



ORIGINAL PAPER

Architecture as a Political Tool. Case of the Macedonian Identity Policy (2006-2017)

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Abstract:

This paper presents the effects of the research on the identity policies led by Macedonia's government in 2006-2017. The historical method was used. This work is based on paper publications, as well as on the author's experiences from several field trips to the Balkans (2013-2014). The aim of this article is to analyze the mechanism used by the ruling VMRO-DPMNE to create and strengthen national identity through architecture. The visual arts were always an important tool of transmission of political content. Many governments across the globe have started an 'architectural policy' with the purpose of building a nation: Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan being an example. In every case, architecture was part of the social engineering process. Macedonia's identity policy was based on the concept of antiquization: an idea which assumes that modern Slav Macedonians are descendants of the ancient Macedonians. The government started transforming public space. The intention was to change its function and make it a part of a propaganda system. In the entire country, many structures were built. Large national flags, monuments of Alexander the Great and pseudo-classical buildings, were considered to be the best means of creating the ethnic Macedonian identity. Controversy over the 'Skopje 2014' Project caused a decline of support to VMRO-DPMNE and led it to lose power. The new social-democratic government started to change the policies which led to an agreement with Greece and admission to NATO.

Keywords: *architecture; Macedonia; identity policy; social engineering; antiquization.*

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Introduction

The last decade of the 20th century brought profound changes in many European countries. This period was marked by political, economic and social transformations. One of its most important processes was the breakup of Yugoslavia. As a result of this, brand new states appeared – among them Macedonia. Independence disturbed the foundations on which the fragile balance between the ethnic inhabiting it, was based. Slavic Macedonians were the dominant ethnic group, but they did not create a strong community – their identity began to take shape at the end of the 19th century (Hroch, 2003: 49). Due to the turbulent history of the Balkans, the newly proclaimed republic was home for various ethnic groups: Slavic Macedonians, Serbs, Roma, Turks and Albanians. Their identity was the ground on which nationalist attitudes grew. Ethnic Macedonians built them on the basis of antiquization.

“Initially[,] it was the domain of a few pseudo-historians, but it was picked up with a vengeance by the VMRO-DPMNE when it rose to power in 2006 under Gruevski. It claimed roots to [...] ancient Macedonia going as far as to downplay the Slavic origins. Thus, since the 2000s there are two rival narratives for the hearts and minds of the Macedonians, which also happen to correspond to the viewpoints of the two largest political parties: the Slavist line advocated by the centre-left Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDPM) and the ancient Macedonian by the VMRO-DPMNE” (Heraclides, 2021: 169).

Antiquization was the state’s ideology until 2017. Its decline was just the first step on the democratization path. However, (North) Macedonia has achieved one of its foreign policy goals – it became a member of the North Atlantic Alliance.

The article below, is the result of research on the role that architecture played in Macedonia’s identity policy. The work proves that it became a tool, with which an attempt was made to create a coherent historical narrative. Its aim, was to find a new perspective on national identity and instill it within Macedonians. The text presents the course of the architectural policy which was followed by the VMRO-DPMNE in 2006-2017. The article shows its genesis, course and analyzes the effects so far. Can an identity be designed? Why is it important to visualize it? Can architecture be used for that purpose? What are the consequences? The historical method was used to investigate these problems. The source base were publications in Polish and English, as well as the author’s experiences from several field trips to the Balkans (2013-2014).

Identity in the time of globalization

The contemporary world is shaped by various processes. One of their effects is the progressive homogenization of the culture. Paradoxically, it was globalization that stimulated the economic and social changes that contributed to the emergence of the demand for identity (Malinga, 2002: 212). This applies to all levels of society’s organization – from individuals, through social and ethnic groups, cities and regions to nations, states and international organizations. The development of the separateness’ sense is guided by many processes, including political pressures – the world-famous sociologist Zygmunt Bauman stated that we tend to perceive identity as something that is produced (Bauman, 2007: 18).

