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Identity Struggle in Post-Socialist City – Re-Imagineering Belgrade, Remodelling Skopje

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Abstract

In this comparative study, we explore how common struggle for the production of national identities in the specific post-socialist context of Central and Eastern Europe takes on different manifestation forms. Our focus is on formulation of the large-scale urban development initiatives occurring in the former Socialist Yugoslavia. Through the analysis of legislative and planning documents, expert reports, and media coverage from the period between 2010 and 2016, we show how initiatives for implementation of grandiloquent urban megaprojects (UMP) in the capital cities of Serbia and Macedonia serve as extreme examples of autocratic state-led interventions for the goals of national identity building. On the one hand, redevelopment of Belgrade waterfront through investor-friendly regulatory intervention is an attempt to improve Serbia's international reputation and secure new investments through modernisation and reimagineering of its capital city. On the other hand, remodelling of Skopje through historization is propelled by the contested national identity after the separation, additionally burdened by the legacy of still unsolved inter-ethnic conflicts. Although based on fully different approaches, our study shows that both initiatives are characterised by non-transparent decision-making and politically orchestrated process of nation branding that finally caused struggles and rejection of the general public.

Keywords: Post-socialist city, Belgrade, Skopje, identity building, urban mega-projects

Introduction

More than two decades after the collapse of the communist system, most of the countries of the Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) completed their transition to market-oriented democratic societies with varying results. Considering the fact that the CEE countries haven't followed the same dynamics during the forceful imposition of the socialist system after the World War II (Stanilov, 2007), the process of post-socialist transition similarly had highly different rates. Coupled with profound political and economic reforms they also influenced means and dynamics of spatial transformations in the region. Among the most prominent cases are the successor countries of the former Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY), challenged by the particularly complex socio-political issues. Today independent nation states have been for decades under the influence of socialist planning and modernist functionalism that fundamentally transcended national boundaries and local specificities. One of the common characteristics thus remained the complex post-conflict recovery process driven by neoliberal agenda.

The specific focus of this paper is on two capital cities of the former federal states, Belgrade in Republic of Serbia and Skopje in Republic of Macedonia. In addition to the legacy of technocratic planning principles, Belgrade suffered from a negative media-generated image after the Balkan conflicts. The atmosphere of unsolved national identity conflicts characterized Skopje after the separation from SFRY. Along with the challenge to cope with transitional complexities, political elites in both of the countries strived to reinforce national identities by different means. Political leaders in Serbia advocated for an iconic large-scale intervention at the urban forefront of the capital Belgrade, as a tool to improve the city's image and countries' international reputation. Macedonian political elite looked upon Western European cities in their fantasizing about a perfect 'historic' capital to formulate identity of the newly born European nation. Despite seemingly different strategies, the study showed how politically orchestrated national identity building shared some striking similarities, such as top down approaches and non-transparent decision-making that resulted with polarisation of the population, strong public dissent and final rejection.

In the first section of the paper we discuss the role of urban megaprojects (UMP) in urban identity building and link this debate to the scholarly work on post-socialist urbanism. The second section reviews the political context of identity in the socialist Yugoslavia and discusses its implications for spatial development of the cities in focus. The third section introduces the case of the former federal capital Belgrade; the fourth brings the case of Skopje. We conclude with the insights gained through both case studies for wider debates about urban identity building in the post-socialist context.

Urban megaprojects as a tool for identity building in the CEE context

Neoliberal global economy and growing intercity competition turned the values of urban identity into important economic assets. Driven by the interest to attract attention as a prerequisite for international investments (Franck, 1998; 2005), advanced development strategies mobilised manipulation of symbols and construction of identities through the means of urban marketing and branding (Yeoh, 2005). As global visibility is highly valued but increasingly difficult to achieve, city branding started relying on high-magnitude measures with great impacts, such as UMPs or mega-events (Anttiroiko, 2014). In many cases, UMPs have already produced globally circulated images, which re-shaped the ways cities and countries represent themselves (Evans, 2003, Broudehoux, 2010). Swyngedouw et al. have designated UMPs as "emblematic examples of neoliberal forms of governance" (2002: 548) that propel socio-economic restructuring. Nevertheless, scholars have also criticized UMPs, mostly on democratic, economic and social grounds (Olds, 2004, Orueta and Fainstein, 2008, De Cerro, 2013), and have particularly noted the lack of transparency in their development. The last generation UMPs are even less clear, with their benefits and gains under debate with a diversity of approaches (Plaza, 2000, Sandercock and Dovey, 2002). Seemingly serving a broad range of interests, they also mask the underlying shift "from collective benefits to a more individualized form of public benefit" (Lehrer and Laidley, 2008: 786). Such enterprises seem also to be prone to planning failures, as marked by overspendings and excessive delays (Flyvbjerg et al., 2003, Flyvbjerg, 2011). In the Western European context, recent civic engagement against particular projects has gained much attention and has contributed to significant delays in implementation (Novy and Peters, 2013). In how far urban megaprojects in the context of CEE follow the same trends and facilitate comparable processes of socio-economic restructuring is under debate (Müller, 2011, Kinossian, 2012, Kinossian and Morgan, 2014, Koch, 2014, Cope, 2015, Koch and Valiyev, 2015).

