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Neoliberalising the Divided City

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Abstract

This paper examines the relation between ethno-nationalism and neoliberalism in urban space. Contrary to common views in urban studies, it argues that the 'ethno-nationally divided city' and the 'neoliberal city' are not antithetical, but that neoliberal nationalism is a new modality of urban conflict in a globalised world, which reshapes the relation between the local and the global and draws new urban geopolitics. By investigating practices of nation-branding in a divided city, this paper bridges different theoretical fields to shed light on an aspect of urban conflict that has largely been ignored by the literature on nationalism and urban divisions. It also complements existing research on neoliberal nationalism by emphasising the spatial and material aspects of nation-branding, and by showing how it can be used by competing ethno-national leaders to mobilise their communities and extend their control at the national and urban levels. By highlighting processes common to neoliberal and divided cities, this paper draws on recent calls within urban geopolitics to rethink current theoretical categories and labels attributed to cities. It develops this analysis by examining contemporary neoliberal urban policies in Skopje, Macedonia, which have become a new battlefield where interethnic conflicts unfold.

Key-words: neoliberal nationalism, nation branding, divided city, urban geopolitics, Skopje, Macedonia.

INTRODUCTION

In the last few decades, urban divisions have been examined by a growing scholarship, which has traditionally stemmed from two different strands of research. While these strands have attempted to describe a range of political, social and economic fractures in urban space, their common emphasis on urban divisions hides different theoretical frameworks and empirical cases. The first research strand has generally focused on processes of increasing inequalities and spatial segregation between social groups as an effect of the neoliberal globalisation of world cities. This perspective has led to a scrutiny of phenomena of residential segregation, privatisation of urban space or the formation of impoverished ghettoes and affluent gated communities (see Davis, 1990; Mollenkopf and Castells, 1991; Fainstein *et al.*, 1992; Graham and Marvin, 2001; Marcuse and van Kempen, 2002; Skop, 2006; Wacquant, 2008). More recently, a second strand of research has focused on ethno-national divisions resulting from intercommunity conflict in contested cities (see Bollens, 2002; Calame and Charlesworth, 2012; Gaffikin and Morrissey, 2011; Hepburn, 2004; Kliot and Mansfeld, 1999; Kotek, 1999). In particular, the concept of the 'ethno-nationally divided city' (Anderson, 2008), which designates cities combining issues of state contestation and ethnic division, has been employed to examine the way ethno-national rivalries can lead to the fracture of the urban unity. This approach has dominated critical research on the urban dimension of geopolitical conflicts in the past two decades.

However, little connection has been made between these two strands of research, as if the 'neoliberal city' and the 'divided city' were entirely different realities. This fracture reveals another, more general, cleavage between perspectives on neoliberalism and that on nationalism. Neoliberalism and nationalism are often portrayed as competing ontological and normative approaches, even antithetical to one another (Harmes, 2012). As Harvey (2005:79) argues, 'Nationalism … is profoundly antagonistic to the neoliberal agenda'. Neoliberalism is indeed often equated with internationalism, free trade and borderless markets, while nationalism is associated with protectionism, anti-globalisation and anti-free market. More recently however, some scholars have started to challenge this view and showed that nationalist policies are not only compatible with neoliberal values, but that certain nationalist policies may even be essential for these values (Harmes, 2012). Neoliberal nationalism is best exemplified by policies of *nation-branding*, 'a compendium of discourses and practices aimed at reconstituting nationhood through marketing and branding paradigms' (Kaneva, 2011: 117). As showed by critical scholars, nation-branding illustrates a form of 'commercial nationalism' (Volcic, 2009), which redefines the nation in relation to neoliberalism.

This perspective has not yet fully reached the field of urban studies, where the ethno-nationally contested city and the neoliberal city are often understood as contradicting each other. Yet, as suggested by Yacobi (2012; 2016) in the case of Jerusalem, neoliberal urban trends such as privatisation of space, infrastructure development, touristic planning or gentrification may serve ethno-nationalist and geopolitical interests. Therefore, nationalist ideologies and neoliberal urban policies do not necessarily contradict each other, but may even be complementary. This paper seeks to extend this perspective by arguing that neoliberalism and nationalism in urban space are not only complementary at times, but that neoliberal nationalism is a new modality of urban conflict in a globalised world. By investigating the relation between ethno-nationalism and urban neoliberalisation, it suggests that neoliberal urban policies may serve ethno-nationalist objectives, which deeply affect intercommunity relations and reinforce already existing geographies of urban conflicts. In turn, neoliberalism transforms nationalism and the way ethno-nationalist conflicts are fought. In particular, it reshapes the relation between the local and the global and draws new geographies of urban conflict.

This paper will advance this argument by examining practices of nation-branding in Skopje, capital of the Republic of North Macedonia.[1] Skopje is an empirically interesting and conceptually relevant case to study the relation between nationalism and neoliberalism in urban space. A former socialist country, Macedonia has experienced significant transformation in terms of politics, economy and culture over the last few decades. Privatisation and capitalist globalisation have been accompanied since 1991 by a need of national self-redefinition targeting as much internal as external audiences. Despite being the capital of the only multiethnic former Yugoslav country that has not been torn apart by a civil war and gone through ethnic cleansing, Skopje is a contested city. The resolution of the 2001 conflict between Albanian militant groups and Macedonian security forces by the international community in Ohrid may have given the impression that the issue of interethnic relations was solved, but the city is marked by increasing intercommunity tensions and spatial divisions reflecting ethnic fractures and competing nationalisms. Urban polarisation has recently taken a new dimension with new city-marketing strategies of urban renewal and beautification opposing ethnic Macedonian and ethnic Albanian municipalities, with the involvement of the central government. In only a few years, several dozens of buildings, statues and monuments have been erected, and façades, streets and squares revamped in the city centre. These neoliberal policies

[1] Hereafter 'Macedonia'.

illustrate attempts at improving the city's image to outsiders by branding the nation in urban space through architecture and planning. They also exemplify a political enterprise aimed at reinforcing ethno-national identities and controlling populations at home. In only a few years, the city has been reshaped following a deeply nationalist and exclusive conception of space and society.

Skopje's policies therefore make it a highly relevant case to understand how cities can be strategically crucial arenas in which neoliberal nationalism unfolds. In contrast with Jerusalem, Belfast or Nicosia, Skopje has also not been much explored by scholarship on urban geopolitics and divided cities. Previous research on urban politics in Skopje is situated mostly in anthropology, heritage studies and urban planning, and has focused on heritage management (Mattioli, 2014; Janev, 2017), planning doctrines and cultural diversity (Grcheva, 2018; Mojanchevska, 2020), political mobilisation (Stefoska and Stojanov, 2017) and strategies of resistance (Janev, 2016; Véron 2016, 2017). Little has been said on the relationship between ethno-nationalism and urban neoliberalisation in Skopje, and its spatial impact. This paper will therefore offer an original discussion on an overlooked city in geography and urban geopolitics and on recently completed urban projects. While one of these beautification projects, *Skopje 2014*, has already been examined as an enterprise of nation-branding by Graan (2013), this paper largely extends this analysis by showing that the project cannot be regarded only as a strategy deployed by Macedonian governance to respond to economic globalisation and target foreign investors and tourists, but it is a new modality of the ethno-nationalist conflict that divides the country since its independence.