After gaining independence, Macedonia began to aspire to become a member of the modern states’ club, but exposure to the multidimensional impact of globalization interrupted the period of a relatively calm internal situation and the first attempts to build effective political institutions. The republic then became a testing ground for social engineering. The intended result, was to be a new Macedonian national community – its appearance, history and values were already designed by VMRO-DPMNE politicians, especially under the leadership of Prime Ministers Nikola Gruevski (2006-2016) and Emil Dimitriev (2016-2017). Similar reactions to globalization processes were observed in other countries,

especially those that emerged as a result of the collapse of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia. Construction of national communities was initiated by (quasi-)authoritarian governments. The methods they used were similar, including: monumentalization of public space, supervision of artistic activity, politicization of museums and desire to create a positive image of the country as democratic (Poles & Isaacs, 2018: 51-53). In such a context nationalism is proof of only a breakneck attempt to stop globalization processes, instead of actually stopping them. The resulting national megalomania turns into a caricature of states' institutions. It reveals the complexes of the rulers and confusion of the citizens (voters). According to Anthony Giddens these problems are easiest to analyze if we look at them as dilemmas, for which solutions help to maintain identity narrative (Giddens, 2001: 258). On the other hand, Darren J. O'Byrne emphasized that

“Traditionally, political identity has been linked specifically to the nation-state. This is primarily because throughout modernity the nation-state has been the dominant form of political administration. [...] Nation-states have required the support of the people, and in order to attain this[,] have sought to ignore cultural pluralism and define the ‘nation’ in monocultural terms. Thus[,] cultural identity has been suppressed by political identity, and this suppression is represented by the ‘assimilationist’ model of citizenship inclusion” (O'Byrne, 2001: 140-141).

Zygmunt Bauman confirmed that national identity was used by state institutions to define the boundaries between ‘us’ and ‘them’. However, states which do not have that monopoly, try to serve as supreme tribunals which could issue judgments about disputed identity (Bauman, 2007: 23).

In the late-modern era national identity becomes obsolete. Arjun Appadurai wrote even that globalization processes resulted in the crisis of the nation-states (Appadurai, 2005: 37). In fact, societies are constantly transforming, borders are blurring and integration in the international structures cause, that the bond of an individual with the state (nation) weakens. That drags him into the embrace of cosmopolitanism. In the hierarchy of human needs the position of national belonging continues to decline. Globalization leads the state to leave the unshakeable relationship of a citizen with the nation. The patriotic sentiments – which were the base of modern nation-states – had to convert partially into the souvenir industry and serve more to entertainment than politics (Bauman, 2007: 29). Siniša Malešević emphasized that

“Bauman’s insistence that consumerism has replaced nationalism is equally flawed. [...] not only has consumerism always been an integral part of [the] nationalist experience, but the two have rarely been mutually opposing forces. [...] consumerism is often an important aspect of nationalist projects” (Malešević, 2013: 186).

Thus, nationalist identity policies are based on a commercialized image of the nation.

Introduction to the Macedonian identity policy

The Balkans are a melting pot of cultures. Maria Todorova stressed that “modern historiography, as it has developed since the nineteenth century, has been recognized as the chief producer of the national narrative, working in close collaboration with and underpinning the activities of the nation-state” (Todorova, 2004: 22).

The strengthening of ties between local Balkan communities sped up in the 19th century. Macedonian Slavs were somewhat uninvolved in these processes. They used to described themselves as ‘locals’, but others considered them to be Bulgarians. The slow increase in their awareness resulted in them leaving Bulgarian insurgent structures, opposing

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the dominance of Greek as a language used in liturgy and education, starting the codification of the language and reporting the need of recognition, of their distinctiveness by the European empires. In the 1860's the term 'Macedonia' was revived in the political context (Stawowy-Kawka, 2000: 137-139). The confirmation of the existence of an independent Macedonian nation was accompanied by controversy over its name – it comes from the monarchy that was ensured by Alexander the Great.

The attitude of the Provisional Government of Macedonia presented an original combination of a reference to the ancient heritage with the creation of a multi-ethnic society (Czamańska & Szulc, 2002: 29). The most important manifestation of Macedonian national awakening was the insurrection which began on August 2nd, 1903 – the Ilinden Uprising. In Kruševo, a republic led by Nikola Karev was proclaimed (Stawowy-Kawka, 2000: 152). Another important event, was the publication of Krste Petkov Misirkov's work in 1903. 'On Macedonian Matters' was kind of a manifesto which indicated the need to develop a literary standard of the Macedonian language (Stawowy-Kawka, 2000: 141-142). The creation of the Macedonian identity was facilitated by the territorial changes introduced after World War II. A key aspect of political emancipation of Macedonians was the religion – the Macedonian Orthodox Church was established. Later on, it obtained the autocephalous status which clearly strengthened its position in the state's politics (Czekalski, 2006: 336). When the Yugoslav federation broke up, the case of Macedonians was an excellent example of how effective the construction of identity can be for a nation (Hroch, 2003: 50).

