

# **Authoritarianism, Networks and Architecture: the Urban Project Skopje 2014**

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The paper examines the urban project called Skopje 2014 by focusing on the role of authoritarian rule and networks created in implementing the project. It argues that the arbitrary decision-making processes and the (in)formal network have proved instrumental in making the project possible. The complex network consisted of power groups, intellectual elite and civil society organizations. It was characterized by a shared ideological vision for Skopje and the way in which the city should develop. Examining the project through the notion of authoritarianism, the paper goes beyond nationalism to understand the complexity of the revamp of the North Macedonian capital. Conceptually, the paper points out the need to study urban space in the context of hybrid political regimes.

## **Introduction**

The massive urban project called Skopje 2014 has received a lot of scholarly and media attention since its introduction to the public in 2010 by the mayor of Skopje. Initially planned to cost 80 million euros, the final costs reached a stunning amount of over 680 million euros. Its monumental size is reminiscent of similar revamps in post-Soviet Astana or Ashgabat (Koch 2010; Sir 2008). The project is above all seen as a nationalist undertaking, and rightly so. Over 150 sculptures and monuments, as well as over 20 new buildings, were constructed to celebrate ethno-Macedonian nationhood. The dominance of ancient figures aims to point out to an uninterrupted link between ancient and modern times by glorifying the legacy of Alexander the Great. Other monuments to various historical figures have been designed to represent the idea of Macedonian nation.

Skopje 2014 was carried out during the times of rising authoritarianism in the country, more precisely during its peak in the period between 2010 and 2016. During that time, the government led by VMRO-DPMNE and the prime minister Nikola Gruevski managed to gain control over the key power domains in the country, penetrating the state institutions as well as controlling almost all mainstream media, including the state television. Apart from that, the state invested a lot of resources through different campaign to promote the idea of eternal Macedonian nationhood, which was criticized due to the exclusion of the large Muslim and Albanian population from all cultural process set up by the state.

The early academic analyses on Skopje 2014 were framed in the language of national identity, highlighting the project's attempt to link the Macedonian nationhood with the ancient past (Kolozova 2013; Janev 2011). The subsequent works approached the project from different academic angles, such as anthropology and social movements (Mattioli 2014), neoliberalism (Graan 2013), memory politics, as well as urban studies (Grcheva 2018). While the scholarship on Skopje 2014 has produced significant knowledge, it has achieved little understanding of how the authoritarian processes impacted the revamp.

This paper deals with the question of how the authoritarian and centralized practices affected the implementation of Skopje 2014. Examining this relationship, the paper seeks to contribute to the literature on urban design politics, hybrid regimes and “competitive authoritarianism” in Southeastern Europe and beyond that overlooks the urban environment as a cultural and political domain for exercising illiberal power. Competitive authoritarianism is a type of dynamic political setting, where the institutional democracy is nominally established but is bypassed through informal networks, political coercion, control of media, and central state institutions, such as judiciary and police (Levitsky and Way 2002; Bieber 2018). Unlike fully authoritarian or totalitarian systems, the competitive authoritarian governments, often labelled hybrid political systems, are confronted by a competitive political environment, partially free media, as well as weak, but existing democratic institutions and practices. What is more, they often face resistance from political opposition and civil society, as was the case with Gruevski's government and Skopje 2014 (Mattioli 2014). The democratic processes established to protect the usurpation of public space posed an obstacle for the state and promoters of Skopje 2014. To face all these challenges, the revamp of Skopje required creation of a quite complex network, which was mobilized to confront established institutional and political mechanisms that posed an obstacle to the plans for rebuilding the city center.

The paper looks at the network that was created to implement the project. It consisted of various political and non-governmental subjects, supported by the state, the national-conservative party VMRO-DPMNE<sup>1</sup>, and its leadership. The last part of the paper reflects on the eclectic ideological content disseminated in Skopje's central area as well as the political frontier that emerged as a result of the redesign of the North Macedonian capital. In doing so, the paper seeks to advance the empirical contribution to the literature on Skopje 2014, and the literature on post-socialist urban developments by calling for more attention on the aspect of illiberal practices in the new spatial arrangements. It draws on secondary data sources, primary sources like interviews, data base collected from the leaked recordings published in various media houses, documentaries as well as data collected by investigative journalists in North Macedonia.