Despite comprehensive changes, urban development of the CEE region is still profoundly shaped by the legacies of socialist urban planning and the post-1990 political and economic reforms. One of the important themes in the literature has thus been to examine overlapping of socialist legacies and global processes of neoliberalization in reconfiguring urban spaces in the CEE (Stenning et al., 2010, Grubbauer and Kusiak, 2012, Hirt, 2012, Kovács et al., 2013, Golubchikov et al., 2014). In many cases, some of the outcomes confirmed the assumption that cities throughout the region have embraced entrepreneurial strategies of urban imagineering and actively supported the transformation of central urban spaces modelled on Western examples (e.g. Temelová, 2007, Cook, 2010, Golubchikov, 2010). However, scholars also pointed out that nation-state politics in the CEE context had considerably more influence than in Western examples, particularly regarding implementation of large-scale urban development projects. Often associated with megaevents, UMPs were in many countries of the CEE region interpreted in terms of post-socialist nation building (Palonen, 2013, Cope, 2015, Kinossian, 2012, Koch and Valiyev, 2015).

Political context of identity in the socialist Yugoslavia and its implications on development of Belgrade and Skopje

After the Yugoslav communists came to power in 1945, they introduced a new federal establishment based on social grounds, as a guarantee for national equality in multinational country (figure 1). The main principle of 'Brotherhood and Unity' also had the task to legitimize the leading role of the Communist Party in the Yugoslav society. The official identity was thus based on an ideological vision of the common future, rather than on common ethnic, political and cultural characteristics of the constituent nations (Haug, 2012, Jović, 2004). Still, there was one notable exception, when communists actively supported national consciousness in politically instable Macedonia (Haug, 2012, Frusetta, 2004). It was based on standardisation of the language, restoration of autocephaly for Macedonian Orthodox Church, as well as selective interpretations of its history (Frusetta, 2004), aiming to weaken links with Bulgarian nationalist ideology and strengthen ties to other Yugoslav nations (Haug, 2012, Frusetta, 2004).

The post-socialist development of Macedonian capital Skopje was marked by attempts to hide the legacy of Yugoslav socialist ideology and planning, although largely characterized by significant efforts to renew the city after the earthquake in 1963. The unprecedented disaster gathered eighty-seven countries to help reconstruction of the city. Japanese architect Kenzo Tange won the UNESCO's international competition for the new master plan, which was never fully implemented. Still, many new buildings have been constructed according to principles of international modernism, which was then regarded as progressive and forward-looking. After the emergence of independent Macedonian state in 1991 universal international style was no longer seen as capable to support the identity dispute that came along with economic and political crisis. Due to a lack of convenient pre-socialist national histories, new controversial alternative theories appeared; one of them considered the modern nation descending from the migrating Slavs, who mixed with remnants of the ancient Macedonian people of Alexander the Great (Frusetta, 2004). Specific socio-political conditions to enable creation of identity for the 'newly born' nation were met after a party with national democratic orientation VMRO-DPMNE[1] won the parliamentary elections with absolute majority in 2008. Founded in 1990 as a counterbalance to the then ruling Communist Party, VMRO-DPMNE considered itself legitimate successor of the historical rebel movement against the Ottoman rule. The new national government used both historical justification and nostalgic feelings for political legitimization of the national revival through the radical UMP "Skopje 2014". However, the portrayals of national history caused some dissent and discontent in the region, especially in the