After 1991, the young republic tried to gain recognition of its sovereignty by as much members of the international community as possible. Controversy was again aroused by the term 'Macedonia' as Greece defined it as an unlawful reference to the heritage of the ancient Macedonians. Athens which sees itself as the heir of these barbaric people embarked on a heavy diplomatic offensive. On September 13th, 1995, an agreement was concluded which guaranteed mutual respect for sovereignty, political independence and the inviolability of borders. The compromise obligated Skopje to abandon the use of symbols taken from the ancient heritage, especially the Vergina Sun. The change of the emblem and the flag led to the end of the economic blockade, but Macedonian-Greek relations remained tense (Stawowy-Kawka, 2000: 311-313). However, an important role in Macedonian politics was still played by the religion,

“both the socialist SDSM and the nationalist VMRO-DPMNE strongly supported the Macedonian Orthodox Church. An important element of Macedonian identity, it played a disproportionately large role in state affairs. Orthodox icons and religious symbols were featured on bills and coins” (Koinova, 2013: 66).

This way, the Orthodox religion started to be present in everyday life of every citizen, no matter their private beliefs. The period of progressive stabilization of Macedonia's international position, ended with the parliamentary elections held in 2006. They were won by the VMRO-DPMNE which obtained 32,5% of the vote and received the mission to form a government for the second time in history. The premierships of Nikola Gruevski and Emil Dimitriev were marked by an aggressive identity policy (Majewski, 2013: 182).

Political (mis)use of culture and art

The identity policies are related to history or memory politics. All of them have a direct impact on culture, art and education – they serve to embody the designed identity models. This goal can be achieved using e.g. mythology. The importance can be illustrated by the fact, that it is still created in the modern day (e.g. the cult of the soldiers fallen during the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022). In the countries of the former Yugoslavia, an important role is played by the myths of origin, which justify the ethnic character of the

nation. The Macedonian mythology is based on the concept of antiquization. On the other hand, it contains elements, that are to prove the contribution of the Macedonian people, to the culture of the Orthodox Slavs. Thus, the heroes' pantheon was joined by among others: Cyril and Methodius, Tsar Samuel and Prince Marko. This is related to the belief in the superiority of Macedonians as the 'chosen people' – the idea is present also among other Balkan nations (Rekšć, 2013: 45-46 & 183-188). Ivan Čolović stated that theories about differences between Balkan nations lead to a conclusion, that they share the same system composed of symbols, rituals and other elements of the political sphere (Čolović, 2014: 72).

In view of the progressing globalization, the best tool for shaping a nation is a permanent material, which can be used to embody the imaginary vision of national identity. Therefore, visual arts that meet this criteria are still of great political importance and can serve e.g. for propaganda purposes. This hypothesis is confirmed by the action undertaken by numerous governments all around the world. They try to take control over the sphere of culture e.g. nationalizing scientific and museum institutions (Machcewicz, 2017: 53-54). Another type of activity aimed at supervising the process of creating (national, ethnic or religious) identity is the implementation of architectural projects. Almost 100 years ago, Stanisław Noakowski stated that every man should know the rules and architectonic styles. It is because, like any other art, architecture reflects the epoch and its values. This kind of knowledge enables us to understand the past as well the present, better (Noakowski, 1957: 34). Arts, including architecture are the medium of communication. The propaganda potential has been used from the ancient times. Buildings are used to influence an individual, convey specific messages and create 'correct' habits. An analysis of information hidden in them, reveals that they represent the views of their creators. They are constructed to interpose on people's behaviour and actively shape it in a particular way. Siniša Malešević stated that

“although symbols such as monuments can and often do remain invisible, empty markers, they can relatively quickly be infused with intense and very different nationalist imaginings. It is so too with other nationalist symbols, from the commemorations of national days to public festivals, sports competitions, beauty pageants, tourist destinations, national cuisine, triumphal arches or war memorials. In everyday life all of these and many other symbols can become powerful mobilizers of nationalist action, [...] such symbols can remain unnoticed for very long periods of time, it does not mean that they are insignificant” (Malešević, 2013: 134-135).

On the contrary – they serve to visualize identity and legitimize the existence of a state.

In Tajikistan, artistic reference to the heritage of the Samanid dynasty helps to unite Tajiks and strengthen their sensation of being one national community. New monuments tend to fill the identity gap which is the result of the fact that the national culture center – Bukhara – is located in Uzbekistan. Same process took place in Kyrgyzstan where the 1000th anniversary of creation of the Epic of Manas in 1995 took on a nation-building character. In the Talas Region, a historical park was built. It hosts a museum and some yurts where Kyrgyz handicrafts are sold. In both countries, identity is visualized by objects devoted to heroes and figures of the culture e.g. writers. The cases are similar also by the fact that their identity policies were initiated by the presidents (Niechciał, 2018: 181-185).

