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Make Macedonia great again! The new face of Skopje and the Macedonians' identity dilemma.

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Abstract

For long time, the existence and the nature of the Macedonian nation have been contested by Macedonia's neighbours - particularly Greece and Bulgaria. With the establishment of Tito's Yugoslavia Macedonia became a federal unit and its inhabitants, the Macedonians, a constituent nation. However, the Yugoslav decades seems to have been only a buffer-time period, and identity disputes re-emerged in 1991 with Macedonia's declaration of independence. A huge debate with Greece started over the use of the term Macedonia but, more profoundly, over the symbolical meaning and national importance of all that the term Macedonia symbolizes.

From 2010, the Macedonian government has undertaken a project called "Skopje 2014", aimed to renew the capital city Skopje not only by adopting neo-baroque style and building statues but also renaming the major streets, the stadium, the airport and the schools after the names of alleged ancestors lived in "a glorious past". Hence, the project has gradually shaped, and changed, not only the identity of Skopje but the one of the Macedonian nation more generally, producing new national narratives.

The importance in analysing what seemed to be a simple urban renovation lays, therefore, in a devious identity politics whose narrative is emphasizing a direct descent of the Macedonian people from Alexander the Great. However, opinions concerning reason and purpose of this new identity building are many, ranging from a serious identity crisis, to more economical and political reasons.

Nevertheless, considering the turbulent past of the Macedonian nation-building, the paper seeks to analyse more in detail this "making Macedonia great again" by means of architecture, paying particular attention to the new state-promoted 'ethnogenesis' and the national narratives attached to it.

Key words

Nation Building – National narratives - Macedonia - Skopje 2014 – Urban Renovation

Introduction

Implemented by the Macedonian national party VMRO-DPMNE[1], the project "Skopje 2014" renewed the urban image of Skopje, capital city of the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM)[2] and promoted a feeling of direct descent from the Ancient Macedonians, epitomized by the figure of Alexander the Great.

Impressive statues, fountains and even a triumphal arch now stand in all their grandeur in the city centre of the Macedonian capital, Skopje.

Although apparently meant to give a new face to Skopje, whose architectural heritage is predominantly Socialist and partly Ottoman, the urban change is however also tied to a "great" national narrative concerning the Macedonian nation – which apparently is shaping, and changing, not only the city of Skopje but also the national identity of the Macedonians.

The Macedonian nation had a turbulent past in matter of recognition, and still nowadays its national distinctiveness and uniqueness is contested. Throughout its history, the geographic area of Macedonia has indeed been a crossroads of populations that influenced, with their religions, cultures and traditions, the identity building processes of the area's inhabitants. However, the term "Macedonia" had for long time had a regional/geographic connotation and only then assumed a national one.

For different reasons, Macedonia's neighbouring states contested its identity and the very existence of the nation as separate and unique and, after the Yugoslav decades - which seemed to have put an end to the contestations - the debate over "Macedonia" began again.

The recent implementation of the project "Skopje 2014", and the possible meanings attached to it, have thus to be read in the light of centuries of contestation and struggle for distinctiveness, in which the production of new national memories serves the purpose to give solid and ancient roots to an apparently "fragile and more recent" nation - hence assuring uniqueness.

Therefore, this contribution aims to analyse more in detail possible reasons and interpretations behind the ambiguous project recently implemented. The paper will firstly historically contextualize the "Macedonian question(s)", exploring its origin as well as standpoints/claims of both the Macedonians and its opponents; then, deepening the most recent debate over the Macedonian nation (and state) with Greece, it will proceed with a clear analysis of the devious identity politics connected to the project "Skopje 2014".

The aim of the article is, thus, to shed light on this "making Macedonia great again" by means of architecture, trying to better understand the new state-promoted "ethnogenesis" contextualizing and deepening what there is behind the new, but at the same time old, national narratives conveyed.

The "Macedonian Question"

Before entering Yugoslavia and gaining political recognition as a federal republic, Macedonia's history has been turbulent and, from an identity point of view, quite problematic.

"Who are the Macedonians?"[3] has, indeed, been a frequently asked question that, nevertheless, still has a considerable relevance in contemporary identity discourses in Macedonia. The question deals with the process of collective identity creation as well as state building, and we may say both processes have not ended yet.

The origins of the Macedonian question can be traced back in the pre-Yugoslav era, where the geographic area of Macedonia was subject of conquests and partitions. According to the conqueror, the population has often been subject to homogenization and assimilation and shifting identifications was often the result of forced identification pursued by the dominant group – as, for instance, "Serbianization", "Bulgarization" and "Hellenization". The people living in the geographical region of Macedonia were called Macedonians because of the territory they inhabited, and the term has for long had a purely geographical connotation. The debate, thus, was essentially over the inhabitants' ethno-national identity – if they were Bulgarians, Serbs or Greeks[4].

The issue, meaning what is Macedonia and who are the Macedonians, is complicated from different points of view. As Poulton[5] explains, the Macedonian issue can be described in three possible ways: first, we can consider as Macedonia the geographic area currently divided between Greece, Bulgaria and the Republic of Macedonia; the second way is to identify Macedonians as the citizens of current Republic of Macedonia and, finally, the third way is to ethnically identify as Macedonians the Slavs inhabitants either of geographic Macedonia or Republic of Macedonia.

