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SKOPJE 2014: DISNEYFICATION OF A CITY OR POWERFUL TOOL IN THE HANDS OF THE COMPETITIVE AUTHORITARIAN REGIME IN MACEDONIA?[1]

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Abstract

The paper focuses on research on the political decision-making process in the Skopje 2014 project. It describes the procedure for execution of the project from the aspect of transparency and involvement of different segments of Macedonian society based on journalistic article analysis. Thematic analysis was used as the method to accomplish the research. The analysis of the articles shows the undemocratic way of making decisions about the future urban landscape of the capital. In this case, the Disneyfication of the Skopje city centre was only used as a tool for the construction of a competitive authoritarian regime.

Keywords

Skopje 2014 • media content analysis • thematic analysis • urban planning documentation • decision-making process • rule of law • transparency • Macedonia[2]

1. Introduction

Two and a half decades after the fall of communism, the periphery of Europe has seen another gigantic project that revamped the capital of one country. One hundred and thirty-seven amazing structures, including twenty-eight new buildings and five new squares, were constructed as part of the Skopje 2014 project in the Skopje city centre in the period between 2006 and 2017. The Macedonian government, together with the local municipalities, spent more than €683.000.000 on all construction sites in the very centre of the Macedonian capital (Skopje 2014 pod lupa 2017; Jordanovska 2015a). As a government and municipality-led project, Skopje 2014 was revealed at a press conference organised in a hotel on 4 February 2010 by the Mayor of Skopje, Koce Trajanovski, the Mayor of the Municipality of Centar, Vladimir Todorovic, and the former Minister of Culture, Elizabeta Kanceska-Milevska (Nova Makedonija 2010). All of them were the closest allies of Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski, who led the ruling nationalist VMRO-DPMNE political party. The revisionist agenda of rewriting and politicization of Macedonian history was initiated after Gruevski came to power in 2006 (Reef 2018). The government-sponsored urban renewal project Skopje 2014 changed the city radically, in order to foster a new historic narrative based on the idea of ethnic continuity since the times of Ancient Macedonians, and to give the capital the style of a "European metropolis' (Skoulariki 2020). The VMRO-DPMNE political party used the public space of locations in the Skopje city centre unfinished in the process of post-earthquake reconstruction after the 1963 earthquake that hit the city. The process of the post-earthquake renewal of Skopje lasted until the early 1980s, when all the funds had been exhausted and Yugoslavia fell into the deep economic crises of the 1980s (Ivanovska Deskova, Deskov and Ivanovski 2020, 123).

The case of Nikola Gruevski's government, when politicians were playing the game of architects or urbanists of the capital, is not something unfamiliar. One should not forget

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2 Since 12 February 2019, Macedonia's new official name is Republic of North Macedonia. Taking into account the fact that this paper covers the period before 2017, the author uses the name "Macedonia" for the country which at that period of time was internationally recognised as "Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia". An exception is made only for those publications in the paper where the current situation in the country is treated and the new name of the country is used.

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that architecture in the hands of politicians has been used many times in recent history. It is known that architecture is deeply embedded within economic and other structures of power (Leach 1999). Aman Anders would add that it is not the question of whether but how architecture depends on ideology (Anders 1992, 259). If architecture depends on ideology as a means of obtaining or demonstrating more power, then it becomes a tool in the hands of non-democratic politicians, which was the case with Socialist Realism in the former Eastern Bloc countries. 'Therefore, metaphorically speaking, architecture and urban planning were to become instruments in the political reconstruction of the Soviet Union and Germany, a pattern that was to be repeated many years later in Romania (Bucharest)' (Dimitrovska 2005, 158). Harald Bodenschatz, in his paper 'Urbanism and Dictatorship: Expanding Spaces for Thought!', wrote that for dictatorships, the widespread approval of large design projects was an overarching goal. 'Architecture and urban design were not only a means to demonstrate power, but also to fascinate, inspire, and build consensus' (Bodenschatz 2014, 23). It is interesting to mention that almost all dictators have used architecture as an instrument at the peak of non-democratic rule. According to Spiegel, fascist urbanism can be divided into three phases, and Mussolini's dreams for monumental projects came in the last phase of his rule (Spiegel 2014). The Soviet variety of totalitarianism spent many years ripening before reaching its apogee (Kolakowski 2011). By the middle of the 1930s, Stalin had effectively consolidated his power and a few years later he became the 'ultimate centre of all power' (Weeks, 2014). Only in that period was he able to effectively execute the proposed Socialist Realism in the landscape of Moscow (Bodenschatz and Flierl 2014). In the Eastern European countries, Socialist Realism was imposed only after the communists cleared all the important opponents of their rule. In Poland it was 1948, when the last opponents of communists were eliminated (Paczkowski 1999; Lebow 2013). In Romania, the purges of the 1950s and the harsh repression came after the elimination of the last powerful opponent. 'On December 30th 1947, even the form of government changed. King Michael was forced to abdicate and go into exile' (Dobre 2015, 20). Both in Poland and Romania, Socialist Realist architecture appeared in the capital cities at the peak of the Stalinist rule at the end of the 1940s and the first half of the 1950s of the twentieth century. Even later, the revamp of Bucharest in the 1980s was possible only after the communist regime entered its nationalist phase, the cult of personality was established and repressive methods for clearance of dissidence were reestablished (Dobre 2015). The correlation between consolidated non-democratic rule and the imposing of classicist monumentalism is evident even among the dictators of the twenty-first century from Central Asia. Among them is the former President of Kazakhstan Nursultan Nazarbayev, who announced his intention to move the capital from Almaty to Astana on 10 December 1997. 'The urbanization as an important component of Kazakhs' nation-building policies became a unique driving force in establishing national identity' (Mkrtchyan 2013, 232). But, even in the case of Kazakhstan, it took a couple of years for consolidation of the non-democratic regime before the ruler began to 'dig' in architecture for legitimization of his rule.

