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Contesting Ethnocratic Spatial Order: Narrative Spaces in Skopje

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Abstract

This paper employs the concept of narrative spaces to identify the dynamic processes of social production and social construction of space in the city of Skopje, the capital of Macedonia. While power-holders at local and central level persistently seek to divide the territory through symbolic buildings and monuments and other visual displays, many of the citizens of Skopje have found their own ways to protest such divisions. The inspiration for such resistance arises both from the global connections and urban aspirations of a younger generation and from the positive example of conviviality as embodied in the traditions of Skopje's Old Bazaar. In this paper I hope to show how comprehensive engagement with locality and spatiality has great potential to help understand interethnic relations.

Keywords: space, Macedonia, ethnicity, ethnocracy, narrative space

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Introduction

Rearrangements to the spatial order and spatial organization of the cities often accompany major transformations of political systems. The collapse of numerous socialist regimes Eastern Europe in 1989 was one such social transformation. The post-socialist transformation of cities that has since ensued in these countries, especially in their capital cities, has been identified as a major variable as to whether or not and at what stage a given country is in the process of accession to the European Union (Hamilton et al, 2005). Classification in terms of such "EU-zation" distinguishes between first and second wave accession countries and a third group of countries defined as 'long-term excluded'. Macedonia belongs within this third group whose efforts at regional and wider international integration have been stalled. However, the capital city of Macedonia, Skopje has even been singled out as a particular case of political and geographic isolation (ibid: 13). This assessment was made prior to important recent developments in Skopje.

Since 2010 Skopje is infused with historicist architecture, with dozens of buildings in Neo-classical and Baroque style and countless, hundreds of them, equestrian statues and monuments of historical figures. This symbolic reconstruction of the Macedonian capital has significantly contributed to the impression that the city has become separated from global trends in urban development. I argue that this reconstruction of public space, famous as "Skopje 2014" is a result of prolonged political and economic isolation from general trends of globalization and European integration. In other words, the consequences of that political, economic and cultural isolation have now been made tangible and visible: Skopje has been given a new look under the leadership of a right-wing nationalist party that aims to rebuild the city as a Grand National Capital.

Going against any of the generally accepted recommendations for integrative urban planning aimed at accommodating social diversity (Wood and Landry 2008), the imposition of this 'new look' has served to further aggravate the already tense interethnic relations in Macedonia. This anachronistic overhaul of the city has attracted the attention of the international media, which is not usually the case with the news from this country.[i] The oddities of this case make it highly relevant in seeking an understanding of the link between spatial order and social forces—political forces in particular. This link has long been recognized and established in anthropology since its inception (Kuper 1972). The connection between politics and public space has also been firmly established (Low 2000; Low and Smith 2006; Amin and Thrift 2002).

In this paper I shall explore the interplay between political power and spatial order and use spatially informed analysis to apprehend the tense interethnic relations in the country, arguing that greater attention needs to be paid to spatiality when examining nationalism and its manifestations. The argument of this paper is based on acceptance that acts of urban planning and designs are rooted in the power structures that shape society (Fenster and Yacobi 2010). The Macedonian case I shall elaborate upon here can be further narrowed down to an exemplary case of nationalist 'homeland-making' (Kaiser 2002). Employing the concept of narrative spaces, I shall identify the intention of the political leadership to create particular collective identities. The symbolic reconstruction intends to change the spatial order in the capital city and alter the spatial practices of its inhabitants and visitors. The same concept of narrative space is useful to describe the ways in which the new and perhaps unintended, or rather unexpected spatial practices of the inhabitants of Skopje that have created an alternative reading of their city.