### **Urban Space and Politics after Socialism**

After the collapse of Eastern European communism, the process of economic liberation, decentralization, and democratization provoked comprehensive changes, prompting political actors to adjust to the new conditions and modify the conventional approach to power and politics. On top of that, nationalism established itself as a dominant ideology which eventually affected the symbolism of the capital cities across Eastern Europe (Diener and Hagen 2013). Due to the political and social liberalization the top-down model of spatial politics often found itself in conflict with other power and social subjects. Indeed, cities such as Budapest, Krakow, Lodz, Moscow, Yerevan

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<sup>1</sup> Full name of the party: Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization – Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity.

or Berlin found a way to promote their “national” character, however, the urban interventions were often contested by different civil society and political organizations that relied on new institutional mechanisms and media, enabling them substantial political leverage (Stanilov 2007; Nedovic-Budic, 2001).<sup>2</sup>

As Kiril Stanilov stresses, the urban development in the post-Soviet space has largely been affected by the policy decisions adopted on national, local, and regional level (Stanilov 2007). New political and social agents, from local governments, through free media, NGO sector, intellectuals, to private interest groups, have surfaced ever since the liberalization of states and societies took place. In Moscow, over the 1990s, tensions aroused between the mayor and the president of the country over the urban design policies and Soviet architectural legacy (Forest and Johnson 2002). A similar tendency can be traced across Central Europe and South Caucasus, where the state authorities in cities such as Krakow, Lodz or Yerevan were confronted by new institutional mechanisms, opposition from the civil society sector, and political competition (Ochman 2010; Ter-Ghazaryan 2013; Young and Kaczmarek 2008). During the first term of Fidesz in power in Hungary (1998-2002), the urban space in Budapest was used as a platform for rebuilding a political frontier between the political right and center-left; metropolitans vs populists (Palonen 2013). The so-called “war of monuments” in Estonia emerged in a new socio-political reality, (re)producing cleavages along ethnic lines between the titular nation and a large Russian minority (Brüggemann and Kasekamp 2008; Burch and Smith 2007). In certain cases, such as in Skopje or Belgrade, the urban design was affected by authoritarian rule that enabled the realization of the new spatial planning.

The structural and political changes and their manifestation onto urban space caught the attention of the academic literature, which approached them from a range of disciplines. Concepts of national identity, post-socialism and neoliberalism became dominant conceptual tools and focus of analysis. Topics such as suburbanization of cities, the land (re)distribution question, deindustrialization, gentrification and the socio-political and class polarization, have received more attention by the political geographers and urban studies scholarship (Borén and Gentile 2007). On the other hand, the role of the new authoritarianisms in designing urban space has not received adequate empirical and conceptual attention. Similarly, the spatial development of Skopje has received little attention by scholars working on post-socialist cities, as Bouzarovski notes (2011: 265). Only after the emergence of Skopje 2014 has there been an increased interest in Skopje. Yet, authoritarianism as a conceptual theme has slipped the scholars’ focus.

### **Urban Space and Politics in Skopje and North Macedonia**

The urban development of modern Skopje has been shaped by the devastating earthquake in 1963, which destroyed and damaged over 70% of the city. The master plan that followed was based on a modernist style dominated by brutalist architecture. Despite its partial realization, the plan was perceived as a successful undertaking. After the country gained independence in 1991, Skopje’s evolution went through different phases and was affected by structural and political changes. The following decentralization of power on the local level affected the power dynamic in the city. In respect to urban space, while new planning laws drew on the previous regulations, they were upgraded with regulatory mechanisms, “introducing obligatory standards for urban planning and design with an intention to establish rules and regulations without ideological direction” (Grcheva 2018).

