrain from alienating the government, which is still expected to award the final commissions for the completion of the project. In general, the few reactions towards the architectural choices are lamenting the preference for neo-classical or pseudo-baroque designs over a more contemporary approach for the public buildings, but hardly offer any alternative lines of thought. (Bugjevac, 2010; Bugjevac and Ralev, 2010)

For Nebojsa Vilic, a professor at the Faculty of Arts in Skopje, the root problem behind the project is the lack of a truly democratic public discussion. On the contrary, the project's sponsors avoid public debate and the opinions of local or international experts and are in general oblivious of such reactions. One of the first occasions of public protest against one part of the project, the building of an Orthodox church with state funds on the main city square (announced prior to the launch of the visualization of Skopje 2014, but also part of the project's initial stage), was a demonstration in the spring of 2009, organized by an initiative of architecture students called 'The First Architectural Brigade' and supported by other non-governmental organizations. When the protesters gathered on the main square in order to challenge the construction of the church, they were met by a much larger group of counter-protesters (organized by the nationalist party and religious groups) and the two groups clashed violently. Since then, the national government has apparently backed off from the plans for the church, which came under heavy domestic and international criticism, as the secular constitution forbids the state to favor any religion over others. (Dimishkovska, 2010; <http://skopje2803.blogspot.com/>; VMRO-DPMNE, 2008)



In their critique of the project anthropologist Goran Janev and architect Blaz Kriznik argue that many major European cities are on the path from being monumental national capitals, (re)-constructed during the period of nation-state formations and industrialization, towards globally integrated open cities. At the same time, Janev and Kriznik suggest, that globalization has also become an important source of symbolic reconstruction in many cities, which are trying to replace their industrial imagery with a new post-industrial one. These urban redevelopments are accompanied by legitimizing discourses, where undesired social and spatial outcomes are frequently presented as their 'normal and unavoidable price'. Such symbolic reconstruction and its related discursive practices are often instrumentalized by economic and political elites against the actual needs of citizens. Thus they enhance existing social and spatial divides and prevent the development of more inclusive forms of local governance. (Janev and Kriznik, 2008)

Skopje, according to Janev and Kriznik, seems to have taken an almost opposite path. Due to frequent social changes, tense political conflicts and to interventions by occupying or imperial forces, the city's symbolic order was trapped in a state of confusion. Although Skopje and Macedonia have gained more autonomy within Yugoslavia, the process of urban development and symbolic formation of the national capital has taken a different turn after the earthquake of 1963. Following doctrines of Yugoslavian etatist socialism and international urban planning and architecture, a new open city was proclaimed and started to emerge, but was never completed. Yet, the current transformation of Skopje is not only a consequence of this unique history, but also an outcome of more recent changes in Macedonia's social and political sphere. The interests of economic and political elites, hidden behind nationalistic discourses, directly influence present-day urban development and symbolic reconstruction. Macedonia turns towards reinventing and reaffirming its separate and glorified identity as a direct outcome of the political formation in Macedonia and an ethnopolitical order established after the armed conflict in 2001. As the present symbolic reconstruction suggests, a divided society is being reproduced. The new monuments, buildings and institutions try to construct ethnic boundaries through symbolic power. (Janev and Kriznik, 2008)

Janev's and Kriznik's analysis also points towards the exclusion of any sort of representation of Macedonia's minority communities from the project. Many ethnic Albanian organizations have criticized the project for its discriminatory approach by exclusively promoting the values and heroes of the predominantly Macedonian population. The Albanian community has therefore started to demand the construction of statues portraying its own Albanian historical figures and their inclusion in the project. A statue of Skenderbeg has already been erected by an Albanian-majority district-municipality in defiance of the building regulations of the city. While the government initially spoke of minority representations being an integral part of Skopje 2014, it has not reacted (left alone dedicated sufficient funds) to the current demands. One might therefore argue that the confrontation of monuments mirrors the opposition of two nationalist discourses and indicates a further divide of the urban society along ethnic lines. (Marusic, 2010; Janev and Kriznik, 2008)

Despite these various but rather diverse strands of criticism there is also significant support for the project. Most of the supporters express delight over the fact that – after decades of neglect and standstill in terms of urban development – something is finally being done and that the city center will be turned into an architectural ensemble. In addition, one must not forget that the VMRO-DPMNE-party (the project's sponsor) still enjoys a significant majority in parliament, which might imply that a fair share of the population supports and endorses its political program and projects. While the construction works are progressing steadily, the government upholds its avoidance of entering into any public debate about the destination and the nationalist flavor of the project. At the same time, resistance in the civil society appears to be growing but remains fragmented and dispersed between questions of economic and aesthetic rationale, claims of corruption and minority-nationalist sentiments.