This paper has three main objectives. First, it aims to bridge different theoretical fields to shed light on an aspect of urban conflict largely ignored by the literature on nationalism and divided cities. By investigating practices of nation-branding in a contested city, it emphasises a neoliberal tool of governance and control as a new form of urban conflict, which draws new geographies of power and exclusion in urban space. Second, it aims to complement research on neoliberal nationalism and nation-branding by highlighting two overlooked aspects of these strategies. While nation-branding has been mostly analysed through its discursive aspect of image production through national media and online campaigns, this paper shows that it is also a spatial and material process that may profoundly reshape urban space and society. It also demonstrates that in multicultural settings nation-branding is not only a governmental strategy targeting foreign investors and tourists, but it can be used by competing ethno-national leaders to mobilise their communities and extend their control at the national and urban levels. Third, this paper is part of an emerging line of research, which seeks to rethink current theoretical categories and labels attributed to cities and challenge the canonical distinction between urban divisions of socioeconomic and socio-political nature (Rokem, 2016; Rokem *et al.* 2017). By advocating a multi-factor analysis of urban geopolitical processes and highlighting processes common to 'neoliberal' and 'divided' cities, it follows Robinson's (2006) perspective on ordinary cities and aims to de-compartmentalise academic theorisation of urban phenomena. By analysing how ethno-nationalism and neoliberalism interact in a Balkan, post-socialist city, this paper also responds to calls to depart from traditional North-Western urban theories (Yiftachel, 2016; Rokem and Boano, 2018), which often privilege a particular narrative of the city (Yiftachel, 2006) and divide urban phenomena into incommensurable classes (Scott and Stroper, 2014; Rokem, 2016).

This article is drawn from my own Skopje-based field research between 2008 and 2011, which included a 9-month ethnography, 35 semi-directive interviews, 75 in-depth interviews, a survey with 223 Skopjani and selected archival analyses. The remainder of the paper is divided into four main parts. The first examines the theoretical framework around ethno-nationalism and neoliberalism in urban space. The second section attempts to broaden the scope of research on

neoliberal nationalism and the city by analysing the concept of 'nation-branding'. The third outlines the context and case selection, before discussing how contemporary urban politics in Skopje illustrate the new modalities of ethno-nationalist conflicts in a globalised world. The concluding section reflects on the need to broaden the current focus of urban geopolitics.

URBAN GOVERNANCE IN ETHNO-NATIONALLY DIVIDED CITIES

While spatial divisions upon ethnic, linguistic, racial, religious or socio-economic grounds may be found in many world cities, the concept of 'divided city' has generally been applied to a small number of cases only, with the most researched examples being Jerusalem, Beirut, Belfast, Mostar or Nicosia. In contrast with multicultural cities, such as New York or Chicago, which may also host strong ethno-racial divisions, conflict in 'ethno-nationally divided cities' is seen as sharpened by an added, wider contestation over national sovereignty (Anderson, 2008; Gaffikin and Morrissey, 2011; Hepburn, 2004). The coexistence of two or more ethnic groups in the same space, with neither inclined to concede supremacy to the other, often reflect larger national patterns and generates pressures for group rights, autonomy or territorial separation (Bollens, 2002; Hepburn, 2004). Ethno-nationally divided spaces are conceptualised as urban 'ethnocracies' when controlled by a dominant ethno-national group, which attempts to appropriate space and marginalise ethnic minorities (Yiftachel and Yacobi, 2003). Conflict in such places may lead to a total breakdown of urban systems and their *urbicide*, 'the deliberate … killing of the city' (Graham, 2004:25). Due to these particular attributes, ethno-nationally contested and divided cities are claimed to fundamentally differ from other cities (Anderson, 2008; Bollens, 2011; Gaffikin and Morrissey, 2011; Pullan and Baillie, 2013).

The literature on divided cities has focused on the multiform expressions of conflict in such spaces and their impact on the city's functional unity. A wide body of research has in particular explored urban governance and the manifestations of divisions in urban planning, municipal governance, service delivery, resource allocation or housing development (see Hepburn, 2004; Calame and Charlesworth, 2009; Bollens, 2011; Murtagh *et al.*, 2008; Pullan and Baillie, 2013). Divisions are examined as resulting from the mobilisation of groups competing for their exclusionary right to the city (Tzfadia and Yiftachel, 2004), with the general citywide interest subordinated to the aims of specific political interests. Dominant groups resort to planning to create 'purified' and homogeneous ethnic spaces (Shirlow, 2003) and segregate minority communities to facilitate their own expansion (Yiftachel and Ghanem, 2004). Planning may therefore have a 'dark side' (Yiftachel and Huxley, 2000) when used to repress subordinate groups, essentialise collective identities, and hierarchises urban citizenship (Kliot and Mansfield, 1999; Yiftachel and Yacobi, 2003).

While valuable to assess the relation between ethno-national divisions and urban governance, this scholarship has left a dimension of urban conflict relatively unexplored – the collusion between ethno-national interests and neoliberal urban policies. Little attention has indeed been paid to the market-driven, globalised context of urban conflict and how it affects ethno-national discourses and urban governance strategies. This lacuna may be explained by the fact that the growth of a neoliberal economy is usually associated with the end of national hegemony and the shrinking ability of ethno-national governance to affect social and spatial processes (Yacobi, 2012). This association is not surprising, given the broader conflation of neoliberalism with internationalism, that is, a borderless world (Friedman, 2000) and 'the end of nation-states' (Ohmae, 1996). Nationalism is itself often equated with national protectionism and closure in reaction to neoliberal globalisation (Radice, 2000; Worth, 2002). This perspective has led some scholars to posit that urban neoliberalisation could even have beneficial effects on divided cities. In particular, it has been argued that privatisation processes and the growth of commercialism could challenge sectarian logics and undermine ethno-national segregation (Shtern, 2016). More generally, this perspective has

reinforced the distinction between 'divided cities' and 'neoliberal' world cities and deflected attention from the collusion of neoliberal and ethno-national interests in urban governance.