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In the first decade of North Macedonia's independence, the city saw a sporadic intervention in the public space, mostly exercised by private investments and individual expansion of apartments and houses. Despite occasional discussions on redesigning the central square, the central area remained untouched. However, this started to change in the early 2000s with the introduction of ideological content in the city. The shift had a lot to do with the arrival of a new political right in the country, as well as the post-conflict context and redrawing of the Skopje's municipality borders. Thus, in 2001, a 66-meter-tall cross on the top of Skopje's mountain Vodno was built, visible from every point in the city. The cross is seen as a provocation to the Albanian community and an attempt to assert a symbolic dominance in the city and country. Against this backdrop, a statue to Skanderbeg, regarded as a central historical figure for Albanian nationalism, was installed in the heart of the city in 2006. This event is seen as a response to the construction of Orthodox symbols in the multicultural space (Ragaru 2008).

In 2006, VMRO-DPMNE came to power, after which the so-called "antiquization campaign" was launched (Vangeli 2011). The campaign is perceived as an attempt to redefine the national narrative structure in the country by creating a link with the ancient past. This shift found its place in the historiography, textbooks, national holidays and the urban environment alike. Skopje's airport was renamed after Alexander the Great, while the main football stadium was renamed to Philip II arena. In 2010, the mayor of the city announced the urban project Skopje 2014. It envisaged a wholesale restructuring of the city center, inspired by eclectic neoclassical and baroque architecture. Soon after the construction started, the project gained a reputation of an anti-communist undertaking, due to the negligence of the modernist buildings and the plan to refurbish existing modernist architecture into the new eclectic style (Koteska 2011). Despite the initial popular skepticism regarding Skopje 2014, the government led by conservative VMRO-DPMNE managed to implement the project as it had been initially designed.

Its mono-national content provoked criticism and tensions in the city that is divided along the lines of ethnicity. The mono-ethnic character of Skopje 2014 was criticized for excluding the large Albanian population living in the city. While the city is considered to be divided along ethnic lines, this observation requires more elaborate reflection. The south part of the city consists of over 95% ethnic Macedonians, whereas the northern side is of mixed ethnicities, dominated by ethnic Albanians. Skopje's historical center the Ottoman Bazaar is located in the northern part and is popularly seen as a cultural property of Albanian and Muslim citizens. After the violent conflict in 2001 between Macedonian forces and the paramilitary Albanian National Army (ANA), both Albanian and Macedonian political subjects signed the so-called Ohrid Framework Agreement (OFA), assigning to the minorities, in this case targeting especially Albanians, a set of cultural and representative rights. Many right-leaning ethnic Macedonians, as well as the Macedonian political right, were displeased with this outcome, perceiving as a triumph of Albanian nationalism. The cleavage that had been defining Macedonian political dynamic since 1991, spilled onto the urban space after 2001, as illustrated in this section.

Besides creating rival varieties of ethnic nationalisms, the urban projects, such as the Millennium Cross and Skanderbeg statue, were characterized by non-democratic processes, designed exclusively in a top-down manner (Daskalovski 2009; Vangeli 2010). This trend continued later with the project Skopje 2014, which was implemented in the time of rising authoritarianism in the country (Bieber 2020). During that time, the state was considered a backslider in democracy. Scholars indicated a dramatic fall of free media, further weakening of state institutions and

increased involvement of the leader of VMRO-DPMNE and former prime minister Nikola Gruevski as a key figure behind the illiberal turn (Gjuzelov and Hadijevska 2020; Bieber 2018; Staletovic 2017). Labels such as hybrid regime, state capture, authoritarian populism, competitive authoritarianism were used to describe the character of the authoritarian backsliding (Gjuzelov 2020; Petkovski 2016, Bieber 2018). The rise of authoritarianism occurred simultaneously with the increased interest in urban design – especially during the period when the project Skopje 2014 was under construction (2010-2016).

This paper argues that this was not a coincidence. The arbitrary and top-down implementation of the project intensified the democratic backsliding, which in turn proved crucial for administering of the urban project. Carrying out the operation it required building a complex and comprehensive network, including different state institutions, political party, the involvement of civil society's elements and local intellectuals to bypass formal procedures and democratic institutions. Other than that, the new urban plan was micromanaged by Nikola Gruevski, whose contribution included the very designing of objects, thus giving him a role of an unofficial architect.

