

# REDEFINING NATIONAL IDENTITY IN MACEDONIA

## Analyzing Competing Origin Myths and Interpretations through Hegemonic Representations

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This paper analyzes symbolism pertaining to and popular receptions of the project Skopje 214, an architectural journey in the capital of the Republic of Macedonia. While attempting to understand the multifaceted symbolic meanings and perceptions associated with this project, we pay attention to the existence of previous narratives of Macedonian national identity prior to the announcement of Skopje 2014 and therefore position the project against that backdrop. We want to argue that Skopje 2014 represents a monumental and spectacular turning point in official narratives of Macedonian national identity. The gap between the previously dominant narrative of Macedonian national identity, and the new official discourse offered and realized in and through Skopje 2014, and the multicultural reality of the country are the central themes of this work.

**Key words:** cultural symbolism, discourse, meaning, semiotics, national identity, antiquisation, de-ottomanization, Skopje 2014

### Introduction

This paper analyzes the agendas, popular reception, and interpretations of a recent architectural project in Skopje, the capital of the Republic of Macedonia, a project named Skopje 2014. While attempting to understand the multifaceted symbolic meanings and perceptions associated with this project, we will pay attention to the existence of previous narratives of Macedonian national identity prior to the announcement of Skopje 2014. However, we want to argue that Skopje 2014 represents a monumental and spectacular turning point in official narratives of Macedonian national identity. The disjuncture between the previously dominant narrative of Macedonian national identity and the new official discourse offered and realized in and through Skopje 2014 is one of the central themes of this paper.

The first part of the paper explores this disconnectedness by examining how the politics of space and representation manifested by Skopje 2014 reworks premises of national identity formulated against two central features – the Yugoslav (and socialist) and the Ottoman (and Islamic) legacies. The fact that Macedonian national identity is heavily marginalized by neighboring ideologies is a source of inspiration for the project. The second part of the paper engages with a seemingly public debate largely constructed by the two competing discours-

es offered by the political elites. In this respect, it will be argued that this semiotic struggle marked by the political dominance of the Government over the oppositions' criticism has had a divisional impact on Macedonian political and national realities.

In this respect, the study proposes two central arguments. The first argument, in the first part of the paper, attempts to show that Skopje 2014 destabilized or at its best, builds a superficial national identity in Macedonia in profound ways that are still emerging. Second, it tries to show that what seems to be an ongoing public debate where views and ideologies clash over the question of the interpretation of the projects multi-perspectival and heterogeneous values and functions is in essence a very specific situation. Namely, we believe that it reflects a situation of power imbalance and abuse in which government discourses are trying to silence opposing voices, thus irreversibly risking not only the abolition of public space, but more importantly the creation of insurmountable social, political and ideological fissures in an otherwise unstable and threatened national and civic unity.

## Methodology and Parameters of the Study

This research consists of a three layered-methodology. First, we will start by providing a review of the anthropological literature concerning nation building processes in Macedonia as a backdrop against which Skopje 2014 will be positioned to show how it disrupts past narratives and proposes a new allegedly linear evolution of Macedonian identity going back to antiquity. This will be followed with an overview of some policies (principally cultural) relating to the multi-ethnic context of the country including the Ohrid Framework Agreement, which was complicated thanks to the simultaneous crafting of ethno-nationalist politics and projects such as Skopje 2014. The versatility of this discourse will be positioned against the backdrop of international recommendations and pressures for the country as they greatly influence the nationalist narratives and partly, as they served as an inspiration for the Skopje 2014 project.

Finally, within this context of opposed discourses operating in hierarchically organized levels of enunciation (party-critics-people), we will try to trace a rhetoric and discursive continuity, the inter-relation and interdependence between the formative role of the parties' discourses, their reiteration and amplification in the texts produced by intellectuals, experts, social critics and the like, as well as their impact on people's attitudes. The purpose of this is to demonstrate how the dominant discourse concerning the project, whilst seemingly oppositional, is in fact a power ridden, hegemonic discourse, imposed by the political elite.

## Constructing a Macedonian National Identity amidst Neighboring Discourses and the Country's Multicultural Reality

Historically speaking, Macedonia refers to a geographical and historical region of the Balkan Peninsula. Its boundaries have drastically changed throughout history. Today, it includes parts of modern-day Bulgaria, Greece, Serbia, Kosovo, and the Republic of Macedonia. The territory of the present day Republic of Macedonia was under Ottoman rule for a long period of time, that is, from 1371, when the Ottomans gained access to a number of cities that

belonged to the wider Thracian and Macedonian region including the central region of what is today the Republic of Macedonia (around the town of Prilep) until 1913. The territory of the present day Republic of Macedonia was in 1913 the last part of the Balkans ruled by the Ottoman Empire. After 1919, Macedonia entered the Kingdom of Yugoslavia under Serbian jurisdiction and without any administrative autonomy. After 1945, Macedonia was defined as the People's Republic of Macedonia within the framework of Yugoslavia. After the breakup of Yugoslavia, Macedonia declared independence on 8 September 1991 and was admitted to the UN on 8 April 1993 as the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM) until an agreement concerning the new state's name could be reached with Greece. The naming dispute has still not been resolved and is to a great extent a crucial factor for the strengthening of nationalist discourses, artistic production, and tensions between the two major ethnicities in the country – Macedonians and Albanians.<sup>1</sup>