I will analyze the ethnocratic spatial transformation of the Macedonian capital by employing the concept of narrative spaces—a concept borrowed from the fields of literary and film studies. The 'Skopje 2014' project is focused above all on the city's central square and is intended to create a representational

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space in which the contested national history of Macedonia is made visible and tangible. In reaction to this project, the chiefly Albanian-run municipality on the other side of the River Vardar is now building a new square to celebrate the central figure of the Albanian national myth, George Kastrioti Skanderbeg. The citizens of Skopje, composed mostly of ethnic Macedonians and Albanians, as well as a number of other ethnicities, have become caught between these two new squares and have started looking for an alternative space. In doing so, they have not needed look any further than the border area between the two squares—the Old Bazaar, or charshija.

I consider the Old Bazaar to be a locality (Appadurai 1996) containing multiple historical layers that stands as a mnemonic vertical that pierces the nationalist urbanism's smoothing horizontal surfaces. The nationalist urbanism conflates the cityscape with nationscape and intends to create homogenous symbolic field that aims to communicate with domestic and foreign audiences. The concept of narrative space will be used here to illuminate the construction of meanings and layers of storytelling that accompany the construction of a built environment. However, the analysis would be incomplete without due attention to the meanings constructed and accumulated in the course of people's everyday engagement with that environment. The concept of narrative spaces fits neatly with Amin and Thrift's (2002) understanding of the city as a process and a potentiality of networks, human and trans-human, made effective through encounters. The city inhabitants subject these encounters and interactions to further interpretations. The emerging narratives of social space, a locality, get attached to it and in return guide the social interaction. The concept of narrative space also helps capture the essentializing attempts being made to construct a Macedonian national capital and an Albanian ethnic space within that city. This concept also helps us understand the emergence of alternative narratives of the city that have evolved amidst the new monumental constructions and which seek to escape this imposed environment.

Postponed Post-Socialist Urban Transformation

The quasi Neo-classical look clearly imitates the architectural styles that prevailed in the late nineteenth century, at the time of the rise of many European nation-states and the creation of national capitals (Cosgrove and Daniels1988). In Central and Eastern Europe these processes were completed after the collapse of the Ottoman and Habsburg empires around the beginning of the twentieth century (Damljanović and Makaš 2010) Skopje had somewhat different developments and filling this 'void' a century later asides from being anachronistic undertaking creates numerous other cleavages. This regional comparison brings us to a thematic comparison. While other fields of social science were swift to develop the field of post-socialist studies, urban studies were slow to follow suit. Stanilov (2007) identifies the main reason for this neglect in a preoccupation with the grand themes of politics and economics. However, one particular aspect of urban transformation has received its fair share of attention: thus the analysis of changing cultural landscapes in post-socialism by Czepczynski (2010), demonstrating a major concern with the removal of socialist monuments and other material symbols of former regimes. This spatial transformation during the transition period is well noted in the literature (Czaplicka at al. 2009). In particular, many capitals have been subjected to such symbolic transformations.

In comparison with post-socialist countries of Central and Eastern Europe, Macedonia demonstrates a number of dissimilarities in terms of the timing of certain manifestations of the transformation and in terms of the legacy of the socialist spatial order which was so ardently submitted to erasure and more subtle transformation in other countries in the region. Thus, there is a significant temporal disparity between the symbolic reconstruction that took place in other nations in the region and in Macedonia. In most central European countries, this reconstruction took place in the early 1990s

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immediately after the toppling of their previous regimes and the destruction, removal, dislocation and functional transformation of communist icons acquired a cathartic role and marked a new beginning for these nations (Czepczynski, 2010: 72). No such processes occurred in Skopje during the 1990s and we must look further east to Kazakhstan to find any parallel with the Macedonian case in which a government led nation-building process has driven the construction of a new capital (Danzer, 2009).