### **The creation of network: power, agency, and illiberal turn**

While the interest in using public space as an ideological source had started to increase after the military conflict in 2001, this process accelerated after VMRO-DPMNE took the power from the social democrats in 2006. In the period between 2006 and 2010, the VMRO went to win a landslide at the national elections in 2008, as well as an overwhelming victory at the local elections in Skopje in 2009. Both events proved to have been turning points, enabling the conservative party control over central power domains, including the office of president who was supported by the conservative party. A few months VMRO-DPMNE won the local elections the project Skopje 2014 was unexpectedly announced by the new mayor Koce Trajanovski in a short video presentation. Soon after, the government received public criticism for lack of a public debate or any indications about a possible massive intervention in the heart of the Macedonian capital.

Despite the government's silence, there are indications that the urban plan for Skopje had been planned earlier. This reveals lack of concern for the established institutional practices and broader popular debate. Most notable in this series of events was a decision made in 2006 to put up a monument to Alexander the Great. Back then, the mayor of the municipality of Centar was Violeta Alarova from VMRO-DPMNE, who signed the decision (Jordanovska 2015). Another event that indicates the lack of democratic inclusion was the construction of the national parliament. In 2006, the assembly speaker Ljubisha Georgievski announced the need to reconstruct the parliament by adding two additional floors and domes, inspired by the German Bundestag in Berlin, as unofficially requested by Gruevski (Blazhevski 2016). The idea met with rejection and skepticism of the Macedonian architects since such reconstruction was against the law, which specified that the object cannot be upgraded (Blazhevski 2016). The Macedonian Association of Architects boycotted the plan and some prominent architects resigned from the commission for the reconstruction of the parliament, stating that the domes had not been a part of the initial plan, but that they were introduced afterward (Vojnovska 2009). After this, the majority in the parliament selected other pro-government members for the architectural commission. The whole process for finalizing the institutional mechanisms to implement the project was finished in 2009, and the reconstruction started in 2010 – the same year that the project Skopje 2014 was announced.

The illiberal trend characterizing the decision-making process related to urban design continued later in the project Skopje 2014. As stated before, the announcement of the project took many by surprise; not solely because of the lack of public involvement, but also due to its magnitude, massive costs and lack of an elaborate master plan preceding this large-scale urban intervention. According to a comprehensive investigation by BIRN, the project Skopje 2014 does not officially exist (Chausidis 2016). It does not exist as a document nor as a project with defined phases and deadlines. It does not appear in any official contract, or in any official party program (Chausidis). Unusual for a project of this magnitude, Skopje 2014 does not appear in the form of a master plan. It does not have a leading architect or official planners typical for a project of this size. Instead, the way in which the project was implemented reveals a procedural mess, involving politicians and an informal network in charge of the urban planning and architectural design. The absence of methodological urban planning enabled the power elite to have the last word in the design of the central area. Many originally endorsed objects were subsequently remodeled, which was against the law of urban planning. Despite the lack of a coherent plan, the project was almost fully implemented, its costs eventually reaching the amount of 680 million euros of public money, clearly surpassing the initially declared amount of 80 million euros. Between 2010 and 2016, the annual expenses for Skopje 2014 constituted 3% of the state budget, which equals the amount distributed to the health sector.

Among other institutional tactics worth mentioning is the circumvention of the parliament regarding the question of monuments deemed of historical importance, in spite of the legal obligation to include this political body in questions of cultural and historical significance. The bypassing of the parliament had seemingly to do with the fact that monuments credited with a historical status must be accepted by the non-majority communities in the country – so-called Badinter principle or double majority (Stojancevska and Jordanovska 2013). It is to assume that the government was aware of the fact that ethnic Albanians in the parliament would not provide support, and instead decided to administer the process through the municipality of Centar, which appointed the commissions (Stojancevska and Jordanovska 2013). The importance of the municipality of Centar for the project came to full display after the VMRO-DPMNE's mayoral candidate lost the local elections in Centar in 2013. Faced with an electoral loss, the government engaged in registering elderly non-Skopje citizens to the municipality of Centar, most of them from other regions, so that they could vote for the conservative candidate and secure power in this key institution. After the VMRO-DPMNE was defeated at the repeated voting, the new mayor started to reveal the corruptive and non-transparent process of urban planning.