This brief overview of the historical circumstances sheds light on complexities regarding the construction of Macedonian national identity. Before moving to analyze Skopje 2014 let us look briefly into an exciting nation-building journey proposed by the anthropologist Keith Brown in his *The Past in Question* (2003). The main focus of his work is on the organized revolt against the Ottoman Empire known as the Ilinden Uprising of August 1903 taking place in the small town of Krushevo, in the present day Republic of Macedonia. This event resulting in the short-lived Krushevo Republic, which became a national symbol for the Republic of Macedonia, and still resonates strongly among those who feel Macedonian. Brown immaculately dissects the multifaceted ways in which the “local histories”, that is, various explanations of the nature of the uprising of the inhabitants of Krushevo (a historically mixed town incorporating Greeks, Turks, Albanians, Macedonians, and Vlachs) interacted with the national history. The Ilinden uprising is in Brown's account, the gravitational center of Macedonian historiography over time, including the period of Socialism and the period following the independence of the country in 1991. The metaphor of the Ilinden uprising has been powerfully applied in the 1950s when the Partisan Struggle in WWII has been referred to as the “Second Ilinden” of Macedonian national liberation, thus promoting this period and this event as a symbol and paradigm of national awakening and liberation.

## Disrupting Narratives: The Newly Emerging Facades of a Non-existent Past

Skopje 2014 breaks away from this pattern and disturbs these narratives, proposing a new allegedly linear history of the Macedonian nation, stretching all the way back to antiquity. So far, this project has radically changed the face of the city, launching itself with the erection of a monumental statue of Alexander the Great in the central square, dubbed *The warrior on a horse*, as well as at least fifty additional sculptures, bridges, Churches, and museums. SK 2014 is also known and criticized as *Antiquisation*.<sup>2</sup> The main investor in SK 2014 is the Govern-

<sup>1</sup> According to the last population census in 2002, 1,297,981 inhabitants declared themselves to be Macedonians, representing 64.18% of the total population. Approximately 509,083 inhabitants declared themselves as Albanians, representing 25.17% of the population. Smaller ethnic minorities include Turks (77,959 or 3.85%), Roma (53,879 or 2.66%), Serbs (35,939 or 1.78%), Bośniaks (17,018 or 0.84%), Vlachs (9,695 or 0.48%), and others (20,993 or 1.04%). The Macedonian national census records most ethnic groups, but the smaller ones are not enumerated separately in the final report.

<sup>2</sup> As Vangeli points out: “in the contemporary Macedonian discourse “antiquization” refers to the identitarian policies based on the assumption that there is a direct link between today's ethnic Macedonians and Ancient Macedonians” (2001: 13).

ment of the Republic of Macedonia (i.e. its ruling conservative democratic-Christian party VMRO-DPMNE, which came into power in 2006 and was re-elected in 2008, 2011, and 2014). They have invested an 80 to 200 million Euros. The Ministry of Culture announced a public competition, but no international competitor won the bid, the design and execution of the project having been entrusted to local architects and artists.



Figure 1: View of the central monument in Skopje City Square dubbed "Warrior on a Horse" (photo credit: [www.everythingmacedonia.com](http://www.everythingmacedonia.com))

The proponents of this project argue that it neatly offers a linear chronological overview of all things Macedonian. Ironically though, there is almost no correlation between these figures, marking an alleged continuity of Macedonian national identity. The project commemorates all sorts of historical characters, thus creating confusion, rather than linearity as concerns identity. It goes from *the Antique period*; moves on to figures from *early Christianity*, notable *historical figures* who were born in or ruled in or around Skopje, as well as a league of freedom fighters who fought for Macedonian independence. It also includes two huge boats in the otherwise non-navigable Vardar river. Millions of Euros have been spent on the project. It was only recently that the government presented an official financial report, which confirmed rumours of the hefty fees paid to the sculptors.<sup>3</sup>

In his archaeological-architectonic analysis of the project, Chausidis (2013: 37) points out the fact that Skopje has never been much of a utilitarian city, but rather a symbolic city, which often served as a medium for the expression of particular individuals' dominance, enacted through architectural frenzy – this includes anything from Romans, through to Byzantines, Ottomans, Serbs, Bulgarians, Yugoslavs, socialists, communists. The current symbolism is rather confused and creates an overall (an)aesthetical dissonance of styles and historical