mid 1990-es, when Greek foreign policy issued economic embargo and sanctions to any use of the term "Macedonia", considered to be exclusively Greek in historical context.
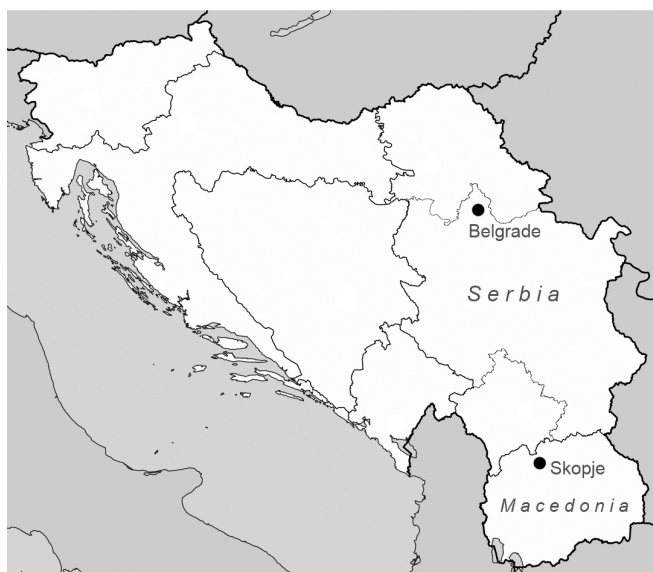

Figure 1. Belgrade and Skopje in the former SFRY[2]

On the other hand, Belgrade as the federal capital between 1945 and 1992 was subjected to significant efforts to support national unity and represent all Yugoslav cultural and political identities (Ápor, 2015, Damljanović Conley, 2010). Although its parallel role as Serbian capital became somewhat secondary, the city still benefited from the federal establishment, both in national and regional contexts. Belgrade therefore gained a distinct, rather cosmopolitan character by the 1980-es; besides numerous monumental edifices constructed for Yugoslav Government and other Party buildings, one of priorities was also a vision for the new capital on the opposite side of the Sava River (Slavković, 2014, Blagojević 2014). Former international modernist style with lack of references to any particular nationality was conveniently selected to transfer the ideology standing behind the project. Although never finished, the New Belgrade still became the biggest of all 'new cities' in the outskirts of the major urban settlements of the CEE region (Waley, 2011).

Although particular socialist self-management system in SFRY placed greater importance on market-type economic relations that generally enabled higher living standard and a lower level of under-urbanisation (Vujović & Petrović 2007), in its foundations it was still typically socialist. Therefore, after the fall of communism, Yugoslav capital confronted similar problems as capital cities of other countries of the Eastern Block. Belgrade particularly suffered from former development directions, especially considering a number of partially realised large-scale urban infrastructure projects that Serbia alone could not support any longer (Blagojević, 2005). Poor economic situation and international isolation of the country imposed by the UN during the war years prevented external forces to support necssary economic liberalisation. National political elite deliberately delayed socio-economic reforms to keep their power (Vujović and Petrović, 2007), with an overall lack of political interest for the role of Belgrade or other Serbian cities in the global economic competition. Besides accumulated social, economic, traffic and other urban problems, additional consequences of the decade of stagnation also included the extremely negative public image. The much-needed transformation and recovery commenced after Milošević's regime was overthrown in 2000. Providing a safe atmosphere for investors, attracting skilled working class, boosting city image, and fostering national economic growth and competitiveness became the main goals for the new democratic government. Ambitions to compete with other metropolises of the region rested upon several initiatives associated with redevelopment of Belgrade's waterfronts, holding the most prominent location within its urban fabric.

Re-imagineering Belgrade through conversion of its' waterfronts

Although Belgrade is the only European capital that rests on a confluence of two transnational rivers, decades of shifting planning directions, along with political and economic instability, left its urban foreground lack attractive riverside neighbourhoods. Nevertheless, the vision of a city on water was profusely used for the purpose of political propaganda since the early 1920-es (Slavković 2014). One of the most gigantic visions for an urban centre on the waterfront from the 1970-es never got implemented, as the socialist regime put an emphasis on the more important construction of the New Belgrade. In the 1990-es, the idea revived as 'Europolis', however, solely for the political campaign of the then-ruling Milošević's Socialist Party. Democratic shift after 2000 finally enabled economic liberalisation, followed by initiatives for international competition and improvement of the national image. Revival of Belgrade's waterfronts during the mandate of the democratic coalition rested upon redevelopment of several brownfield areas close to the city's historic urban core. Firstly, shortly after unfortunate privatisation of the Port of