New procedures and rules were adopted at a great rate to accommodate the desired style dominated by eclectic neo-classical architecture. This concerns many changes made along the road to the Detailed Urban Plan (DUP). Since 2006 when the rebranded VMRO-DPMNE came to power, 15 changes to the Law on Spatial and Urban Planning were made. According to Grcheva, the purpose of these changes was to avoid any institutional blockade where the ruling party was short of a majority (2018). According to a statement by the former Minister of Culture, the project would be a mix of “baroque, classicism, neo-classicism, and romanticism” (Grcheva 2018). To be able to carry out this task, the government introduced a legally binding procedure that imposed a mandatory style for the new buildings.

The central figure behind this process was Nikola Gruevski, the president of VMRO-DPMNE (since 2004) and the prime minister from 2006 to 2016. Gruevski publicly admitted that Skopje 2014 was his idea (Mina 2012). His involvement was not a coincidence, neither a surprise. The

former prime minister's interest in redesigning Skopje dates back to 2002 when he pushed the initiative for building the Millennium Cross. Back then he was perceived as a rising star in the conservative right, serving as a minister of finance. Once he took the prime minister's office in 2006, and gained access to the state's resources, the investment in public space instantly increased, as demonstrated by the example with the reconstruction of the parliament. Sharing his thoughts about Skopje 2014, Gruevski stressed:

Our metropole Skopje had always been on the fringes of the previous governments, which showed no interest to invest in Skopje, but rather in their capital cities. We have to change this trend and build at least a part of what was supposed to be built in the last 200 years. This is our opportunity, now we have our own state (Skopje Prodolzuvva).

The contribution of the former prime minister goes beyond the governmental support in terms of adopting initiatives and securing financial means from the budget. Gruevski was micromanaging the project and he had the last word in deciding on the architectural style of the new objects. Addressing his right-hand the minister of infrastructure Mile Janakieski, Gruevski suggests:

There is one fountain in Rome, with obelisk, very pretty, we would like this one, but how should we do it, should we make a concept first? We should build fountain and obelisk. 20 meter-tall obelisk (Jordanovska 2015).

The quote demonstrates a highly centralized operation as well as a commitment to directly decide on matters concerning architectural design. Besides new objects, many existing buildings of cultural significance were deprived of their status so that the authorities could change the original façade. This concerned mostly the objects built in the post-earthquake Skopje by the socialist government, a period seen adversely by the ideological right, as time of suppressing Macedonian nationhood. Instead, the promoters indicated that the Macedonian cultural legacy is much richer, dating back to the times of Alexander the Great and the ancient Kingdom family. Thus, many buildings were refurbished into baroque or neoclassical style, the most notable case being the remodeling of the government building. As the minister of culture in one of the leaked recordings states, "some facades in the city were protected by the law. The prime minister said that we should deny them this status, so that we can do what we want" (Jordanovska 2015).

The elaborate network created by the VMRO-DPMNE as a leading power organization relied on the state as a resource to financially and organizationally support the project. The state provided a source for human and financial capital, bureaucratic support, which in turn enabled the dissemination of ideological content related *per se* with the ideological right in the county, leaving thus an enduring physical mark in the capital. As discussed in this section, this organizational effort was needed to bypass the established institutions designed to guarantee a democratic process regarding urban development in post-socialist democratization. But this was not all. The network extended to non-governmental groups and sympathizers of the party, which were mobilized to defend the project and the government.

### **“Skopje 2014 should have happened earlier:” The role of intellectual class and the emergence of the narrative of a marginalized Macedonian city and architecture**

While the government intentionally avoided any public debate about the project, it made sure to legitimize the undertaking by relying on government-controlled media, visual and political

campaigns, as well as the mobilization of the intellectual elite close to the government. The way in which architects and public intellectuals were involved in this project indicates a particularly organized undertaking. Besides supporting and promoting the project in media close to the government, the right-leaning intellectuals were part of various state commissions, having the task of deciding on a respective architectural proposal. Most of the members of the commission were architects and public figures who have defended the politics and the ideological symbols affiliated with the VMRO-DPMNE and political right in general (Chausidis 2017; Interview Chausidis 2021). They proved to be key mechanisms along the institutional road. Interestingly enough, some individuals were members of several commissions, and many of them took part in various media campaigns, workshops and documentaries on the historical development of Skopje and Skopje 2014.