<sup>3</sup> Darko Duridanski reports in the Balkan Insight article from the 26 April 2013, that Valentina Stevanovska, designer of some of the main statues that form part of the project, including the equestrian statue of Alexander the Great, one of his father, Philip, as well as a triumphal arch, earned 2.9 million euros in fees. Stevanovska was a complete unknown before being awarded the commissions to design the grand statues. For the 24-metre-high Alexander statue on Skopje's central square, Stevanovska earned 649,000. Interestingly, the political barometer in September 2012, as part of a regular piece of research into public opinion carried out by "TNS Brima Gallup Intl" showed that 57.8% had a negative opinion, and 26.4% had a positive opinion with the rest being undecided.

periods. Koteska (2011) points out that although Skopje 2014 in itself carries all sorts of assemblages of past times and styles, one style is however clearly absent: the soc-realistic style. Before Skopje 2014, two most distinctive characteristics of the city were: the Old Turkish Bazaar and the modern socialist buildings from the 1950s to 1970s. Part of these buildings were far more pragmatic than socialist, as they catered for society after the devastating earthquake of 1963 in Skopje, when architects from the whole world (including Kenzo Tange), gathered to help and provide the city with a new fresh, modern look, and buildings that would accommodate as many people as possible. This modern look is additionally taken out of the city, and a neoclassical, baroque architecture is implanted instead. The new buildings must satisfy the request of having a baroque or neoclassical facade, while the older but modern buildings are now under the attack of “new-old” facades, undergoing a full make over. A blatant example is the building of the Government of the Republic of Macedonia, designed in 1970 by the architect Petar Mulickovski, and the “new” baroque facade currently being built. The architect refused to participate as a consulting expert and specified that changing this building’s facade is illegal and that the persons responsible must give a statement on this issue. The governmental excuses are lame to say the least, ranging from dubious arguments that the aesthetics of the building will be improved, to claiming that the new facade will improve the safety and make energy savings in the building.<sup>4</sup> Koteska (2011) further notes that SK 2014 intended to cut off both the socialist and Ottoman legacy. We want to argue that Skopje 2014 is a clear break from the socialist past, and ironically so, as the Republic of Macedonia was constituted for the first time in 1944 as part of the People’s Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. Even more ironically, it is a break from a recent, very modern past, when architects ranging from Kenzo Tange to local names as Mulickovski had a very modern, if not futuristic vision of the city. Instead of that, SK 2014 implanted baroque and neoclassicism, styles unknown to this region. Equally so, if not more, SK 2014 is a de-ottomanization process aimed at cutting off or at its best, obliterating the Ottoman heritage and breaking away from Islam. Even if it does aim at crafting a mono-ethnic, Macedonian, Christian Orthodox sentiment, it does so against the multi-ethnic reality and legacy of the country. As Koteska (2011) observes “SK 2014 produced a line of ethnic, gender and class divisions. Namely, the bronze mania serves only to build up the dominant Macedonian identity and the demographic exclusivity, while the ethnic minorities (Albanians, Turks, Vlachs, Serbs, Roma, etc.) are not being adequately represented.”

With this in mind, we will briefly look at the complexities of the multicultural reality of Macedonia, including the ethnic conflict which took place in 2001 and the preceding discourse of the country as an oasis of peace, *vis-a-vis* the blood shedding experiences of the other former Yugoslav countries. Although believed to be the only state to gain independence peacefully from former Yugoslavia, in 2001 Macedonia was struck by an ethnic conflict, which brought eight months of unrest to the region. The conflict expressed the grievances of the Albanian community as a marginalized group within Macedonia, and aimed to improve its participation in society. The Ohrid Framework Agreement (OFA) was signed on 13 August 2001, finally putting an end to the insurgencies and improving the conditions of the Albanian population in Macedonia. Skopje 2014 displaces the multiculturalist narrative crafted in this agreement, and Albanians as well other ethnic groups reacted to its mono-ethnic, Christian Orthodox prominence.

<sup>4</sup> For more details on the disagreement between the architect of the original building design who won a number of world prizes for their creative ideas and the new facade, as well as photos, see <http://www.build.mk/?p=24670> and <http://www.dnevnik.mk/?ItemID=3F3B5BC7018082468C6D2297FE441D7C>.

The salt on this wound is the “name dispute” with Greece and its insistence on the change of the constitutional name of the country. In this light, we must interpret much of SK 2014 as a political statement to Greece regarding the “name dispute” as manifested through architecture. The centrality and the size of the sculpture *Warrior on a Horse*, which otherwise makes a blatant association with Alexander the Great is but one example. To support this interpretation, we bring the statement of the former minister of foreign affairs, Antonio Miloshoski, who in an interview for the Guardian on the initiative to build the 22 meter monument of Alexander and having in mind the 20-year long name dispute between the Republic of Macedonia and Greece over the name Macedonia, replied: “This is our way of saying [up yours] to them!”<sup>5</sup> This desire to take revenge or make a political statement regarding the tensions with Greece, resulted in the construction of architectural narratives, which do not necessarily correspond with the overall opinions of the citizens of Macedonia as we shall see in the remainder of this text. It additionally unnerves the other ethnic groups in the country and disturbs the existing narratives of Macedonian national identity touched upon earlier.