The main inspiration for this paper originates precisely from this history of previous non-democratic regimes. Previous experience shows that it is necessary to first clear the social scene of all possible critics of the ruling regime in order for the ruler to impose large architectural projects in the capital. This was not the case with the Skopje 2014 project. The revamp of the Macedonian capital began in the late 2000s. Contemporary antiquisation in the case of Macedonia has been revived as an efficient tool for political mobilization, which reinforced the political primacy of its promoters (Vangeli 2011). 'Macedonia had democratized by the late 2000s, due in large part to intense Western engagement' (Levitsky and Way 2010, 124). However, the democratic transition in Macedonia was much more insecure compared to the other Southeast European countries. As a young nation formed in the twentieth century, the Republic of Macedonia in 1991 for the first time in its history worked for an independent status and a path toward democracy. 'Like Albania, Macedonia was an unlikely democratizer. It was the poorest and most closed of the Yugoslav republics, with virtually no active dissident movement and a weak post-communist civil society" (Levitsky and Way 2010, 124). Some scholars would make even more negative conclusions. Six of twenty-nine post-communist states (Albania, Armenia, Georgia, Macedonia, Moldova, and Ukraine) have an unbroken record as hybrid regimes throughout the entire period of their existence (Berglund and Ekman 2013). The real attempt towards democratic transition emerged with the chance for European and Euro-Atlantic integration of the country towards the end of the 2000s. However, the new government under the rule of Nikola Gruevski made a reversible turn after he came to power in 2006 (Bieber 2018). According to Freedom House, the freedom rating of Macedonia after the one-decade governance of Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski dropped to 3.5 in 2017 (Freedom House 2017a). As reported by 'Freedom in the Press 2016', Freedom House ranked Macedonia as a 'not free country' (Freedom House 2017b). Reporters Without Borders in 2017 ranked Macedonia in the 111th position, in the group of countries where press freedom is limited, together with Bulgaria, Turkey, Belarus, and Russia (Reporters Without Borders 2017). Instead of a consolidated democracy, or at least a transitional democracy (Linz and Stepan 1996), Macedonia was once again ranked among countries with competitive authoritarian regimes. The decade of VMRO-DPMNE rule in

Macedonia is characterized by conservative and nationalist policies, which became particularly pronounced following Macedonia's failure to join NATO in 2008 (Vangeli 2011; Bieber 2018).

This short explanation of the Macedonian transition should emphasise the main research goal of this paper – How did different segments of the Macedonian society participate within the political decision-making process about the Skopje 2014 project? This is still a question inadequately answered by scholars. In the case of Macedonia, the link between architecture and politics is crucial when discussing the failure of democratic transition in the country during the period of rule of Nikola Gruevski. After Gruevski fell from power, the new government of Zoran Zaev halted the Skopje 2014 project one month after they came into office in April 2017 (Jakov Marusic 2017). The social-democratic government of Zoran Zaev after 2017 removed only one of the erected monuments in the Skopje city centre, but it managed to form a working group in the Ministry of Culture for preparation of Analysis for Implementation and Consequences from the Skopje 2014 project. The Analysis confirmed that placement of buildings and monuments had been illegal from the very start (Blazevski 2019). The government decided to use the opposite method from the one used for the construction of the Skopje 2014 project (Sidzimovska 2019). The different approach in solving the problems with the Skopje 2014 project was indirectly recognised by Freedom House in the Nations in Transit 2021 report, where North Macedonia received the second-highest positive score in their Change in Democracy Score (2017-2021), leaving Armenia at the top with the highest improvement. On a scale of 1 to 7, North Macedonia in 2021 scored 3,82 points (Freedom House 2021). The Skopje 2014 project changed the landscape of the Macedonian capital, but still, there are so few publications on this issue. The dearth of publications cannot give an in-depth explanation on the question of how the competitive authoritarian regime was formed once again in Macedonia in the period between 2006 and 2017. This paper is trying to contribute to the research on this topic by conducting a media content analysis. It is an analysis of journalistic articles that describe the phases of decision-making about the Skopje 2014 project, the phases of exclusion of professional communities and citizens in shaping the future urban landscape of the city over the last decade.