Belgrade in 2009, the new owner revealed master plan for the conversion of its cargo centre into an attractive urban neighbourhood (figure 2: C). The authors of the plan named 'City on Water' were international 'star architects' Studio Libeskind in cooperation with Gehl Architects (figure 3). Secondly, the passenger terminal was to become a prominent urban landmark on the Sava River, based on design by the Japanese architect Sou Fujimoto (figure 2: A). After winning the international competition organized by the city government in 2011, the pedestrian spiral named 'Cloud' was to link ferry, tram and bus terminals, but also to offer retail and leisure activities (figure 4, left). Finally, as a flagship by Zaha Hadid Architects, the new multifunctional complex on the site of the former textile giant "Beko" was to facilitate a whole new character to settle on Danube's riverfront (figure 2: B; figure 4, right). Nevertheless, after the following political shift in 2012, all the mentioned initiatives were successively suspended, due to claimed conflicts on the land ownership or high implementation costs. In fact, the new national government led by the liberal-conservative Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) advocated for a vision of its own.
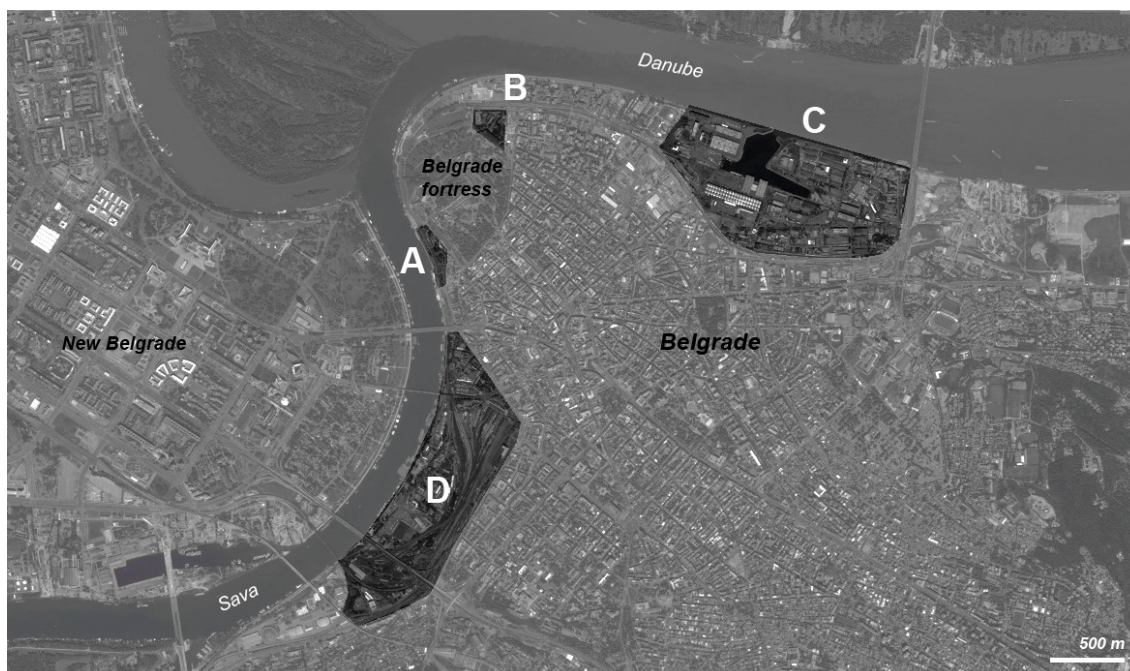

Figure 2. Planned large-scale interventions on Belgrade waterfronts
A – "The Cloud", B – Former "Beko" factory, C – "City on Water", D – "Belgrade Waterfront"[3]