While this paper focuses on the relationship between nationalism and neoliberalism, it shares Yiftachel's (2016) view on the need to consider the relational and ever changing nature of the powers affecting urban space. The urban landscape is shaped, not by a single or a pair of structural forces, but by an assemblage of interacting and fluctuating forces of domination and discourses, as well as many sites of resistance. In the case of Skopje, the Macedonian capital is, among other, a post-imperial city, shaped by over five centuries of Ottoman control, whose legacy has always clashed with the politics of territoriality deployed by modern ethno-national movements; a religious city, home mainly to Christian and Muslim communities, whose narratives are closely intertwined with ethno-nationalism; a post-socialist city, shaped by the modernist dream of international solidarity and cooperation following the 1963 earthquake; a gendered city, where patriarchal perspectives on national memory and identity are reinforced by current urban politics; as well as a political city of ordinary people who either reproduce or challenge these various layers of domination in both public and private space. While this list does not encompass all the structural forces that operate in Skopje, it helps uncover the myriad intersecting powers that co-shape the city and highlights the need for a dynamic reading of these. As suggested by Yiftachel, it seems also important however to concentrate on the forces identified, for a particular place and time, as most powerful and consistent – in the case of present-day Skopje, the ethno-national/neoliberal equilibrium.

CONCEPTUALISING NEOLIBERAL NATIONALISM IN THE CITY

Helleiner (2002) together with Pickel (2005) have challenged the idea that neoliberalism and nationalism are antithetical by examining how nationalist discourses or policies have been employed to promote a neoliberal programme and, in turn, how neoliberal policies have been used to advance a nationalist agenda. According to Harvey (2005:85), 'Forced to operate as a competitive agent in the world market and seeking to establish the best possible business climate, [the neoliberal state] mobilizes nationalism in its effort to succeed'. Nevertheless, appeals to nationalism have largely been seen as part of a political and instrumentalist strategy for neoliberals (Harmes, 2012). Resorting to nationalist policies does not demonstrate any true theoretical compatibility with neoliberal values, but is motivated by political expediency. However, neoliberalism should not be conflated with economic liberalism. Neoliberal values are far less internationalist than previous strands of liberalism and not necessarily opposed to state intervention, in particular when the latter is favourable to business climate and markets. This explains why, according to Harmes (2012), nationalist policies may not only be genuinely compatible with neoliberal values, but these values may also be dependent on certain nationalist policies.

Neoliberalism in the divided city

The complementarity between neoliberalism and nationalism has been touched upon by Tzfadia and Yacobi (2011) in the field of divided societies. According to them, ethno-nationalism is capable of adapting to threats, such as globalisation and neoliberalism, and instrumentalising them for territorial control. Based on research in Jerusalem, Yacobi (2012) further argues that ethno-national ideologies and neoliberal economic interests may be complementary in urban space. Behind a veil of the 'free market', the state holds its monopoly over urban planning, allowing it to privilege the dominant ethnic group and keep its spatial and demographic control over the city, hence

subordinating the market to the ethno-national project, while advancing neoliberal economic interests in the name of nationalism. The close ties between market and state are illustrated by the better conditions offered to private actors who ideologically serve ethno-national interests. Yacobi (2016: 102) also suggests that Jerusalem has now become an 'apartheid city', that is, 'a distinct urban regime based on urban trends such as privatization of space, gentrification, urban design, infrastructure development and touristic planning'.

How exactly these processes are operationalised and participate in geographies of urban conflict deserves to be further examined. In this paper, I analyse the ways in which ethno-nationalism uses neoliberalism as a form of territorial control and community mobilisation. I argue that neoliberal urban policies and ethno-nationalist interests may not only be complementary, but that neoliberalism should be seen as a new modality of ethno-nationalist conflicts in urban space. In a globalised world, cities are at the heart of the neoliberalisation process. They increasingly adhere to urban entrepreneurship and become competitiveness clusters, whose aim is to develop their appeal under international competition. As shown by Chatterjee (2009), local conflicts need to be understood in the context of the dynamics of neoliberal globalisation. Similarly, neoliberal urban policies cannot be analysed independently of local geopolitical dynamics. Local urban elites interact with global processes, which modify their strategy and provide them with new tools of urban control. In ethno-nationally divided cities, neoliberal policies may therefore be used in ways that privilege dominant ethnic groups, marginalise minorities and lead to further intercommunity separation. Neoliberal and ethno-national logics of exclusion combine to support intersectional forms of exclusion – class and ethno-national – which reinforces urban geographies of power and division. In order to understand the new 'glocal' geographies of ethno-national urban conflict in Skopje, I will now investigate one of neoliberal nationalism's main tool of governance, *nation-branding.*

Nation-branding: a new form of nationalist control in a globalised world?

Emerging in the late 1990s, nation-branding has quickly become a widespread governmental strategy. Although neglected by political geographers and scholars of nationalism, it says a lot about processes of national (re)production in a globalising world and about nation-state/market relationships. A marketing strategy, its aim is to produce an image of the nation-state that meets the competitive expectations of the market. The state becomes an enterprise whose goal is to create coherent national value and identity in order to turn the nation into an attractive product on the world market. By treating the nation identity as a form of capital, it follows a logic of neoliberal governance with several objectives:

> (a) create greater visibility; (b) attract foreign investors and tourists, and expand exports; (c) enhance a nation's geo-political profile among the member states of international organizations such as the United Nations and the European Union; (d) generate national pride and internal solidarity; and (e) repair damaged reputations (Jansen, 2008:124).

Although the idea that nation-branding equally targets external and internal audiences is debated by scholars, in this paper I argue that nation-branding does not follow only external objectives, but also internal ones. By providing a cohesive image of the nation, it seeks to improve its economic, social and cultural development, and build national identities and social solidarity among the population (Jansen, 2008). It is therefore a sign of the commodification of nation building and national identity (Bolin and Mizazhevich, 2018). As part of a wider strategy of 'commercial nationalism', it is 'characterized by unprecedented levels of state expenditure on branding consultants, the mobilization of private/public partnerships for promoting national identity, and the convergence of

the state's use of commercial strategies for public and international relations with the private sector's use of nationalism to sell products' (Volcic and Andrejevic, 2011:599). Encouraged by globalisation, this strategy is a 'soft power', which determines a nation's supremacy by its performance in the marketplace rather than on the battlefield (Jansen, 2008).

Nation-branding has been widely employed by former socialist countries under an identity crisis. Developing a new nation brand has been an important step and a prerequisite for the success of transition (Szondi, 2007). According to brand consultant Simon Anholt (2003), who coined the concept and has played a major role in establishing the practice worldwide, nation-branding is an 'agent of global justice' since it offers smaller nations deprived of economic and military resources the opportunity to compete in a global market. To him, the commodification of nations is a tool of democratization, liberalization and peace-building (Anholt, 2006). This position is shared by Van Ham (2001:3), for whom nation-branding is 'gradually supplanting nationalism' by channelling negative national sentiments and 'marginalizing chauvinism', therefore working towards the 'pacification of Europe'. In the Balkans, nation-branding has been presented by marketers as an alternative to the violent imposition of nationalist ideologies by transposing ethno-national competition in the marketplace. According to Volcic and Andrejevic (2011:606), the promise is that 'the market can dissolve archaic forms of collective cultural conflict by disaggregating collectives into self-interested individuals and reassembling them into branded communities'. However, this imaginary post-political, pragmatic and politically neutral alternative to nationalism fails to be substantiated when critically examined.