2. Methodology

Competitive authoritarianism must be distinguished from democracy on the one hand and full-scale authoritarianism on the other. What is the difference between competitive authoritarian regimes and full-scale authoritarianism? According to Levitsky and Way (2010), competitive authoritarian regimes are civilian regimes in which formal democratic institutions are widely viewed as the primary means of gaining power, but in which fraud, civil liberties violations, and abuse of state and media resources so skew the playing field that the regime cannot be labelled democratic. Although incumbents in competitive authoritarian regimes may routinely manipulate formal democratic rule, they are unable to eliminate or reduce it. Therefore, incumbents use bribery, co-optation, and more subtle forms of persecution against critics (Levitsky and Way 2002). According to Levitsky and Way (2010), in electoral, judicial, and other critical disputes, agencies that are designed to act as referees rule systematically in favor of incumbents. These 'in-between' regimes have been given a variety of names: illiberal democracies, semi-authoritarianism, hybrid regimes, defective democracies, and so on (Berglund and Ekman 2013; Zakaria 1997). In this paper, the term *competitive authoritarian regime* will be used, explained by the above-given definition by Levitsky and Way. It was also used by Florian Bieber in his analysis of the Western Balkan countries, including Macedonia. Competitive authoritarian regimes that have emerged in the Western Balkans have adapted to the challenge of maintaining external support by Western actors (EU and USA) while ensuring authoritarian control domestically. They exercise control informally through taking control of media and the state institutions and by using the structural weakness of democratic institutions to their advantage (Bieber 2018). Larry Diamond argues that freedom and democracy have been regressing in many countries because of bad governance. He strongly believes in the Freedom House measures of political rights and civil liberties, although he claims that subcategories related directly to the rule of law and transparency should form a third distinct scale of measurement (Diamond 2015). Larry Diamond and Leonardo Morlino in their paper 'The Quality of Democracy: An Overview' identified eight dimensions on which democracies vary in quality: the rule of law, participation, competition, vertical accountability, horizontal accountability, respect for civil and political freedoms, progressive implementation of greater political equality and responsiveness (Diamond and Morlino 2004).

Two of these dimensions were taken into consideration for this research paper, in order to find answers about the political decision-making process in the Skopje 2014 project. Therefore, this paper tries to provide in-depth answers to the following research questions:

1. What was the establishment procedure of the Skopje 2014 project, from the aspect of transparency and involvement of different segments of the Macedonian society?
2. How can we describe the rule of law regarding the execution of the Skopje 2014 project?

For the United Nations system, the rule of law is a principle of governance in which all persons, institutions, and entities,

including the State itself, are accountable to laws that are publicly promulgated, equally enforced, and independently adjudicated, and which are consistent with international human rights norms and standards (United Nations). So, rule of law, according to the UN, can be measured by several indicators: adherence to the principles of supremacy of the law, equality before the law, accountability to the law, fairness in the separation of the law, separation of powers, participation in decision-making, legal certainty, avoidance of arbitrariness and procedural and legal transparency. Both the democracy and rule of law principles have a long common tradition. The key function of the functional rule of law is the ability to control the conferral of wide and unguided powers of the political and economic elites (Kmezic 2020). As a whole, promoting the rule of law appears closely related to the objective of supporting democratisation and good governance as a precondition for political, economic, and institutional development (Appicciafuoco 2010). Contrary to the rule of law, rulers of the competitive authoritarian regimes in the Western Balkans are using authoritarian tools, mostly informally, to subvert formal democratic rules (Bieber 2020). This informal use of authoritarian tools appears openly after their implementation in practice by the rulers. Following this, transparency, whether explicitly mentioned or derived from the context, is an integral part of nearly all definitions of good governance. Transparency means that decisions are taken and their enforcement is done in a manner that follows rules and regulations. It also means that information is freely available and directly accessible to those who will be affected by such decisions and their enforcement. Transparency also means that enough information is provided in easily understandable forms and media, and it also includes openness in the decision-making and enforcement processes as well as access to and distribution of information (Weiss and Steiner 2006; Ball 2009). This definition of transparency, together with the indicators that measure the rule of the law mentioned above, is the basis from which I formulated the hypothesis regarding the realization of the Skopje 2014 project during the rule of Nikola Gruevski's government.

In this research, I begin from the assumption that the decisions taken by the state authorities within the Skopje 2014 project were against the rules and regulations given by the Macedonian legislation. The information that citizens and experts received about the project came after the authorities had already made or implemented the decision. In the process of urban planning, where participation in decision-making is guaranteed by the law, experts and citizens were either excluded or their complaints were neglected or ignored. Arbitrariness in making decisions about the construction of monuments and buildings has been repeated several times over the years between 2006 and 2017. In its final stage, the laws in the country were changed just to allow legal construction of the planned structures by Nikola Gruevski's government in the Skopje city centre. The Skopje 2014 project was used as a tool in the hands of the government for development of the competitive authoritarian regime in the country.

Taking into consideration the formulated hypothesis, the main goal of this research was to analyse how professional associations, non-governmental organisations, and other entities of civil society, but also citizens themselves, were included in the whole process of adopting decisions about the Skopje city centre. First of all, it was important to find answers about the decision-making process regarding the urban planning documentation. At that very spot, the rule of law is an important aspect of this project. One segment is citizens of Skopje and their guaranteed legislative option to object to the redesign of the city centre. It was important to follow the respect of official legislative procedures regarding this issue, but also, to discover the real degree of acceptance of citizen's standpoints within the decision-making process by authorities. The last segment is to examine the authority's commitment to respect the professional expertise made by architects, urban planners, and other parts of the professional community in the process of adopting decisions about urban planning and architecture. This aspect of participation is in close relation with the definitions of transparency and rule of law mentioned above, taking into consideration the fact that urban planning is a highly structured procedure, well-explained by every national law.