The most decisive role on the overall appearance of Belgrade's waterfronts held a neglected zone of small business and dilapidated housing, mostly covered by old railway tracks, at the bottom of the so-called Sava Amphitheatre (figure 2: D). Its remarkable location between the Old City and the New Belgrade made this brownfield site one of the most strategic development areas the city had to offer (Vukmirović & Milaković 2009). Its conversion into a particular UMP "Belgrade Waterfront" ("Beograd na vodi") was early announced in April 2012, as a flagship for revival of the national economy (Filipović and El Baltaji, 2014). The brownfield area was supposed to become a new quarter with high-rise buildings, offices, hotels, and luxury apartments in only six to eight years (Slavković, 2014). The real prerequisites, however, depended on extensive preparatory work with unforeseeable completion dates. The most questionable among them was displacement of all the railway facilities on site, relocation and construction of the new main bus terminal, as well as finalization of an ambitious project from the mid-1970s for the new train station building. Nevertheless, the initiative became certain in 2013 after the agreement between the governments of Serbia and United Arab Emirates (UAE) was signed (Serbian Government, 2013). The project was marked by many controversies, starting from apparently personal connections and interests of key stakeholders from both parties; then First Deputy Prime Minister of Serbia Aleksandar Vučić claimed friendship with the Abu Dhabi royal family, the Al Nahyans (Filipović and El Baltaji, 2014). The project was introduced with general disregard of public involvement, shown not only through the secret dealing, but also in unclear authorship of the master plan. "Belgrade Waterfront" reached its full publicity before the national parliament elections in March 2014 (Bakarec, 2015), especially after its world premier at one of the most prestigious international real estate events MIPIM in Cannes.

Soon after the elections Vučić became Prime Minister of Serbia, which further facilitated advancement of the project. In the forthcoming implementation phases the very top of Serbian political establishment adopted an autocratic role, characterized by investor friendly decision-making and exclusion of both municipal authorities and effective legal regulations. The "Belgrade Waterfront" project was officially declared as of special importance for national economic development in May 2014,[4] followed by the legal confirmation of the proposed project falling under public interest (Official Gazette of RS 34/2015). The Joint Venture Agreement signed in July 2015 (Serbian Government, 2015) was a step towards implementation, setting the rules for newly formed public-private partnership between the contractors. However, after the document was finally made available to the public two months after,[5] there were many unclear elements and contradictory information reported, especially concerning costs and financing of the joint venture. Initially announced €3 billion ($4.08 billion), which the investor and developer Eagle-Hills was

supposed to invest in the "Belgrade Waterfront", turned out significantly reduced to only €150 million (Sekularac, 2014). The public insights into the draft of the Spatial Plan (Official Gazette RS, 7/2015) and Strategic Assessment Report (Strategic Environmental Assessment, 2014), followed by a session of the commission for public review in late 2014 (Report on Public Insight, 2014) finally triggered a serious public debate. Various professional and civil society organizations, such as the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, the local and national architect's associations, national representatives of Transparency International, as well as citizens gathered around the initiatives "Ne da(vi)mo Beograd"[6] took part in the hearing and raised points of critique. They mostly questioned the bases on which the plan was formulated as of special national importance and criticized the overall drafting process of the plan, its economic viability and lack of control of the social and economic implications, as well as failure to respond to the local urban context. Most of these points of criticism were rejected (Report on Public Insight, 2014), based on the previously ensured grounds of profuse legislative adjustments.

Figure 3. Master plan 'City on Water' by Daniel Libeskind and Jahn Gehl[7]

Figure 4. "Cloud" by Sou Fujimoto (l) and "Beko" by Zaha Hadid Architetcs (r)[8]

Until the foundation stone was finally laid in 2015, the national government intervened numerous times to ensure project's smooth execution (Grubbauer and Čamprag, 2017 expected). Autocratic regulation, overall lack of transparency, and legal but questionable citizen's participation in decision-making processes associated implementation of "Belgrade Waterfront" with contestations coming from both general public and professionals. Although the intellectual elite gathered around professional associations and newly formed grassroots failed to prevent the implementation of the project, it still managed to influence the course of public debate. Particularly, the civic initiative 'Ne da(vi)mo Beograd', managed to raise important questions through the engagement of media, experts, planners, and other NGOs. Due to general censorship by the Serbian government, their own media dealt with economic, planning, legal and social aspects of the project. 'Ne da(vi)mo Beograd' took over the role of advocates for more participatory planning and inclusion of both general and professional publics. Besides, many associations of national experts also voiced the necessity of integration of citizens and experts perspectives[9] for more successful and more feasible redevelopment of the Sava Amphitheatre. Thus, the civic sector – supported by intellectual and professional elites – offered hitherto unknown contestation on the alarming inadequacy of privileging real estate led development in the process of post-socialist reimagineering of the Serbian capital.