Nation-branding is an updated form of nationalism, which obscures social relations of power and domination among and within nations. A new 'technology of governance', it is designed to satisfy the expectations of a foreign 'gaze' and reflects the post-Cold War neoliberal order (Kaneva, 2011). As such, it is part of wider global power structures favouring representations aimed to appeal to Western tourists and investors (Kania-Lundholm, 2012). Unsurprisingly, nation-branding has been mostly employed by 'transitional' and 'developing' nations in need of finding their new economic and geopolitical place in the international order. Post-socialist and -conflict countries have endeavoured to offer a new image of nationhood that would enhance their chances of entering neoliberal international organisations. By silencing local perspectives and avoiding controversial issues that would jeopardise their ambitions in the global world, nation-branding embeds not only a neoliberal discourse, but also a neo-colonial one (Kania-Lundholm, 2012; Tegelberg, 2010).

Internally, nation-branding produces a-historical and exclusionary representations of the nation (Bolin and Mizazhevich, 2018), redefining national cultures at the expense of real or imaginary 'others' (Kaneva, 2011). By policing the boundaries of national identities, it seeks to maintain social control over populations. The process of self-definition implies to homogenise nationhood by concealing potential problems or silencing heterogeneous elements:

> Nation branding is a monologic, hierarchical, reductive form of communication that is intended to privilege one message, require all voices of authority to speak in unison, and marginalize and silence dissenting voices… The primary impetus for branding products, companies and nations, like cattle and slaves, is control (Jansen, 2008: 134).

These narratives reveal a deeply political and ideological project that reinterprets nationhood in terms of power. As Volcic and Andrejevic (2011: 612) argue, nation-branding 'opens up new spaces for the commercial exploitation of the political—for the use of nationalism to sell a range of cultural products and to build brand loyalty'. At the same time, by reducing the struggles through which national identities are produced 'to an exchange of media-centric, brand symbols' (Kaneva, 2017:

133), nation-branding has a depoliticising effect. Ironically, this depoliticisation revives ethno-nationalist sentiments and tensions in post-socialist countries. By essentialising national identity and reducing diversity and pluralism, it privileges dominant ethnic groups and excludes minorities from national expression. Branding a nation may therefore have divisive social consequences.

In this paper, I show how ethnic nationalism can employ the discursive and material technologies of branding to serve its interests and pursue conflict by non-traditional means. Far from having supplanted nationalism, nation-branding is a neoliberal tool of power and control through which ethno-national governance extends its battlefield from the political to the market, and from the social psyche to public space. Branding the nation is not only a discursive practice, but also a material one, which reshapes public space. In the city, this strategy may have the effect of further materialising sectarian divisions, reinforcing interethnic segregation and contributing to geographies of power and exclusion. As seen in Skopje, nation-branding illustrates a new modality of urban conflict through which ethno-national groups confront each other and compete for spatial control.

BRANDING THE NATION IN URBAN SPACE: ALEXANDER THE GREAT *VS.* SKANDERBEG

Contemporary urban politics in Skopje

As many of its neighbours, the post-socialist transition in Macedonia was followed by a political, economic and cultural crisis, further exacerbated by several threats posed to Macedonian identity. The newly proclaimed Republic immediately faced the contestation of its sovereignty by some of its neighbours, in particular Greece, which delayed its international recognition. This dispute and the strained economic situation resulting from the Greek embargo amplified Macedonian nationalism and was accompanied by rising interethnic tensions within the country. Although the first national Constitution gave a privileged status to ethnic Macedonians, they make up only two thirds of the national population. These nationalist policies led to negative reactions in the Albanian community, which makes up more than 20% of the population. Intercommunity tensions escalated throughout the 1990s and led to the violent conflict between Albanian fighters and Macedonian security forces in 2001, which was eventually ended by the international community's intervention. While the Ohrid Framework Agreement prevented the conflict from degenerating into a full civil war, the issue of interethnic relations has not been solved. The new consociational arrangement has left many Macedonians deeply frustrated and led to the politisation and essentialisation of ethnic identities in the country. These geopolitical circumstances, in conjunction with the high rate of unemployment and the need to advance Macedonian integration in the European Union, explain the attractiveness of neoliberal nationalism for a country seeking to create national wealth and improve its international image (Véron, 2017).

In contrast with most Balkan cities, Skopje has remained home to various ethnic communities after the fall of Yugoslavia. The city makes up a quarter of Macedonia’s population of two million and the composition of its population closely follows the national one, with more than two thirds of ethnic Macedonians (who identify as Christians), 20% Albanians, 5% Roma and almost 9% other ethnic groups, most of whom identify as Muslims. However, Skopje's communities are not evenly distributed in urban space *(figure 1)*. While a majority of Macedonians live on the southern side of the Vardar River, ethnic minorities live mostly on the northern side. Most Albanians reside in the Albanian-led Čair municipality, where they made up 57% of the population in 2002, while Roma made up almost 80% of the population of Šuto Orizari, the only Roma municipality in Macedonia. The spatial distribution of ethnic communities coincides with poverty rates and unemployment. While

unemployment rate was of 17% for Skopje in 2002, it reached more than 46% in Čair and almost 63% in Šuto Orizari.[2]

The post-socialist period in Skopje has been characterised by two related processes – the rise of interethnic divisions and urban neoliberalisation. Intercommunity relations started deteriorating in the 1980s, but the situation worsened in the 1990s (Véron, 2016). While Skopje's northern side was already home to minority groups since the 19th century, it came to be 'Albanianised' after the transition, with increasingly ethnically exclusive neighbourhoods, such as Dižonska in Čair. Spontaneous processes of segregation were accompanied by the departure of many Macedonians who moved to the south side. Once multiethnic, the preserved Ottoman Čaršija in Čair came to be perceived as 'Albanian' with the departure of Macedonian merchants. In only a few years, division and ethnic homogenisation have profoundly altered the urban landscape, with expression of ethnic identities taking an increasingly public dimension, as exemplified by the display of national or religious markers on façades. Although the 2001 fights stopped at the gate of Skopje, the fear of ethno-nationalist claims and retaliation led to the intensification of urban partitioning.

In parallel, Skopje has also been profoundly reshaped by neoliberalisation. As in many post-socialist states, transition to decentralised, market-oriented capitalist economies has been a priority for the newly independent Republic. In Skopje, this process translated in profit-seeking investments, large-scale privatisation of previously state-owned assets, in particular housing, and the production of new meanings and discourses, leading to uneven development and the rapid closure of urban space (Golbuchikov, 2017; Tsenkova, 2009). In middle-upper class areas of the south, one-floor buildings were turned into individual houses surrounded by fences. In northern areas, poor neighbourhoods have been rapidly threatened by investors and conquered by commercial space. Topaana, a major Roma slum, has been surrounded by commercial areas separating it from the rest of the city, forcing its inhabitants to cut themselves off from the outside (Mijalkovic and Urbanek, 2011). In the absence of state programmes of social housing, rising housing market prices have intensified segregation trends. State-owned lands have been sold to developers and public funds redirected towards public/private partnerships, often at the expense of minority communities. In southern municipalities, such as Aerodrom, Roma neighbourhoods have been destroyed to make space for parking lots. This suggests that the privatisation of space led by neoliberal policies has resulted in increasing restrictions on minorities' right to the city and in the exacerbation of ethnic divisions. In only a few years, neoliberalism and ethno-nationalism have altered the cohesion of Skopje, whose spaces and populations appear to be increasingly homogeneous, closed and divided.

