

TITLE : SKOPJE FACELIFT: MEGALOMANIAC PROJECT DEVOURS THE CITY

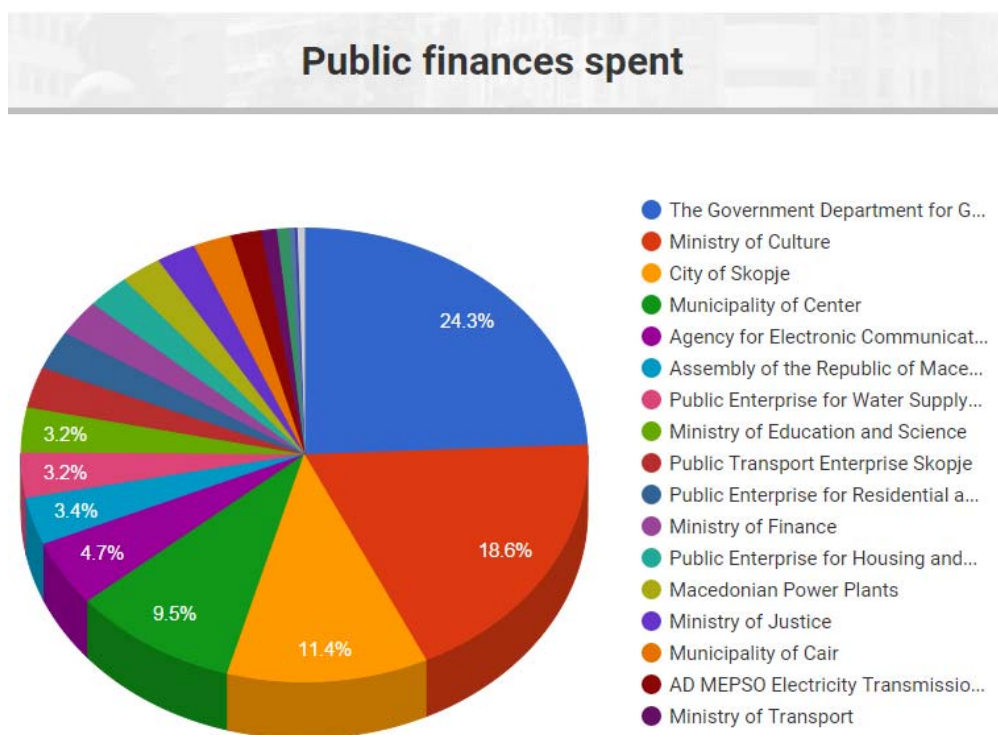
A story of How Skopje 2014 annihilated Skopje – a review of the lost commons

By Ivana Dragsic

What is Skopje 2014?

Skopje 2014 is the single greatest construction investment project in Macedonian history. It redecorates the most central city area of cca.1 km² of the capital of Macedonia. The project was implemented through several institutions, most prominently the Ministry of Culture, the City of Skopje, the Municipality of Centar and the Ministry of Transport and Communication. It has been the most confrontational issue in recent Macedonian politics and the most divisive question among the citizens of Skopje.

Over 100 sculptures, 34 monuments, 27 buildings, 6 garages, 5 squares, 1 triumphal gate, numerous other urban interventions such as fountains, small squares, candelabra have been erected, whereas 12 parks and green corners have been ruined. Several times publicly stated by various Government officials that it will cost 80 mil. EURO, the cost of Skopje 2014 has reached nearly 640 mil. EURO, with an average annual amount reaching the average Macedonian healthcare budget.



Credit: "Skopje Uncovered" - Balkan Investigative Research Network

Imagine the German government spending 20% of the annual budget, or three hundred thirty six billion on redecorating a 1km² area of Berlin, paving parks, destroying squares and cultural heritage buildings, complicating the traffic, polluting the air – all of this by breaking, bypassing and even changing legislature and disregarding popular will and professional recommendations.

What is Skopje 2014?

This project can be problematized from many different aspects. The picture is ugly buildings and monuments of quasi political military personas and incorrect inscriptions, a demise of the urban commons, but its essence is a systematic attack on the processes of democratic decision making and all institutionalized procedures that provide for a sustainable and humane spatial planning. Currently, the project costs eight times more than announced¹ as we still see objects in the city that haven't been accounted for.

However, the most visible impact it had was on the urban commons in many of its forms, but also the culture and cultural heritage, the history and knowledge perpetuated through media, education and organized leisure opportunities.