Figure 5. Belgrade Waterfront master plan[10]

Semantic Shift in Architectural Language: Remodelling Skopje

One of particularities of the post-socialist urban fabric of Skopje was the striking contrast between its many heterogeneous fragments. Particular was the juxtaposition between the buildings from the Medieval and Ottoman periods, and the ones from the late modernism, which gave the city its unique appearance. Such variety of urban spaces involved variety of their uses, especially when taking in consideration multi-ethnic composition of the city's population. However, resulting from the rising identity issues after the independence, different ethnic and religious communities started to compete for visibility and presence in urban realm. This situation culminated in 2002 with construction of the 66,6 meters high Millennium Cross on top of the nearby Vodno Mountain. More drastic changes of the city centre commenced after the official media broadcasted a short video "Skopje 2014". This massive urban refurbishment was fully conceived, implemented and sponsored by the national government (Kubiena, 2012, Graan, 2013). Constructed as an eclectic assemblage of historicised architectural forms, the emerging city image in fact hardly had any architectural or stylistic references neither to the history of the capital city nor of the Macedonian nation. The political elite remained silent about the project rationale (Kubiena, 2012), pushing other important socio-political issues in the first plan instead. Initially there was little response coming from the general public, however, with advancement of the project the national intellectual elite and professional associations initiated numerous debates. They targeted not only architectural formulation, but also extremely non-transparent and unlawful procedures behind the project's implementation.

Figure 6. The statue of Alexander the Great (l), with a detail of the fountain at its base (r). Photo: B. Stefanovska

After the UMP "Skopje 2014" commenced in 2010, the aim was to redefine the city's appearance in only four years. The government-sponsored renovation plan envisioned construction of a new philharmonic hall, three government buildings, a new business centre, a new church, three new museums, two new hotels, a triumphal arch,

two new bridges, and over twenty bronze and marble statues of national historical figures (Graan, 2013). In 2011, on the 20-year anniversary of Macedonia's referendum on independence, a 14,5 meters high statue of Alexander the Great was unveiled on the biggest Macedonia Square (figure 6; figure 7, A). The statue became the most iconic representation of the project, however, resulting from competing claims over a common history it also additionally fuelled diplomatic and political tensions with Athens. Other projects added on overall controversy of the initiative, due to stylistic elements from the times of Baroque, Classicism and other historical periods. Firstly, although the government initially advocated for rebuilding of the old theatre destroyed in the earthquake, the final outcome was hardly a genuine reconstruction, but a modern structure that imitated old design (figure 7, B; figure 9). Secondly, the new building of the Constitutional Court had some similarities with the Palace of Justice in Rome (figure 7, C), the triumphal arch Porta Macedonia resembled Arc de Triomphe in Paris (figure 7, D), and planned but not realised intervention on the existing modern Parliament Building of the Republic drew parallels with Norman Foster's dome of the Bundestag in Berlin (figure 7, G). Finally, the existing buildings in the style of late modernism were coated with new classical façades to conceal the most visible legacy of the former Yugoslav planning. The project thus generally communicated through an abstracted and modified form of imitation, without concrete historical examples (image 8; 9). The final result was a collage of historical semantics, which on the one hand aimed to simulate economic growth and welfare, while on the other hand to claim identity of the whole nation as unquestionably European. However, since the much-needed substantial changes in the society and national economy did not emerge after a while, the project "Skopje 2014" came under public scrutiny, primarily on the bases of its costs. From the initially announced €80 million, the estimated costs rose up to €500 million (Kubiena, 2012), with a total to outreach €667 million until 2018.[11] Other points of criticism mainly addressed the aesthetic programme, lack of democratic pubic discussion and exclusion of minorities from the programme of the project (Kubiena, 2012, Graan, 2013).
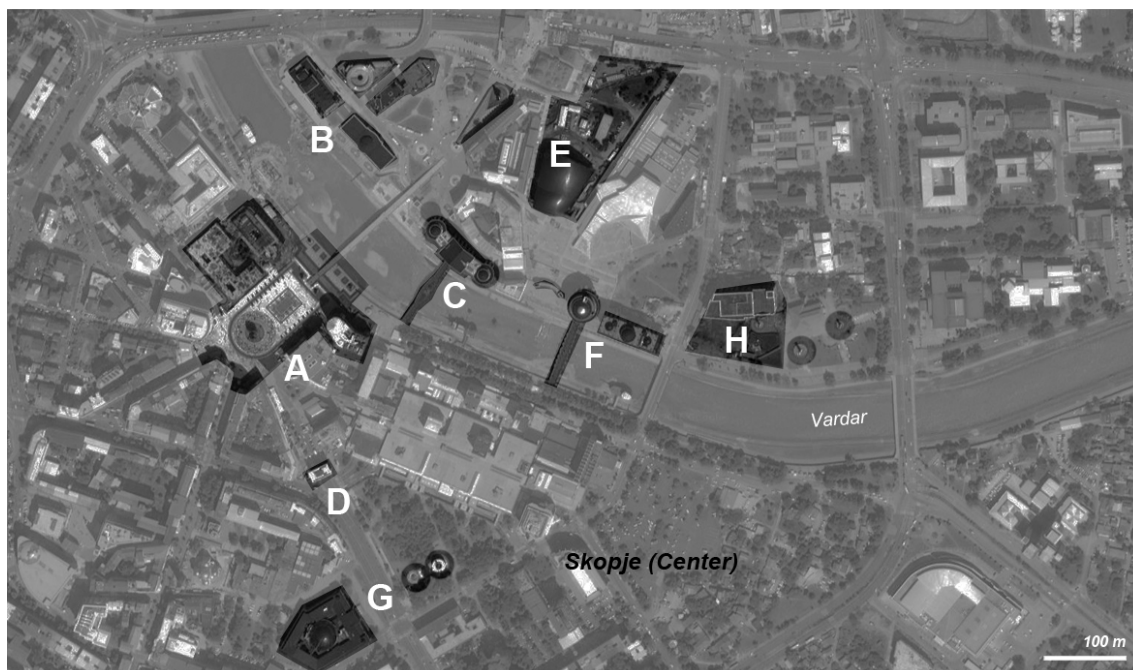