## Cultural Intimacy and SK 2014

Verdery argues that statues often stabilize the landscape and temporarily freeze particular values in it (2000: 6). She makes a solid vivisection of the political symbolism behind the erection/removal of statues and bodies from mausoleums in East Europe and the former Soviet Union since 1989. Her observations that statues are dead people cast in bronze or carved in stone, symbolizing the timelessness and sacredness of a person is accurate (ibid.: 5). Likewise is her statement that “desecrating a statue partakes of the larger history of iconoclasm” (ibid.). She also goes on to argue that, while there is nothing specifically post-socialist about tearing down or erecting statues (as it goes on all over the world) there are certain instances specific to post-socialism. One of the instances is that many post-socialist countries wish to claim discontinuity with the socialist past and embark on tearing down much of the socialist era statues. While there is a clear desire to detach from much of the socialist past in the SK 2014 project, the project also reveals the desire to make a break from other legacies (Ottoman/Muslim) in particular and implant new histories (baroque/neoclassicism), which did not exist previously.

Although clearly aimed at building an awareness of the national self amidst neighbouring denials, research conducted by the Institute of Social Sciences and Humanities Skopje (ISSHS), on SK 2014 and its effects on the perception of Macedonian identity among its citizens, diagnosed a recurring pattern in the results. The researchers departed from the premise that, by way of producing symbolism with distinct historical references and aesthetics through monuments and architecture, the SK 2014 intends to affirm, strengthen and ensure the perseverance of a historical truth about Macedonian identity as the only truth. Among various theoretical frameworks, this project rightly took Herzfeld’s (2005) concept of “cultural intimacy” as a concept which relates to the culture and its symbolism one most immediately identifies with as familiar, yet not the face of the collective self one would want a foreigner to see. This is everyday culture and its codes of intimacy that state institutions mobilize in order to build an official national narrative. Hence according to Herzfeld: “the

<sup>5</sup> The full interview can be downloaded here: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/aug/14/alexander-great-macedonia-warrior-horse>.

embarrassing” intimate side of the national sense of selfhood are “sanitized” by providing it with a functional position in the narrative of an internationally presentable self. The results of the research however, show incompatibility with the codes of “cultural intimacy” (2005: 4).

The results revealed that Macedonian identity was mainly described as a blurred category, filled with a sense of inferiority, and identity confusion. Moreover, Skopje 2014 was not a prominent marker of identity formation, or the redefining of a nation, since most interlocutors experienced culture through various non-material reifications (music, language, tradition, food, etc.) and the period of antiquity is not high on the list of national markers. This research also found out that the sense of “cultural shame” appeared as predominant among Macedonians. Asked about the historical period that defines Macedonian national identity the answers gave the following figures:<sup>6</sup>

- Independence (from 1991) 13%
- Enlightenment period (19 century) 26 %
- The Revolutionary period (beginning of the 20 century) 31 %
- SFRY 30 %

An additional national poll was carried out by ISSHS in September 2013. According to the results of the poll only 5.8% of the general population viewed antiquity as an historically and culturally defining period for Macedonia, whereas among ethnic Macedonians the result was 7.6%. The majority of the ethnic Macedonians identified the period of Medieval Slavic Christianity (of the so-called “enlighteners” St Cyril and St Methodius) as the most formative period from the less recent past. Moreover, an average of one quarter of the respondents identified the periods of independence from SFR Yugoslavia, of participation in the federation of SFR Yugoslavia, the IMRO (International Macedonian Revolutionary Organization) period and that of Medieval Slavic Christianity as historically defining for the formation of Macedonian ethnic identity. A great argument for the disruption of the previous national narratives comes to the fore with results which show that 73% of the participants in the survey think of Goce Delchev (one of the organizers of the Ilinden uprising) as the leading figure involved in constructing Macedonian national identity, while only 9% consider that person to be Alexander the Great. These results show that there is a great discrepancy between the population’s sentiment and the narrative the Government seeks to promote.<sup>7</sup> Clearly, antiquity as a period is very low on the citizens of Macedonia’s agenda, and yet the statue of Alexander the Great is seen protruding in the city centre square and everything else, including Goce Delchev, revolves around it. Filtered through the lens of ‘cultural intimacy’, the results point to serious discrepancies between the official cultural profile and ‘codes of everyday culture’. It is clear from the results that the project and hence the country’s cultural policy does not operate within the cultural codes of everyday culture. Instead, SK 2014 seems to be a distant and alienating cultural formation to which citizens respond indifferently.