Organized celebration of high school graduation in 2013, for the first time introduced after the setup of the “Equestrian warrior”. Credits: www.press24.mk

Not only did Skopje 2014 physically obstruct and destroy the commons, but it also:

- represents a reconstruction and reinterpretation of history based on glorifying anachronous and dubious personalities from the history, perpetuating false history or mythology, neglecting or twisting facts proven through scientific methods;
- forces new values on the citizens by imposing relating to history, locality, violence, masculinity, epicness, on the account of the values gained thanks to the major international intervention after the devastating earthquake in 1963, which were cosmopolitanism, solidarity, transparency, openness and sentimental relating to both the ottoman heritage and modernism;

¹ <http://skopje2014.prizma.birn.eu.com/mk>



Skopje before Skopje 2014. Credits: www.faktor.mk

-exploits the intellectual and digital commons (such as culture, language, media, legislation) and imposes a new discourse, language and self-experience of the citizen in Skopje through a series of documentaries broadcasted while the project is still in construction, branding postcards and other official stationery, engaging well-known names as apologists of the project, changing legislature to fit the idea and not the needs of the city, adding contents in textbooks and taking school children on organized excursions to the monuments.

This project costs its opponents even more. Many of them have lost their jobs or have been degraded due to public articulation of their attitude, some have even been prosecuted, physically attacked, stigmatized and slandered in the media, while the ones that managed to stay “safe”, had to consciously decide to keep quiet and censor themselves.

The Macedonian Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski can be heard on leaked telephone tapes dating from 2013, conspiring violent mobs against the new mayor of the Municipality of Centar elected on a program for preventing the further continuation of the construction of Skopje 2014².

² <http://www.makdenes.org/content/article/26966451.html>



The Prime Minister of Macedonia, Nikola Gruevski, has been the only one closest to admitting authorship of Skopje 2014.

How did it come to Skopje 2014?

The project was simply promoted with a video render of the center of the city dubbed “Visualization of the center of Skopje in 2014” that appeared on YouTube news agency accounts³. There was no announcement, no prior discussion or an archive of a such, the Macedonian Association of Architects had no knowledge of this, as well as most of the other prominent architects, urbanists, city planners, artists and other relevant stakeholders. What the citizens hadn’t known at the time is that all decisions were made, open calls ended and the construction companies were selected and set to start works:

-Instead of discussing monuments of historical persons of international value in the Parliament (as regulated by law), the issue was taken to the local Municipality and quietly voted on. The open calls for authorship were very precise in terms of style and visual requirements, while the authors who participated carefully selected. Namely, Valentina Stevanovska, the author of the biggest monument on the square - “Equestrian warrior” - had previously had only one public piece, a bust of a primary school patron and hadn’t had any solo or participated in group exhibitions. She holds the Macedonian record for a publicly commissioned artwork, reaching 2.94 mil. EURO and got to teach at the Art Academy in Skopje.

³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YBYtmAOt7RI>



The highest paid artist for a public artwork in the history of Macedonia: Valentina Stevanovska.
Credits: www.utrinskivesnik.mk

-The project was supported by a broad media campaign with TV commercials, newspaper ads, documentaries and events while most of the buildings were still in the phase of construction and some construction projects have been rushed to meet certain dates and holidays. People with access to public opinion, “experts”, were literally hired to perform apologetic roles in the media and perpetuate the discourse of “construction of a long lost national identity”. Many of the “experts” became members of councils or committees where the procedures for Skopje 2014 passed, or had a promotion, received state awards, monographies and even new university departments throughout Macedonia

-This government has generally flooded the Macedonian Parliament with legislative change requests also a record of times, once reaching 112 laws changed in one day. The strategy of this intense change was to fit the needs of their interest ad hoc and to eliminate all legal obstacles, thus providing rule of law for the international community observing those processes in the country.

The Skopje 2014 project was often put in context with general happenings in the region concerning privatization and commodification of the commons, destroying urban environment for the purpose of shopping malls or profit-oriented urban planning. However, the majority of the urban commons occupied by the project is actually occupied by state or other public institutions and the political party in power, pioneering a process of renationalization of the public space. This is the state of the matter, although private interest and generating profit is behind the construction of the public institutions.

The destroyed commons:

The greens

Skopje 2014, partly as a result of discontinuity in urban planning and partly due to an irresponsible planning and construction process, plays a significant role in destruction of the urban environment. The 'beautification' of the city actually took toll on many 50-70 years old trees, public green areas and informal parks throughout the city center. The air pollution in this area is regularly measured and it has been peaking in PM 2.5, PM 10 and other pollutants concentration for periods of more than two weeks in December 2015⁴.