The geographic area of Macedonia has been part of the Kingdom of Macedonia, led by Philip II (359-336 BC) and, after his death, by his son Alexander the Great – under which a vast empire, that reached Asia and Africa as well, was created. The Slavs came around the 6th century and, subsequently, the geographic area of Macedonia was alternately part of the Bulgarian or Byzantine empires until when, in the 14th century, it became part of the Ottoman Empire – which administrated its territory according to the *millet system*, differentiating the communities following their respective religious backgrounds.

Particularly in the 18th century, when the rise of nationalisms in the West impacted also the Sublime Porte, the way in which people were looking at themselves progressively changed and the *millet* started to be identified with the national group, becoming "the prime focus of identity"[6].

The 19th century, then, saw the beginning of hostilities between Ottomans' controlled peoples and the progressive decline of the Ottoman power led to growing interest towards the geographic area of Macedonia: thus, a separate Macedonian national consciousness slowly began to develop[7].

Following the *millet* system, the Orthodox peoples (Serbs, Greeks, Vlachs, etc.) under the Ottomans were all regrouped in the same unit, called *Rum Millet*. When Serbia gained autonomy from the Ottomans (1915) and the Kingdom of Greece established (1832), the Ottomans "recognized the necessity for autocephalous ecclesiastical jurisdiction in these units, eventually leading to the establishment of independent national churches in both states"[8]. However, also neighbouring Bulgaria demanded its own separate church and, after a Bulgarian Exarchate was established in 1870, religious allegiances basically turned into national allegiances, synonymous of national identities[9]. Given the circumstances, the three neighbouring powers turned their eyes towards the territory of Macedonia and "the eventual annexation of the largest possible portion of geographic Macedonia became thus pivotal

in the nationalist and irredentist plans of Bulgaria, Greece and Serbia and a fundamental consideration of their national consciousness"[10].

Macedonia thus soon became "a bone of contention" claimed by Bulgaria on the basis that its population was allegedly Bulgarian; by Greece, which claimed the Macedonian territory was its own; and by Serbia on the basis that the population of Macedonia was also Slavic-speaking. Therefore, from the 1870s, the three countries made considerable efforts to carve out areas of influence and homogenize the Macedonian population by means of education and religious institutions. This was essentially the core of the "Macedonian question".

Nevertheless, as mentioned, a separate Macedonian national consciousness and identity slowly began to develop and in the beginning of the 20th century[11] the first struggle for an independent Macedonia occurred. The *Vnatrešna Makedonska Revolucionerna Organizacija* (VMRO) was a revolutionary organisation tied with Bulgarian nationalist[12] which organized the Ilinden Uprising, on 2 August 1903: the rebellion was presented as a struggle for Macedonia's autonomy and played an important role in fighting against the Ottomans, but also against Greek and Serbian aspirations in Macedonia. However, as argued by Banac[13] "the VMRO preached Macedonia autonomy, but was in fact a Bulgarian irredentist organization" and "autonomy, then, was the best prophylactic against partition […] the idea of Macedonian autonomy (or separatism) was strictly political and did not imply a secession from Bulgar nationhood"[14]. The VMRO attempt, nevertheless, failed and the Macedonian consciousness "remained fixed for decades on Bulgaria"[15].

However, the regional situation changed soon when, with the Balkan Wars (1912-13), the geographical area of Macedonia was partitioned into three areas of influence - respectively called Aegean Macedonia under Greece, Pirin Macedonia under Bulgaria, and Vardar Macedonian under Serbia. In 1918, under the rule of king Karađorđević, the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes was established and, from 1929, the Kingdom became a royal dictatorship under the name of Yugoslavia - which forced upon the other nations the Yugoslav Unity[16].

For what concerns the Macedonian territory, the *Vardarska Banovina* (District of Vardar) remained under the Serbian domination until 1941; the population was target of a Serbianization process aimed to promptly dissolve any Bulgarian affiliation and association[17] and the region referred to as "Southern Serbia". Generalized discontent led to welcoming the Bulgarian occupying forces (1941), but the same process of Bulgarization and national homogenization occurred.

In the course of the Second World War, then, the Communist gradually attracted the Macedonians and, after having gained control over Vardar Macedonia, they set up the People's Republic of Macedonia – appeasing neighbouring's claims on Macedonian territory and people, and widely contributing to define what has then become the Macedonian nation.

The "New Macedonian Question"

On the symbolic day of 2 August 1944 – also known as "Second Ilinden" -, the first ASNOM[18] Assembly proclaimed the Macedonians constituent nation of the People's Republic of Macedonia (then Socialist Republic of Macedonia) – now a federal unit within the Socialist Federal Republic of

Yugoslavia (SFRY), together with the Republics of Serbia, Croatia, Slovenia, Bosnia Herzegovina and Montenegro.