These results further chime with Herzfeld’s work (2004) on the Greek obsession to hide anything that didn’t resemble Ancient Greece due to the Western European insistence that they had to be like the Ancient Greeks (Byrne 2011: 151). Cultural intimacy for Herzfeld is precisely the recognition of those aspects of a cultural identity that are considered a source of external embarrassment, and yet provide insiders with an assurance of common sociality. A key study with which we can make useful comparisons to SK 2014 is Herzfeld’s *A Place in*

<sup>6</sup> For deeper insights into and further information regarding the results of the ISSHS research project ‘Skopje 2014 Project and its Effects on the Perception of Macedonian Identity Among the Citizens of Skopje’, see <http://isshs.edu.mk/documents/1.-Sk2014-ENG.pdf>.

<sup>7</sup> For details of the results, see <http://isshs.edu.mk/documents/Who-owns-Alexander-the-Great-A-Question-Upon-Which-EU-Enlargement-Relies.pdf>.

*History: Social and Monumental Time in a Cretan Town* (1991). Just as the town of Rethemnos in Crete has many pasts and is a mixture of Venetian and Turkish architecture, so might we speak of Macedonia in the same way, where the most prominent architectural styles are the residues of Byzantium and the Turks. Interestingly enough, Herzfeld notes how “the modern Rethemniots’ expressed preference for Venetian over Turkish culture” (Herzfeld 1991: 56-57), thus illustrating a Greek prejudice that is part of a long-standing hostility towards Turkey. Hence, Herzfeld traces political contours in the changing architectural image of the town and places the archaeologists and historians against the local populace. Herzfeld’s maintains that there are two contesting histories opposing each other, one of them being the monumental or official, the other one being social, i.e., popular history (ibid.: 10). Through his study of the Cretan town he comes to understand that the inhabitants’ interest or disdain towards the built environment is closely related to people’s personal histories as opposed to the monumental or formal history, which is what attracts the preservation and conservation agencies that turn people’s homes into collective monuments. Herzfeld draws our attention to the fact that the populace is devoid of agency in the act of monumentalising and formalising history by the conservators, who create “traditional neighbourhoods and archaeological monuments of what, for the residents are the streets where their friends and enemies live and die” (ibid.: 6).

Herzfeld is right in arguing that the people of Rethemnos “tried to reclaim their lives from a detemporalised past and a desocialised present” (ibid.: 9). Yet, their preference for Venetian over Turkish culture, or their resentment at not being permitted to dismantle the remaining Turkish wooden window boxes (ibid.: xii), shows that the social/popular history is equally powerful in changing national narratives. Whilst the results of the research showed that the project does not correspond with the cultural codes of everyday culture pertinent to most citizens in Macedonia, this observation is true mainly for the protruding Alexander the Great monument, which occupies the central position in this architectural undertaking. However, when it comes to hiding things considered embarrassing, SK 2014 corresponds perfectly with the sentiment of many Macedonians to detach themselves from the Ottoman past and from Islam, mistakenly correlated with the Albanian population who are often looked upon as enemies of the state by the Macedonian population who took up weapons in 2001 to fight for greater rights. One vivid example is the blatant refusal of the members of council of the municipality of the Center of SK to accept the Major’s proposal to discuss the initiative of the Islamic Community of Macedonia to restore the centuries old Burmalı Mosque at the original site of the central square currently planned for the new City Hall as part of SK 2014.<sup>8</sup> To this end, there is a general anti-Muslim sentiment found among many Macedonians. Hence, at this level, SK 2014 corresponds perfectly well with the “cultural intimacy” concept. Albeit not overtly excited about the monument of Alexander the Great, Macedonian citizens have generally not reacted to the ethnic separation and anti-Muslim perspective this project reaffirms, because they too, feel strong resentment against it and wish to hide it as an embarrassing part of their identity. In other words, the monumental official narratives of SK 2014 are in accord with the popular history of most Macedonians. Clearly SK 2014 aims at creating a Macedonian, Orthodox Christian national identity amidst competing neighbouring agendas, and the multicultural setting of the country. It does so by tearing apart, fragmenting and creating discontinuous segments of the organic tissue of the history of this region and country for the benefit of a few and the loss of the vast majority of Macedonian citizens.

<sup>8</sup> More info can be found at <http://www.utrinski.mk/?ItemID=94166D2418B86C4EA7FEC4D5323EBDEA>.



## Forum Populi, Vox Populi

The second section of the study seeks to shed some light on the divisional impact that the project has had upon the interpretative discourses that have emerged from this seemingly architectural project. In this respect, the study will argue that what seems to be an ongoing public debate whereby views and ideologies clash over the question of the interpretation of the project's multi-perspective and heterogenic values and functions, in essence is a situation of power imbalance and abuse in which the Governmental discourse is trying to silence opposing voices, thus irreversibly risking not only the abolition of the public space, but more importantly the creation of insurmountable social, political and ideological fissures in an otherwise already unstable and threatened national and civil unity and stability.