In the period between 2010 and 2016, the state television which was under control of VMRO-DPMNE, produced around 70 documentary films related to historical topics, mostly focusing on questions of Macedonian nationhood. A documentary called *Skopje Prodolzuvana* covered Skopje 2014, and the historical development of the city. The documentary series consisted of 14 episodes, based on architect Vangel Bozinovski's idea, who is informally seen as the main ideologue of Skopje 2014; and professor Branislav Sarkanjac, who was a member of the commissions that gave a green light for the building of objects related to Skopje 2014 (Apostolov and Chausidis 2017). Sarkanjac appeared as a counselor of the city of Skopje in 2013 on the VMRO-DPMNE's list.

The documentary advances the narrative of historically marginalized Macedonian city and architecture in the framework of the Yugoslavian and Ottoman system. The narrative turned into one of the central discursive strategies that sought to legitimize the reconstruction of the city. Both political and intellectual elites propagated it via media, public campaigns, artistic and visual channels. According to Vangel Bozinovski, the independence of Macedonia provided the country with an opportunity to discover its rich architectural legacy, which was subdued during socialist Yugoslavia: "we started to finally understand that there is a rich legacy and that we are not a marginalized architecture in the framework of the Yugoslavian system" (Skopje Prodolzuvana). Similarly, journalist Mihajlo Nedelkovski, one of the most enthusiastic supporters of VMRO-DPMNE, stressed that "all former Yugoslavian republics and cities built large objects, only in Macedonia and Skopje nothing was done" (Skopje Prodolzuvana). This narrative resembles the view shared by Nikola Gruevski and other prominent members of the VMRO-DPMNE party.

Furthermore, various workshops and exhibitions were organized by artists and intellectuals, promoting the view of the marginalized city. "Skopje 2014 should have happened much earlier" (Dnevnik 2010) – was the catchphrase heard during the events. Among the organizers were intellectuals linked to the idea of the marginalized city, among them Sarkanjac. Additionally, the events were used to promote the idea that baroque and neoclassicism have been part of the city's urban history, and Skopje 2014 now simply draws on these heterogeneous architectural traditions. In doing so, a counter-narrative was created aiming to challenge the view of the opponents of Skopje 2014, who condemned the project as a fabrication of history and creating traditions that never existed.

On the other hand, the artists who worked on the design of the objects, sculptures and monuments remained strangely silent about their involvement, the message behind the monuments and the artistic expressions (Nedelkovska 2012). This had a lot to do with the effort to remain less transparent to the public as the costs for respective objects were highly questionable. As revealed,



the artists were not known to the public, and for many of them appearing as authors in Skopje 2014 was the first serious project. As Koteska notes, the government was treating the project as “if it is the four walls of its apartment” (2011), in the context when over 70% of Skopje’s disapproved Skopje 2014 (ISHHS, 2013).

### **The popular and civil society engagement**

After VMRO-DPMNE lost the local elections in the municipality Centar in 2013, a new pattern related to the construction of monuments emerged, involving civil society organizations that acted as donors of a number of monuments in the city. As the article by Tamara Chausidis shows, the purpose behind the donations was to circumvent the procedure regarding the public money – primarily because VMRO-DPMNE lost the majority in the Municipality of Center in 2013, as well as due to mounting public pressure to reveal and justify the enormous spending against the backdrop of financial crisis and high unemployment (Chausidis 2017). Thus several civil organizations known as ideologically right-leaning and close to VMRO-DPMNE have donated seven monuments in the city central area. Among the donated monuments was one to the most controversial figures from the local history Anton Lazov Janov – who according to historical sources was involved in terrorist activities in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Interestingly enough, during that time of donating monuments these organizations have received financial and material help from VMRO-DPMNE (Jordanovska 2015).

