

Opponent's Report

Author: Ivana Nikolovska
Master thesis: Skopje 2014: Governmental Role in the Spatial Politics of Collective Memory

The thesis under scrutiny deals with a very controversial project, i.e. with the rebuilding of the centre of the Macedonian capital city, Skopje. The project has been promoted and enforced without any serious public debate by the right-wing political party VMRO-DPMNE since 2010, after it had won elections anew in 2008. The opposing voices of architects, artists and other specialists were openly neglected and discredited as politically motivated. Sporadic protests were organized, but the construction itself proceeded untroubled. The right-wing government continuously rejects complaints by arguing that the people approved the project by voting for the governing party in the elections. Although it seems that public opinion is divided in this matter, the adherents of the project prevail. The opponents failed to mobilize broader support in the public. According to the opposition, this passivity is partially caused by the atmosphere of fear disseminated by the government.

The project (the building process is already relatively advanced) envisages a complete change of the city centre. Huge representative buildings of state administration and cultural institutions are made of concrete and pseudohistorical styles are used. Alleged ancient and baroque motives especially predominate. The open space that is framed by these buildings is fulfilled with statues of historical figures that should symbolize the continuity of the Macedonian nation from Ancient Times. A huge statue of a warrior on a horse, unofficially depicting Alexander the Great, plays the central part. The whole project, obviously, has a deeper ideological meaning. The planners wanted to build a symbolic heart of the young nation-state and, as they themselves declared, they wanted to express Macedonia's, and accordingly its capital's, national as well as European identity.

The critics of the project in concern raised several objections. The most prosaic of these refers to the whole reason of such an expensive enterprise. Moreover, critics state that by using the project, the government attempts to foster nationalism and diverts attention from real problems of the country, from its bad economic situation, high unemployment, etc. They furthermore argue that the project's ideological content provokes misunderstandings, to say the least, between Macedonia and its neighbouring countries (esp. Greece) and also between Macedonia and its Albanian population. Indeed, the project costs are enormous and should be spent on more reasonable purposes. In addition, the irregular selection of architects and construction companies, and possible corruption, are likewise often pointed out. Further objections refer to the aesthetic and architectural value of the project which was characterized as kitsch and caricature. Art historians and architects also criticize the project on the grounds that it does not fit the local architectural tradition (sometimes called the Macedonian national tradition), that it disrespects the urban development and, last but not least, that it falsifies history. The last roughly defined objections are directed against the symbolical and ideological background of the project. The project is based on the primordialistic assumption of a nation that can track its continual existence from Ancient Times. It is noteworthy that only a few Macedonians, professional historians among them, are ready to admit that modern nations were formed only in Modern Times and that the nation-building process of the Macedonian nation was completed only after 1945.

For these reasons it is indeed possible to say that the author chose a very interesting, up-to-date and politically sensitive topic. It touches on several crucial issues of today's Macedonia: Macedonian national identity and its further shaping and (re-)defining after the creation of the independent national state; relations between Macedonia on the one side and its neighbouring states, namely Greece, Bulgaria and Serbia, on the other; inter-ethnic relations between the majority population and the national minorities, especially the Albanians; the nature of the country's political culture and the standards of public discussion; and, last but not least, it deals with disputes about the country's cultural heritage, i.e. what is connected with the question of collective identity and historical consciousness and what is not. Therefore, I would like to appreciate the author's effort and highlight that she had really impinged on the most challenging soil.

Ivana Nikolovska approached the subject from several different angles. The title of her thesis (which is rather complicated) refers to the "Skopje 2014" project as the government's project to form a collective memory and identity of the Macedonian nation. Nevertheless, she likewise covers the discussions of architects, historians and art theorists, as well as issues connected to public opinion. Furthermore, she depicts the development of the city of Skopje from a historical perspective and raises the very question if the project of rebuilding Skopje's city centre is really adequate. Indeed, it is in this particular moment when the author partially abandons her "objective" standpoint and enters the debate by employing a more subjective stance. Finally, the author attempts to explain the Skopje 2014 project, its social and political connotations in terms of theoretical concepts of national identity, collective memory and interactions between society and public space.