This section will try to untangle some of the multilayered competing interpretations produced by the largest Macedonian parties – the ruling VMRO DPMNE<sup>9</sup> and the oppositional SDSM,<sup>10</sup> which are in turn enforced and perpetuated by the help of their apologists and like-minded public figures, and are reflected in the popular everyday discourses of Macedonian citizens. Within this context of opposing discourses operating along hierarchically organized levels of enunciation (party-critics-people), we will try to trace a rhetorical and discursive continuity: an inter-relation and interdependence between the formative role of the parties' discourses, their reiteration and amplification in the texts produced by intellectuals, experts, social critics and the like, and their impact on people's attitudes. The purpose of this is to demonstrate how the discourse on the project, although seemingly oppositional is in fact a power ridden, hegemonic discourse of the imposing political elite. The discussion will be positioned against the discourse analytical background as a theoretical frame convenient for the discursive analysis of the production of meaning and its ideological implications. Conceiving of discourse as an inseparable unity of language use, discursive act and social practice (Fairclough 1992; van Dijk 1997) this framework seeks to analyze certain key propositions, their interdependence on various hierarchical levels of production (source-proponents-people), their ideological implications as well as to account for the sociopolitical effects of this language use within the discourse formation so conceived.

To achieve the end of demonstrating the hierarchically organized structure accountable for the production of meaning that is subdued in elite political interests, and to analyse its effects, several various have been analyzed: news articles, interviews, reports, TV debates, TV reports and internet discussion forums. The whole of the analysis is based on and largely organized around three key propositions articulated by the government: that 'the project contributes to the growth of the local economy, to the development of tourism and to the reification of subjugated history'. These propositions are constructed through a series of different argumentative strategies and schemes in which the government mostly relies on the topos of comparison and strategies of differentiation, scapegoating/victimization, and legitimization/delegitimization amongst some. (for a fuller account on these strategies especially in the context of the discursive construction of national identity see Wodak et al. 2009 [1999]) The linguistic manifestation of these strategies have been analyzed on a clause level, by a presentation and discussion of the implicit and explicit links that the clauses used have firstly with the immediate context of occurrence and then intertextually to other aspects of

<sup>9</sup> The acronym is a compound made from the name of the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization (VMRO), an organization formed at the end of the XIX century with the general objective of liberating the then occupied Macedonian territory from Turks, with the modern addition of DPMNE (1991), which stands for the Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity.

<sup>10</sup> The Social Democratic Alliance of Macedonia is the opposition block in Macedonia led by the Social Democratic Party.

the discourse. From here one may work one's way to the ideologemes embedded in such linguistic structures (Fairclough 1992). In addition, the counter-hegemonic voice of the opposing party mainly focuses on the strategy of subverting the 'economy' argument, emphasizing the 'aesthetic' argument and trying to completely delegitimize the whole project.

## Discourse Representation and Analysis

The 'economic benefit' argument was brought to the fore at a press conference held at the end of April 2013 (22. 4. 2013) where the Macedonian Minister of Culture, Mrs. Elizabeta Kanceska Milevska, in an exhaustive manner attempted to justify the financial expenditure by both presenting the project cost and reminding the public of the economic benefit of the project which she described as a capital investment with a visible and verifiable impact upon structural engineering, encouraging the growth of industry, creating new jobs, and contributing to the accumulation of additional income from the number of tourist visits<sup>11</sup>. At the conference, answering a journalist's question referring to the opposition's criticisms of the low aesthetic criteria of the project, the Minister used a referentially vague, but much iterative phrase 'something is being built', which was used as a counter-attack on the absence of any architectural, or construction activities conducted by their major opponents SDSM, in an attempt to delegitimize the oppositions' criticisms. This 'something' is contextually semanticised as 'a movement, (a difference) from the dead spot' left by the previously ruling party, which hadn't built anything against which the current project could be either compared or evaluated.



Figure 2: A view from the "Goce Delcev" bridge, with the new Skopje 2014 buildings seen on the left bank and the "old" modernist building architecture on the right bank of the river (photo credit: Stojan Toshe Nikolovski)

The consistent frame wherein one side continuously builds support for its argument by attacking that of the other was also present in the opposition's discourse which criticizes the project on many grounds including: a) financial embezzlement, b) circumvention of local government laws, urban planning, and building permits, c) the non-transparent manner of planning and decision making, d) an unprofessional and devastating architectural concept e)

<sup>11</sup> The claim of a54% annual growth of tourist visits has been scrutinized recently, as the following analysis shows, demonstrating that the increase has been a marginal one (see Anfas 28. 4. 2013).

an aesthetic kitsch, f) a “cultural rape” that demonstrates a lack of understanding of national and cultural values, g) an expression of political totalitarianism.