The research sample included articles from Macedonian media published in the period from 2006 to 2017. Here, the main obstacle was to collect the necessary data for analysis. The online research for media articles began at the Macedonian forum for architecture, construction, and urban development 'Build.mk'. This online forum was established in 2007, so many forum members published journalistic articles on it during the most important moments of execution of the Skopje 2014 project. In addition to this online research, another approach was incorporated to collect articles for this analysis. The urban documentation for the Skopje city centre was changed nine times in the period from 2007 to 2012. The research of the archive materials in the Macedonian media was focused on the period determined by the exact dates of those nine changes. After gathering all important dates for the execution of the Skopje 2014 project, thorough research to find journalistic articles was done. As a result of that, in this research were included articles published in the Macedonian newspapers 'Nova Makedonija', 'Vecher', 'Dnevnik', 'Utrinski vesnik' and 'Vest', together with articles published by Macedonian national television stations and daily informative websites. It was important for this research to incorporate a period of ten years that follows the participation of different segments of the Macedonian society in the political

decision-making process about the Skopje 2014 project. In this research were analysed sixty-two journalistic articles, all of them included in the research sample as a result of one criterion – giving information and tackling the topics of interest elaborated with the two research questions and hypothesis propounded in the methodological framework.

All articles were analysed by using thematic analysis. It is a qualitative method that ensures empirical results on certain topics important for the researcher. As a qualitative analytic method, thematic analysis is a flexible and useful research tool that is not strongly affiliated with some theoretical frameworks. It is widely used in a range of theoretical and epistemological approaches (Braun and Clarke 2006; Berg 2008). This qualitative method is somewhere in between discourse analysis and content analysis. 'A thematic analysis does have some advantages over a simple 'content analysis' of material – which is simple counting of the use of certain terms and the contrasting of level of appearance of terms between different texts – but it does not go as far as discourse analysis in its linking of terms in a text…' (Parker 2005, 99).

3. Transparency, rule of law, and the Skopje 2014 project

In 2006, urban planning documentation for the Skopje city centre did not recognise the necessity for the construction of the so-called baroque buildings. At that time, the Skopje 2014 project was not part of the Detailed Urban Plan 'Mal Ring', which covered the whole area of the city centre. Immediately after the right-wing political party VMRO-DPMNE won the parliamentary elections in 2006, the first construction sites in the Skopje city centre were promoted in public statements given by government officials to the media (Vojnovska and Bogoeva 2006). The Minister for Culture Elizabeta Kancheska-Milevska said in January 2007 that their election program is pretty clear – they will continue the procedure for construction of the Museum of Macedonian Struggle, the Old Theatre, and the City Hall in the city centre of Skopje (Popovski and Angelovska 2007).

All statements made by government officials in 2006 were dissonant with the urban planning documentation. In the beginning, it was necessary to include all monuments, buildings, squares, bridges, and other structures in the Detailed Urban Plan for the Skopje city centre. These activities of the government and local authorities for the construction of the Skopje 2014 project began in November 2006, which was less than four years before the official promotion of the revamp of the Skopje city centre in February 2010 (Jordanovska 2015a). Incorporation of the Skopje 2014 project within the urban planning documentation was the main goal of the ruling political party VMRO-DPMNE. In the period from 2007 to 2012, nine remarkable changes of the Detailed Urban Plan for the city centre of Skopje were done by the Municipality of Centar (Grcheva 2013b). Some of these changes were conducted in only four months, which is impossible in the context of a normal technical and political procedure that includes all professional associations, experts, citizens, and companies.

To explain how frequent these changes were in a period of five years, we should describe the history of the Detailed Urban Plan for the Skopje city centre after the 1963 earthquake. Its last version before the Skopje 2014 project was appointed by local authorities in 1997, after a six year process consisting of urban planning and debates among experts, local authorities, and citizens (Trajkovska 2008e). The previous change of the Detailed Urban Plan for the Skopje city centre was conducted after the 1963 earthquake (Senior 1970). This version was a product of the Japanese team of architects led by Kenzo Tange, the Croatian team led by Feodor Wenzler and Radovan Miscevic, and Skopje's Institute for Town Planning and Architecture (Stefanovska and Kozhelj 2012, 94). In a situation similar to that in 1997, Yugoslav and international architects and urbanists were involved in the whole procedure for almost two years after the 1963 earthquake. These drastic contrasts in time frames can be a short introduction to the political decision-making process in the Skopje 2014 project. Preparing exactly nine changes in the urban planning documentation for less than six years is an indicator of the instant decisions that officials adopted for the Skopje city centre.

The first change in the Detailed Urban Plan 'Mal Ring' came in October 2007 (Vest 2007). According to the decision made by the Municipality of Centar, this city planning document has incorporated the monument of Alexander the Great, the new building of the Macedonian National Theatre, the reconstruction and upgrade of the Parliament building, the Macedonian Philharmonic Orchestra Hall, and the new City Hall (Trajkovska 2007a; Mitevska 2007b). All of these changes were instituted as a proposal given by the Macedonian government in a period when the Municipality of Centar was in the hands of the ruling political party VMRO-DPMNE (Mitevska 2007a). In that period, the university professor Miroslav Grchev, as one of the authors of the 1997 Detailed Urban Plan, publicly said that most of the changes made in this document are illegal because they were against the master plan for the City of Skopje. Macedonia's opposition Social Democrats decided to bring the adopted changes of the Detailed Urban Plan before of the Constitutional Court of the Republic of Macedonia. The City of Skopje had complained that their mandatory suggestions were not implemented by the Municipality of Centar (Trajkovska 2007b). The Mayor of Skopje, Trifun Kostovski, in one interview given in 2006 publicly talked about his exclusion from participation in the decision-making process for the first three buildings of the

Skopje 2014 project. 'For most of the projects planned by this government, mainly, I find out through the media', said the Skopje Mayor Trifun Kostovski (Mitevski 2006).