What Pettifer[19] has defined as the "new Macedonian question" refers, in fact, to the post-1944 period, when the People's Republic of Macedonia was established and the Macedonian nation politically recognised. In the Yugoslav decades, efforts in building the Macedonian nation were substantial and, in Troebst[20] view, "the Macedonian case had been an exception in Yugoslavia, as Macedonia was the only federal republic where the Yugoslav aspects of nation-building were less intense than the Macedon".

One of the most important steps in the Macedonian nation building was the standardization of the language and the writing of national history: as Vangeli[21] explains, among the narratives promoted there was also the idea of ancient Macedonian nationhood which, however, had a considerably lower place in the hierarchy of myths and was mostly "instrumentalized in the disputes with Bulgarian historiography and also as a protection from the nationalist discourse […] based on the idea of 'returning the Bulgarian consciousness' of Macedonians". Therefore, although many Macedonians still considered themselves as Bulgarians[22], the Yugoslav authorities promoted and consolidated the Macedonian national identity, progressively eradicating pro-Bulgarian feelings. However, as Barkers specifies, "the feeling of being Macedonians, and nothing but Macedonians, seems to be a sentiment of fairly recent growth, and even today is not very deep-rooted"[23]. Another important aspect of the Macedonian nation building undertaken by the Yugoslav authorities was the establishment of the autocephalous Macedonians Orthodox Church in 1967[24], separated from the Serbian one.

However, the reason why the Yugoslav decades marked what has been defined as a "new Macedonian question" is that the identity's trouble face by the Macedonians did not finish - although officially recognized as a distinct nation. The Macedonian language, although standardized and proclaimed official, was not recognised by Bulgaria, which considered it as a Bulgarian dialect; the autocephalous Macedonian Orthodox Church was not recognised by the Serbian Orthodox Church, even though relations between the two have remained quite peaceful. Greece, finally, continued to consider the Macedonian population as "Slavophone Greek – that is, Slav-speaking but Greek in terms of subjective national identification"[25].

After Yugoslavia fell apart, the Macedonia's independence re-opened the Macedonian question, posing new difficulties for the Macedonian nation in both affirming itself and achieving international recognition. Both Greece and Bulgaria, in fact, agreed that the Macedonian nation was and is a Tito's invention, a "state-sponsored ethnogenesis"[26]. Greece denied Macedonian nationhood since "the existence of Macedonia as a part of Greece has a fundamental place in the Greek political psyche"[27] while Bulgaria, instead, although recognised the country's independence, appealed the Bulgarians in Macedonia "denying the whole concept of a Macedonian nation and stressing the Bulgarian nature of all Macedonians in Yugoslavia and Greece as well as Bulgaria"[28].

The official Macedonian version is that the geographical area of Macedonia is homeland of the Macedonian people – which are neither Bulgarians nor Greeks.

The dispute with Greece

When the former Yugoslav unit declared independence in 1991, it adopted the name "Republic of Macedonia". The use of the word "Macedonia", however, provoked the strong disagreement of Greece, which claimed property over the term and "suggested" the new-born republic to change its official name, hence conditioning its recognition to the name issue. Therefore, the debate began.

The dispute with Greece, also known as "the name dispute", has a central importance in understanding the recent urban renovation of Skopje and the changing of national narratives entailing the Macedonians' origins and roots. Therefore, this section will try to disentangle the debate between Greece and Macedonia over "(ancient) Macedonia", analysing meanings and narratives attached and conveyed by both sides.

The debate between Macedonia and Greece may be defined, in few words, as a nationalist debate over who is able to demonstrate "the longer historical presence in Macedonia"[29], hence, who is entitled to claim property over ancient Macedonia.

The Greek narrative on the issue is that the term "Macedonia" is fundamental part of the Greek history and national identity and that no one else can use it or claim property over it. Accordingly, ancient Macedonians were Greeks and, on the basis of a continuity tie between ancient and modern Greece, it follows that Macedonia and Macedonians are Greeks and only Greeks have right to identify themselves as Macedonians. A separate Macedonian nation does not exist - it was a Tito's ethnogenesis; and a Macedonian state cannot exist as well, since the only existing Macedonia is a region in northern Greece. Consequently, when the former Yugoslav republic declared independence adopting the name "Republic of Macedonia", Greece strongly opposed the use of the term by a group of "Slavs of southern Yugoslavia, who settled in Macedonia in the sixth century AD and who called themselves 'Bulgarians' until 1944"[30].

On the other side, Macedonians inhabiting the current Republic of Macedonia also claim a direct descent from the ancient Macedonians, hence the right to use the infamous term. Although, as Roudometof[31] clearly stated, "the ancient Macedonians do not bear any genealogical connection to modern-day Macedonians", that national narrative "provides the single most important component that has historically differentiated them from Bulgarians"[32]. Against Bulgarian and Greek claims, today's Macedonians assert to be a separate and distinct nation, with its own heroes and myths, language and identity. Moreover, as Nancheva[33] explains, the Macedonian people "could effectively declare their own identity only by the name of their land", hence the territory and its name acquired a central position in national narratives, becoming non negotiable. Extreme Macedonian nationalists, however, even deny their Slavic origins, claiming to be direct descendants from Alexander the Great.