The opposition contestation went so far as the attempt of the newly appointed mayor of the Center municipality, Mr. Andrej Zernovski, to put a moratorium on the project in order to financially and legally revise it with the hope of unveiling instances of embezzlement and law-breaking. A little after their public announcement of this intention, the mayor was heavily criticized and ridiculed by many Government-supporting organizations, among which, by the Macedonian 2001 military conflict veterans ‘Bedem’, whose spokesman stated that:

- (1) The revision will face a fierce reaction not only from the organization ‘Bedem’, but also from all Macedonian citizens, (...) this is not a political reaction, but a defense of Macedonian national dignity. (*eVesti* 27. 4. 2013)

This comment, wherein the economic and legal intent of the revision was displaced by national(istic) discourse that reiterates the government’s national identity strengthening strategy (‘homage to national heroes’) is just one example of many apologetic and even politically partisan discourses that defended the project. Other similar justifications could be heard from many quarters including: university professors, political allies, public figures, journalists, and the like. Thus:

- (2) The project does not only actively write history, it opens the forbidden, hidden pages of Macedonian history. (*Kurir* 9. 5. 2013)
- (3) After 56 years I am not ashamed to have a guest from abroad (...) I am not ashamed because I have somewhere to take him to take photographs (...) by building Skopje in the past 7 years we have built a new Alexandria. (*Faktor* 28. 4. 2013)

The first and the second excerpt articulate a naturalizing argument whereby the project is presented as an opportunity for history to speak for itself. The project is thus an ideologically and politically undisputed signification of the subjugated national past. In this sense, the project constitutes a strategy for the scripting of national history, a rhetorically powerful and even visceral reification of the unknown, the hidden and the forbidden. The third excerpt, except for the argument ‘an opportunity to take a picture’, discussed later, confirms the magnitude and the historic significance of the project through the use of the metaphor ‘a new Alexandria’.

The most devoted apologist, the architect Vangel Bozinovski, justifies the project because: a) ‘leaving a lasting mark is a costly endeavor’, and b) “the new look was necessary as the old look lacked completeness and vision” (*24 Vesti* 8. 5. 2013). As for the choice of a baroque style he maintains that Macedonian style in the XXI century does not have to be identical in form and content to 21 century styles elsewhere (*Zebra Online* 9. 5. 2013). Similar to the example above, Bozinovski believes that the project writes the true, genuine history of the Macedonian nation, something that has not been done by the majority of slavophilic historiographers.

On the other hand, the architect Miroslav Grcev, has been criticizing the project on many grounds including: unlawfulness, unruly manner of execution (no political, cultural, aesthetic or architectural research was carried out, and no public debate preceded its acceptance). In his professional opinion, the project is distasteful, an ‘architectural stuttering’ (*24 Vesti* 8. 5. 2013), both a usurpation of public space, and a kitsch and political perversion of a single man. There are a number of likeminded critics who also point to the financial embezzlement involved, and the unlawful and anti-constitutional execution of the project, veiled in secrecy and non-transparency. Some of the architects strongly agree that the project, which made the architectural profession in Macedonia obsolete, has also had a devastating effect on the

spatial development of the city. Its unprofessionalism and lack of expertise has penetrated all levels in which meanings are articulated (ideological, historiographic, urbanistic, cultural, artistic). From an aesthetic point of view, all critics agree that it is the biggest example of kitsch, a counterfeit, epigone project in the history of the country), a theme park that serves the purpose of being consumed, but a park which has, as noted by the architect Bakalcev, an 'obsessive narrativity' (*Okno* 25. 4. 2013). The symbolic burden and emptiness of this totalitarian project is poetically articulated by the artist Liljana Gjuzelova according to whom: 'we have overloaded the emptiness, one void space being filled by another (Gjuzelova for *Okno* survey, in: *Okno* 17. 9. 2012).

These irreconcilable relations between the two poles of the public debate are also reflected in the media reports where apart from a number of favorable media reports ("Citizens supporting Skopje 2014", "Survey: Majority of citizens support the government and the project 2014."), there are a series of critical reports. One of these, aired by the Radio of Free Europe, addresses the issue of re-facading the city center, and the choice of baroque as the aesthetic-architectural code. Except for the objections that the project literally wipes the existing modern look and architectural tradition out of history, (a tradition that has been initiated by the world renowned Japanese architect Kenzo Tange who has been globally awarded for his modernist vision of the city), what is notable in the report, is the bitterly quiet reaction of one of the most acclaimed Macedonian modern architects Mr. Petar Mulichkovski to the speculation to re-façade (in baroque style) the building of the Macedonian government, an object over which he claims complete architectural authorship.



