Troubles with History: Skopje 2014

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"Even the automobiles have an air of antiquity here".
Guillaume Apollinaire
"Only here", Chirico once said, "is it possible to paint. The streets have such gradation of gray."
Walter Benjamin

Building Bonanza

Skopje, the capital of the Republic of Macedonia at the moment undergoes one of Europe's biggest urban and art upheavals – the project is dubbed Skopje 2014. Labeled as a "building bonanza",(1) by the British Guardian, Skopje 2014 project was planned by the Government for several years under relative lack of transparency, until it was officially presented in February 2010. The plan seeks to transform the city center of Skopje into a rich concentrate, with a wide range of interventions and numerous new buildings: a triumphal arch, fountains, memorials, new Macedonian Orthodox church, museums, footbridges, a new theater, the national archives, the foreign ministry, the constitutional court, the electronic communications agency, etc. The central part of Skopje 2014 is the Sculpture Project with over 50 sculptures, all of them to be placed within a 1.5 km radius in the city center, of which centrally located is a 22 meters-high monument of Alexander the Great.

Other items on the agenda are: the reconstruction of buildings (including the Parliament) with domes and new facades; erecting 60 three meters-high sculptures of the historical world politicians, among them of Abraham Lincoln and Winston Churchill, in concrete, stone and bronze imprinted on the new facade of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs; a Museum of National

Struggle with a hundred life-size wax models of historical figures; a big panoramic wheel, artificial summer beaches on both banks of the Vardar river; parking-lot structures, etc. Since its first presentation, the plan has been changed several time; additional objects and buildings popped up, while others were moved or changed their utility.2

The main creator and investor is the Government of the Republic of Macedonia (i.e. its ruling conservative party VMRO-DPMNE, which took power in 2006 and was re-elected in 2008 and 2011) with estimated 80 to 200 million euros. In 2006, the Ministry of Culture announced a public competition, but no international competitor won the bid, and instead the design and execution have been entrusted to local architects and artists, most of them previously unknown to the public. (3)

The project commemorates all sorts of historical characters, from the Antique period: Alexander the Great, his father Philip II and his mother Olimpias of Epirus; figures of early Christianity: Saint Cyril, Saint Methodius, Saint Clement, Saint Naum; notable historical figures who were born or ruled in or around Skopje: the Byzantine Emperor Justinian I, the Byzantine Tzar Samuel, Mother Theresa, etc., as well as a league of freedom fighters that fought for the Macedonian independence. The critics labeled the project as Antiquisation, referring to the term coined by the historians to explain the Renaissant practice of giving a city the appearance of ancient Rome or Athens (a phenomenon visible in and after the 15th century in Italy and all over Europe). (4) However, the Antiquisation, as a label, was meant to be more than an explanation of a sudden love of the country for the classical poetics, rather, it was meant as a pointer to the nationalistic myth-building. Many analysts accused that the project included aspects of social engineering, and its purpose being an attempt to construct a nationalistic superstate. However, the term Antiqusation does not fully explain the project, also because it is intended to engulf a whole lineage of history, from Ancient, to Medieval to modern Macedonia, plus to commemorate different world artifacts, styles, leaders and phenomena, not necessarily connected to the territory or the nation.

Diachrony and Synchrony of Skopje 2014

Skopje 2014 is a peculiar example of the exact opposite of today's regular laments about the architecture becoming Americanized, postmodernized, globalized, etc., in which the glittering metropolitan centers of glass and steel are reaching its aesthetic climax in the meaningless "zero-buildings" (such as enormous shopping malls boxed in glass), etc. When the history is used in today's contemporary architecture, it is used mainly to neutralize the shock-potential of history, its dangerous Chauvinism. The new postmodern historicism (a combination of retro styles and genres, of "everything goes", of pastiche) is meant to weaken the national borders, to claim "the end of history"; "historicity" today celebrates the nomadic dynamism, world without local myths, and cultivates cynical distance away from any history. Skopje 2014 is the strict opposite of this. The buildings and figurative sculptures of the project are quite serious when imitating the old styles in architecture (neo-romanticism, neo-classicism, neo-baroque), the imitation is not meant to play mockingly with the obsolete, or used ironically to portend an increasing cynical gap, but are used to send a "serious" note to the world that Macedonia is on the map of the bourgeois societies. The artistic tendencies of the project are based on the 19th century self-

centered megalomania, and the return to pre-modern glorification of styles. According to Slavoj Žižek the difference between the modernism and the postmodernism in the architecture(5) is that in modernism, a building was supposed to obey one all-encompassing great Code, while in postmodernism there are multiplicity of codes.(6) Although consisted of everything historical, from Alexander the Great to Winston Churchill, Skopje 2014 is not here to serve the multiplicity of codes, but one great Code: an old-fashioned pride and dignity of a bourgeois capital of a superstate.