Firstly, I would like to point out the qualities of the thesis under scrutiny. In general, I. Nikolovska's approach seems appropriate and adequate. She manages to maintain a critical distance which is necessary, but not always easy. I especially appreciate the chapter on the expert debate and critical reactions; it is both the most interesting and the best elaborated part of the thesis. By and large, the author collected a remarkable number of sources and displayed a whole scale of various pros and cons connected to the debate. On the other hand, however, one does not learn how representative or how accidental the selection of her sources was.

Despite all the merits, the thesis has got some weaknesses that must be mentioned. First and foremost, the author's style and argumentation may seem rather complicated and clumsy at times. There are moments when the author does not seem to be sure what exactly she wants to say, or rather assert. In addition, her research questions are not formulated precisely and, concurrently, there are too many of them to be solved in just one single M.A. thesis. For example, there is no point asking whether the Skopje 2014 project aims at transforming the capital city into a more Europeanized and at the same time a more nationalized city, and if this is complementary or contradictory. Such a question had no sense in the author's research as the project planners themselves declared this as their goal. Instead, Ivana Nikolevska should have asked what it actually meant and what the project initiators had in mind when they called for nationalization and Europeanization of Skopje. Last but not least, I found the third chapter, concentrating on theoretical approaches, as the most unclear.

Moreover, I also have some objections to the second chapter which deals with the historical development of Skopje. The author did not make use of any general monograph on the history of the Balkans, the Ottoman Empire, Yugoslavia, not even on the history of Macedonia itself. She relies only on a few works about cities and towns in Macedonia and on the official

website of Skopje. This is something I regard as a weakness, especially in the case of a M.A. thesis in the field of history. Furthermore, the author did not avoid several factual mistakes in this chapter: For example, Skopje did not become the capital city of independent Macedonia in 1992 because it was largest city in the country. Skopje had been the capital city of the Macedonian Republic ever since Federal Yugoslavia was created at the end of the Second World War. In addition, in the previous chapter, the author mentions Metodija Andonov Čento as “the first Macedonian president”; this statement can be misunderstood. Čento was the chair of the highest political body (ASNOM) in the newly established Macedonian Republic that itself was a federal unit of Yugoslavia in the years 1944-1945. Therefore, his office was not called “president”. The office of president of the Republic of Macedonia was introduced only in 1991. Moreover, the author writes about the year 1929 in relation to interwar Yugoslavia. Nevertheless, she does not mention that the territory of today’s Macedonia entered the Yugoslav state in 1918 as a part of the Kingdom of Serbia. The above mentioned year is important for another reason which is likewise omitted in the text: Under the dictatorship of King Alexander, Yugoslavia was subdivided into administrative units called “banovinas”. Skopje became the capital of the Vardar Banovina, a unit that included not only the territory of today’s Macedonia, but also a considerable part of nowadays Kosovo and southern Serbia. It was in this period when Skopje, as an administrative centre, enjoyed a certain constructing boom. Last but not least, the Macedonian Orthodox Church was not newly established after 1990 as the author claims, but it seceded from the Serbian Orthodox Church in the 1950s following the instructions of the communist authorities in power at the time.

Additionally, it should be noted that the chapter in concern offers rather tendentious historical interpretations. The Empire of Tsar Samoil (Samuel), with its centre on the territory of today’s Republic of Macedonia, is known as the First Bulgarian Empire. Only Macedonian historians do not acknowledge the Bulgarian character of this state. In similar way, the author neglects the fact that Tsar Stefan Dušan, who established his seat in Skopje, was a Serbian ruler. Last but not least, it is absolutely ahistorical to say that in the Middle Ages, “Macedonia caused many attacks from the Serbs and the Bulgarians”.

Nonetheless, all these objections are rather marginal and do not change my general high evaluation of the thesis. I can fully recommend the thesis of Ivana Nikolovska for defence and I propose to classify it with the mark „very well“.

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