### *Conclusion*

Hardly any region other than the Balkans has seen such rapid succession and changes of different state-formations and power configurations in the past centuries. The processes of nation-state-formation in the region were shaped by often violent

conflicts over territory, autonomy and political and economic domination and had been influenced by the geopolitical strategies of empires, which rose and vanished, of various Great Powers emerging from the successive wars, of the Church(es) and of frequently shifting alliances between all these players. While national and ethnic boundaries continued to be contested and re-mapped, the new nation-states attempted to manage their ethnic minorities with varying measures and success.

I tried to present these processes as a multiplicity of events and ruptures, which are neither sequences of a linear development nor the inherent property of a single nation-state. Still, in the process of the manifestation of national identity, the newly emerging states in the Balkan region tried to assert their singularity by claiming historical events and figures as being exclusively their own.

In the past years, the current nationalist-led government has embarked on a political project of urban redevelopment of the capital of Skopje, which tries to construct a narrative of Macedonian identity, by weaving a continuity from antiquity over the middle ages to the times of Macedonia's struggle for nationhood into the fabric of the city's built environment. The construction spree is not only characterized by new public buildings and monuments, most of which feature neo-classical or pseudo-baroque aesthetics and are representing this continuity, but also by a number of strategically patterned silences and omissions, such as Macedonia's Yugoslav past and the presence of minorities and their cultural and political manifestations.

While the project can be interpreted as a belated manifestation of nationhood with a questionable sense of style and scale, there seems to be more to the retrograde aesthetics than just the architecture. In his analysis of Eastern-European Art, Boris Groys explicates the erasure of a communist past as follows: with the demise of European communism, the liberal West also lost the most significant alternative to its modern uniformity in recent history, one that was not merely formulated, but also brought about. The national revival of a supposed pre-modern cultural identity in many post-communist societies, which is accompanying and challenging their gradual approximation to the West can therefore be understood, according to Groys, as a move against the flow of time, from the (modern) future into the past. (Groys, 2001) Balibar refers to a similar trajectory

(although not specifically for post-communist societies), when he refers to the myth of origins and national continuity as „an effective ideological form, in which the imaginary singularity of national formations is constructed daily, by moving back from the present into the past.“ (Balibar, 1991)

The two most recent phases of urban redevelopment (first, in the 1960s and 70s after the earthquake of 1963; second, the symbolic reconstruction of Skopje 2014 into a grand national capital) share a strict top-down approach with little or no public participation. But their outcomes differ significantly: While the reconstruction efforts and the architecture of international and Yugoslav architects and town-planners at least attempted to turn Skopje into an Open City after 1963, the current musealization project rather seems to reaffirm the social and spatial divides along ethnic lines. The current debates around the project, i.e. the silence of the government and the fragmented and heterogeneous voices of criticism, do not point into a direction of a more inclusive solution for the actual needs of the citizens and the diverse communities.

Since the initial version of this paper had been written, a number of events took place which deserve to be briefly mentioned: In the early parliamentary elections of June 2011 Gruevski's ruling party had to face significant losses but remained strong enough to form a coalition government. On the eve of the elections a 22-year old man has been violently beaten by the police and died of the inflicted injuries. Soon afterwards, a prominent opposition politician was arrested on the basis of charges of bribing and misconduct in his political position.

In the end, I want to return to the commentary by political scientist Jusuf Islami about the two critical words - „Ours and Theirs“ - in societies where different communities are living alongside each other. In the current political climate in Macedonia, domestically and in relation to some of its neighbors, it seems difficult to imagine, if and what kind of a museum, monument or other, more innovative practices of memory could make a significant contribution to reconcile the competing claims over cultural and historical heritage, over truth and falsehood or over the urban space for the manifestation of identities.

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