Skopje 2014 project commemorates different historical artifacts precisely because that was the 19th century bourgeois premise of the eclecticism in architecture – a city as a world in miniature. As Walter Benjamin wrote in his book "The Arcades Project," a city wanted: "to seize the essence of history".(7) The Government seemingly treated the main square as if it is within the four walls of its apartment; the city center as a huge living room of the nation: with its baroque buildings and classicistic sculptures ("what does the Government think is the best for our living room?"), yet to serve but one purpose: to build a superstar nation, worthy or pride and prestige. "[To] disclose a church, a train station, an equestrian statue, or some other symbol of civilization"(8) – these were the ideals common in the 19th century, according to Walter Benjamin. His elaboration of the 19th century tendency "to ennoble technological necessities through spurious artistic ends."(9) to some extent explains Skopje 2014 project. It explains the wax museum (Benjamin wrote: "No immortalizing [is] so unsettling as that of the ephemera and the fashionable forms preserved for us in the wax museum"(10)); it explains the mandatory domes above the building, as well as decorative facades ("Ornament is to this house what the signature is to a painting"(11)); it explains the political celebrities glued to the buildings, the monuments of everybody from Justinian I to Abraham Lincoln ("The impression of the old-fashioned can arise only where, in a certain way, reference is made to the most topical." (12)); it explains the building of lions on the bridges (the lions convey an image of a rich country); it explains the returning to baroque and rococo ("Every stone bears the mark of despotic power, and all the ostentation makes the atmosphere, in the literal sense of the words, heavy and close…" (13)). The idea behind Skopje 2014 is to repeat the old motifs, "as they once were", without the cynical distance, which arguably makes the Project a scary and totalitarian display of power.

Should Skopje 2014 be labeled as the 19th century pre-modern eclecticism or as postmodernism? If we are to understand the idea of a national city becoming historical (a museal approach to urban life) by means of attracting money, tourists, new residents, and to satisfy the desire of the local elites, than Skopje 2014 belongs to the widely understood 19th century eclecticism in architecture. But, with its intense admiration for the old-style ornaments (which serve no functionality) put on the buildings with pure utilitarian function (such as the electronic communications agency, or the constitutional court, or the foreign ministry), then the project could also be explained with the terms "decorated sheds" and "neo-Brutalism",(14) used by Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour in their book "Learning from Las Vegas".(15) Skopje 2014 largely consists of ritzy and extravagant facades on buildings where the citizens will go to perform their most daily activities; the buildings are merely supposed to look better, but not to be better, therefore the term "decorated sheds" explains Skopje 2014 phenomenon of mandatory building of the "rhetorical front" on the "conventional behind".(16) Although because of its historicity, Skopje 2014 is close to a definition of pre-modern eclecticism, paradoxically, it is

also a showcase of the "decorated sheds", due to the cacophony of useless and inadequate architectural symbolism.

One predominant feature which fuses two seemingly paradoxical paradigms of the Skopje 2014 project (the 19th century eclecticism and the postmodern "decorated sheds"), is of the ideal of miniaturization of history, a concept which explains why besides the need to glorify the past via various monuments, the project also inclines towards "decorated sheds" – altogether an important stylistic phenomenon rooted all around the Eastern European architecture in the past two decades, most notably after the fall of the Iron Curtain and the end of modernism in architecture. One explanation about this Eastern European appeal to build both historical monuments and "decorated sheds" lies in the desire to send two opposed messages at the same time: by glorify the past they are on the map of the "serious" nations of the world, yet by building cacophonic, inadequate symbolisms, they are "at leisure"; they are playful and relaxed about their own past, just as "the rest of the world".

To dwell deeper into congruity of these two different architectural codes we are using the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben's complex reading of society's need to simultaneously place itself on the two opposed paradigms: diachrony and synchrony (among others, via the concept of miniaturization) from his book "Infancy and History" (1978). Agamben developed a theory about the complex relations between infancy and history – a society needs to both dismantle and distort the past and expand the present, but at the same time to "reduce" the present and zoom-in on the past, as two opposite tendencies.