Skopje has experienced a somewhat exceptional development, moreover, insofar as its recent history has largely been determined by urban recovery from the catastrophic earthquake of 1963. This disaster presented an opportunity both to demonstrate international solidarity at a time of heightened Cold War tensions and to show the openness of the Yugoslav model of socialism. The city was rebuilt according to the urban Master Plan of the Japanese architect Kenzo Tange, who won an international competition organized by the UN to reconstruct Skopje (Mijalković and Urbanek 2011). Skopje was rebuilt as an 'open city'—a city symbolizing both international solidarity and socialist progress. Very few monuments were erected in the city at this time—not even of Josip Broz Tito, the icon of Yugoslav socialism. Nor did Macedonia experience any repressive communist regime from which to be liberated by the kinds of citizen revolutions and uprisings that toppled Soviet communism. The transition from socialism was not marked with change of the symbolic landscape during the first decade of independence in the 1990s.

'Skopje 2014': A Nationalist Façade for the Capital-City

How then was it possible for the current transformation of Skopje to come about? Why is it happening now? And how is this transformation to be described and explained? How has the image of Skopje as an open city—a city of solidarity that was international and cosmopolitan in its orientation—been turned into the image of a capital of a remote and disconnected nation-state? Where was the need and urgency for commencing such a thorough overhaul?

I shall seek to answer these questions employing the concept of narrative spaces. A brief description of the Skopje 2014 project and its counterpart in Skanderbeg Square is necessary, however, before going on to an analysis of the ethnocratic remaking of Skopje.

The existing modern buildings in the vicinity of the square will be adorned with Neoclassical and Baroque facades. The space between the buildings has been overpopulated with bronze and marble monuments each representing characters from Macedonia's ancient and recent national history. Amongst these monuments, the most dominating and provocative is the fifteen-meter-high bronze sculpture of Alexander the Great mounted on a rearing horse and holding a sword in the air. This monument stands on a 17-metre-high marble-coated concrete column that rises from the middle of a fountain surrounded by lions and ancient Macedonian phalanx soldiers bearing spears and swords. The official name of this sculpture is 'A Warrior on a Horse' and this naming of the statue must be understood as a cynical response to calls from the international community not to aggravate the tense relationship with Greece any further while negotiations over the name of Macedonia are still ongoing—as they have been for over fifteen years.

Many other aspects of Skopje's city square could be fruitfully subjected to analysis, but for this monument to Alexander the Great is alone sufficient to illustrate the application of the concept of narrative spaces. The square has been turned into a site for national folk assemblies. The eastern entrance to the square is now regulated via a passage through a Triumphal Arch. The official opening of the Warrior on a Horse statue was accompanied with a great parade in the square to tie in with the 20th anniversary of Macedonia's independence on 8 September 2011. And recent Macedonian successes in sport—the Macedonian basketball and handball teams' achievement of fourth and fifth places in European

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championships—have been marked by government-organized celebrations around the base of the Warrior on the Horse after passing through the Triumphal Arch.

The ruling party VMRO-DPMNE promotes a form of historical revisionism that aims to overcome and supersede the communist version of Macedonian history. This revisionism aims at correcting the injustices of the communist regime: all those historical injustices are to be put aside once and for all through the 'rebirth' spearheaded by this party. Rebirth or renaissance, indeed, is incorporated within the official slogan of the electoral program of VMRO-DPMNE, '*Prerodba vo 100 chekori'*, meaning 'Rebirth in 100 Steps', each of these steps being a particular policy or measure proposed to achieve a Macedonian renaissance. The party is promoted as one that will tell the world the truth about Macedonia and the Macedonians. In the view of VMRO-DPMNE, the communists and their modern descendants, the opposition party of the Social Democratic Union of Macedonia, were guilty of taming and minimizing the heroic past of the glorious Macedonian nation. This radical reworking of the past was always bound to stir up great debate. Sadly, however, the priority of protecting the 'national interest' means that this debate has been framed quite narrowly and public discourse has been reduced to exchanges between 'patriots' and 'traitors'. In its efforts to erect new pillars for Macedonia's national identity, the Government has enforced a historical myth of continuity from antiquity. This insistence on continuity between the ancient Macedonian kingdom under Alexander the Great and the present-day state has gained notoriety under the name 'antiquization'. Vangeli (2011) provides an overview of this process and its consequences both at intra-group level and inter-group relations in the country. In his assessment and that of others, the consequences of antiquization have been largely negative, and yet the governing party continues relentlessly to pursue their policies of accentuated Macedonian national identity in the face of all criticism.