Therefore, in both Greece and Macedonia's national narratives the term "Macedonia" – and all what it symbolizes - occupies a key place; and, in one case the usage by another state, while in the other its contestation, are felt as threats to their modern national identities.

Another issue connected to the Greece-Macedonia dispute and the symbolical importance of the "ancient Macedonia" was the flag's design adopted by the Republic of Macedonia at the time of independence: the Sun of Vergina.

The Sun of Vergina was an artefact discovered in 1978, in a royal tomb, during archaeological

excavations in Greek Macedonia, close to the city of Thessaloniki. Since then, both contemporary Macedonians and Greeks are claiming property over the symbol emphasising their tie with, and the historical legacy of, the Ancient Macedonians. The dispute over the symbol reached its peak in 1992 when the Sun of Vergina was officially displayed on the flag of the Republic of Macedonia. Not surprisingly, the Greek government "expressed outrage at what it considered to be the misappropriation of a symbol of Macedonian Hellenism by a group of Slavs"[34]. Although Macedonia then changed the flag's design adopting a new one, it did not change the state's name.

Finally, the debate between Greece and Macedonia also concerns the presence of ethnic Macedonian minorities in Greece: the Greek government had for long denied the existence of Macedonian minorities in Greece [35], stating there are only some Slavic-speaking groups which however are nationally Greeks – since, according to them, a Macedonian nation doesn't exist. However, particularly in the beginning of the 1990s, tension between Greece and Macedonia was high and demonstrations in favour of right's protection of the Macedonian minority in Greece (but in Bulgaria too) took place in Skopje. The Greeks replied writing on the Yugoslav Embassy's wall in Athens "Macedonia is Greek" or "Gypsys of Skopje get out of Greece"[36], and Macedonians answered with slogans such as "Solon [the Greek city of Thessaloniki] is ours"[37].

In 1993, with international mediation, the acronym FYROM - Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia was proposed to end the "name dispute" and the following international recognition of the new state was interpreted by Greece as a political defeat. The following year, Greece imposed an embargo on Macedonia, which lasted until 1995. Greece also vetoed Macedonia's accession to European Union (EU) and North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO).

The dispute over the name, that actually is a dispute over alleged same cultural roots of two different nations, still has to be solved. All the national narratives involved, fundamental in building group solidarity, loyalty and identity, remain questioned by both sides and are not going to be changed neither by Greece nor by Macedonia.

(Re)Building the Macedonian national identity

The historical contextualization provided by the previous sections was aimed to shed light on the constructed nature of nations and national identities, and the debate between Greece and Macedonia provides an interesting example of how national narratives and interactions between different groups shape those collectivities. Accordingly, form a national narrative's perspective, the political debate over the name issue is essentially a debate in which colliding nationalist standpoints over the same territory, symbols and the meanings attached and conveyed, clash posing a threat for both sides' national identities. It's a dispute over ownership of traditions and culture, where the selective re-interpretation of the history is aimed to strength the national "we-feeling".

The political use of history for national(ist) purposes offers a clear evidence not only of the constructed nature of nations and respective identities, but also of the power of nationalism in projecting nations "far back into the past and treating them as eternal"[38]. What is at the center of the Greece-Macedonia debate is essentially the cultural content of the nation, which consequently mark the boundary between

"who we are and who are you", who's the real ancient Macedonian and who's the "trickster".

Fredrik Barth[39] is probably the scholar who focused more on the boundaries-making process and its connection with the process of identity formation: according to his pioneering work, indeed, we know that boundaries as well as identities are formed, and constantly shaped, by social interactions and negotiations between groups and individuals. However, the scholar was convinced the cultural content of the group was not crucial in defining the group's boundary. More recent studies, like the ones of Conversi[40] or Wimmer[41], show instead that the cultural content of the group actually matters and features like language, symbols or traditions function as markers aimed to characterise collective identities and define the respective boundaries, hence making the group distinct and unique.

This is particularly evident in the Macedonian case here analysed, where not only the historical past, but also language and symbols have for long constitute a bone of contention, threatening the Macedonian nation's existence. Therefore, the putative nation imagined by Macedonian nationalist is a great nation whose uniqueness is incontestable and genealogical ties, providing continuity, are meant to assure today's Macedonians the same status. Myths and symbols[42], together with public ceremonies and political speeches which over-emphasize the cultural and historical content of the nation, serve "to change the world, to change the way people see themselves"[43]; in this way, national narratives about origins and roots of the nation provide its members with the emotions needed to develop the shared conviction of being part of the same glorious "family"[44], whose members are allegedly bond together by common ancestries.

The role played by nationalism in the nation-building process is thus essential: nations are ideological creation whose existence is tied to a doctrine shared by the majority – nationalism[45]. Nationalism is the glue able to develop group solidarity and political legitimacy, and it transcends the administrative boundaries of a state reaching all the nations' members: this also explains the role played by the Macedonian and Greek diasporas[46] in the 1990s, where manifestation in Australia, Canada and elsewhere where held in favour, or against, the recognition of the Republic of Macedonia and where symbols as the Sun of Vergina or Alexander the Great were widely used and displayed by both. This because the nation is understood as a super-family[47] and, thanks to powerful state-sponsored political propagandas, the idea of common descent and blood-ties penetrates the micro-world reaching also "brothers and sisters" abroad.