Figure 7. The main interventions of the "Skopje 2014" project: A – Alexander the Great sculpture, B – the National Theatre and the Museum of Macedonian Struggle, C – the Constitutional Court, Archaeology Museum, and the Eye Bridge, D – Porta Macedonia, E – the Macedonian Philharmonic Orchestra Hall, F – Financial police, Ministry of foreign affairs and the Art Bridge, G –the Parliament Building, H – Public administrative building[12]

Many intellectuals and professionals – mostly architects, city planners and art historians – developed a rising interest on how the initiative was conceived and developed. The significant shift in city's imagineering was explained as a turn from an "open city" towards a hegemonic, controlling, excluding, divided and singular "grand national capital" (Križnik and Janev, 2008). Due to a lack of representation of national sentiment in the new autonomous republic, transnational and open character of Skopje from the 1960es did not meet the needs of the population, while at the same time the city was on the way to become a real national capital for the first time in its recent history (Križnik and Janev, 2008). This framework was taken as a basis for the new nationalist discourse of the ruling political party that aimed to fulfil the long-awaited wish for transformation of Skopje into Macedonian great national capital through implementation of the project "Skopje 2014" (Križnik and Janev, 2008). However, in 2009 the discussion finally shifted from the shortcomings of the post earthquake reconstruction, to threats from by the subsequent urban redevelopment (Herold et al, 2009). The formation of student activism around the "First Archi-Brigade" group (PAB), which mainly gathered students of architecture, received significant support by some university professors and other committed citizens. Their "First Architectural Uprising" in 2009 was conceived as peaceful demonstration to express resentment against the uncontrolled disfigurement of the city, but it turned into violence after a group of contra-protestants attacked the demonstrators. Since these events, controversial debate on urban change kept getting on its political connotation. Nevertheless, intellectual elite along with the members of the PAB strived on the one hand to

educate the public on the loss of city's authenticity caused by the use of elements of imagined history in contemporary architectural articulations, which diminished the real common memory. On the other hand, they questioned the use of architectural replacements and false facades to construct cityscapes upon European models, as means of compensation for the current national identity issues.

