

## RUSSIA IN SYMBOLIC – MEMORIAL INSCRIPTIONS IN MACEDONIAN URBAN SPACE

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**Key words:** symbols, memorial inscriptions, public space, Macedonia, Russia

**Summary:** The paper focuses on the symbolic and memorial inscriptions in the urban space that represent the image of Russia in Republic of Macedonia, and practically show the ways in which the Russian history and culture symbolically are interpreted in the Macedonian public sphere. An analysis of numerous data obtained as a result of my own field research in tangible and intangible manifestations in the specific domain allows to trace their intensity and their ubiquity in the space, and at the same time shows the mutual interweaving, and convergence of the two cultures: Macedonian and Russian.

**Клучни зборови:** симболи, меморијални инскрипции, јавен простор, Македонија, Русија.

**Резиме:** Трудот се занимава со симболичко-меморијалните инскрипции во урбаниот простор, кои ја репрезентираат сликата за Русија во Македонија. Во овој контекст, зборуваме за имиња на улици, паркови, спомен обележја и т.н. кои практично го покажуваат начинот на кој руската историја и култура симболички се наративизира и интерпретира во македонската јавна сфера. Анализата на бројните податоци добиени како резултат на сопствени теренски истражувања на материјалните и нематеријалните манифестации во конкретниот домен, овозможува да се проследи интензитетот и присутноста на истите во просторот и истовремено дава свој придонес во меѓусебните преплетувања, како и во приближување на двете култури.

The social production of space which includes, among others, setting monumental landmarks, naming streets, parks and so on., is a process that affects not only the semiotic and spatial orientation, but simultaneously it provides identification of certain visions of the concrete site. The paper

focuses on the symbolic and memorial inscriptions in the urban space that represent the image of Russia in Macedonia, and practically show the ways in which the Russian history and culture symbolically are interpreted in the Macedonian public sphere.

An analysis of numerous data obtained as a result of my own field research in tangible and intangible manifestations in the specific domain allows to trace their intensity and their ubiquity in the space, and at the same time shows the mutual interweaving, and convergence of the two cultures: Macedonian and Russian.

The insight into historical data associated to urban culture in Skopje in the period between the two world wars shows the presence of the reference points in space which enabled associative connections with Russia at that time. In the period 1923-25 in Skopje was building a modern hotel / restaurant "Moskva" (Moscow),<sup>1</sup> situated in the most representative part of the city, in the street "Kralj Petar" ("King Petar", today "Makedonija". In this street where the most prominent hotels were located at that time, is noted the existence of the hotel "Rusija" ("Russia"), as well (Kačeva, Hristova, Gjorgjiovka 2002: 153-154).

Such names for these hotels, considering the period when they existed, probably intended to provide credibility, trust and guarantee that it is a superior offer. In this context, giving the name of a visual object, such as the hotel is essential in the creation of point of distinction for potential customers, which will have meaning for them and that will contribute to ensuring a sense of sophistication and superiority over the place (Alderman 2008: 201).

Having in mind that the name of the place is not a passive artifact in space but rather it is a symbolic capital of city's toponymy (Alderman 2008: 199), it provides its own distinction in relation to other hotels at that time. So, "Moscow" among others was recognized as a place visited by richer people.<sup>2</sup> It was especially known as a venue for the city's bureaucracy.<sup>3</sup> This name affected the everyday social practices of the population, accumulating narratives associated with it and thus participating in building

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<sup>1</sup> According to the ads came out about this hotel, its main feature was modern and elegant furniture, good homemade cuisine, as well as natural drinks and fast servants. As owners of the hotel are referred Dorothea Stojanović and Nicola C. Sidić - Sidovski. The hotel was later completely renovated and re-opened on September 1, 1934, and in the ads came out in the daily press in Skopje 1935-36 year are emphasized the presence of water in the bathroom and rooms. See: Kačeva, Hristova, Gjorgjiovka 2002: 155-156.

<sup>2</sup> The amount of hotel tax that is paid according to the quality of service, was 3 dinars - the highest in this area. See: Kačeva, Hristova, Gjorgjiovka 2002: 155-156.