Immediately after the first change of urban planning documentation, the Macedonian government in February 2008 publicized new ideas for the Skopje city centre. At the request of the government, the Municipality of Centar decided again to start a procedure for changes in the Detailed Urban Plan (Trajkovska 2008c). This was the period when negative criticism in the media for the still-not-revealed Skopje 2014 project was growing. Public opinion in Macedonia was not ready to accept new construction sites in the city centre; the public was joined by architects and urbanists, who constantly published public calls and initiatives against the construction of new buildings in the city centre.

Because of this, the government of Nikola Gruevski decided to introduce a different approach in the promotion of 'Skopje 2014'. A strong propaganda campaign, with an already planned series of events, was established at the beginning of 2008. In January 2008, the government spokesman Ivica Bocevski told the newspaper *Utrinski vesnik* that the government is planning to build another building located on the central square. 'Behind the idea of building a church on the square "Macedonia" in Skopje stands personally the Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski, who wants to have a sacred building along the line of the squares in European capitals' (Jovanovska and Angelovska 2008b). Immediately after this proposal, massive reactions came from the main political parties, non-governmental organisations, media, and other parts of the Macedonian society (Jovanovska and Angelovska 2008a). In that period, no one talked about the newly planned buildings on the left bank of the Vardar River, together with the idea for the construction of more than fifty monuments and sculptures in the city centre of Skopje, planned together with the church (Trajkovska 2008b). The idea of building a church was a ready-made play on the religious feelings of citizens and it instantly made strong divisions within the Macedonian society, which was already divided by the 2001 armed conflict. Immediately after Gruevski's proposal, the Islamic Religious Community published a call for a restoration of the Burmali mosque on the central square in Skopje, a sacred building that was destroyed during the Serbian occupation of the city in the 1920s (Angelovska and Duvnjak 2008). Albanian and Turkish political parties, intellectuals, and NGO groups supported this idea in the following months. On the other part of this division were architects and town planners, who were against all new buildings proposed for the Skopje city centre. After this fissure in society opened, government propaganda went to the next step – a strong campaign against everyone who criticised the construction of a new church (Jovanovska and Djordjevich 2009). The main critics of this idea were illustrated in pro-government media as 'traitors' to the Macedonian nation, 'atheists' and 'communists' that are against the church (Hadzi-Zafirova 2009). All of this occurred in a period in which the most numerous sectors of the Macedonian and Albanian ethnic groups declared themselves as strong religious believers. In the following months, series of protests, debates, and other public events were organized to support three different opinions: the first one, to support the construction of the church; the second one, to support the construction of the mosque; and the third one, to support the idea that new structures should not be built in the Skopje city centre.

At the beginning of July 2008, the local council of the Municipality of Centar decided to support the new changes of the Detailed Urban Plan for the city centre of Skopje (Trajkovska 2008d). The church was included in these changes, but the idea for a new mosque was excluded. Also, all new structures of the Skopje 2014 project were incorporated in this urban planning documentation. Immediately after this step, the Mayor of Skopje, Trifun Kostovski, said that all adopted changes were illegal because they are against the main basics of the Master Plan of the City of Skopje. He presented the new version of the Detailed Urban Plan before the Constitutional Court for a further evaluation of the legality of these changes. The Mayor of Skopje said that he was going to initiate a referendum against these changes in the Detailed Urban Plan (Trajkovska 2008d). The process of adoption was executed, although the City of Skopje did not give a positive opinion for all of these planned structures (Kalabakova 2009). The Mayor of Skopje, Trifun Kostovski, said that the decision made by councilors of the Municipality of Centar violated basic constitutional values (Naumovska 2008).

The Constitutional Court in May 2008 decided not to evaluate the first changes of the Detailed Urban Plan, adopted in October 2007. The court resolved this case with the opinion that the initiative was unfounded. According to the Constitutional Court, there was opening to repeal the first change of the Detailed Urban Plan (Trajkovska 2008a). This decision came after Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski visited the Constitutional Court. In spring 2008, constitutional judges did not have their own office space in the Macedonian capital and they were renting their temporary office. Several months after this visit of Gruevski, the government decided that one of the buildings on the left bank of the Vardar River would become the official seat of the Constitutional Court (Duvnjak 2008). It was the same institution that had to decide about the legitimacy of all adopted changes in the Detailed Urban Plan. The building for the Constitutional Court was planned to be constructed at one of the disputed locations in the city centre (Denkovska 2008). In February 2009, the Constitutional Court decided to refuse another request regarding the second change of the Detailed Urban Plan, this time sent by Mayor Kostovski. His initiative was rejected (Trajkovska 2009). After this decision made

by the Constitutional Court, the Skopje 2014 project had no other obstacles to realisation. Judges decided this just two days before the official promotion of the new changes in the Detailed Urban Plan. They were adopted on 27 February 2009. The other changes were made on 29 January 2010, 6 October 2010, 31 May 2011, 1 February 2012, 28 June 2012, and 21 December 2012 (Grcheva 2013b). All of these modifications in the Detailed Urban Plan for the city centre opened the path for construction of the Skopje 2014 project.