Figure 3: The baroque look of the new building of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs

Such conflicting attitudes adherent to the arguments so produced are also to be found among citizens whose 'conversationalisation of the public discourse' (Fairclough 1995) shows visible traces of influence by political elites. These attitudes can be seen in the citizens ongoing internet discussions. In this respect, it is interesting to start with a reflection upon the competing voices which emerged only a day after the airing of the project with a media visualization of the proposal aired on the 4th February 2010. Even at that early time, the concerns of those opposed revolved around similar issues. The opponents of the project even then spoke of the potential high economic expenditure, which they deemed absurdly unnecessary. In addition they also commented upon the aesthetically and urbanistically appalling vision of

Skopje presented in the video, cynically commented on by one of the discussion participants as: “it looks like a multiplayer on-line game, all we need is a monument commemorating fallen Orchs”.

On the other hand, the supporters also proliferated the very same Governmental argument of ‘something is being done’, articulated in many instantiations like: ‘better to do something and err, than to do nothing’, ‘at least someone is making efforts in this country’, and also ‘I see new buildings, monuments, and objects, I see difference’, all these ideas building up towards the binary metaphor of builder/destroyer applied to the VMRO-SDSM relation now more than ever. In 2013, the arguments have not drastically altered. Those critical of the project now even more fervently condemn the project as being an economic disaster; suspecting that it did not attract as many tourists as the government predicted it would (*Anfas* 28. 4. 2013). The supporters still advocate the benefits of the architectural, urbanistic and spatial remodeling of the city on the grounds of the project’s contribution to the degree of its representability, as observed in the following comment made by one of the forum participants: “take a look at the postcards now and those from five years ago, now there’s something to see” (*Build.mk* 3. 5. 2013). The comment implies a fullness, visual richness, and hence consumptive desirability, a surplus of meaning that was not brought forth by the former government.

## Analytical Reflection and Concluding Remarks

It may be summarized that these opinions are not only in line with the binary argumentative structure formed and imposed by the ‘higher’, more politically elite instances of articulation but are undoubtedly formed by them. From a discursive point of view, it may be said that the project has created an insurmountable gap between the two opposed, un-changing, even still radicalizing subject positions between those in favor and those against it. This status quo perpetuating dialogue is built against a discourse metaphorically structured on binary oppositions such as ‘builders/destroyers’, ‘patriots/betrayers’, ‘totalitarians/democrats’, ‘amateurs/experts’. In this context one linguistically intriguing act is the use of the phrase ‘something is happening’. Judging according to people’s narrativisations, the referent of the phrase ‘something’ is a multiplicity of visually perceptible objects such as facades, monuments and museums. But these are only additional signifiers, and thus lacking more elaborated and concrete *interpretants*,<sup>12</sup> the void is filled with Government supplied *ideologemes* including ‘national identity’, ‘a more attractive look’, ‘a change, a difference’. An ideological difference exists between a rich, but ambiguously signifying image of the city in the present moment, and the poorly signifying former image, sustained by the former government. This in a way threatens to spill over, to use Guzelova’s metaphor, the discourse in which a semiotic battle is being fought for political ends.

This semiotic contest (trying to interpret what the project means) is confusing at best, both on a textual and pragmatic level. Thus, if we conceptualize the whole project as a complex communicative event, a structural analysis of all its elements will show ambiguity and conflict on all levels. For the government, the sender of this complex message is the Macedonian historical (‘debt to our heroes’, ‘a new Alexandria’, ‘rewriting hidden history’), which gives this project an instrumental value as a signifier of the voices of the past which are articulated in an ideologically naturalizing manner through the implicit assumption that the

<sup>12</sup> The term is used in a Peircean sense as the meaning of the sign along with its effect on the interpreter.

Government is not inventing, but presenting history. Thus the project represents the will of history, of the people and is not understood to be the product of transient political institutions, such as a political party. On the other hand, the opposition strongly adheres to the argument that the project represents the abusive will of a single person, an argument time and again perpetuated by the likes of Mr. Grcev who criticize both the historical and the political 'mono-accentuatedness' of the project.



Figure 4: Circus attraction or Historic attraction? The newly placed carousel by the Archeological Museum, which can be seen in the background (Photo credit: Build.mk)

Be it as it may, this ambiguity, this conflicting interpretative contestation is present on all levels of articulation. In this context, the project itself is a complex politically burdened signifier, through which different speaker positions are trying to impose and legitimize their own interpretations. In this respect, some citizens greatest fear is that the contesting signifieds, the interpretations; will not affect the material form and existence of this complex signifier (the objects themselves) and the project will not cease to physically exist. This may lead first to the dominance of a single voiced discourse, and perhaps even to the end of the possibility of any 'double voiced' signification (Bakhtin 1981). It will perpetuate itself through history, but not before it creates an irredeemable gap in Macedonian public and political life. Thus the project itself represents both a factor, among many, and a symptom of Macedonian political power imbalances represented by the hegemonic discourse on the project and materially testified by the physical, imperishable existence of a project that may support only one position, that of the ruling political elite.

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