Paradoxically, the Macedonian and Yugoslav communists received their fair share of criticism for contributing to the process of Macedonian nation-building during socialism between 1945 and 1990 (Troebst 2003; Palmer and King 1971). Greek and Bulgarian historiography persistently promotes the idea that Macedonians are the product of Josip Broz Tito's irredentist strategy. However, official Macedonian historiography during socialism was content with locating the pillar of Macedonian identity in their origins as Slavs. Public debate under the rule of VMRO-DPMNE ascribes the people's alleged timid acceptance of this identity under socialism to communist brainwashing and insists on a much bolder and prolonged myth of continuity with roots stretching directly to the glorious Alexander the Great—and even further back in time.

This article will not delve further into other aspects of the propaganda machinery at work in Macedonia under the rule of VMRO-DPMNE; this summary was only necessary to provide the wider context and setting for the Skopje 2014 project. The main concern of this article remains the spatial manifestations of the ethno-nationalist regime and the efforts of the government to territorialize the nation, to mark boundaries and to create a symbolic landscape that will reaffirm the territorial extent of the national space. The description of the counterpart political project in public space, the Skanderbeg Square, is much easier as it is a public space dominated with the abovementioned monument. The plan envisages creation of a vast empty space around it by the way of covering the street next to it thus making him even more imposing by eliminating any other competing visual distractions. Nevertheless, the purpose of the Albanian politicians is the same as the one that drives their Macedonian counterpart. The term narrative space is used here as an interpretative device for reading and understanding the symbolic discourse implicit and explicit in the built environment, as it is narratives that are weaved with particular spatial arrangements.

I use the concept of narrative spaces to identify the dynamic processes of social production and social construction of space in the Macedonian capital—a project ultimately intended to achieve an ethnic compartmentalization of the urban space of the capital. The term narrative space is an interpretative device

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for reading and understanding the symbolic discourse implicit and explicit in the built environment as it is narratives that are weaved with particular spatial arrangements. The current ethnocratic reordering of space practically divides the city along ethnic lines. Such nationalist remaking of a capital is not especially unusual: as Neil has noted, the relationship between urban planning, architecture and evolving conceptions of national identity is at its most direct—and most closely under political influence—in capital cities (2004: 17). I analyse these processes of symbolic intervention and remaking of public space and their effects by paying particular attention to spatial practices as these practices also create narrative spaces.

Most importantly, I propose we look at people's reactions to this nationalist project, not only in terms of discursive and creative activism but also in less overt, unarticulated acts of resistance to the newly imposed spatial order. I argue that these acts of resistance consist of spatial practices, trajectories of movement and presence in particular spaces— acts which not only reclaim space but which also produce counter-narratives of the city. Pile frames this as resistance through insinuation,

> *"[T]hus, resistance does not just act on topographies imposed through the spatial technologies of domination, it moves across them under the noses of the enemy, seeking to create new meanings out of imposed meanings, to re-work and divert space to other ends"*
> (Pile and Keith 1997: 16)

For while the government is busy remaking the city, its inhabitants are moving in the opposite direction to create an alternative map and to utilize the space as they wish—and not as the imposed spatial order urges them to, in line with the ethnocratic vision of 'Skopje 2014'.