<sup>3</sup> In the words of the chronicler Danilo Kocovski, see more: Spasovski 2014.

the collective memory of the city.<sup>4</sup> In this sense, it is interesting to mention the so-called "Russian beach" which existed in Skopje, where "bosses and richer world bathed" (Kačeva, Hristova, Gjorgjiovska 2002: 233).

In the period after World War II, when Macedonia exists as part of the Yugoslav federation, social production space adopts general determinations, political and ideological directed within the socialist context of the survival of society. During this period, much of the streets of Skopje receive names which commemorate historical events and persons coherent to the socially accepted ideology and whose relationship with Russia becomes visible in spatial features, such as boulevard "Crvena Armija" (Red Army) in Gjorče Petrov, boulevard and bridge "Oktomvriska Revolucija" ("October Revolution") in Karpoš, then the streets "Leninova" and "Leningradska" in the center and many others.

All previously mentioned names of the streets experienced changes in accordance with the new social and political context of the existence of independent Macedonia (see: Služben Glasnik 2012), but much of the streets associated with the Russian culture have managed to keep the former symbolization until today.

Thus, within the present topography of the city, continued "Russian" presence in the space, are noted by street names: "Volgogradska" and "Moskovska" in the municipality of Karpoš, then "Peter Čajkovski", "Petar Draganov", "Fjodor Dostoevski" also in the municipality of Karpoš, "Puškinova", "Esenin", "Ivan Turgenjev", "Lav Tolstoj" in Kisela Voda, "Anton Čehov" in the municipality of Gjorče Petrov, "Lermontova", "Majakovski", "Maxim Gorki" in the municipality of Center etc.

Simply, thanks to the inter Slavic collaborate, particularly topical at the time of the Yugoslav federation survival, Macedonia put on in layers "Russian" representations in public space, which ensure "Russian" symbolic presence in it.

The previous shows that despite the changes in the social and ideological context of independent Macedonia, Russian Culture in Macedonian urban area continues its articulation in street names, through the selection of eminent Russian writers and composers. This is certainly very important because street names convey a message in everyday life and virtually create a sense of space that allows expression and shaping the narratives that accentuate the Russian recognition in it.

Long time after independence, Macedonian urban space despite the "inherited" did not note the other spatial features associated with the Russian history and culture. However, recent years characterize increased

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<sup>4</sup> Even today the name of this hotel is mentioned in numerous news reports and in narratives of chroniclers.

activity in this area. Besides, re-naming the street "Zelengora" (Kisela Voda) in "Viktor Ivanovič Grigorovič" (Služben Glasnik 2012), according to the name of the first Russian who came to Macedonia with records of monasteries, churches and geography of Macedonia, there are "Russian corners" recognizable in two municipalities in Skopje - Kisela Voda and Karpoš.

Namely, in 2009 marking the 210 anniversary of the birth of Alexander Pushkin, in Kisela Voda, on the eponymous street, has been put in order and opened a park named after this famous in the world, Russian poet. Along horticultural landscaping: planting of many birch trees in the place, setting up benches and lampposts and others accompanying elements, the park includes setting of pedestal in the shape of a truncated pyramid,<sup>5</sup> seven feet tall, with a bust of the poet on it.

It is one meter high and made of bronze by Russian sculptor Leonid Vatnjik. According to engineer Ljubomir Gigovski, who made the architectural decision of the park, it is a mixture of traditional religious forms, supplemented with elements typical of the time and place where the poet lived (Arsoska, 2009).<sup>6</sup>

Thus, the park has the shape of a cross which symbolizes the act of death of Pushkin who had died with open arms and in the middle of the cross-shaped paths, is placed his monument. The arrangement of the park is an initiative of the International Federation of Russian-language writers and the Embassy of the Russian Federation in Macedonia, which financed it and is presented as a "gift from Russia to Macedonia".<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> The pedestal has the shape of a truncated pyramid made of granite, and all four sides seem trapezoids. The truncated pyramid and the trapezoids are symbolic of a broken life of the poet, his literary work and enormous potential. The four sides of the pyramid are a symbol of the evangelists: St. Luke, Matthew, John and Mark (According the speech of Oleg Volovik, president of the International Federation of Russian-language writers, held on April 7, 2009, at the opening of the monument to A.S. Puškin. See more in: Pametnik A.S. Pushkinu 2009. Accessed: 14.03.2016.