The Constitutional Court on only one occasion decided to stand against the government plans for revamping of the Skopje city centre. At the end of June 2010, this court accepted the new initiative submitted by the Macedonian urban planner Miroslav Grchev. This initiative was related to the change of the Detailed Urban Plan conducted in January 2010 (Gjorgjevski and Trajkovska 2010a). 'The Constitutional Court repealed the last changes of the Detailed Urban Plan that the Municipality of Centar adopted earlier this year. According to constitutional judges, the plan was adopted in a shortened procedure' (Trajkovska 2010f). Immediately after this decision, Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski became furious. He went in front of the media to make a statement to the public that the Skopje 2014 project will not be stopped (Trajkovska 2010b). Several days later, the Municipality of Centar announced that the Skopje 2014 project is not dead (Trajkovska 2010e). The local authorities decided to make new changes to the Detailed Urban Plan, in which all construction sites in the city centre were included again in the plan (Trajkovska 2010d). The whole legislative procedure had been repeated in the next months, and the experts were again excluded from the decision-making process. Danica Pavlovska, the President of the Macedonian Association of Architects, publicly said that architects and urbanists were excluded from the process of planning of the Skopje 2014 project (Denkovska 2010a). During the repeated procedure, the Municipality of Centar decided to hide all poll ballots from the organised public debate about changes in the controversial urbanist plan (Denkovska 2010b). On 6 October 2010, the new changes to the Detailed Urban Plan for the city centre were adopted by the Centar Municipality, with the decision to reject all fifty-six suggestions from the public debate proposed by architects and citizens (Trajkovska 2010c).

Among all of these changes in urban planning documentation, the Skopje 2014 project was born. It was a project prepared in the period from 2006 to 2010. Once the phase of urban planning was almost completed, the Macedonian government in February 2010 decided to publish the famous video about the Skopje 2014 project (Nova Makedonija 2010). After the well-structured promotion was done, a massive reaction came from Macedonian society. Elizabeta Avramovska, a university professor at the Faculty of Architecture, which is part of the University of Skopje, in an interview said that the oldest faculty in the country has never been consulted or informed about the Skopje 2014 project (Petrova 2010). The Macedonian Association of Art Critics and Art Historians went before the public to say that they have never been consulted in any phase of the Skopje 2014 project. 'In this case were consulted only those architects, sculptors and artists that were involved in the "game", which means that their support for the project came automatically', a statement came from this Association (Frangovska 2010).

The most intense reactions came from architects within the Association of Architects of Macedonia. They held a special assembly of this association, an event that was open for the government and local officials. None of these officials appeared at the event (Angelovska 2010a). At this assembly, they decided to support the public letter written by the President of the Association of Architects of Macedonia, Danica Pavlovska. Macedonian architects created a public letter about their position in the matter of the Skopje 2014 project (Ivanovska 2010; Angelovska 2010a). 'We, architects, together with citizens, are placed in an unworthy position. Professional and general public opinion is excluded from making important decisions in the Skopje 2014 project' (Okno 2010).

In the months following February 2010, the Macedonian Association of Architects made constant efforts to establish contact with the government and local authorities. In April 2010, they sent an open letter to the Macedonian government with a request for access to all documents from the Skopje 2014 project. In this case, they asked for the establishment of the conditions needed to develop their expert analysis for all construction sites in the Skopje city centre (Angelovska 2010b). In May 2010, the Association sent another open letter to the National Cultural Heritage Protection Office. Architects asked this institution to help them in their efforts to reevaluate the Skopje 2014 project (Angelovska 2010c). Despite all these reactions (obligatory, official, and unofficial) from the associations, faculties, and courts, the Macedonian government decided to continue with the execution of the Skopje 2014 project and to keep the intellectuals far away from participation in the decision-making process.

Another important factor for the inclusion of Macedonian society was the Skopje citizens. Immediately after the official presentation of the Skopje 2014 project, several national surveys on important political questions were conducted. The leading Macedonian newspaper *Dnevnik* conducted one survey with a nationally representative sample. These results showed that 58% of all citizens did not support the Skopje 2014 project, while 39% of Macedonians had a positive opinion of this project (Utrinski vesnik 2010). After its publication, Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski publicly said that he did not read the survey results for this project, at the same time stating that it was 'an unreliable survey from an anonymous newspaper' (Vojnovska 2010b). In June 2010, the American International