The increased civic involvement goes well beyond the civil society groups, expanding to the sympathizers of the VMRO-DPMNE – or what is in VMRO-DPMNE’s language known as *Narod*. In 2009, a young group of students called *First Arhi Brigade* organized a protest against building a church in the main square of Skopje’s central area. The group had demanded a halt of the construction, summoning the politicians to – “instead of investing in kitsch architecture – focus public funding on the maintenance of the authenticity and originality of the old buildings that already exist but, due to neglect, decay” (Ignatova 2009). Soon after the students have announced the protest, the media close to the former government called for a counter-protest to defend Skopje from “gays and atheists” (Ignatova 2009). The counter-protesters have eventually shown up in a much larger number, thus marginalizing the rally organized by the students. The protest ended up in violence, which was happening in front of the police, who failed to react. The protesters were publicly discredited and depicted as anarchists. According to Véron, some members of other grassroots organizations (*Plomad Sloboda*) were also under strong political pressure, being followed in public and threatened with lawsuits and loss of jobs (Véron 1453).

A similar event dating back to 2013 shocked the public, when leaked recordings revealed the involvement of Nikola Gruevski in the organization of a protest that turned violent. The protest was organized against an alleged plan of one of Skopje’s municipality mayor to demolish a church – an event that mayor denied altogether (Marusic 2016; 2020). In the leaked recording Gruevski instructs the Transport Minister to arrange 2000 protesters and have them storm the offices and slap the mayor in the face (Marusic 2020). The protest indeed took place, as a large group of people surrounded the municipality building and interrupted the continuation of council sessions (Marusic 2013).

The events that took place showed an organized and orchestrated organization, involving the power elite and civic elements, and relying on coercive and non-democratic mechanisms. In addition, the authoritarian dimension extends to the field of ideology. The ideological content of Skopje 2014 has been mainly seen as representing ethnonational values. Yet, looking closer and contextualizing the

narrative into the Macedonian political setting it turns out that a set of messages promoting what Weber (1978) called closed society relationships have been now part of Skopje's urban character. In the next section, I discuss how the project generated and reproduced new and old cultural and political frontiers based on the eclectic mix of illiberal, nationalist and conservative principles.

### **Authoritarianism beyond political practice: ideology and creation of political and social frontiers**

The scholarship on authoritarianism discusses this phenomenon primarily as a political practice and ruling strategy, rarely as an ideological discourse. Likewise, in the scholarship on the new form of authoritarianism that emerged in the post-socialist context, the ideological dimension does not appear as a central model of analysis. This section looks at how the authoritarian practices were directly affecting the content of the project Skopje 2014. As showed before, the choice of architectural styles lied in the hands of the power structures and the circle close to Gruevski's government, which created a vision of a city, whose implementation was supported by an authoritarian network. Besides being implemented in a non-democratic way, Skopje 2014 promotes an exclusive content, an understanding which requires going beyond (methodological) nationalism. To be able to advance the argument I contextualize the study in the Macedonian political and historical setting, alongside the analysis of the narrative structure embedded in the new monuments.

As stated before, the project's mono-ethnic character excludes ethnic and social categories, and it is considered to deliberately ignore a large Albanian community. Its symbolic display of group dominance undermines the post-conflict processes and Ohrid Framework Agreement, which guarantee social and cultural inclusion of Albanians. Apart from this, the project openly celebrates militarism and para-militarism, as Véron noticed (2015:200). The majority of the monuments are designed in a way to promote military values or to militarize historical figures, such as Goce Delcev, who represented the intellectual class rather than the military one (Véron 2015:200). Incidentally or not, the monument to one of the most controversial figures from the local history Anton Lazov Janov, who according to historical sources was involved in terrorist activities in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, has been erected right next to the Supreme Court – in a military uniform holding a knife, which was popularly interpreted as disclosure of the government's perception of justice.

The pronounced masculinity in a form of a dominant male leadership is another element characterizing the project. For example, the monument to Philip II rises above the statues of his family (figure 1), conveying patriarchic views of the dominant male figure, which resembles the conservative-authoritarian values embedded in the normative and operative ideology (Malesevic 2013) of VMRO-DPMNE. This vision of a closed society expands to other social categories. There are hardly any monuments to women; except for Olympia, the mother of Alexander, whose social function had, however, been already determined by the authorities – she is depicted as a pregnant mother. Moreover, the monument promotes an anti-abortion campaign and “the third child policy” designed by Gruevski's government. The monument to Olympia holding three children (figure 2) expresses this policy through the monumental art, thus symbolizing the reduced and pre-determined social position of women in the society.