By December 2013, Skopje 2014 took toll on more than a dozen parks, pedestrian zones, riverbanks and cycling paths. The total public green area in the center decreased by 50% and the total canopy surface by 20%⁵. The state with urban trees is deteriorated too, though the total number of trees hasn't significantly decreased. The severed trees were mature and healthy, having impact in pollution reduction, clean air production, urban temperature reduction and providing conditions for particular biodiversity. Furthermore, the somewhat balanced canopy distribution (providing for balanced temperature reduction and air cleansing throughout the area covered) is disrupted and will remain so until 2017⁶. With the currently established pace of construction and urbanization on the account of urban green spaces, the lost amount of public greenery is irrecoverable.

In addition, cutting trees plays a major part in the destruction of public and social spaces, as they mostly became social due to the shade provided by the planned planted trees. Not only were historic tree rows severed, but much of the secluded green areas in the local parks and on the bank of Vardar are also covered with monuments, sculptures and other, borderline absurd, but also costly urban interventions.



Public greenery comparison: (75649m² in 2002 and 34994m² in 2013) Credits: Grcheva L., Grcheva I., Jovichic L. "We are running out of trees! - States and tendencies of decreasing of public greens in Mal Ring 2002-2017", Freedom Square, Skopje, 2014

⁴ <http://www.porta3.mk/zagadenosta-na-vozduhot-vo-skopje-i-natamu-e-na-previsoko-nivo/>

⁵ Grcheva L., Grcheva I., Jovichic L. "We are running out of trees! - states and tendencies of decreasing of public greens in Mal Ring 2002-2017", Freedom Square, Skopje, 2014

⁶ Ibid.

The urbans

The main square in the center of Skopje, called Square “Macedonia” was the central square of Macedonians, the political arena of supporters of all political parties, the stage for celebration of sports victories (of the Macedonian, Turkish and Albanian national teams) and the location for the central Christmas tree every year. It was the crossing point of all versions of the city and the regular pathway of the citizens. A gathering point for group events and manifestations and a hanging-out point for the youth and elderly. Although it has never provided a lot of urban content itself (which is arguably one of the reasons for Skopje 2014), it still managed to be the space for contents.

Since 2010 until today, 15 of the objects from Skopje 2014 (monuments, buildings, fountains, sculptures) have been set up on the square. Many buildings in the surrounding have been “refacaded” and there are still objects to be constructed on the surface of the square or near it. People witness how they have completely changed their everyday routes, mostly avoiding passing through the square. The groups of people meeting or staying in the space have been substituted by masked statist, people hired to wear antique robes and masks, posing for pictures.

Due to the fact that there was a major opposition to the monuments, all of them have been quietly set up and erected at 2-3 a.m., even more, the City hired a private security company to keep the monuments safe. In addition, massive surveillance equipment has been set up.

The fountain at the base of the “Equestrian warrior” plays music so loud (Wagner pieces, among others), that combined with the large LCD commercial screen on the neighboring building, it prevents from any type of audible consummation or use of the space.

Square “Macedonia” has only been artificially filled and used since 2010 – for political rallies of the ruling party, forced independence celebrations and other events where visitors are arranged and organized. The rare occasions when the square was spontaneously filled were related to the mourning of the death of Toshe Proeski (young Macedonian pop singer) or the revolt against police brutality and the cover-up of the murder of Martin Neshkovski⁷.

The square is a no-place today, much less a common place.

The hidden

There is a part of the Skopje 2014 acquisition that no one talks about, or discussion of such is considered petty and naive. One might call them even invisible urban commons, but only because of the way their appropriation is ignored, they were not invisible before. Those are several smaller (public) spaces in the form of passages, corners or other parts of a larger urban/architectural structure, currently existing as completely repurposed spaces by literal occupation and annexation to the newly constructed or freshly ‘refacaded’ buildings. They were a constructive part of the modernist heritage of Skopje, more precisely the “City wall” of Kenzo Tange’s Skopje Master Plan from 1963 and were often planned to exist as “empty” spaces. Those changes and their regulation cannot be seen in the publicly available urban and spatial plans, but the architects, urbanists and other professional communities still haven’t brought these occupations in question. Therefore, the whole process of decision making for the repurposing of these spaces remains unclear and unarchived.