Figure 8. The riverside before (l) and after the new building of Archaeological Museum hid the view on the National Theatre (r).
Photo: B. Stefanovska

Changes in the cityscape of the capital Skopje showed high resemblance with the trend of constructing new identities for attracting international recognizability and competitiveness in a global marketplace (Graan, 2013). However, provisional interpretations of national history, its manipulation by the government and rejection by the general public remained an open discussion. Although the grandiloquent initiative managed shortly to distract public attention from many other problems that burdened the small Balkan country, since the beginning of 2016 there was a rising resistance to Macedonian political establishment. Dissatisfaction with the numerous affairs and secret dealing of the VMRO-DPMNE government initiated citizens' protests all over the country. After the Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski finally resigned from his office, parliamentary elections were postponed, which deepened the political crisis. The demonstrators required more democracy and legality during the mass protests later named the "Colourful Revolution", when the new facades and monuments were thrown with colour. From the initial plan to serve as the base for national identity building, UMP "Skopje 2014" finally became the symbol of unlawful actions and astray from the national government.

Image 9. The reconstructed National Theatre (l) and the Museum of Macedonian Struggle (r). Photo: B. Stefanovska

Discussion and Conclusion

Under the auspices of the ruling political establishment in Serbia, "Belgrade Waterfront" received enormous support in terms of concessions in legislation. Besides its locational qualities and expected modernisation of the city image, this UMP can clearly be classified as an investment-driven urban development. Aspirations for a new urban landmark, which should at the same time perform as a flagship for national economic revival, ended up in the shadow of clientelist relations and overall lack of transparency. This is especially relevant in the Serbian context, where governments and authorities lack experience and resources, due to legacies of socialist planning and a decade of economic and social decline. In contrast to this approach, the most remarkable characteristic of the project "Skopje

2014" is its free historic inspiration focused on the very centre of the city, as a strategy that enabled spatial proximity of monuments and monumental buildings. The implicit narratives occured in a newly created urban foreground, hiding at the same time unwanted elements of reality out of public sight. Through architectural spectacle Macedonian political leaders strived to materialise their political authority on the national level, but also to gain engines of economic value on the international stage. Rather than producing a "European" image for Macedonia, some critics claimed that a second-rate copy of originals could only embarrass and marginalize the country (Graan, 2013). These two different ways of pushing for UMPs by national political elites in both Belgrade and Skopje could be fully explained only by taking their particular post-socialist and post-conflict contexts into account. This allows for two insights with regard to the evolving power relations and modes of governance in image making and identity construction in the Balkan region and CEE more generally; the first related to the specific role of national political elites and the second related to the constitution of the reflective urban public.

Firstly, implementations of UMPs in Belgrade and Skopje were relying solely on goals and preferences of political leaders and investors, with blatant disregard of public opinion and professional advice. This to a certain degree contrasted Western European examples, where the decisive role in redevelopment of inner-city brownfields areas was mostly in hands of local governments, advocating for interests of participating communities and thus allowing avoidance of the harmful consequences of speculative development (Moulaert et al., 2004). The failures of national governments in Belgrade and Skopje to respond to the local urban contexts and address the variety of socio-economic challenges were caused by an overall lack of transparency in contracting, financing, and all the other planning and implementation procedures related to the projects. Secondly, rapid development of reflecting urban public in both of the countries made these cases a bit closer to the Western European contexts. They seemed to be initiated by educative role of the national intellectual elite, enabling swift mobilisation of citizens to confront obscure implementation of the initiatives. Finally, no matter whether justification of UMPs is of national greatness (Müller, 2011), global competitiveness (Golubchikov, 2010), or European cultural roots (Dixon, 2013), the issues of state-led regulatory intervention and lack of democratic control could offer explanations why the means for nation identity building in the contexts of both Serbia and Macedonia failed the imperative to satisfy genuine public interest.

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1 The Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization – Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity

2 Source: NordNordWest, CC BY-SA 3.0 de (with author's additions), https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=16948183 2016-11-12

3 Source: www.bing.com/maps/ 2016-11-03 (with author's additions) 2016-11-12

4 The project was declared of special importance for economic development of Republic of Serbia in accordance with the decision 05 no. 350-3533/2014 dated 1st May 2014.

5 The Joint Venture Agreement in both English and Serbian was available on the official website of the Serbian Government, http://www.srbija.gov.rs. 2015-11-13

6 A game of words, meaning 'we won't let Belgrade d(r)own'.

7 Source: http://www.lukabeograd.com 2016-11-12

8 Sources: http://www.archdaily.com and http://www.zaha-hadid.com 2016-11-12

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10 Source: http://www.belgradewaterfront.com 2016-11-12

11 "Skopje 2014 Uncovered", Source: http://skopje2014.prizma.birn.eu.com/en 2016-11-18

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