Building on Levi-Strauss's fundamental distinction between cold and hot societies, Agamben developed a critical reading of the society's relation to its history to either enlarge the sphere or rituals and historical fixations (in Levi-Strauss terminology the so-called: cold societies) at the expense of play, or vice versa (the hot societies). (17) The cold society is operating on the level of diachrony, the human time is measured according to the number of monuments, archaeological objects, archived documents or worshiping of antiquity as 'material content' that guarantees one's existence in history. In such a society, time needs to be preserved in its documentary character, because it values its place in the world according to its place in the chronology of the events.(18) The Agamben's reading of Levi-Strauss's theory, however, offers a rather paradoxical insight into the results of this modeling on the level of diachrony, the paradox being that the obsession with history (as a guarantor of one's certainty as a nation) eventually results with such societies having frozen history,(19) not able to move along the lines of diachrony.

The second type of society (the hot society) is operating on the level of synchrony, such that the play is increased on the account of suspension of the mania for historical hoarding. According to Agamben, this suspension of historical (the refusal to collect monuments and preserve ethnographic content, cessation of worshiping antiquity, etc), paradoxically does not result in historical time being erased, but on the contrary, the history is being saved and transformed into "human time". Agamben writes: "In play, man frees himself from sacred time and 'forgets' it in human time",(20) meaning that only play possesses the quality of transforming synchrony into diachrony. In proving this paradoxical thesis Agamben builds two toposes: that of a "playland" as an ultimate historyland, (21) and that of a toy as "the cipher of history".(22) The nature of a

toy in Agamben's writing is that it possesses a deeply rooted historicity in itself. He writes: "the essence of the toy… is then, an eminently historical thing: indeed, it is, so to speak, the Historical in its pure state."(23) Of course, there cannot exists a society in which all diachrony is transformed into synchrony and the play totally replacing the historical rituals, yet the differential margin between diachrony and synchrony is what identifies the human time, in other words, history itself. According to Agamben, that is the reason why only societies that can regularly get rid of the mania to build monuments to the national and historical myths, can really live on the level of diachrony, i.e. in the human history.

How is one to translate Agamben's concepts of diachrony and synchrony in reading Skopje 2014 architectural and political project? Craving to situate themselves along the lines of pride democratic nations of the world after the fall of communism, the Macedonian government introduced Skopje 2014 as a need to be perceived as a "normal" society, relaying on the idea that every culture is first and foremost a particular experience of time. By pushing an agenda to erect monuments to everything historical in order to have a guarantor of the nation's existence in history, they erased precisely the diachronic intervals between past and present, as is a case with every society insisting on a diachrony (thus turning it into a cold society). As a consequence, that operation helped freeze the historic time, by suspending the playfulness as a quality of synchrony and of the existence of oneself in the historic time. And since the play was suspended, the melodramatic sentiment was installed. Since one may note that as kitschy and as laughable Alexander the Great on a horse in the 2011 Macedonia might be to a critic's eye, we need to bear in mind that it serves a purpose for the political elites: people will always experience monuments like this one as authentic and deeply emotional. When building the nationalistic superstate symbols, there is no place for ironic distance. Benjamin wrote: Kitsch is always sincere. In Macedonia in recent years, images of Alexander the Great have been used to advertise everything from traveler's books to various wines, and it is not an ironic playfulness on part of the marketers, but a targeting of the deeply held emotions of people. While a substantial part of the Macedonian civil society protested about the project, for an ordinary Macedonian, the project is perceived as something "authentic". Ask a young educated Macedonian cosmopolite, s/he will tell you it's ironic, but ask a more representative sample and they'll tell you Alexander the Great makes them feel good, makes them feel strong.(24)

Agamben's concept of the marginal difference between diachrony and synchrony further helps us understand the sizable split that Skopje 2014 produced in the Macedonian identity. An opinion poll conducted in March 2010 showed that 54 per cent of the citizens do not support Skopje 2014 project, and 46 per cent do. This means that the project "forced" Macedonians to choose between being Slavs or being descendants of Ancient Macedonians, by making them choose between those who support the diachronic paradigm, and those who refuse it. Even though the nationalistic images of Skopje 2014 drift away from the regular complaints about the "(architectural) imperialism under the signs of Disney and McDonald's",(25) it is interesting that when the project was first introduced, most of the opponents to the project referred to it as a Disneyland, or a Legoland, or Las Vegas. What we see here is not only the stubbornness of "the Disney fatwa" (Koolhaas's term) in architecture, and also how strong a denominator the Western mass culture is when explaining the urban developments around the globe, but also to what extent the extravagant combination of the 19th century eclecticism and the 20th century "decorated sheds" of the project puzzle its critics, and Disneyfication comes to label even