Dividing a City

The government-led project Skopje 2014 is an example of nationalist intervention in public space that aims at flattening and ironing out the immense heterogeneity of Skopje. I argue that the infusion of material objects, monuments and buildings loaded with nationalist historical narratives aims at creating emblematic ethno-national space right in the centre of the capital. The project Skopje 2014 aims to set and fixate the meaning of the spatial order, projecting an indisputably homogenous national character on the capital, and consequently the whole country, as an ideal nation-state. At the same time, however, this imposed meaning is contradicted by the existing composition of the population. If we take in account the constant movement and flow of the population than it emerges that this imposed homogeneity and singularity becomes either utopian or problematic for it creates mismatch with reality.

This highly politicized symbolic intervention in the public space has shaken up the dormant public sphere in Macedonia, provoking numerous reactions and enlivening the underdeveloped civic sector. It also attracted the attention of the wider public sphere and garnered quite serious body of critical analysis (Čausidis 2013; Kolozova 2013; Marina 2013; Vilić 2013). Nor can the numbers of those who support the project be neglected; this polarization is interesting in itself and an analysis of its fault-lines contributes greatly to an understanding of the Macedonian political sphere. Here, however, it is necessary to confine our attention to the contradictions between the newly imposed and the previously existing spatial order. In this paper I argue that the trajectories of the heterogeneous population create fluidity and mixture in the social realm that undermines and negates the imposition of a singular national identity with a glorious history and whatever other attributes the government is seeking to cement in space.

The history of the central square in Skopje alone will reveal the constant rewriting of the semantic load inscribed in the buildings and monuments installed there. This history of the suare reads like a

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palimpsest, but the intention of the latest makeover of the square is to erase this multi-layered script. This whitewashing endeavour faces many obstacles, however, since the memories and aspirations of the residents of Skopje are not necessarily identical with those of the government. As Bender (2002: 136) points out:

Landscapes can never stay still – feelings and engagement with place and landscape are always in the making. Nor can they be situated only in the present, for they contain and are referenced on what has gone before. People sometimes talk about the landscape as 'palimpsest' meaning by this that past activities leave their signatures upon the land.

I maintain that the spatial practices of Skopje citizens inscribe an alternative meaning on the city to that intended by the government. Amidst all these dramatic changes to the central city square, it is the citizens of Skopje citizens who will have the final say in defining this space by the active way in which they use it and relate it to other spaces in their city.

I maintain that Skopje 2014 and the new Skanderbeg Square are projects intended to reshape the public space first and foremost in order to mark the ethnic territories of the city. This division is achieved by means of buildings and monuments designed to tell a certain story, a specific narrative. Predictably, nationalist narratives are inherently confrontational, especially at the borders. The messages emanating from these monuments and buildings are partly communicated to the outer world, it is true, but they primarily cater to domestic audiences, potential voters in particular. It is the reactions of the local population that we should observe, however, since Skopje inhabitants are inevitably exposed, day in day out, to these remade public spaces. The success or failure of these divisive intentions will depend on people's acceptance or rejection in practice of these imposed borders. It is through their spatial practices—their ways of using certain spaces—that the inhabitants of Skopje will express their understanding of these nationalist public spaces.

The final phases of the process of establishing an ethnocracy in Macedonia will inevitably result in territorial divisions as the logical realization of the nationalist drive for homogenous national territories in which everyone born on a certain piece of land speaks the same language, belongs to the same religion, goes to the same schools and experiences overwhelming awe before the national flag. Kaiser describes similar developments as a process of homeland-making driven by nationalism, which "is fundamentally an ideology and political action program designed to convert land into national territory" (2002: 231). The ethnocratic reordering of public space in Macedonia undertaken by the Macedonian and Albanian ethnopolitical elites at both local and central governmental level fits perfectly with Kaiser's description of nationalism as a struggle for control over land. This politicised engagement with public space inspired me to include spatiality and spatial practices in my analysis of interethnic relations in Macedonia, as this project resonates well with Kaiser's statement that the nation is ultimately a "mode of constructing and interpreting social space" (ibid.). The concept of narrative space helps us attain a better understanding of the current construction and interpretation of social space in the Macedonian capital.