Republican Institute published another unpleasant result for the Macedonian government. Only 26% of all Macedonian citizens supported the Skopje 2014 project. A vast majority, or 66% of the people, opposed the project for the construction of new buildings and monuments in the city centre of Skopje (Jovanovska 2010). The negative opinion from Macedonian citizens has been repeatedly confirmed in the following years. In October 2012, TNS Brima Gallup Intl. published another national survey, in which the same results were obtained. According to this survey, 57.8% of all citizens had a negative opinion of the Skopje 2014 project, and only 26.4% of them had positive feelings toward the new monuments and buildings. This survey showed that 15.8% of all citizens were indifferent toward this question (Stojanchova 2012). The only positive answer for the Skopje 2014 project came in 2013, on a national survey conducted by Ipsos Strategic Puls and the pro-government institute Dimitrija Chupovski. Their analysis showed that 63.6% of all citizens support this project 'entirely' or 'partly', and only 34% of them 'entirely' opposed the Skopje 2014 project. For the first time, this survey included another variable, the ethnic origin of participants. 28% of ethnic Macedonians 'entirely' supported the Skopje 2014 project, while 27% of them 'entirely' opposed it. Albanian citizens had a clearer opinion about this project. 57% of Albanians 'entirely' opposed Skopje 2014 and only 14% of them 'entirely' supported it (Kanal 5 2013). All of these surveys indicated the deep division among the citizens themselves regarding this project during its realization in the city centre of Skopje. Negative reactions of citizens and their anger were the real reason for the Macedonian government to reject the requests for the organisation of a referendum about the Skopje 2014 project. The first referendum on this issue was organised by the opposition Mayor of Centar Municipality in April 2015 (Vaseva 2015), although it was unsuccessful and boycotted by the ruling political party VMRO-DPMNE (Jordanovska 2015b).

During the realisation of the Skopje 2014 project, some specific laws were changed several times in a very short period. The Law on Spatial and Urban Planning was changed by the Macedonian parliament as many as six times in the period between 2013 and 2016 (Blazhevski 2016b). According to architect Sanja Radjenovic-Jovanovic, Construction Law in Macedonia has been changed as many as sixteen times in the previous years (Dimkov 2017). The Macedonian Law on Protection of Cultural Heritage has been changed twelve or thirteen times in the last ten years (Shashevski 2016). The constant changes of these laws, among others, have been a key mechanism for ensuring 'lawfulness' in all phases of execution of the Skopje 2014 project.

Despite the constant changes in the legislation, violations of the law were evident during the implementation of the Skopje 2014 project. According to the architect and urban planner Leonora Grcheva, Skopje 2014 is not a project, but only propagandistic visualization of buildings constructed against the law. 'Visualization for one part of a city does not exist as a separate legal definition in the Law for urban planning' (Grcheva 2013a). There were as many as nine changes in urban planning documentation in six years (Grcheva 2013b). Therefore, the Macedonian legislation was breached in order to exclude expertise and criticism for the future revamp of the Skopje city centre. The government and local authorities have never organised an international competition for a new Detailed Urban Plan of the Skopje city centre, although the magnitude of redevelopment leads necessarily toward this step (Grcheva 2013a). Contrary to this, all nine changes of urban planning documentation led to the gradual insertion of new buildings in the Detailed Urban Plan for the Skopje city centre. The Centar Municipality was appointed as executor of these changes, but the Macedonian government initiated all of them.

The problem with the rule of law in the case of the Skopje 2014 project can be explained by another aspect of urban planning. After the 1963 earthquake, the Master Plan of the City of Skopje was prepared before the Detailed Urban Plan for the Skopje city centre. It was designed following the general plan for the whole city. According to the architect Georgi Konstantinovski, all new Skopje 2014 buildings on the left bank of the Vardar River are constructed in a zone prohibited for construction, as a zone in which the new structures can have seismic problems after their construction (Konstantinovski 2012). Contrary to all previous urban planning documentation, the Skopje 2014 project proposed erections in those public spaces that have never been planned before for construction activities. After the adoption of the new changes in the Detailed Urban Plan by the Municipality of Centar in 2008, the Mayor of Skopje Trifun Kostovski said that all changes are against the basics of the Master Plan of the City of Skopje (Naumovska 2008). The City of Skopje did not give positive permission for the new buildings incorporated in the Detailed Urban Plan, which means that all changes made by the Municipality of Centar were against the Law on the City of Skopje (Trajkovska 2008f). Other possible infringements of the Macedonian legislation were connected with the right of the Macedonian national parliament to be included in the decision-making process about the Skopje 2014 project. One explicit example of this violation was the construction of thirty-four monuments in the Skopje city centre. According to Macedonian law, memorial monuments have to be approved in a procedure organized by the national parliament. The procedure for construction of the Warrior on a Horse statue (Alexander the Great) began at the end of 2006. In February 2010, the former Mayor of the City of Skopje, Risto Penov, publicly said that all new monuments are illegally enacted by local authorities: 'The Alexander the Great in these dimensions, a thirty-meters sculpture on a horse, is a

national monument, and therefore it cannot be constructed by the Municipality of Centar or the City of Skopje, but only by the state. The decision for this kind of monument has to be adopted by the national parliament' (Vojnovska 2010a). Contrary to the legal procedure, the Municipality of Centar approved the construction of all monuments in the Skopje city centre by means of one loophole. The Macedonian legislation gave the right to local authorities to decide about the construction of monuments that have local significance. In this case, the Municipality of Centar had to prepare a five-year program for marking important persons and historical events (Petrova 2008a). Nevertheless, almost all monuments with 'local significance' on the central square in Skopje were approved by the Municipality of Centar without prior preparation of this program (Petrova 2008b). Five years later, an official audit commission on the Skopje 2014 project was initiated by the new Mayor of the Centar Municipality, Andrej Zhernovski. This commission confirmed all allegations for infringements of the Macedonian law. They concluded that the Municipality of Centar had no authority to construct monuments of national importance in the Skopje city centre (Taseva and Malinovski 2013, 2).