projects which are highly nationalistic. But, even more complex, although when the Disney metaphor is used in today's architecture, it is meant mostly as an insult or an offense to architecture, yet Agamben's theory offers the material to understand that the Disney metaphor is paradoxically something historical in its essence, as a contradiction that resides within the structural tension between diachrony and synchrony. Namely, as was already mentioned, the project introduced considerable split in the Macedonian national identification with people self-identifying as either belonging to the societies obsessed with history (the government proposal), or to ones inclined towards the "play", as explained in Agamben. This split, not by an accident, is situated along the generational lines. Since the historical Skopje 2014 is the exact opposite of the playfulness of today's architecture (of Agamben's synchronic society), and as such is not designed to appeal to younger generations, when the first monuments materialized, the "Disney metaphor" was actually not only used as an offence to the project, but was paradoxically at the same time, used as a shield on the part of the younger citizens who disliked the conservative facelift of the city. For example, when in June 2011, Alexander the Great monument arrived from Florence, it arrived apiece in several trucks. The comments in the online social networks were that Alexander arrived as a gigantic Kinder Surprise egg (Kinder Surprise egg is one of the most popular chocolate products in Central and Eastern Europe: it is an egg shell made of chocolate, and wrapped up in lively-colored paper; after one unwraps the egg and cracks the chocolate shell open, one finds in it parts to assemble the toy) – so after the parts of Alexander's monument were put together, the commenters asked who ate the chocolate shell.

The comments were directed towards the possible financial corruption behind the project, which costs enormous amounts of money, for a country where one third of the population is reported to be unemployed. This reaction proves Agamben's concept of a toy as an architectural relict, as exceedingly historical thing ("the Historical in its pure state"), with half of the citizens intuitively preferring the toy-ish aspect of the monument as something worth dealing with (the synchrony of life), instead of being impressed by the grandeur historical figure, which not only intimidates but freezes historicity.

However, apart from this structural identity division, on a concrete cultural level, Skopje 2014 furthermore 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. The biggest Roma settlement in Europe, the district Šuto Orizari situated near Skopje, remains a modernity noir in form of a slam, or a ghetto, unaffected by the grandiose Skopje 2014 project. Furthermore, Skopje 2014 translates history to an archaic family drama, as a way of scaling down the great nation to domestic size. The project is consisted of monuments to the Son (Alexander), to his Father (Philip II), and to his Mother (Olimpias), as in every patriarchal daddy-mommy-me triad, yet the travesty already resides within the desired model. While, Alexander is imagined to be the ideal Son from the nationalistic dreams (the greatest military and political leader of all times), his suspected bisexuality is a slap in the face of the nationalists, and one could jokingly conclude that: "Skopje has the largest statue of a gay man in the world erected by a homophobic political leadership".(26) Besides the ethnic and patriarchal antagonisms (the inferior status of women represented, the father-son axis, etc.) the monuments also reflect the class antagonisms in the society – for example, Alexander the Great monument is 22 meters high, while the sculpture called "Cleaner of Shoes" placed near the Alexander's

sculpture is only a meter high, so we could say that the form is not a "mere" form, but it involves dynamics and materiality of social life (and reading Žižek, one could say that this was precisely the articulation of the Governmental fantasy of "longing for inequality",(27) of clear hierarchy and class distinctions which to a certain degree falls in line with the rightist Macedonian Government known for holding strict hierarchical order, with the Prime Minister acting as a micro manager of the country).

Since no public discussions or debates took place before the presentation of Skopje 2014 project, soon after the plan was presented by the Government, a grass-root protest movement called the Archibrigadiers was established, the first of a kind in independent Macedonia. The protesters actualizing the famous 1960s Henri Lefebvre motto of the "right to the city" and the movement rallied against the forceful and ethnocratic reordering of the public space, using new social media to communicate their views (some of their creative slogans include: "Skopje – best before: 2014", or "Skopje 1963 Earthquake – Skopje 2014 Mindquake"). The tensions reached its heights in March 2009, when a group of students from the Architectural Faculty in Skopje tried to protest peacefully against the project, and were beaten by religious and rightists counter-protestants, in the presence of the police and media. Maybe the biggest paradox is that, oddly enough, with Skopje fighting over its identity, it is the leftists who, in their struggle against the nationalistic-style rebuild, find themselves defending the status quo!