Multiplicity of Narrative Spaces

Identifying changing spatial orders requires sensitivity for firstly, the immaterial quality of the built environment and secondly, the spatial practices of the citizens who use and thus shape the public space. Appadurai (1996) uses the notion of locality, and more specifically the neighbourhood, as a site of resistance to imposed nation-state definitions of national territories as pure, homogenous and unified. In neighbourhoods, he argues, we find mixture, cross-group communication and diversity that create general untidiness from the perspective of the nation-state. I will shortly introduce us to one such space, a particular

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locality, where resistance to the ethnocratic order is to be found. I suggest that for understanding the political dynamics in the public space we can read locality as a narrative space.

There are a number of theoretical approaches that treat the built form as a direct symbolic expression of social and political structures (Lawrence and Law, 1990: 466). These approaches are founded on the presumption that the built environment either intentionally or inadvertently acquires a semantic load, both before and after its construction. Even more comprehensive is Kuper's (1972) elaboration of the notion of social space, which encompasses our inhabited environment with particular attention to sites of symbolic and political significance. I conflate Kuper's concept of site with Appadurai's concept of locality in the proposed notion of narrative space. This paves the way for an analysis of the built environment that focuses on the acquisition or inscription of meaning and the consequential need to understand that meaning. The meaning of a certain place, street, building or square might be idiosyncratic or universal, popularly accepted or disputed, individual and intimate or publicly shared, obviously apparent or subtle. This depends on the intentionality or spontaneity of the acquired meaning and whether it comes from the creators of the built environment or is created by the practices of the inhabitants. For meaning, I maintain, is not contained solely in the surface appearances of material objects.

With the concept of narrative space I suggest we can comprehend the greater complexity of a given narrative attached to a given site in synchronic perspective. Every narrative has its assumed prologue and in the case of the built environment there are artefacts and histories, oral and written, that can reveal those narratives and convey the full meaning of the current dominant narrative. The perspective that includes the narrative information in and on and about a particular space allows us to peek at the historical moments that preceded the creation of a given building or public space. Engagement with those previous narratives provides an insight into the process of metamorphosis of a given locality. The mnemonic quality of built environment allows capturing the previous historical existence of a certain space and its recent and current transformation.

The notion of narrative space should not be understood as one-off project or finished product. Produced in a palimpsest manner, it is also marked by the coexistence of several narratives concerning the same site. Indeed, a whole variety of narratives surround any locality. Each of us attaches our own meaning and significance to sites of importance in our life. Political discourse, meanwhile, and especially ethno-political discourse, tends to simplify and unify the multiplicity of spatial narratives. Narrative space is not formed simply by erecting monuments and ornamented buildings; its creation necessarily involves active engagement with that space on the part of the inhabitants. Spatial practices are a central, vital element in creating narrative spaces. In the following section I offer a description of the Skopje Old Bazaar (*charshija*) as a locality (a term used here in greater accordance with Appadurai's conception) that defies the nationalist imposition of homogeneity. I see the charshija in Skopje as a site that still commemorates the indigenous model of conviviality in a city—a country, indeed—of remarkable ethnic, cultural, religious, linguistic plurality.

Skopje Old Bazaar has stood in its current location since the city's beginnings in the Middle Ages. It is located just below the Old Fortress and has sometimes been known as *Podgradie*, meaning 'under the town'—the 'town' being the fortress itself. The Christian town was conquered by the Ottomans in the late fourteenth century and remained under the rule of Istanbul until the First Balkan War. The bazaar, or *charshija* as it is widely known, has kept its function through the centuries and even today is a site primarily for trade and entertainment, with some remaining production and a few surviving craftsmen. After the disastrous earthquake of 1963, the Old Bazaar was incorporated within the new city of Skopje. Many buildings were reconstructed and the infrastructure was renewed; and after the initial socialist appropriation

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of the shops in the bazaar, private small business were later re-encouraged. Thus the bazaar blossomed in the seventies. As Macedonia entered independence, however, followed by a complete transformation of the economic and political system, the Old Bazaar was ill-prepared to answer the new challenges. Shopping malls and fashionable cafe bars mushroomed in other parts of the town, draining visitors away from the bazaar, which then entered a prolonged period of stagnation.