Architecture as tool of Macedonian policy

In socialist Yugoslavia, the emphasis was placed on the creation and development of the Macedonian literary language, folk studies and the educational system (Baczyński, 2021: 14). Another serious interference with the already existing local identity, was the reconstruction of Skopje after the 1963 earthquake. This kind of architectural policy was

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used also by the authorities of the independent Macedonia. The undertaken investments were to stress the Macedonian character of the new state. The other aim, was to secure the privileged position of ethnic Macedonians, their language, Orthodox religion and the official version of history. It was a specific weapon in the conflict waged with the neighbours and minorities, who demanded the strengthening of their position (Majewski, 2013: 304).

The architectural policy had a strong impact on the international relations. A huge controversy was raised around the statue of Mother Teresa which was built in Skopje, by the artist Tome Serafimovski. The problem was, that the world's most famous Catholic nun was born in Skopje as a daughter of an Albanian family. The Albanians protested against misuse of their heritage. On the other hand, Kuvendi (Albanian parliament) proclaimed the anniversary of her beatification as a national holiday (Czekalski, 2006: 337). However, the most controversial construction was the Millennium Cross which began in 2002. For the location of the 66-meters high cross, the 1066-meters high Krstovar peak was chosen, at the foot of which lies Skopje. Part of the cost was covered by the Orthodox Church and public donations. However, the monument was criticized from the Muslim community (Majewski, 2013: 304). It is difficult to argue, as such an obvious symbol of the domination of Orthodoxy is far from the standards of a modern secular state.

The VMRO-DPMNE developed the antiquization ideology. Antonina Kłoskowska pointed out, that linking the community with the historical ethnos and ensuring a sense of its continuity is the basis for nation-building. Its antiquity is confirmed by the mythology and symbolism which connects it with the old ethnic and usually imaginary form of the community (Kłoskowska, 1996: 80-81). Thus, 'holy places' have great value – historically important areas play a huge role in the national mythology (e.g. Kosovo polje for the Serbs or Gernikako Arbola for the Basques). The content combined with them takes on a unique character. In the case of Macedonia the focus was on towns, villages and archeological sites (e.g. Ohrid, Kruševo, Galičnik and Stobi) where traditional customs are cultivated. The symbolism is present there all the time – even more during celebrations and events. However, the success of indoctrination may not result from quality but the accumulation of messages in the public space. So, a large-scale campaign to nationalise it, was launched. Its aim, was to create an architectural narrative that would show the strength of the state and legitimize its vision of the past. The public space was filled with messages, which were supposed to convince people that the nation has a thousand-years long history (Majewski, 2013: 364-365).

“The policy of antiquization is implemented not only in the capital city of Skopje, but also in smaller towns like Bitola. The main square of the town is decorated with the monument to King Philip II as well as with archaic Macedonian symbols (such as the sun). Thus, we can say that antiquization is a national project, executed by a right-wing government, with an aim to establish an official self-representation of its ancient roots” (Dambrauskas & Baradziej, 2021: 162).

Even a small nation is an imagined community. So, architectural representations of the nation help to build its identity. In fact, the lack of knowledge about others members, forces them to cherish an idea about what their nation really is (Anderson, 1997: 19).

Ambiguous character of ‘Skopje 2014’ Project

One of the tools of the VMRO-DPMNE's identity policy was the architecture. Piotr Majewski emphasized that the party's desire was to build evidence of the independent state's power (Majewski, 2013: 245-247).

“The political misuse of patriotism has shifted to a type of *materialization of nationalism*, backed up by the state institutions and government structures. The most evident expression of this materialization has been the

construction of a considerable number of public buildings and monuments, mainly within [the] ‘Skopje 2014’ Project. The city core of Skopje became a *topos* of choice for erasing, writing, and rewriting the Macedonian identity on various levels” (Risteski & Kodra Hysa, 2014: 198).

So, the main aim of the Project was to make Macedonians accept the imposed model of their own identity. While construction works had begun earlier, the public was informed in 2010. The Project involved a reconstruction of the city center in a ‘modernized’ neoclassical style. The key element of the Project were monuments. Their creation repeatedly provoked reactions of Bulgaria and Greece. Sofia protested against the appropriation of heroes of Bulgarian history, including the revolutionary Gotse Delchev. The axis of the dispute with Athens, was the use of Hellenic symbols and the setting of monuments to the ancient rulers: Alexander the Great (24,5 m) and Philip II (28 m).