Architecture as Politics

While the Antique roots of the Macedonian nation were generally struck out from the vocabulary of politicians, writers, journalists and social scientists for the past two centuries, the fuzzy idea about Alexander as an ancestor of the Macedonian nation indeed existed in different, marginalized segments of the society: mainly in folk songs, in writings from the 19th century national Enlightenment, in the 20th century's resistance towards the Yugoslav communist identity, and in the opinionated pieces in the Macedonian press after the country's independence. But, the Antique roots were never elevated to a state ideology, due to two main constraints: the obvious Slavic roots of today's Macedonians, evident in the language, religion, and the cultural traits of the Macedonian people; and because of the county's history of statelessness, so no political elite could use Alexander as a platform for a national cohesion. But, in the middle of the past decade, the huge symbolic capital of Alexander the Great has been rediscovered by Macedonians, and soon the process of Antiquisation begun: at first, by putting ancient labels on the airport, the city stadium and the highway, and renaming them after Alexander or his father, Philip II, and finally, by the start of the Skopje 2014 project. The Bulgarian theoretician Ivaylo Ditchev writes: "In a way, antiquity is like oil: A western company discovers it, then young nation-states nationalize it and start selling it back to the West."(28) The first to use the huge symbolic potential of Alexander the Great in the Eastern and Southern Europe were the Greeks during their 19th century revival of Hellenism,(29) although already in the 19th century, some Western historians objected this revival. In Macedonia, when the rightist party gained political power in 2006, the country appeared as yet another Balkan candidate to ask for its part of the Alexander's heritage (Alexander the Great was born in the Balkans). In the 21st century, the Macedonians couldn't go for the concept of Hellenism (it would have been a direct negation of the Slavic language and culture of the nation, also Alexander was used as the embodiment of the boundary that separates the (neo)Hellenes from the Slavs(30)), so instead the Macedonians went

for a fuzzy idea of the union of all the Macedons (the Antique) and the Macedonians (the Slavic ones). If we push this idea to the extremes, it will mean that while the rest of the Balkan Peninsula was being Hellenized, Latinized, Slavofied, or Turkeytrotted, only Macedonians stayed Macedonians (despite being Slavofied, Turkeytrotted, Latinized, or even Hellenized).(31)

The evident problem of the present Macedonian Antiquisation was first displayed via its most notable paradox: When in October 2010 in an interview with the British Guardian, the Macedonian former foreign minister Antonio Milošoski said: "Alexander the Great, in fact, had no passport or birth certificate",(32) he literally acknowledged that Alexander cannot be part of any modern concept of a nation. Even more interesting answer was provided by the President of the Culture Union of the Vlachs in the Republic of Macedonia in August 2011, when he said: "We, Vlachs, consider ourselves to be direct descendents of Alexander the Great. Unfortunately, Alexander the Great did not speak the Vlach's language, and he was not a Vlach!"(33) And is this bizarre answer not the best indicator of unmasking the shadow-theater functioning behind the national-historic appropriations? ("I don't even pretend that I believe my ancestor is indeed my ancestor, however, my ancestor does not need to comply with my nationality, the reciprocity is not even expected, since my ancestor is by no means obliged to return my identity back to me!"). What one may acknowledge in this case is that the free exchange of identities was done one way, and that it stands on its own – most of the national countries which emerged out of the Yugoslav federation, for the past two decades, also tried to relate to some famous ancestor, both for the national homogenization, and for the international prestige: two most recent bizarre conflicts were from 2011 – one was a feud between Croatia and Italy over the nationality of Marco Polo, and the other between Croatia and Britain over the nationality of King Arthur. Another sign of the troubled Antiquisation is the monument of Alexander itself, from which his name virtually disappeared. Although the Skopje's sculpture bears a great resemblance to the ancient hero, the Macedonian official name of the monument is "Warrior on a Horse". By separating the subject of art (the actual historical figure depicted) and its appearance (a mask of an unnamed warrior), the Macedonian Government wanted to externalized the enemy (here, the Greeks), but the perversity is that it acted in the exact manner as their rival Greece, who after the break-up of Yugoslavia and creation of the independent Macedonian state, forced the international community to create a provisional name for Macedonia – the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, or FYROM in short form – altogether a name which highly humiliates Macedonians, not only because the name Yugoslavia remained in the reference to the country that claims the Yugoslav heritage was a negation to its longing for independence, but also because the identity of the country was rendered descriptive and masked under a cucumbered name. In a strange, almost masochistic twist, the Government copied the very solution it otherwise despised, masking the identity of the monument under the provisional name the "Warrior on a Horse" (this mask-frame further produced a line of jokes in the new social media, and the newly renamed city's stadium "Philip II" was again mockingly re-named by the cynics into "The Father of the Warrior on a Horse", the hotel "Alexander Palace" renamed into "The Warrior on a Horse's Palace", etc).