The rapid and radical changes in the political economy of the country and the region are just some of the complex developments that have affected the destiny of the Old Bazaar. During the initial period of independence, Macedonian politicians managed to turn the city's famous ethnic diversity from an asset into a major security concern. The bazaar has been proclaimed unsafe because of the increased presence of Albanian shopkeepers that by the very virtue of their ethnicity estranged it for bringing in their backwards culture and the whole gamut of negative stereotypes and prejudices attached. The relaxation of collectivism in Yugoslavia and the relieving of ideological and administrative pressure on small businesses, no longer labelled as exploitative capitalist enterprises, saw individual entrepreneurs in the Old Bazaar gaining greater economic freedoms. This was simply an opportunity for the otherwise unprivileged ethnic Albanians for economic and social mobility. A number of older shopkeepers have told me about the golden period of the 1970s and 1980s when they had the Yugoslav market at their disposal and were able to generate great profits. One shoemaker still keeps a model of the summer shoes he used to sell, season after season, to many shops on the Adriatic coast. Another older shopkeeper, who still produces fur and leather goods, told me of the enormous successes he used to enjoy at trade fairs in Slovenia where in just a few days he would sell truckloads of goods produced over the course of a year. The silversmiths and goldsmiths also remember that time as their best period of business. These business opportunities lured many Albanians to the Old Bazaar, possibilities for self-employment being especially attractive to Albanians who were marginalized and excluded from other channels of social mobility in Macedonia.

The influx of Albanians into the Skopje *charshija* captured the popular imagination as 'Albanianisation'. Indeed the prevalence of Albanians in the *charshija* is notable today: in a survey I conducted in September 2010, 59 per cent of the respondents were Albanian (239 out of 405), 18 per cent (79) were Macedonian, and 15 per cent (63) were Turks, the remainder being composed of Bosniaks, Roma, and Serbs, plus one Vlach and one Italian. In terms of religious denomination, 81.3 per cent of the respondents were Muslims and 16.7 per cent were Orthodox Christian.

There were some 700 shops in the *charshija* at the time of the survey; but over 200 of these were closed and abandoned—a more significant indicator of the wellbeing of the *charshija* than the ethnic composition of its shop owners. In the public imagination, however, the Skopje bazaar had been 'Albanianised'. Moreover, the *charshija* was pronounced an unsafe zone. When I began my research in 2008, the bazaar was quite neglected. It was even a little spooky to walk there after dark. With all the shops closed and just the occasional pedestrian walking along poorly lit streets, the *charshija* resembled some abandoned quarter of a remote Balkan town—not the palest resemblance to the bazaar I had known in my youth, full of bustling cafes and traditional restaurants with live music. I shall argue that the image of Skopje's Old Bazaar as an Albanianised and dangerous place was created due to the dominance of ethno-political discourse.

Again it was ethno-politics that contributed towards the next shift in the fortunes of the Old Bazaar. The flooding of the public space with nationalist symbols, both Macedonian and Albanian, as epitomised in the Skopje 2014 and Skanderbeg Square projects, has provoked commotion across the imagined ethnic boundaries. This latest change started unexpectedly with the opening of a wine bar and a neighbouring cafe at the edge of the *charshija*. By the following summer the *charshija* had become the hottest spot in the city with thousands of visitors flocking there each evening. Many of the young people whom I interviewed in