⁷ <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/macedonians-protest-after-police-murders-youngster>



Random view of Skopje 2014. Credits: www.plusinfo.mk

The collective memory

Skopje 2014 is obviously consuming the urban commons in all of its forms. In addition to the physical destruction and renationalization of public space, it marks territory, disrupts commuting paths established almost a century ago in combination of collective memory and citizens' habits⁸. For the people of Skopje, the most irritating part of the process was the erasing of the collective memory and the annihilation of the cultural landmarks of Skopje: the city's first landmark – the Stone Bridge – has been surrounded by new, shiny bridges with several dozens of sculptures, a carousel and a panorama wheel, the buildings from the modernist era all around the city have been “face lifted” with “neo-classicist” facades, while buildings of dubious dimensions and shapes, colonnades and monuments create a wall along the river Vardar that obstructs the view of the modernist heritage represented through the Macedonian Opera and Ballet, as well as the view of the minarets of the old town.

⁸ Dragsic I., Vitevski G., Grcheva I., Spasovska A., Baldazarski A., Krstevski D., Dimitrova M., “Freedom Square: Learning From the City”, Freedom Square, Skopje, 2013



Building along the river bank covering the Macedonian Opera and Ballet complex, and the view to many minarets. Credit: Public domain

In addition, historic tree rows were cut down, thus destroying social spaces oriented around the benches underneath. The natural border within the city along the river of Vardar, which divides it into a modern business core, and an older historic, “oriental” core, is enhanced through strong orthodox symbols (monuments of two pairs of Macedonian orthodox luminaries from the IX and X century set up at the end of the old Turkish bazaar), further emphasizing the banal Muslim-Orthodox separation of people and space. Street and public spaces/institutions’ names were changed, mostly the ones from the socialist past.

A special chapter from Skopje 2014 criticism should be dedicated to the treatment of WW II/partizan themed monuments and landmarks, as many of them were damaged, removed to an unknown location, neglected and even gated.

Keeping the score (a few battles won)

The announcement of the orthodox Christian church was a test drive for Skopje 2014. The reactions and protests, the media spin put on the issue of secularism, the stigmatization of all parties that reacted critically. The Government went so far, that the parcel on the central square was sold to the Macedonian Orthodox Church for a beneficiary price and registered in the spatial plan of the city at the time. Still, the church was constructed on a different location at a later point in time.

Since the public pressure for the construction of a church ceased, the movement for the reconstruction of a mosque just 100m towards the river also stopped its activities. This was an initiative whose goal was rehabilitation of neglected parts of Skopje’s urban geography, including the reconstruction of Burmali mosque, which stood near the proposed church parcel from 1495 to 1925, when it was demolished for the construction of a cultural space for the members of the army, later in SFRY famously dubbed Home of YPA (Yugoslav people’s army).

This fact is important for keeping the score against the wholesome picture and symbolism being imposed on the city and the country, because it could have easily been a slippery slope into '*compensational*' urban planning, opening space for another religious object on the main square of the capital of a secular state.



City trade center as the best example of symbiotic architecture. Credits: www.telma.mk

In addition, there is the successful story of protection of a city shopping mall, dubbed “GTC” in the language and collective memory of Skopje. It was proposed that this milestone of architecture and urbanism be subjected to '*baroquization*', closing down the open space and passages, adding colonnades of pillars, a complete revamp in accordance to the visual identity of Skopje 2014. Strangely enough, this building actually provides space for private capital, but the architectural project (an open space shopping mall combined with a small portion of residential area and adjacent to the largest public park in the center of the city) bears a strong social thread, it is urbanistically and geographically symbiotic to the environment and acts as a bypass for different types of traffic and commuting. It is a landmark in collective memory with some of its authors still living.



Citizens of Skopje defending the City trade center. Credits: www.novatv.mk

The citizens were supported by the Municipality of Centar (the ruling party does not have the majority there any more), and it organized a local referendum in 2015. It managed to gather 97% of the votes in the municipality, sending a clear message that changing the essence of this public space is unacceptable. Unfortunately, only 47% of the voters turned up and the legal 50% threshold wasn't met because of the boycott called upon by the ruling party. The civil society and the Municipality still consider this a success because the building is still untouched and the civil society achieved a great dynamic with the local community and professional societies.

Skopje 2014 – a past in construction



The quality of Skopje 2014 in the year of 2014. Credits: unknown

The two referendums have been the only participative democracy attempts to protect or participate in regulation of the urban commons. But they are only a partial cure the problem. There is still no significant debate about handling the case of already decaying buildings, or the project as a whole. The construction work is ongoing, monuments are erected, street names changed and as this paper is being written, the City of Skopje announced a new “reconstruction of facades of existing objects in the central city area”, phrasing used for visual hindering of modernist architecture and facades, not quality improvement. The city is growing while the commons are disappearing or being abused, and so far it seems that the only way to stop it is to stop the government.