Figure 1: Monument to Philip II and ancient kingdom family. Photo by B. Staletovic

The project shows similar ignorance of both Ottoman and socialist architectural legacies. The buildings constructed during socialism are now either refurbished into new neoclassical objects, or they have been covered up by new buildings, thus diminishing their architectural value. This is in line with the anti-communist narrative of the political right that seeks to discredit the socialist legacy, and thus delegitimize the main political opponent, the social democrats. While the Ottoman Bazaar remained untouched, the new large objects built in front of the Bazaar's "entrance" tend to cover its historical and symbolic significance.



Figure 2: Monument to Olympia (officially called the Mothers). Photo by B. Staletovic

As a result of the project new lines of divisions emerged. Proponents of the socialist architectural legacy, mostly coming from Skopje's urban class, were among the most persistent opponents of the project. The government went to label them as *komunjari* (commies) and traitors. The authorities depicted the conflict in a populist language framing it as an ideological clash between the *Narod* and the others. A similar dynamic occurred in the spatial rearrange of Budapest during Orbán's first term, when the government politics generated a cleavage between what Palonen called metropolitans vs populists (2013).

The glorification of ancient past created a new cleavage, popularly seen in Macedonia as ancient vs slavic Macedonians, which transcended political subjects, reaching the intellectual class and citizens. Although Albanians political parties and citizens did not protest against the project, and remained mostly silent, Skopje 2014 reinforced the cultural "borders" in the city. The urban morphology of the project left lasting physical marks and provoked the dissemination of rival nationalisms with the construction of the Skanderbeg square – a project celebrating Albanian nationalism, although far less controversial in terms of the financial aspect and the ideological symbolism. Nevertheless, the territorialization of ethnicity continued to shape the character of the city, and, as this paper seeks to argue, a lot of it had to do with the authoritarian turn in the country and abolishing existing institutional practices.

## **Conclusion**

Since the urban revamp was announced, the government was in permanent control over the narrative of Skopje 2014. Having control of all mainstream media, power domains, judiciary and police, put the government in charge of the public discourse and processes related to the project. Despite many reports about infringement of the procedure and corruptive behavior, the judiciary had opened no case. The party penetrated deeply into the state structures (Gjuzelov 2020), thus preventing thus any institutional effort to block or investigate the massive spatial restructuring in Skopje. Only when the government lost power in 2016, did the processes against the leading politicians start to mount. Although the police and judiciary were not central institutions, their silence and support speak of a systematic effort to put the plan into practice.

That being said, the authoritarian practices behind the project turned out instrumental in making Skopje 2014 possible. Despite the fact that Gruevski played a crucial role, this was an organized effort involving state institutions, the intellectual class, and civic society organizations. Despite the fact that the project was implemented at a surprisingly great pace, this paper points out to a quite complex organizational undertaking that dates back to 2006, when Gruevski came to power. However, its practical implementation unfolded in 2010, at the peak of VMRO-DPMNE's political dominance. At that time, the party was holding all power domains in the county, which enabled smoother execution. The process and networks had a task to circumvent established institutional practices, deploy both the state and party resources as a main power organization force, and shut down any critical voice. Alongside of that, many cultural projects were organized, revealing a systematic effort, reaching out to non-governmental social categories, from academics, artists, journalists, to public personas, all mobilized for a broader legitimization of the project Skopje 2014.

Conceptually, this study seeks to direct attention to illiberal politics when it comes to the thematic field of urban planning, thus going beyond methodological nationalism to explain Skopje 2014. As discussed in the opening section, nationalism has been a dominant explanatory concept on the project. While nationalism and nation-building are without a doubt among the most important

ideological elements, the expression of ethnonational ideology was dependent on the centralized and arbitrary processes that made this project possible. Nationalism, as any other phenomenon, does not exist on its own. It is an ideology of need for permanent reproduction, which takes place by interaction with other social phenomena, institutions or agencies. In the case of Skopje 2014, it was authoritarianism and the network built that enabled the spread of narratives glorifying Macedonian nationhood, ancient past and right-wing ideology. Apart from this, the paper draws attention to the way in which urban planning is affected by the hybrid political contexts, thus attempting to make contribution to both urban studies literature and scholarship on authoritarianism that neglects the public space as a platform for exercising power.

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