In a carnivalesque sense, Skopje 2014 could be interpreted along the lines of Slavoj Žižek's "In defense of Lost Causes": When Macedonians appeared unable to resolve the name dispute, they pushed their position to the extreme, and they did not reject the rejection, but they reinvented the rejection, providing even more material to be rejected by their northern neighbor. And the timing

of Skopje 2014 proves it. After Greece blocked Macedonia to join the NATO alliance at the Bucharest summit in 2008, the Skopje 2014 project was initiated, so the Government actually acted according to the strategy which Žižek explained with quoting Beckett's line: "After one fails, one can go on and fail better".(34)

When in the above-mentioned interview for the Guardian, the former minister was asked to comment on the plans to erect a 22 meters bronze monument of Alexander, having in mind the 20-year long name dispute between the Republic of Macedonia and Greece over the name Macedonia, and the right to claim Alexander as a national hero, he replied: "This is our way of saying [up yours] to them!"(35) Known otherwise for his reserved and rigid overall attitude in public, the minister's alleged outburst immediately produced a line of hilarious comments in parts of the Macedonian press: "The Warrior on a Horse" monument was ironically renamed into "A Finger on a Horse", with journalists writing that instead of a giant monument of Alexander, it would have been much cheaper for the country "to simply erect the minister's middle finger in its natural size".(36) The "digitus impudicus" (impudent finger) already mentioned in the Ancient Roman writings,(37) was immediately denied by the minister; however Guardian refused to correct its statement.(38) But, regardless of whether the minister used his body language or not, the international community already considers the monument of Alexander to be an irrational political "digitus impudicus" intended towards the neighbor. Probably the same logic of irrationality functions in explaining most of the Eastern European emerging national myths after the fall of the Iron Curtain – if, after the fall of communism "we failed" with the reasonable means of joining the developing world: dialogue, negotiations, and solutions (the parliamentary democracy was very young, the countries were lacking the know-how of talking with their political enemies, etc.), we (these countries) went into the opposite direction, and in spite of the horror with which such endeavors will be welcomed by the liberal world, they perversely actualized the worst enemy of today's democracy: the extremist national myths. And this is exactly the case where we see Agamben's theory of transforming the political events into architectural structures and architectural structures into political events.

Skopje's Changing Ideologies

The top-down approach in reconstructing Skopje is not a new idea for the city. When architect Antonio Petrov from the Harvard University was visiting Skopje in 2010, he pointed out that "Skopje 1963" lead to "Skopje 2014".(39) He was referring to the devastating earthquake which hit Skopje in 1963, when sixty per cent of the city was destroyed. The rebuilding was conducted by the politicians and architects who decided about the future outlook of Skopje, and the citizens were forced to accept the concept of the city which was offered to them. The rebuilding team under the patronage of the UN included the most renown architects of the time: Cibrowski (best known for his reconstruction of Warsaw after the Second World War), the Japanese architect Kenzo Tange (who planned the restoration of Hiroshima), Luigi Piccinato (who worked on restoration of Rome), J.H. van den Broek and Bakema (the planners of new Rotterdam), etc.(40) The idea about the top-down approach during reconstructing of Skopje was also pointed out by Robert Home, who in his study of Skopje's Master Plan adopted after the Skopje's earthquake, says: "The Master Plan left a legacy of submissive public attitudes, possibly linked to centuries of Ottoman subjugation – an expectation that the state and its technocrats would dictate solutions."(41)