However, besides strengthening group solidarity, another main nationalism's function is connected to political legitimacy – without which a nation can barely exist and survive. This, again, is evident in the Macedonian nation's case, where the constant menaces coming from the neighbouring states in a way "obliged" the Macedonian nation "to prove" its distinctiveness in order to gain political legitimacy – not only domestically, creating a sense of common origin, but also and specially internationally. Any contestation in matter of national distinctiveness and uniqueness is, in fact, seen ad perceived as a threat to the very existence of the nation as a separate group. This is what the Macedonian nation experienced – firstly considered part of Bulgaria, Greece and Serbia and then a mere Tito's invention.

Hence, once gained independence in 1991 (and for the first time in its history), Macedonia used nationalism to domestically and internationally prove its distinctiveness and uniqueness as a nation by establishing an ethnic nation-state grounded on a glorious past. Therefore, the recent emphasis put on

the ancient Macedonian past, epitomized by the implementation of the project "Skopje 2014", may be seen as a nationalist reaction to nationalist contestations and perceived injustices – which didn't begin in the 1990s but far back in the past, and re-became actual with Macedonia's declaration of independence.

The recent "antiquization"[48] of Macedonia has, thus, to be read in this turbulent context.

"Skopje 2014": the project

As previously mentioned, "Skopje 2014" is a urban project inaugurated and planned by the Macedonian national party VMRO-DPMNE led by Nikola Gruevski, and implemented since 2010.

The realization of the project included the construction of new buildings in neo-baroque and neo-classical style and, among those, a new national theatre, government buildings, a triumphal arch called "Porta Makedonia" as well as churches, museums, bridges, hotels and tens of bronze and marble statues portraying historical figures from the past – which, overall, are obscuring the Socialist and Ottoman architecture.

Alongside ancient Macedonian figures - as Alexander the Great, his father Philip II and his mother Olympia - also other historical figures and heroes belonging to Macedonia's past have found their place in Skopje – as, for instance, Goce Delchev and Dame Gruev, protagonist of the Ilinden Uprising in 1903; or the brothers Kiril and Methodius, the "apostles of the Slavs", which contributed to the spread of Orthodoxy by inventing, and then translating the Bible, in Cyrillic alphabet[49]. Beside new constructions, also the re-naming of streets and other places after the names of ancient Macedonians figures took place: for example, the Macedonian highway has been renamed after Alexander the Great, as well as the airport of the capital city Skopje, while Skopje's stadium has been renamed after Alexander's father, Philip II.

Overall, the projected resulted quite controvert and arouse some critiques and opposition for different reasons. According to many of its inhabitants, for example, Skopje has become "unrecognizable"[50], and the new architectural style adopted and the significant number of statues and monuments built are compromising and changing the "City of International Solidarity"[51].

However, beside the urban aspect of the city and looking beyond the mere surface of the new constructions, these historical representations stand at the centre, and want to convey, a precise national narrative. Therefore, we could say these monuments and buildings are changing not only the exterior aspect of the capital city Skopje, but also the national narratives connected to the Macedonian nation itself.

The project "Skopje 2014" is indeed highly tied to narratives aimed to stress and prove the alleged ancient Macedonian past of today's Macedonians and their direct descent from Alexander the Great and his great empire. By "adopting the ultranationalist obsession with Ancient Macedonia of Antiquity" - as Saveski and Sadiku[52] said – the project realized by the national party VMRO-DPMNE, thus, fostered what has been defined the "antiquization"[53] of Macedonia.

Antiquization is, indeed, a term used to describe the state-led ethnogenesis Macedonia and Skopje in

particular are going through, which is not only based on "ancient architecture" but also on the spread of a particular "ancient national narrative". Antiquization, thus, is grounded on an ethnocentric and biased version of the history, in which a new national narrative is conveyed particularly by means of architecture.

Especially the figure of Alexander the Great - by both Greece and Macedonia considered a national ancestor, symbol of their nations' greatness and central into their national narratives – occupies a key position (although its official relevance in the Macedonian national discourse has increased only recently, with the coming to power of VMRO-DPMNE). The epitome of the antiquization of Skopje, in fact, may be considered a 22 meters-tall statue of Alexander the Great erected in the middle of the central square of Skopje. Nonetheless, in a few meters of distance, stand in all their grandeur also a fountain representing Alexander's mother, Olympia, and another representing his father, Philip II.

"Skopje 2014": Beyond the statues

In the context of contested identity and denied nation's existence, the project "Skopje 2014" seems to be strictly connected to the dispute with Greece over the ancient Macedonian past.

The over-emphasis posed by modern Macedonians over their alleged ancient Macedonians roots and the over-use of ancient Macedonians symbols may, indeed, be looked as part of the still on-going debate between the two countries. Architecture serves thus to make visible, above all to Greece, who's the *real* descendent of ancient Macedonians but, more generally, it also answers the psychological need of being internationally recognized as a distinct and unique nation – precisely, a great nation coming from great ancestors.