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the *charshija*, most of them in their twenties, were visiting this part of the city for the first time—'discovering' this site for themselves. Others, in their thirties and older, were revisiting the *charshija* after a long absence—falling in love with it all over again. In the first year of this revival, an Italian NGO got together with a number of local NGOs to organize a cultural event entitled 'On the Cultural Path'. This event started from the city's central square and led thousands of visitors in a procession over the old Stone Bridge to numerous locations in the Old Bazaar where numerous exhibitions, short plays, folklore dances and contemporary music concerts were being held. That evening I met perhaps more than thirty friends with huge smiles on their faces. We enthusiastically exchanged memories of this or that place we used to go to—'that bar'…'that restaurant'…—those endless nights in the *charshija* before the emergence of ethnopolitics that sealed the destiny of the bazaar since mid'1990s. The following summer saw many more bars opened to meet the demand of many visitors.

This movement across the old Stone Bridge constitutes an act of resistance to the nationalist remaking of the capital. There is no discursive or otherwise articulated program or manifest to confirm this statement, but I base my argument on the bases of my observations of movement, trails created and trajectories emerging. I observe many signs of Skopje citizens moving across the River Vardar. I see life returning to the *charshija* after a long period of dormancy. I see no questions being asked, only Turkish tea being served quickly. I see a bar selling Macedonian *rakija* (a traditional liquor) next to a Turkish tea house beside another Turkish tea house squeezed between a beer-garden and wine bar owned by Macedonians and a cafe owned by two ladies, one of Greek and the other of Turkish ethnic origin, next to an Albanian-owned cafe beside an Albanian tea house and so on… I base my analysis on the otherwise unlikely coincidence that this revival of the *charshija* should happen at the very moment of a heightened nationalistic attempt to mark out space. I base my analysis on the observation that the tables of different cafes and restaurants almost touch one another in the narrow streets of the *charshija* and that their guests sit right next to each other. The crowds spilling out of the mosque after Friday prayers mix with tourists, hipsters and women in summer skirts—all sharing the same space, the same streets, and, most importantly, similar lives, despite their many differences.

The *charshija* as experienced by visitors is not the same as the *charshija* of the shopkeepers who share their lives more intensely on a daily basis. Indeed the charshija could even be seen as a community with a shared moral universe. And the main regulator of this community is the notion of *esnaf*. This concept has been the dominant form of organizing life in the *charshija* for centuries. It is a word of Arabic origin that corresponds to the medieval guild—an association of craftsmen or traders that regulated the economic, educational and moral conduct of its members. My research has revealed that although *esnaf* is no longer present in organizational form it is still frequently invoked as an ideological principle. The older shopkeepers speak with nostalgia of the times gone by and the youngsters still hold the values of *esnaf* in high esteem. It is a word that represents honour, decency, civility, honesty, trustworthiness, qualities attributed to a deserving person that has to be earned and maintained by practicing them impeccably. Today, they say, there are no longer real *esnaf* people. But the ideal is still alive and it is one of the basic components of the image of the old bazaar.

Together the *charshija* of *esnaf* and the *charshija* of diversity combine to create a narrative space different in every regard from the narrative spaces imposed by the ethnocratic establishment. Most importantly, the citizens of Skopje are creating an alternative narrative space in which diversity can be negotiated in an accommodative manner, not perceived as a problem but as an asset; and they are doing so without any resources at their disposal and without any need to materialize ideologies. Narrativity offers wider engagement with various forms of imagination. Certainly, here we are confronted with nationalist

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imaginaries and urban imaginaries, points of overlap and points of departure. The charshija is thus a locality that resists the kind of ethnocratic spatial reordering that tries to deal with diversity by imposing divisive policies; rather, it is a locality that still maintains its longstanding tradition in social and spatial practice of negotiating diversity.

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Notes

[i] This controversial project has been covered on the front page of the *International Herald Tribune* and in several articles in *The Guardian*. It has been reported on by CNN and the BBC, other West European news outlets, (France, Germany, Austria, etc.) as well as numerous broadcasting and print media outlets in the region. Domestically, the controversy bred by this project has ensured that it remains one of the most newsworthy topics.