Surely, Skopje 2014 cannot be compared to Skopje 1963: the 2014 plan was launched on a state level only, and the execution was handed to the artists previously anonymous to the public, while Skopje 1963 was built by the world' top architectural elite, and although the full implementation of the master plan adopted in 1965 never materialized due to lack of resources, Skopje in the 1980s (when the reconstruction was over) was considered a successful story. On the other hand, today, all of the reconstructions are handled by artists without any substantial portfolio. Furthermore, Macedonia never had a strong school of classicism, baroque, or rococo, which means that basically the artists were delivering their art while learning their craftsmanship. The result is that most of the objects of Skopje 2014 appear unpolished. In his book "Rape Skopje" the art historian Nebojša Vili? analyzed 27 smaller sculptures placed in Skopje by November 2009 within four merits: the theme, the shape, the location and the aesthetic value, and on the one to five scale, he gave an overall grade of 3.27 for all the smaller monuments, concluding that: "From the point of view of the sociology of art, we indeed got art that we deserve, art which is mirroring the society as it is."(42) And to return to Kenzo Tange's master plan from 1965: the Viennese architect Luchsinger, during a 2010 debate about Skopje 2014, said that the best part of Tange's Skopje was that Tange imagined Skopje as a fragmentary city, which left it open for further development of the urbanism – therefore, Skopje 2014 could be treated only as a small fragment in the Tange's overall concept.(43)

Although Skopje 2014 in itself caries 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. This project is intended to cut off both of these traditions, but not to the same extend. While the Ottoman heritage is somewhat shunned, it is still reflected in parts of the project: domes were not just part of the Renaissance architecture, but also of the Ottoman and the Byzantine traditions; the preservation of objects from the Ottoman past are on the agenda of the Government, etc. Therefore, one could say that the main goal of Skopje 2014 is to rework Skopje in such a way that it will finally break up with the communist heritage in architecture and is intended to make a final cut with the ugly, communist image of the city. That explains the proliferation of figurative monuments in Skopje 2014 (only 6 of the 27 sculptures placed so far are abstract).

In Yugoslavia during communism a huge body of modern abstract architecture has been produced especially during the 1960s and 1970s. The monuments were financed by the state and were used to shape the identity of the new, modern communist country. Most of those propaganda monuments were abstract because the ideals of the industrial society were to be embedded in them. The communist buildings and monuments were either resembling the mimetic animal and floral symbolism (buildings like huge turtles, or birds, or bugs, or flowers, for example the Macedonian Telecommunications and Post Office, 1974-1989, in Skopje looks like a giant flower), or the monuments had futuristic angular geometries, in the shape of a macro-view of a viral cell, or a crystal (such as the "Macedonian Opera and Ballet" on the left bank of the river Vardar). While today mostly neglected and considered tasteless locally, these communist propaganda monuments regained their worldwide fame after the books "Spomeniks" (a Slavic word for monuments) by the Belgian photographer Jan Kempenaers, and "Architecture in Socialist Yugoslavia" by the Austrian photographer Wolfgang Thalera were published and the

monuments of ex-Yugoslavia immediately provoked significant interest on the part of the foreign architects and designers. What we see here is a paradoxical connection between the art and the ideology: when the communist monuments were built in the last century, for the Western observer they were treated as a mere kitsch, and as a totalitarian art. Half a century later, when the countries of Eastern Europe finally managed to get rid of their totalitarian traits and to join the democratic community, their previous art tradition is being reconsidered as a genuine art. Today, when the Western analysts summarize the art created in communism, they are amazed by the presence of abstract themes and by the Yugoslav avant-garde ("wasn't this a proof of the artistic freedom under the communist regime?"), but the point is that the avant-garde in ex-Yugoslavia was not merely tolerated, it was advocated on the level of the official doctrine (only after the bohemian status was taken away from the avant-garde). The communist National Liberation Movement monuments were scattered across the landscape of former Yugoslavia, and they fascinate with their futuristic bravery, but that is exactly the point – the futurism was preferred. A Western visitor left a comment on the internet page attributed to the Yugoslav communist monuments: "I wonder when a gigantic robot will throw itself in the picture to fight the monument."([44](#)) And this comment is well-placed, communism liked science fiction, the jets of concrete were there to challenge the Universe; the "humanoid" absence from the monuments was desired: The monuments offered escape from the themes of poverty and political misfortune. If something was periodically forbidden in art, it was the works of naturalism or realism, which dealt with social problems (for example, and one of the rare works Tito attacked and formally prohibited during his 35 years rule in Yugoslavia was a Serbian play "When the Pumpkins Blossomed" by Dragoslav Mihailovic, a naturalistic picture of the tragic effect of the repression on the common people living in the suburbs of Belgrade.)