<sup>6</sup> According to the data placed on the site of the International Federation of Russian-language writers, the cross has a length of 36 meters - "as many years as the poet has." See full description at: Pametnik A.S. Pushkinu 2009. Accessed: 14.03.2016.

<sup>7</sup> This is the project realized within the program "World Cultural Heritage, fundamental values, Russian language and a world without war", which predicts monuments to Pushkin to be placed in several countries.



Monument to Alexander Pushkin in Kisela Voda (Popovska, 2016)

On the other hand, as a result of accepting the initiative of the Embassy of the Russian Federation in Macedonia to build a monument to the Russian cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin, in the municipality of Karpoš, on April 16, 2015, it was discovered a commemorative plaque.<sup>8</sup> It is presented as “a worldwide symbol of the limits of human achievement and opportunity”.<sup>9</sup>

According to the Mayor of Skopje, the design idea of the layout of a plaque is represented by the Russian Ambassador in the Republic of Macedonia, accepted as such, and after its preparation donated to the municipality of Karpoš (Kanal5 2015).

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<sup>8</sup> It should be mentioned that according to the news placed on the site of the Embassy of Russian Federation in Republic of Macedonia, the monument to Yuri Gagarin was discovered in Strumica, as well, on October 4, 2012. It is made by the Russian sculptor Gregorij Potocki. See: Ambasada na Ruskata Federacija vo RM, 2012.

<sup>9</sup> Speech by Mayor of Skopje Koce Trajanovski at the very disclosure of the monument. See: Večer 2015 (Accessed: 15.03.2016).



Monument to Yuri Gagarin in Karpoš (Ristovska- Josifovska, 2016)

Previously described monuments placed in the City of Skopje, as well as other Russian symbols in public space over the country such as: Russian Cross in Bitola, honoring the Russian Imperial Consul Alexander Rostov, who died on this territory in 1903,<sup>10</sup> then Russian memorial cross and marble plaque in honor of the fallen Russian soldiers - placed on German cemetery in Prilep, on the occasion of the hundredth anniversary of the First World War and the twentieth anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between Macedonia and Russia,<sup>11</sup> represent images that express the notations of Russian identity in Macedonian public space.

<sup>10</sup> "In 1913 in Bitola was set Orthodox cross in memory of Rostkovski. During World War II, the cross was removed. It was raised again in 2003, a few meters from the original location ... " (Bogoevska 2015). The consecration of the cross is made on May 24, 2005 by representatives of the Russian Church and the Macedonian Orthodox Church, on the occasion of three years of the opening of the Russian consulate and anniversary of the restoration of Russian Cross. See more: (P.C. 2005 and Večer 2009).

<sup>11</sup> The monument is set on August 1, 2014 and symbolizes the 100th anniversary of the First World War for Russia. See more: Zenit 2014; 10bez10 2014; Pela Net 2014. In this context, the plan is to build a bell tower in Skopje, as a second part to perpetuate the memory of Russian soldiers in Macedonia (see: Turiševa 2014).

These monumental productions are from recent times, and it is notable tendency of intensification in this domain. If we look at the monument as a process through which the story is manifested in space, then such representations shape the "Russian Story" that show the Russian presence in it. Considering that all features are set at initiative and as a donation from the Embassy of the Russian Federation in Macedonia, it is clear that this is a political strategy that Russia used to increase the visibility of its own narrative in Macedonian memorial presence. With the entry of its own history in Macedonian traditions, Russia seeks to legitimize their claims about the historical, political and moral authorities. It is because, participation in the raising of monuments and the definition of its content practically legitimize their protagonists (Minta, 2009: 38).