However, the urban renovation of Skopje may also be looked and understood from other perspectives that, in turn, may reveal the presence of other narratives and interpretations. Graan, for example, sees the project from a city's image perspective and considers it as part of a process defined "nation branding" consisting in "strategic efforts to formulate national identity as a branded commodity"[54] and aimed to give a new, "more European" image to the country and its capital city, making it more attractive to tourists and outsiders. The scholar looks at the massive constructions as a political campaign entailing the organization of events aimed to promote the image of Macedonia abroad and attract foreigners investors as well as tourists - rather than a pure construction project. He also explains that the "cultivation of the country's image was thus viewed as a prime way for Macedonians to influence the otherwise unresponsive political and economic processes that were understood to determine the country's future"[55].

Partly inter-connected, another possible perspective to look at the nation's antiquization is related to the metaphorical meaning conveyed by the figure of Alexander the Great – a strong leader able to overcome any difficulty and obstacle. Its myth, thus, "was meant to be an answer to apathy and the disappointment that transition inflicted upon the citizens"[56]. More precisely, since the transition from one regime to another was accompanied by economic deficiencies, unsuccessful democracy's consolidation[57] and, above all, a new wave of identity's contestations, the over-emphasis posed on the alleged ancient roots of the Macedonian nation may be seen as a "national compensation for

backwardness"[58], as Vangeli argued. National narratives of direct descent from antique and great ancestors, thus, help smothering frustrations coming from different fields, ranging from economy to political changes, from domestic tensions to identity's contestation. Hence, the narrative conveyed is aimed to foster a sense of grandeur and pride among the ethnic Macedonians, who are in fact increasingly convening that Alexander the Great is their most important historical figure[59] and which, overall, "take comfort from the idea that they are the descendants of a glorious world"[60]

Finally, another interesting interpretation focuses the attention on domestic inter-group relations. The project "Skopje 2014" is, not by chance, concentrated in the Macedonian part of Skopje[61] and monuments depicting Albanian or Muslim historical figures haven't been included in the project. Furthermore, the strategic positioning of some of the monuments appears "as a provocation of the predominantly Muslim Albanian community"[62] and the Ottoman heritage has been obscured. Thus, the renovation of Skopje was meant to be a mono-ethnic project, dealing only with the ethnic Macedonian culture and past. Without taking into consideration the other groups living in the multiethnic state, hence, Macedonians tried to strength their ethno-national identity and their status as dominant group, implicitly reiterating the ethnic nation-state rhetoric present since the independence[63].

Finally, next to interpretations focused on the psychological-identity character of the project, other opinions and interpretations focus the attention on its political and economic character. Accordingly, in the light of the poor economic performances of the country, the implementation of "Skopje 2014" appears financially unfeasible: the estimated expense was, in fact, between 80 to 200 million of euros[64] and it seems that "enormous amounts of public money ended up in the hands of several companies"[65]. A common opinion among the project's opponents is that "Skopje 2014", ideated and implemented by the Macedonian national party VMRO-DPMNE, actually served the interests of a circumscribed elite tied to the party, and the emphasis on Macedonians' ancient roots and glorious past was only a façade to cover and shift people's attention from some major, totally different, interests[66].

However, what is undeniable is that "Skopje 2014" has drastically changed the face of its capital city but, first and foremost, it's also responsible for a national narratives' change - grounded on a direct link between ancient and modern Macedonians and denial the Slavic origin of the Macedonian nation.

Conclusion

The paper tried to analyse how the urban renovation of Skopje happened with the implementation of the project "Skopje 2014" has gradually shaped, and changed, not only the identity of Skopje but the one of the Macedonian nation more generally, producing new national narratives.

The importance in analysing what seemed to be a simple urban renovation lays, therefore, in a devious identity politics whose narrative is emphasizing a direct descent of the today's Macedonian people from Alexander the Great and the ancient Macedonians. However, as shown, different are the possible reasons and motivation behind this "making Macedonia great again" and they rang from a serious identity crisis to a dispute with Greece, from domestic inter-ethnic relations to more economical and political reasons.

Nevertheless, the historical identity's frustrations the Macedonian people experienced, and are still experiencing, have had a considerable weight that cannot be underestimated. The identity troubles and contestations faced by the inhabitant of the geographic area called Macedonia have shaped the Macedonians' nation building process, and the over-emphasis posed on alleged ancient glorious roots has to be seen as a response to this constant denial. It has to be reminded that, until before Yugoslavia, the term Macedonia had a regional/geographic connotation and it was only under Tito's Yugoslavia that the Macedonians' national identity gain considerable strength. This, however, does not mean Tito invented the Macedonian nation, nor that this national identity was imposed upon people against their will. However, as widely explained, Macedonians are still not considered a separate and distinct nation by neither Greece nor Bulgaria, and both states have historically contested some of the Macedonian nation's constitutive elements – as language, territory, symbols and so on. Therefore, the recent ethnogenesis, undertaken by means of misused historical facts and myths for political purposes, has provided a contested nation with its own national heroes, monuments, and other alleged evidences of a glorious past.