The pending question ever since the fall of Iron Curtain is: What to do with the communist propaganda monuments all over Eastern Europe? The old architectural heritage was generally neglected, and erased from the memory, and only occasionally it was being reshaped to serve a new purpose. In a case extensive covered in media, in June 2011, an anonymous artist (immediately dubbed by the media as Banksy of Bulgaria) overnight transformed a cast-iron sculptural group of the Russian Red Army soldiers in Sofia into popular superheroes and cartoon characters: Supermen, Santa Claus, Ronald McDonald, and the Joker (Batman's foe). Although the artistic intervention was washed away already the next day, this solution was immediately commented as the most effective way to get rid of the communist past: better than physically smashing or removing the monuments from the past, it was a way to effectively decompose the past and spring new elements serving as touristic attractions. This is precisely a case where the synchronicity and the Disneyfication, previously discussed, come to mind: it is not by destroying one's tradition, that the tradition is being erased, but by reworking it into a more playful model. Paradoxically, the tradition is best preserved when one strengthens both the values of the country ("we have joined the progressive world "), and at the same time overlaps it with the values of the national pride ("we have modified our national tradition to best serve tourism, while still preserving our very tradition"), the paradox being that the emancipation from the nationalism goes hand in hand with the fight against the same nationalism, but more importantly, this operation situates the differential margin between diachrony and synchrony closer to the later, thus opening a possibility for transformation of the frozen history into "human time".
In his canonic text "Future City" Frederic Jameson, explaining the logic of the Western future urban developments, he writes: "In the end, there will be little else for us to do but shop".([45](#)) If

we transfer his motto to Macedonia's present situation, the line would read: "In the end, there will be little else for us to do but remember". Mainly consisted of symbolic and not habitual buildings, Skopje 2014 is the world not trapped in a shopping mall, but in a museum, displaying the Eastern European tendency to periodically jumpstart the sense of history and to open up the "great repository of ghosts". As much as a paradigm of the Eastern European urban developments entrapped in history, at the same time, this project is also a showcase that the world remains much less global than the globalized discourse suggests today.

FOOTNOTES

1. Smith, Helena. "Macedonian statue: Alexander the Great or a Warrior on a Horse?", Guardian, 14 August 2011, http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/aug/14/alexander-great-macedonia-warrior-horse [back]
For more details about the content of Skopje 2014 project also see the book by Mijalkovic, Milan and Urbanek, Katharina. Skopje, the World Bastard (Klagenfurt: Wieser Verlag, 2011), 76.

In the past decade, Skopje had a history of unfortunate architectural competitions; most notable case is from 2006 when the city made an international call for a memorial house to Mother Teresa. The Portuguese architect Jorge Marum was declared the winner; however, the Government and the committee bizarrely decided to ignore expert opinion and staged a new competition, where a local architect Vangel Božinovski won the bid. When finished, the memorial received several negative critiques, one being that: "If it wasn't for the Christian cross, it could be a disco or a casino." For more on this topic read the article: Pencic, Divna "A tactless and tasteless homage to Mother Teresa". Architectural Review, 2009. http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m3575/is_1350_226/ai_n32441180/

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The terms modernism and postmodernism in architecture are used differently than to denominate broader cultural tendencies as Žižek uses them. However, his distinction is helpful in understanding the nature of Skopje 2014 project.

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I would like to thank the architects Nikola Strezovski and Filip Josifovski from Skopje for their careful reading of the first draft of this paper. I hugely benefited from their editorial interventions in the parts dedicated to architecture, from their generous help in making a clear distinction between the modernism and the postmodernism in architecture, and from their suggestion to reference the book "Learning from Las Vegas" by Venturi, Scott Brown, and Izenour. [back]

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Ibid, 80. [back]

Ibid, 76. [back]

Ibid, 79. [back]

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Ibid, 81. [back]

Ibid, 80. [back]

This elaboration is based on the comment posted by the user Killian on September 8, 2009 on the article Žižek, Slavoj. Architectural Parallax. Spandrels and Other Phenomena of Class Struggle http://www.lacan.com/essays/?page_id=218 [back]

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This point is a rework from the similar sentence attributed to modern Albanians in P.J.O'Rourke's book "Eat the Rich". See: O'Rourke , P.J. Eat the Rich. A Treatise on Economics. (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1998), 51. [back]

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