Another important aspect of the rule of law in the Skopje 2014 project is the question of copyrights regarding the demolition of the facades of the modernist buildings in the Skopje city centre. This idea for facade 'facelift' came as the final phase of execution of the Skopje 2014 project by the ruling elite. The city authorities said that they are trying to reconstruct the old facades of the modernist buildings. In reality, they did their best to conduct an overall facelift of these facades following the three architectural styles preferred by the government: classicism, neoclassicism, and baroque. Older architects, who designed the modernist buildings in the capital, did not participate in the execution of the decisions about the future appearance of their buildings (Blazhevski 2016a). More than twenty buildings from the city centre received new facades within the Skopje 2014 project. Some of these buildings were protected by Macedonian law as cultural heritage (Denkovska 2011). The process of reconstruction became a process of changing the exterior design of many buildings according to the preferred architectural styles of the government (Marusic 2016).

Journalistic articles explained the three different ways leading to the exclusion of architects from participation in the decision-making process. The first scenario was when the architect received an offer to participate as a consultant in the preparation of a future project but without the opportunity to protect the original design of his work (Sekulovska 2013). The second technique summoned original architects to a meeting by the investors in the facades, after the design was already prepared for them. They received documents to sign, but they did not consent (Faktor 2014; Blazhevski 2016a). In the third case, some of the authors of the post-earthquake buildings said that the city authorities have never asked them about the future facades. The most prominent member of this group is the Macedonian architect Trajko Dimitrov (Blazhevski 2016a). At the beginning of 2010, many architects claimed that construction activities on old buildings were executed without their knowledge, although they were still alive as authors. Some of them warned the Macedonian government that its decision could lead to opening criminal charges for copyright infringement. 'Some of the authors are alive, so the authorities have to make consultations with them. This is also written in the Macedonian Law on Copyright and Related Rights', argued the architect Georgi Konstantinovski (Trajkovska 2010a). The President of the Association of Architects of Macedonia, Danica Pavlovska, also voiced public critique to the construction activities destroying the old facades. 'It is particularly unacceptable to do such a thing without permission from the author' said Danica Pavlovska (Angelovska 2011).

4. Conclusion

The Skopje 2014 project is a typical example of how one large-scale and government-funded idea can be used as a tool for the establishment of and strengthening of the non-democratic regime. Instead of the rule of law, Macedonia in the period between 2006 and 2017 saw unlawfulness in the process of making decisions about the revamp of the Skopje city centre. Instead of implementing the necessary international competition for the new urban design of the very heart of the Macedonian capital, the government and local authorities decided to jointly produce constant changes in the Detailed Urban Plan 'Mal Ring'. Their main goal was to incorporate all planned buildings and other structures of Skopje 2014 in the urban planning documentation. All monuments of national importance, such as the very well-known statue of Alexander the Great, were executed by the Municipality of Centar. This was the only way to bypass the voice of the national parliament in the matter of this issue. After the armed conflict in 2001, the so-called Badinter mechanism (the double-majority vote that aims at protecting the ethnic minority from being outvoted by the ethnic majority) was introduced by the national parliament. Nikola Gruevski knew that the majority of ethnic Albanian members of parliament would not vote in favor of the Skopje 2014 project (in the period from 2006 to 2008, Nikola Gruevski formed the first government in a coalition with the second biggest Albanian political party, DPA, which did not have a majority of the ethnic Albanian members of parliament), so his government decided to skip the necessary decision of the parliament in the process of construction of the monuments of national importance by giving them the

status of monuments of local importance. The media analysis of published journalistic articles shows that the production of such arbitrary decisions became a systematic solution for the execution of the Skopje 2014 project. It became a pattern for encircling the Macedonian legislation until the moments of direct confrontation with certain laws. In those very moments, the government tried to accomplish its plans by changing specific articles in the law. In all these cases, there was one constant – all executors of the Skopje 2014 project were supporters, members, or allies of the ruling political party VMRO-DPMNE. At the same time, the government through the state budget became the main investor in all structures constructed in the Skopje city centre.

Another characteristic of the Skopje 2014 project revealed by this analysis is that of non-transparency and exclusion in the political decision-making process. After the official promotion of Skopje 2014, the leading professional associations and faculties in the country released the information that they were not included in the preparation of this project. The national surveys that asked citizens for their opinion about the Skopje 2014 project were not taken into consideration during the preparation and execution of all the buildings, statues, and squares. The most flagrant infringements on Macedonian law were executed in the first years, from 2006 to 2009. In this earlier phase of execution, there were still some control mechanisms guaranteeing the existence of a system of checks and balances. However, the ruling political party tried to gradually grab the control mechanisms during the same time, with the execution of the Skopje 2014 project from one stage to the next.

In the first years of execution, one major thing was neglected: transparency. The government never told its citizens at the beginning what was going to happen to the Skopje city centre. The promotion of the planned revamp only came after the whole procedure for changes in the urban planning documentation was completed. Together, the concept of non-transparency and exclusion of society in the Skopje 2014 project was promoted.

This thematic analysis has described the non-democratic forms of political decision-making that have been established since the very beginning of the implementation of this project in 2006. The Skopje 2014 project had become a tool in the hands of the ruling political party to establish a competitive authoritarian regime, after the government failed to realize the country's accession to NATO and the EU. Architecture and urban planning had never before been used for this purpose by Macedonian politicians. Since its independence, Macedonia had constantly tried to pave the way for a transition toward democracy. The government of Nikola Gruevski, with the Skopje 2014 project, did its best to take the reverse non-democratic course to rule over the country.

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