Skopje 2014: an exclusive enterprise of nation(alist)-branding

Intercommunity tensions have taken a new dimension in 2010 with the launching of a major urban project for the city centre, *Skopje 2014*. Officially directed by the ethnic Macedonian municipality of Centre, the project has been financed by the VMRO-DPMNE[3] right-wing government of Nikola Gruevski for a total cost of €684 million.[4] While the original project planned to build 60 buildings, monuments and statues of ethnic Macedonian 'heroes' around Macedonia Square – Skopje's main

[2] Source: 2002 census. The 2002 census was the last census undertaken in Macedonia, which leaves us with a lack of more recent figures. A new census would be needed to measure the evolution of the distribution of population during the last two decades, but it has constantly been postponed due to political controversy over demographics.

[3] Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organisation – Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity.

[4] Source: BIRN Macedonia, http://skopje2014.prizma.birn.eu.com/en [accessed 19/10/20120]

square – their number and diversity have constantly increased in the years that followed, including a Ferris wheel modelled after the London Eye, a fake galleon serving as a restaurant on the Vardar and a carrousel. Despite the opposition's attempts to stop the project, Skopje 2014 has now reached completion and completely reshaped Skopje's centre following a highly ethno-nationalist representation of space.

Skopje 2014 is an enterprise of nation-branding led by the neoliberal Macedonian state pursuing both external and internal objectives. Externally and officially, the project seeks to give Skopje a new image to attract foreign investors and tourists and enhance Macedonia's profile on the international scene. Internally and less officially, Skopje 2014 is part of a strategy that aims to construct Macedonian history in ethno-nationally exclusionary terms, control urban space and purify it from 'undesirable' elements – ethnic minorities.

Skopje 2014 illustrates how nation-branding is used by governments to achieve visibility in a competitive world market and attract outside capital. As shown by Graan (2013), the project has been positioned as the keystone of the efforts deployed by the Macedonian government as an entrepreneurial subject to construct a nation brand for Macedonia. According to Čamprag (2018), it exemplifies an extreme case of neoliberal rebranding led by a post-socialist country through urban re-imagineering of its capital city to strengthen national greatness, global competitiveness and European cultural roots. The project has indeed to be examined as part of a wider attempt to brand the country as a business and travel destination, which started in 2007 with a big media campaign implemented by marketing agencies contracted by the government. The first series of campaigns – 'Invest in Macedonia' –promoted Macedonia as a 'new business haven' with '0% tax on retained earnings' for foreign investors.[5] Stemming from 'an official Government investment and export promotion agency responsible for attracting foreign investments and supporting the export promotion' of Macedonia, [6] the campaign's current website displays pictures of Skopje 2014 on its front page. The campaign has also targeted tourists with various 'Macedonia Timeless' and 'Explore Macedonia' commercials broadcasted on international media.[7] The second ranged from encouraging local populations to develop entrepreneurship and businesses, and – in controversial commercials portraying Macedonians as a barbarian endemic species – to be more welcoming hosts for tourists.[8] By seeking to create a new image for the country and policing internal behaviours, this campaign is, like Skopje 2014, both a marketing strategy and a form of governance (Graan, 2016). Resorting to national imaginary aims to create a new image for the capital city – the prime showcase of the country – and gain points within international competition. Government officials have always presented Skopje 2014 as a way to increase Macedonia's recognisability and competitiveness in the world economy. As argued by Koce Trajanovski, mayor of Skopje until 2017, the objective is to make Skopje 'functional, recognisable, and attractive to tourists', which implies to redesign it in 'the style of a European metropolis', according to Vladimir Todorovikj, then head of the Centre municipality.[9] The central aim of turning Skopje into a 'European' city entails two major measures – the de-socialisation of Skopje and its antiquisation.

Revising Skopje's socialist past has been considered an important step towards its Europeanisation. Following the 1963 earthquake, Skopje was almost rebuilt from scratch by an

[5] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VNgROAQsAHo&feature=emb_title [accessed 21/10/2020].
[6] www.investinmacedonia.com now http://investnorthmacedonia.gov.mk/ [accessed 24/10/2020].
[7] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rd5fXbqBolM [accessed 21/10/2020].
[8] https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCcL_CXbuzV33lOP2shhC7cQ [accessed 21/10/2020].
[9] *Večer*, 'Repezentativen Centar—Ogledalo na Državata.', n° 14314, 06/02/2010, http://www.vecer.com.mk/?ItemID585BF0DE7A3FB4E408458006C20B44C0E [accessed 21/10/2013].

international team entrusted by Yugoslavia government. Since its victory in 2006, the VMRO-DPMNE has started removing socialist buildings and replacing them with copies of interwar buildings and monuments. This period, during which Macedonia was under the Kingdom of Serbia, is seen by the VMRO-DPMNRE as a golden age which marked Skopje's successful transition away from the Ottoman Empire, the end of the 'Islamic city' and the birth of the modern 'European' and Christian city. This enterprise was carried on with the renaming of Skopje's streets and the insertion of a street named 'Victims of Communism', which was echoed by the series of rooms dedicated to the victims of communism in the new Museum of Macedonian Struggle.[10] By explicitly condemning communism and attempting to restore the idealised image of the interwar, the state attempts to show that the country has broken with the previous regime and is ready to enter the European and world market. 'From a city with grey socialist-realist style', Skopje should be turned 'into an architectural and urban whole, which will give the city an artistic appeal', according to Todorovikj.[11] This narrative seems to have been effective among Macedonians, as many of my respondents openly criticised post-1963 Skopje, 'a city with grey, old communist architecture', lacking 'nice buildings which represent the main city and [the] country as a whole'. Inversely, defending Skopje's socialist past has also been a rallying point for opponents of Skopje 2014, as advanced by an activist:

> What the government wants to hide is the modernity of Skopje. Our cultural heritage is neglected, so the idea is to create a new one […] The government wants to build a new identity for the city, but we already have one.