The choice of symbols which will be highlighted and reproduced in a given space is a result of functional dialogue, in our case between Macedonia and Russia. According to available data, on the setting of "Russian" monuments in Kisela Voda and Karpoš, are preceded a meeting of the highest representative of the Embassy of the Russian Federation in the Republic of Macedonia with representatives from Macedonian state and city governments (Kanal5, 2015). The significance of this dialogue is confirmed by the letter of the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Russia - S. Lavrov, addressed to the organizers and participants of the ceremony at the opening of the monument to Pushkin in Kisela Voda. In the letter, he praised the leadership in Macedonia and the authorities of the City of Skopje, as well as Russian compatriots for active support in this particular domain. Inscription of the world famous Russian – Pushkin, in Macedonian's symbolic space, for Lavrov is "a new symbol of the strength and depth of the traditions, friendship and cooperation, which linking Russia and Macedonia."<sup>12</sup>

In reality, monuments or memorial spaces tell the history of a selected and controlled manner. I say this because such inscriptions in space while representing history, they are more a mirror of contemporary events, questions, and in general tensions in society (Alderman, Dwyer, 2009: 52). Pre-made historical retrospective on the developments in this domain, clearly confirms that these areas are "open-ended conditionally malleable symbolic systems" (Alderman, Dwyer, 2009: 52), because their contents are subject to change, to the constant re-evaluation, the values embedded in them can be re-interpreted, or fused to a "new" content, depending on the current socio-political circumstances (Popovska, 2015: 30).

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<sup>12</sup> The letter is available within the text: Monument AS Pushkin 2009. Accessed: 14.03.2016.

This very well illustrates the above mentioned examples, when the changed circumstances of the existence of Macedonia conditioned "delete" of designations in the city toponymy related to Lenin, the October Revolution, the Red Army, etc. On the other hand, toponyms related to culture are preserved as such, and these contents continue to be in the spotlight in the latest "Russian" inscriptions in the Macedonian symbolic space, as well. Simply, particular historical period or a concrete situation "select" complex of symbols in a given period that may be accentuated (Popovska, 2015: 34). Therefore, the Russian foreign minister, in the contents of Russian culture, sees the new symbol that will contribute "to the further strengthening and developing the Russian-Macedonian relations." At the same time, he emphasized his conviction that this "fruitful humanitarian and cultural cooperation," of the two countries will continue with new initiatives and projects. This shows very clearly that it is a political strategy that seeks to ensure Russia's visibility in the public space or symbolically convey a message that it is here and it will continue to legitimize itself through the process of "entering" space contents to the ground.

On the other hand, giving permission for the inscription of the "Russian Story" in the public space and contribute to the remarkable intensification of Macedonian-Russian cooperation in the cultural sphere, it shows the aspiration of Macedonia to establish close relations with the Russian Federation.

The importance of symbolic representations in public spaces, and the power of the appointment in place of the commemoration directly related to the question: What version of the past is made visible to the space, in everyday vocabulary of residents, simultaneously visually and verbally? This is very important, because appearing on street signs, addresses, advertisements, maps particular past becomes part of one's frame of reference, in the present case of Macedonia's one. The naming, whether it is a monument or street, in commemorative sense is the process of introducing the past into the present, because it helps to inscribe (desired) past in the geography of everyday life.

In fact, in this way, through the monuments and street names, Russia highlight its legitimacy and influence in the Macedonian public area, that becomes available to the wider audience, and such notations open debate and reinterpretation between social groups.

Symbolic representations of Russia are integrating into a Macedonian contemporary urban culture not only through the state / city government, but also by individuals that love Russia and who show respect towards the Russian leader Vladimir Putin. An interesting example of this is the bar called "Putin" in Skopje (see photos: Vujović, 2014).



Previously presented enough illustrative present the way in which Russian culture is portrayed in the Macedonian contemporary urban space. However, it should not be forgotten that every place of memory is closely related to the policies of defining: what is historically / socially important or what is worthy to be a part of public memory, which certainly has an impact on an individual level. Hence, the importance and the number of Russian symbolic representations to Macedonia will always depend on the interest, and the stakes in the two countries, as well, in promoting cultural and other cooperation, aimed at the enclosing the two cultures: Macedonian and Russian.

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