The Macedonian question is thus a paradigmatic example of how political discourses, disputes and interests may give birth, shape and re-shape national identities, changing them over time by producing new national memories based on narratives that tie the nation's territory to historical facts. As Roudometof[67] argued:

[…] the maintenance of national narrative and its grip on popular imagination rests on its successful transmission to future generations. This transmission is accomplished through public oratories in national commemorations, school textbooks, and the media reproducing popular orthodox views in everyday life. These institutions have the ability to shape public perception even in cases where their proclaimed past lacks any connection to real historical events.

The production of national narratives is therefore a clear political activity undertaken by ethnonational entrepreneurs and the dispute happening between Macedonia and Greece perfectly symbolizes the constructed and negotiated character of national identities: the dispute is, indeed, a clash of two colliding nationalist versions of the history in which culture and myths are instrumentalized in order to forge and strength their respective nations and national identities.

Concluding, this "making Macedonia great again" by means of architecture, selective re-reading and re-writing of the history undertaken by the Macedonian government particularly since 2010, has to be seen and understood in the light of the centuries-old national identity's contestation, in which the Greece-Macedonia debate represents only the last drop. Therefore, the emphasis on the ancient and glorious roots serves to answer the psychological, human need of being part of a "imagined community"[68]. As once Gellner[69] said, "a man must have a nationality as he must have a nose and two ears; a deficiency in any of these particulars is not inconceivable and does from time to time occur, but only as a result of some disaster, and it is itself a disaster of a kind".

Endnotes

[1] Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization – Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (Macedonian*: Внатрешна македонска револуционерна организација – Демократска партија за македонско национално единство*);

[2] Although the official name of the state is Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM), in this work I'm going to refer to it simply as "Republic of Macedonia" or "Macedonia";

[3] Hugh Puolton, *Who are the Macedonians?* (London: C. Hurst & Co, 2000)

[4] Victor Roudometof, *Collective Memory, National Identity, and Ethnic Conflict. Greece, Bulgaria and the Macedonian Question* (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 2002)

[5] Poutlon, *Who are the Macedonians?*

[6] Poulton, *Who are the Macedonians?,* 36

[7] Sabrina P. Ramet, *Thinking about Yugoslavia. Scholarly Debates about the Yugoslav Breakup and the Wars in Bosnia and Kosovo* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005)

[8] Roudometof, *Collective Memory*, 84

[9] *Ibid.*

[10] Demetrius Andreas Floudas, "FYROM's Dispute with Greece Revisited", *The New Balkans, East European monographs* (Columbia: Columbia University Press, 2002)

[11] Ramet, *Thinking about Yugoslavia*

[12] Roudometof, Collective Memory

[13] Ivo Banac, *The national question in Yugoslavia: origins, history, politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), 326

[14] *ibidem*: 315

[15] Jens Reuter, "Policy and economy in Macedonia" in *The New Macedonian Question*, ed. James Pettifer, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1999), 29

[16] Soeren Keil, *Multinational Federalism in Bosnia and Herzegovina* (Aldridge: Ashgate, 2013), 64

[17] Rudometof, *Collective Memory*

[18] Anti-fascist Assembly for the National Liberation of Macedonia (Антифашистичко Собрание за Народно Ослободување на Македонија)

[19] James Pettifer, *The New Macedonian Questio*N (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1999)

[20] Stefan Trobest, "Historical Politics and Histrocial 'Masterpieces' in Macedonia before and after 1991", *New Balkan Politics,* 6 (2003)

[21] Anastas Vangeli, "Nation-building ancient Macedonia style: the origins ad the effects of the so-called antiquization in Macedonia", Nationalities Papers, 39, 1, (2011): 16

[22] Sabrina P. Ramet *et al*, *Civic and Uncivic Values in Macedonia. Values Transformation, Education and Media*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013)

[23] Elisabeth Barker, "The origin of the Macedonian dispute" in *The New Macedonian Question*, ed. James Pettifer, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1999), 5

[24] Zachary T. Irwin, "Macedonia since 1989" in *Central and Southeast European Politics since 1989*, ed. Sabrina P. Ramet, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010)

[25] *ibidem*, 62

[26] Roudometof, *Collective Memory*, 41

[27] Pettifer, *The new Macedonian Question*, 18

[28] Poulton, *Who are the Macedonians?*, 174

[29] Loring M. Danforth, "Ancient Macedonia, Alexander the Great and the Star or Sun of Vergina: National Symbols and the Conflict between Greece and the Republic of Macedonia" in *A Companion to Ancient Macedonia*, ed. Joseph Roisman, Ian Worthington (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 579

[30] Loring M. Danforth, "Claims to Macedonian Identity: The Macedonian Question and the Breakup of Yugoslavia", *Anthropology Today*, 9,4 (1993): 4

[31] Roudometof, *Collective Memory*, 12

[32] *ibidem*, 75

[33] Nevena Nancheva, *Between Nationalism and Europeanisation. Narratives of National Identity in Bulgaria and Macedonia* (ECPR Press, 2015)