Branding the nation in urban space requires finding a delicate balance between developing a 'European' image for the city and keeping its distinctive Macedonian character against the backdrop of external challenges to state legitimacy. Since independence, Macedonia has claimed its legitimacy as a nation separate from its Slavic neighbours, in particular Serbia and Bulgaria, which have long fostered the hope of assimilating Macedonians in their respective populations. The government has placed a narrative of national identity taking its origin in ancient Macedonia, thereby also challenging Greek claims of monopoly over the past. Based on the belief that the Macedonian nation can be traced back to antiquity, the *Antiquisation* is an official policy pursued by the VMRO-DPMNE from 2006 onwards. Statues of Alexander the Great and Philip II of Macedon have popped up in many Macedonian cities. Streets, stadiums, motorways and airports have been renamed after 'Alexander the Macedonian'. This process has been brought a step further with Skopje 2014, whose cornerstone is the huge fountain topped by the statue of Alexander the Great at the centre of Macedonia Square *(figure 2)*, not far from another fountain dedicated to his father Philip. Placing the figure of Alexander as the forefather of the nation and Skopje's centrepiece is meant to assert Macedonia's legitimacy against Greek and Slavic challenges. A humane conqueror who spread Hellenism through 'barbarian' lands, Alexander the Great also carries strong western values, thereby legitimising Macedonia's belonging to the West and Europe. When installed on the square, the statue was welcomed by an enthusiastic crowd: 'Finally, Alexander is back!', 'This is a historic day for Macedonia!', 'We are so proud of Alexander, the symbol of our identity'. These reactions are telling of the effectiveness of the Antiquisation policy in Macedonian society. As put by a Macedonian respondent met on Macedonia Square on that day, 'Skopje 2014 gives a new spirit to the city at the same time as it re-establishes its identity'. The association between national identity and Europeanness, widely disseminated by the government, was echoed by several respondents, praising the 'better look of the city centre': 'Skopje

[10] Inaugurated in 2011, this museum has been dubbed by the public 'the Museum of the VMRO', in the name of the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organisation, an anti-Ottoman movement founded in the late 19th century, which gave its name to the current VMRO-DPMNE.

[11] *Makedonska Nacija*, 'Prezentiran Proektot "Skopje 2014"', February 5, 2010, http://www.mn.mk/aktuelno/1260-Prezentiran-proektot-Skopje-2014 [accessed 23/07/2013]

will now be like a European metropolis'. As an informant put it enthusiastically, 'the city will now attract more tourists, stimulate the Macedonian building sector and boost our economy'.

While one cannot ignore the increased number of tourists around the main square and the amount of children splashing about the fountain, many citizens have expressed their opposition to this commodification of national identity and 'Disneyfication' (Sorkin, 1992) of the city centre, referring to it as 'an urban nightmare', a 'theme park' or 'a new, kitchest version of Las Vegas'. 'This is not the Skopje I grew up in, I don't recognise my city anymore' reported a 50 year-old Macedonian informant, 'it has become a fake history guidebook for tourists, and there are now more foreigners in the centre than locals'. In only a few years, the city centre has been turned, from a lived space, into a public exhibition of monuments for touristic entertainment, from which inhabitants run away. As voiced by an activist:

> People like me who don't support Skopje 2014 just don't show up in the city centre anymore. I run away from it, I can't look at it, it's beyond any standards... It's simply disgusting. It's not just the brutality of the statues and the aesthetics of the whole thing: it's the idea. They've usurped public space.

Materialising the purity of Macedonian uninterrupted ethnogenesis through nation-branding in urban space is also a way for Macedonian political elites to marginalise ethnic minorities and exclude them from the city core. Skopje 2014 is a strategy not so much turned outward than inward. One of its main objectives is to exclude ethnic and religious minorities from the newly branded Macedonian community and deprive them from their right to the city. I extend previous analyses of Skopje 2014 as an enterprise of nation-branding by showing that it illustrates not only a nationalist strategy deployed by neoliberal governance to respond to economic globalisation, but a new modality of ethno-nationalist conflict in a globalised world.

The attempt to 'Europeanise' Skopje has always been a double edge-sword, since it has gone hand in hand with the attempt to exclude Albanian and Muslim communities from the nation and the city. In the Balkans, nationalist and Orientalist ideas have equated the Ottoman Empire with archaism and Europe with modernity. The attempt to 'Europeanise' Skopje has therefore been paralleled by an attempt to erase its Ottoman legacy. As illustrated by the Museum of Macedonian Struggle, where the narrative jumps from the pre-Ottoman Middle-Ages to the end of the 19th century, it is as if the five centuries of Ottoman rule had not existed. This also denies the contribution of Muslim heritage in Macedonia, hence the legacy of Muslims to the republic – a third of Macedonian total population. This process has been complemented by government support for Christianity. Macedonian central authorities had already provoked heated discussions in the 2000s by financially supporting a 66-meter-high 'Millenium Cross' on top of the mountain that overlooks the city, thereby denying Macedonia's multi-confessional character *(figure 3)*. This enterprise has taken a new dimension with Skopje 2014, which constructs the narrative of a European and Christian city. Many erected statues carry Christian connotations, such as Saints Cyril and Methodius. Because the government pretended that Skopje could not become a European city if it didn't have a church in its centre, a church was also built in 2015. Initially planned on the main square, it was relocated 300 meters from it due to the considerable tensions it triggered. As voiced by an activist:

> Building a church there is a statement. If the project had been to build a kindergarten, I wouldn't have been protesting. But it is not just about space – it is about something bigger. They seek to control us, to impose their narrative, to force us into a homogenous identity, from which alternative narratives and minorities are excluded.

By denying the contribution of Muslim communities to the nation, Macedonian authorities try to lessen the importance of Albanians in Macedonia. A former adviser to the Prime Minister openly admitted that the project was anti-Albanian: 'Antiquisation has a double goal, which is to marginalise Albanians and create an identity that will not allow Albanians to become Macedonians'.[12] Among the hundred or so statues making up Skopje 2014, none initially depicted Albanian figures. It is only after many discussions between the VMRO-DPMNE and its Albanian coalition partner, the DUI,[13] that the decision was taken to include three statues of Albanian personalities in the project – a concession enabling the VMRO-DPMNE to deny accusations of ethno-nationalism. Besides, some buildings are openly anti-Albanian, as illustrated by the inclusion of a monument commemorating the ethnic Macedonian soldiers who died during the 2001 conflict. Instead of dedicating it to the Ohrid Agreement which ended the civil war, the government has chosen to underline the nation's ethnic roots and glorify the heroism of Macedonian fighters as opposed to Albanians.

This attempt to marginalise Albanians does not only assume a symbolic character – it is a material process of spatial bounding, which reinforces intercommunity barriers and geographies of exclusion in the city. Nation-branding is deployed by urban governance to control and purify Skopje's spaces and populations. Skopje 2014 aims to spatially materialise a boundary between the 'Self' and the 'Other' through a series of cultural representations. It seeks to appropriate the city centre, whose gradual shrinking further narrows the contours of national identity. Instead of comprising the area around Macedonia Square and the old Ottoman town – the historical core of Skopje – and thereby unifying the two riverbanks, the centre has been displaced on the southern side, where most of the new buildings have been constructed. By decentring Skopje and limiting it to the Macedonian side, the project denies the city's multicultural character and establishes barriers between communities. Its high buildings on the riversides constitute a wall between Skopje's two banks. Meant to be seen from the south, they hide the old town from view. This suggests an attempt not only to exclude Albanians and other ethnic minorities, but also to wipe them off the urban landscape. By building material and symbolic walls between communities, urban governance enforces separation in the collective psyche. These processes are part of an ethno-nationalist strategy of nation-branding, which seeks to maintain control over urban inhabitants, privilege a dominant ethnic group and further marginalise minorities.