Particular attention was paid to museums. Their role is to shape and familiarize the knowledge about community’s history and identity. Museums can focus on a certain period of the past, therefore they form a powerful political tool (Chłosta-Sikorska, 2018: 302). For that reason, their role was twofold – the national spirit was to be conveyed not only through the architectural exterior, but also the interior with appropriately designed exhibitions. The Museum of Macedonian Struggle in Skopje, opened on the 20th anniversary of independence in 2011, being an example.

Controversy was raised by plans to rebuild the facades of the buildings, which were a valuable part of the city’s heritage. The fortress Skopsko Kale, the officers’ casino and the theater destroyed in 1963 were all to be reconstructed. The universal problem of monuments’ reconstruction was taken up by Dorota Skotarczak. She called examples of the castles in Poznań, Poland and Trakai, Lithuania. In her opinion, they were rebuilt to visualize history. On the other hand, newly constructed monuments seem to be artificial. Despite that, these places enjoy great interest of visitors which can be the fundamental reason of their construction (Skotarczak, 2018: 326).

‘Skopje’s 2014’ narrative was complemented by statues of representatives of the national liberation movement and Yugoslav political scene. Among commemorated personalities were Pitu Guli (insurgent killed in the Ilinden Uprising), Metodija Andonov-Čento (the first president of Macedonia) and Kuzman Josifovski Pitu (partisan and hero of Yugoslavia). Next to the Stone Bridge monuments dedicated to Cyril, Methodius and their students – Clement and Naum – emerged. Their localization shows how strong the state’s relation with the Orthodox Church actually was. Another religious example of ‘Macedonization’ (as well as of the commercialization of memory) was the construction of the Mother Teresa Memorial House – a small museum devoted to the Nobel Peace Prize laureate. Its Asiatic exterior caused a wave of criticism from the architects’ community. However, it is one of the few buildings that seems to have a real impact on the capital city’s inhabitants’ identity. Other positively assessed objects, include the Holocaust Memorial Center – to remind of the now-defunct district and the Jewish community – the equestrian statue of the rebel Karpoš and the statue of Emperor Justinian I. Under pressure from the Albanian minority, also the monument and the Skanderbeg Square – Albanian national hero – were renovated.

Summary

For centuries, architecture has been an important medium transmitting political content. It also includes identity propaganda aimed at creating a belief, that an individual belongs to a predetermined ethnic, religious or social group. Architectural investments carried out in 2006-2017 by VMRO-DPMNE were to lead to the creation of a new national identity and then to its implementation in as many citizens as possible. However, this operation was a failure. Paradoxically, resistance to unprecedented indoctrination has united

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the opposing part of the society. Defining its priorities, led to the outbreak of the Colorful Revolution in 2016. It proved that Macedonians were more and more critical of the idea of antiquization and its impact on the public space look. The protests, during which the newly created buildings were poured with coloured paint, strengthened the sense of local and national identity.

The example of Macedonia and other countries as Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan proves, that identity is something that can be designed in great detail and implemented using arts, especially architecture. This is because construction is best suited to become a visible and permanent record of imaginary image of society and national character, vision of its past and expectations for the future. Buildings create impressions that cannot be generated by film, music, literature or other branches of art. They have the possibility to use a much larger scale of projects that change the aspect of public space for years, decades, even centuries. The identity policy implemented by VMRO-DPMNE in 2006-2017 had a huge impact on the direction in which Macedonian architecture developed. Not only were there new images of cities created, but they were also transformed into carriers of (more or less) carefully selected historical, political and artistic content that influence the views of citizens. It was supposed to become a tool of uninterrupted indoctrination that people are unaware of, but which takes an important place in their memory. Thus, the administrators of public space have a powerful tool in their hands. The politicization of architecture entails transformations in the cultural landscape of public space that are difficult to reverse. Attempts to change it involve costs and potential social opposition of residents who do not want their local identity points of reference to be removed.

The buildings created as part of the 'Skopje 2014' Project overlapped the architectural fabric rebuild after the 1963 earthquake. The capital of Macedonia is therefore aptly described by the words that Karl-Markus Gauß wrote about the Silesian city of Opole: in his opinion, in that old Polish city everything is new, but because of its design the town seems to be as old as it has never really been (Gauß, 2012: 160). In Macedonia, the new social-democratic authorities faced the challenge of sorting out the chaos caused by their predecessors. A direct result of their efforts, was the establishment of a dialogue with Greece. The return to the standards of a democratic state of law has already brought its first results – on March 3rd, 2020 Macedonia became a member of the North Atlantic Alliance.

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