[34] Danforth, *Ancient Macedonia*, 588

[35] Danforth, *Claims to Macedonian Identity*

[36] Poulton, *Who are the Macedonians?,* 170

[37] Roudometof, *Collective Memory*, 63

[38] Danforth, *Claims to Macedonian Identity*, 2

[39] Fredrik Barth, *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Culture Differences*, (Boston: Little, Brown, 1969)

[40] Daniele Conversi, "Reassessing current theories of Nationalism: nationalism as boundaries maintenance and creation", *Nationalism & Ethnic Politics*, 1,1 (1995): 73-85; Daniele Conversi, "Nationalism, Boundaries and Violence", *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 28,3 (1999): 535-84

[41] Andreas Wimmer, "Elementary strategies of ethnic boundary making", *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 30, 6 (2008): 1025-55; Andreas Wimmer, "The making and unmaking of ethnic boundaries: a multilevel process theory", *American Journal of Sociology*, 113,4 (2008): 970-1022

[42] Anthony Smith, *Ethno-symbolism and Nationalism. A Cultural Approach* (London: Routledge, 2009)

[43] Roger Brubaker, "In the name of the Nation: Reflections on Nationalism and Patriotism", *Citizenship Studies,* 8,2 (2004): 116

[44] Dino Abazović, Mitja Velikonja, *Post-Yugoslavia. New Cultural and Political Perspectives* (London: Palgrave, 2014); Siniša Malešević, *Nation-States and Nationalisms* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013)

[45] Malešević, *Nation-States*, 74

[46] Danforth, *Claims to Macedonian Identity*

[47] *ibidem*, 84

[48] Vangeli, *Nation-buildin*

[49] Michael Kubiena, "Skopje 2014 – Musealizing the City, Re-inventing History?" *The Western Balkans Policy Review*, 2,1 (2012): 78-99

[50] Graan, *Counterfeiting the Nation*

[51] In July 1963, a violent earthquake almost completely destroyed the city of Skopje, which was then rebuilt with then help of countries from all around the world. Because of that act of solidarity, Skopje gained the nickname of "City of International Solidarity"

[52] Zdravko Saveski, Artan Sadiku, *The Radical Right in Macedonia* (Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2012), 4

[53] Vangeli, *Nation-building*

[54] Andrew Graan, "Counterfeiting the Nation? Skopje 2014 and the Politics of Nation Branding in Macedonia", *Cultural Anthropology*, 28,1 (2013): 165

[55] *ibidem*, 168

[56] Nenad Markovikj, "The Inability to Change: Dogmatic Aspects of Political Ideology in the Macedonian Context" in *A Life for Tomorrow. Social Transformations in South-East Europe*, eds. Predrag *et al*., (Skopje:

Institute for Democracy "Societas Civilis", 2015), 144

[57] "Nations in transit". Macedonia Country Report (Freedom House, 2016). Accessed December 24, 2016. https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/NiT2016_Macedonia.pdf

[58] see: Peter Hanak, "A National Compensation for Backwordness", (paper presented at the annual colloquium series: Nationalism, Nation-State and, California, UCLA, February 10, 1992); Vangeli, *Nation-building*

[59] Markovikj, *The Inability to Change*, 144

[60] Vangeli, *Nation-building*, 22

[61] The river Vardar divides Skopje into two sides, one mostly inhabited by ethnic Macedonians, and one by ethnic Albanians;

[62] Kubiena, *Skopje 2014*, 90

[63] When, in 1991, Macedonia declared independence, it established that new state as a (ethnic) nation state, declassing the ethnic Albanians to a minority status. The ethnic Albanian discomfort grew consistently, and inter-ethnic tensions culminated in a short conflict in 2001;

[64] Jasna Koteska, "Troubles with History: Skopje 2014," *Art Margins [Online],* December 29, 2011. Accessed December 24, 2016. http://www.artmargins.com/index.php/2-articles/655-troubles-with-history-skopje-2014

[65] Jordan Shishovski *et al*, *Check and Balances in the Republic of Macedonia. How to make them work*?, (Skopje: EPI Working Papers, 2016), 5

[66] Empirical data have been collected through qualitative interviews, performed in Skopje from February 2016 to July 2016;

[67] Roudometof, Collecti*ve Memory*, 13

[68] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined communities. Reflections of the origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983)

[69] Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983), 6

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Arianna Piacentini is a PhD candidate in Sociology and Methodology of Social Research at the University of Milan, Italy.

Her research project deals with post-Yugoslav and ethnically divided societies, namely Bosnia Herzegovina and Macedonia, and concerns the process of national identity formation seen from an inter-generational perspective; thus, she's looking at the interconnections between Yugoslav and post-Yugoslav systems, narratives and generations, with a focus on the family as unit of analysis.

Since 2013, Arianna Piacentini is studying and researching post-Yugoslav and post-conflict divided societies: she lived in Sarajevo, were she studied the generation born during the war and the influence of nationalism in the ethnic boundaries-making process; she was also interested in the Bošnjak identity and Islamic religion in the Balkans, therefore she got a Diploma in Islamic Studies at the University of Sarajevo.

Since beginning of 2016 she's Visiting PhD student at the Ss. Cyril and Methodius University of Skopje, where she's finishing her PhD research.