Skanderbeg's counter-attack

Analysing Skopje 2014 as an enterprise of cultural domination and territorial appropriation is in line with the critical perspectives on nation-branding as a prerogative of the state and hegemonic groups. However, the process of branding the (ethno)-nation has so far not been examined in multicultural conflict settings led by consociational governments. In this section, I will show how this tool can be used as much by dominant ethnic political elites as by ethnic minority leaders to mobilise their communities and extend their control of urban space. My discussion here extends previous analyses of neoliberal nationalism, by offering a more complex picture of urban politics and analysing nation-branding as a weapon between competing ethno-national leaders.

[12] *Balkan Insight*, 'Ghost of the past endanger Macedonia's future', Boris Georgievski, October 27, 2009, http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/ghosts-of-the-past-endanger-macedonia-s-future [accessed: 12/03/2013]

[13] Democratic Union for integration.

Skopje 2014 was still in its early stages when Izet Medziti, the Albanian mayor of Čair, announced the launching of a vast project of renovation of the municipality's main square, Skanderbeg square. Located at the edge of the Čaršija, near the Vardar, it is almost the mirror image of Macedonia Square with respect to the river. A statue of Skanderbeg, a 15th-century key figure of Albanian history, had already been erected there in 2006, causing much anger among Macedonians *(figure 4)*. Following a press conference in September 2010, it was revealed that the square would include a fountain and a memorial to Skanderbeg, and encompass 28,000 m^2 – twice as big as Macedonia Square. The project was quickly labelled as 'the Albanian Square' and seen as a response to Skopje 2014. National and international media headlines and articles testify to this perspective: *Skopje's Albanians plan 'alternative' City Square*, *Skanderbeg Square will be bigger than Macedonia Square*, *The mayor of an ethnic Albanian majority municipality wants to construct a competing square across the river…* The first two phases of the project were completed in 2017 and the third phase is still in process. The square is smaller than initially planned, but the pedestal topped by Skanderbeg statue has been significantly raised and murals depict key scenes from Albanian history along with national insignia, such as the two-headed eagle of the Albanian flag.

It is difficult to deny the dualism of Skopje 2014 and Skanderbeg. Both projects have been planned around each ethno-national narrative's centrepiece, Alexander the Great and Skanderbeg. Both statues are on horseback and symbolically face each other. For centuries, the old town marked the centre of Skopje. It is only during the interwar that Macedonia Square was built and considered the centre of new Skopje by the Serbian regime. With Skopje 2014 reinforcing this displacement, both squares now epitomise the ethno-national struggle for the city centre and illustrate the broader Albano-Macedonian conflict over national identity. By attempting to assert the centrality of Skanderbeg Square in the Albanian urban narrative, Čair Municipality challenges the Macedonian attempt to control urban space and identity. While segregation places undesirable people out of sight, contact and mind, Albanian governance is attempting to resist the invisibilisation of its community, reinvest public space and affirm its right to the city. The Skanderbeg project has therefore met much resistance among Macedonians, who have criticised its ethno-national ethos and vengeful character. Many informants argued that the project posed a threat to Macedonian national identity and to the city's stability, and blamed 'those of the other national belonging [who] create their own centre', so that 'Macedonians don't feel at home anymore.'

However, Albanian officials have never presented the Skanderbeg project as an attempt to counter Skopje 2014. Rather, it has been portrayed as a beautification project aimed at creating greater visibility for the municipality and drawing foreign support and capital. According to Macedonia's Albanian Vice Prime Minister Abdulhakim Ademi, urbanising Čair's central area and 'help[ing] the revitalisation of the Old Bazaar' is meant to attract tourists and investors.[14] As reported by its architects, Skanderbeg Square is meant to become 'a place to organize a wide range of events and cultural manifestations: concerts, outdoor performances, fashion shows, places for recreation, youth festivals, amusement parks'.[15] When I interviewed them, they vehemently refused to compare the two projects: 'It has been commonly said that our project was a response to Skopje 2014. Yet, there is no ground for comparison! While Skopje 2014 is an enterprise of division, Skanderbeg Square is open and unifying.'

[14] Source: http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/skopje-s-albanians-plan-alternative-square [accessed 28/07/2018].

[15] Source: https://www.archdaily.com/892324/skanderbeg-square-in-skopje-qb-arkitektura-plus-bina-plus-besian-mehmeti-architects [accessed 28/07/2018].

Nevertheless, both projects can and should be compared. By attempting to enhance Čair's profile locally and internationally, the Skanderbeg project is as much a neoliberal project of nation-branding as Skopje 2014. It uses space to promote the national brand and create wealth, illustrating an ethno-nationalist attempt at using neoliberal tools to control urban space. The difference is that it is deployed by ethnic minority leaders within a consociational government and it offers an alternative model of national identity to the dominant narrative. This model is not based on a civic, multicultural identity either, but on a monoethnic and exclusive one. Both projects trace boundaries in urban space. By reinforcing the image of an Albanian city centre separate from the Macedonian side, Skanderbeg Square equally supports the ethno-sectarian logic. Together, they construct 'spaces of hate' (Flint, 2004), that is, polarised and antithetic spaces. The top-down attempt to market the city as an investment site and a tourist destination while seeking to divide and control its populations has appeared even more clearly with the news that Skanderbeg Square would be funded by the central government. This indicates a compromise between the two main parties in power, the VMRO-DPMNE and the DUI, meant to silence dissent and deny accusations of ethno-nationalism. Similar tactics were observed when the long-promised Albanian statues were erected in 2016. The monuments were placed overnight, without any prior announcement nor consultation of the then opposition-run Centre municipality, just a day after the DUI backed embattled VMRO-DPMNE in parliament to postpone the forthcoming elections. Rather than a situation of resistance to power, we are in a situation of political collusion and electoral ploy. As argued by a Macedonian informant of Turkish and Serbian origins:

> The project of Skanderbeg Square was made for keeping the mouths of people living on the other side of the bridge shut, even if many Albanians are against the project. It is more or less the same as Skopje 2014. We are giving them the Skanderbeg project, so that now we have Skopje 2014 on this side of the bridge.

Allowing the Albanian community to have its 'own' space was a means for the VMRO-DPMNE to buy the silence of its coalition partner and further reinforce interethnic segregation, as argued by Z., a Macedonian artist:

> The Albanian party is trying to negotiate what they can get from this grand nationalist narrative of Skopje 2014, so they're saying: *'Ok, you're having your Macedonian mythic grand figures… we're having ours'* and because I don't think the VMRO wants to allow too many Albanians on the main square, they're giving them their own space.

For the DUI, it was a means to show other Albanian parties its strength and rally votes among Albanians. Skanderbeg Square and Skopje 2014 are a symbol of the game of power opposing Macedonian and Albanian political representatives rather than their populations. Politicians extend their battlefield from the political to the public sphere, and from the social psyche to the city, which becomes an arena through which political conflicts are played out. While these projects arise from tactical political motivations, they simultaneously reinforce intercommunity differentiation and separation. As argued by a Macedonian local political analyst,

> The division is not only between ethnic communities, but between political parties. The identification with ancient narratives is imposed by the elites. It is a propaganda project. On the one hand, we have ancient Macedonians, on the other, Illyrians… It is dangerous and irrational. We don't need that, it triggers only tension, intolerance and conflict.

This shows that ethno-nationalist conflict is shaped less by logics of group conflict than by sectarian politics, which promote divisive conceptions of urban identity to brand their respective ethno-nations and control their communities. As argued by an NGO activist or Serbian and Albanian origins:

> The Albanians are happy to be part of the coalition, even if the Macedonians are running the show. They thus have some power, they may get corrupted and enrich themselves. This is the main force of this government: it produces divisions. It relies on it. The more the population gets divided, the more frightened it is, and the more power these people get. It's all just 'divide and rule'**.**

At the city scale, these strategies lead to the complete domination of ethno-national narratives within the Macedonian/Albanian paradigm, identifying space in terms of essentialist and exclusive territories. Urban governance is led by a set of political entrepreneurs representing the two main ethnic groups' interests. Under the pretence of marketing the city, they carve and divide up its space in exclusive terms, as reported by an Albanian informant:

> Separatism of the squares separates nations and people. There is now a big divide between the two riversides because of Skopje 2014 and Skanderbeg Square. They have become two different worlds, with almost nothing in common. The Old Bridge is a border between different ethnic communities. They said they wanted to embellish Skopje, create wealth, attract investors from all over the world. But all we are left with is a divided city. Politics and prejudices separate and isolate us.

The impact of these policies extends from the city's main squares to the city centre, and from the city centre to the city as a whole, remodelling everyday practices in Skopje. Existing separations have been intensified and the exclusionary appropriation of space on each riverside reinforced, with the Vardar acting as a border between communities. Such processes have in particular altered collective representations and mobility practices within the city, as shown in the testimony of V., a Macedonian woman in her late 20s:

> When I was a kid, I used to go to the Čaršija quite often with my mother and sister to buy shoes, jeans, bags... It was attractive and nice. But now, I prefer to go to the new malls on the south side. I have always loved the Čaršija but the thing is that, you know... *it's Albanian*. They pushed out the Macedonian population from there. Before, we didn't know about nationalities... who was who, and so on. Politics of division and segregation played a major role. Now, if I am alone in the Čaršija, I don't feel safe... because of all those Albanians. They started with business, now monuments – what next?..

This testimony shows the evolution of representations following the deterioration of interethnic relations in the last two decades. From a place where V. felt 'secure', the Čaršija turned into an ethnically exclusive place, where she does not dare stepping foot anymore. This further highlights the role of ethnic politics in exacerbating tensions among communities and enforcing spatial boundaries within the city. Divisions extend from the city centre to the city as a whole, where each neighbourhood is now ethnically identified and everyday practices territorialised. As reported by a 32-year old Albanian:

> I lived in Čair during my whole childhood. At first, there were only two Albanian families in my building – all the others were Macedonian. Today, all of them are Albanians. It has always been a nice area, but Macedonians started leaving from the 2000s onwards, they didn't feel secure anymore. When I go with friends in Macedonian areas in the South, we don't dare talking in Albanian… it could create problems. We try to cross the place in silence, as quickly as possible. When we were younger, things weren't as difficult. Ethnic relationships used to be better. Divisive politics lead to this absurd city built by money and power…

This further emphasises the impact of state politics on local urban dynamics. The dominance of ethno-national narratives in urban space leaves no room for non-sectarian discourses. Smaller and less powerful minorities, such as the Roma, are completely excluded from these national

representations. Using neoliberal tools of governance, both ethnic Macedonian and Albanian urban projects produce separate and closed worlds, each with their own cultural matrix and their own mode of operating, further dividing the city and exposing it to the risk of ghettoisation.

CONCLUSION

By examining recent urban redevelopment projects in Skopje, this paper points to some of the limitations of traditional approaches of ethno-national urban conflicts. Processes of nation-branding in an ethno-nationally contested city illustrate how neoliberal governance resort to nationalism to respond to economic globalisation but above all how neoliberalism offers ethno-nationalist leaders new ways of controlling urban space and mobilising their communities. These strategies of appropriation and extension of sectarian territories have a profound impact on the city, constructing divisive representations of urban space and society, reinforcing intercommunity barriers and further marginalising minority groups. This suggests that nationalism and neoliberalism do not contradict each other, but that neoliberal nationalism is a new modality of urban geopolitics, which unfolds at various interconnected scales. The fight for representation at the local level is now accompanied by a wider competition for national recognition at the global level, with the concept of international image being central to this strategy. By extending conflict from the political scene to the global economy, local conflicts are increasingly globalised.

This paper therefore underlines the need for a multi-scalar and multi-factor reading of urban geopolitical processes in order to unpack the various sites of power embedded in the city. In a context of increasing neoliberalisation and ethno-nationalist politics, Rokem and Boano (2018) highlight the importance of considering the impact of international geopolitical dynamics on the urban condition, and addressing the planning politics nexus across different scales. The case of Skopje shows that, despite grassroots contestation and resistance, the ongoing reconfiguration of the city has more to do with state politics and global economic and geopolitical processes than with local, urban agency. The city has been redesigned following an undemocratic process led by the central government, which deliberately ignored local inhabitants' and experts' input. While the opposition-led government of Zoran Zaev announced in 2018 the halt of Skopje 2014 and its thorough revision following the country's new, pro-Western politics of Greek-Macedonian friendship, this news further emphasises the role of the state and larger political and economic frameworks in shaping local urban dynamics. This does not suggest that urban space is a mirror of nation-scale dynamics, but that it should be studied as an arena where entangled levels of global economic dynamics, state politics, and local ethnic conditions unfold.

This paper also underlines the need to revise our theorisation of urban phenomena and suggest new ways to think about urban divisions. By highlighting processes common to 'neoliberal' and 'divided' cities, it challenges the canonical view that 'ethno-nationally divided' cities are radically different from other urban areas. Following calls within urban geopolitics to decentre urban theory from its traditional North-Western perspective and to rethink current theoretical 'categories' and 'labels' attributed to cities (Rokem *et al.*, 2017), it seems high time to question the traditional distinction between urban divisions of socioeconomic and socio-political nature. As suggested by Robinson's (2006; 2011) perspective on ordinary cities, the scope of research on divided cities should be broadened and traditional assumptions of incomparability between urban divisions questioned. Examining more closely processes common to neoliberalism and ethno-nationalism, and opening analysis to their interaction with other forces at work in urban space, enables us to move beyond the currently restricted focus of urban geopolitics and overcome the epistemological barriers that ironically separate studies of urban divisions.

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