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Abstract: One of Europe’s newest capital cities, Skopje occupies a unique geographical position at the intersection of several major transport corridors linking Central Europe with Asia Minor and the Eastern Mediterranean. It is a vibrant, dynamic and rapidly-transforming Balkan metropolis which has, surprisingly, received very little academic attention to date. This is despite the city's turbulent history, which has seen its complete destruction and rebirth over the course of several millennia. Current developments in Skopje reflect the consequences of the post-communist transition that has been underway since the fall of Communism in the early 1990s, as well as the legacies embedded in the decision-making behaviours and physical structures lingering from the city's rich historical past. They have led to the internal differentiation of different parts of the urban fabric, under the influence of processes of reurbanisation, densification, infill, upgrading and suburbanisation. But the city still lacks a coherent planning and policy framework to deal with these changes, partly as a result of the inadequacies of its idiosyncratic administrative organisation.
CITY PROFILE: SKOPJE, REPUBLIC OF MACEDONIA

INTRODUCTION

One would be hard-pressed to find another example of a European capital that is both as significant and thoroughly understudied as Skopje. The lack of academic interest in this city is evidenced by the almost complete absence of published research about it: Skopje is not mentioned in any of the more recent authoritative overviews of post-communist urban change (see Borén and Gentile, 2007; Brade, 2009; Stanilov et al., 2007; Tsenkova and Nedović-Budić, 2006). Yet even the most cursory glance at the city’s history quickly indicates that it has played a pivotal role in shaping the development of Southeastern Europe. As the third most populous urban agglomeration in the former Yugoslavia, Skopje was the focal point of much of the country’s southern regions – including parts of Serbia and Montenegro, as well as the entire territories of Kosovo and Macedonia – since the end of World War One. Previously, it served as one of the major centres of the Ottoman Empire’s Balkan dominions, for almost 500 years. This is evidenced, inter alia, by its role as the capital of the large Vilayet of Kosovo during the late nineteenth century. Skopje also hosted the seat of several Slavonic mediaeval kingdoms that existed between the tenth and fourteenth centuries, while serving as a regional capital of the Roman and Byzantine empires that ruled this part of Southeastern Europe since the second century BC.

The city’s central political and economic position in the history of Balkan peninsula largely stems from the benefits brought by its geographical location: owing to a unique combination of tectonic and geomorphological forces, Skopje occupies one of the few sites where the otherwise compact and inhospitable Southern Balkan mountains open up to form a relatively wide tectonic basin (otherwise termed a ‘graben’) that also represents a natural intersection of the main routes between the Adriatic Sea and the Hungarian Plain, on the one hand, and the Aegean Sea and the Turkish straits, on the other. In the middle of the basin, to the immediate north of the Vardar river that traverses it, one finds a few hills that have traditionally hosted the urban core of the city. But Skopje’s favourable strategic location has often been its peril, as city’s successive rulers have spared no efforts in destroying the architectural heritage left
over by preceding civilisations. Their actions have often been aided by the active seismicity of the Skopje basin, expressed in major earthquakes that have wrought destruction to it at almost regular 500-year intervals.

Despite the trials and tribulations of its past, however, today’s Skopje is a dynamic metropolis of more than half a million inhabitants, undergoing multiple transformations in its social and built fabric. It is also the administrative capital and key metropolitan centre of the Republic of Macedonia, a country of more than 2 million inhabitants. Contemporary changes in the city largely reflect the policy choices and development paths followed by its authorities during the post-communist transition that has been underway since the fall of Communism in the early 1990s, as well as the legacies embedded in the decision-making behaviours and physical structures lingering from its rich historical past. This review is mainly focused on the different ways in which such legacies have interacted with contemporary development paths in shaping Skopje’s variegated urban landscapes, paying particular attention to the trajectories followed by different parts of the city – the urban core, inner city, as well as socialist housing estates and suburbs – during the past 20 years. However, in order to contextualise the analysis, I first wish to outline the key stages in the city’s historical development, as well as its main demographic, economic and political features.

A BRIEF HISTORICAL SKETCH

The earliest evidence of human residence in Skopje has been traced back to 4000 BC, although the first records of systematic settlement at the present site of the city date from the fourth century BC. During this time, it is believed, the area was inhabited by various Thracian tribes, most notably the Paeonians and Dardanians. It came under Roman rule in 148 BC – a period associated with the founding of the ancient city of Scupi, whose site can be found ca. four kilometres north-east of the present city centre of Skopje. By the fourth century AD, Scupi gradually became a typical late Roman town, incorporating public baths, fortifications, paved squares and streets, a water management system, Christian churches, palaces, and a theatre. But it was rapidly abandoned following a cataclysmic earthquake that destroyed most of the urban centres in the region in 518. Little is known about the few centuries that followed, except that the area was gradually settled by Slavonic tribes
migrating from the north, while coming under the rule of the Byzantine Emperor Justinian, who built a new town on a nearby (but yet unknown) site, titled Justiniana Prima. Urban settlement only began to recover in the late tenth century, when Skopje – now occupying the area around the hill of Kale, adjacent to the present city centre – became the seat of Tsar Samoil’s empire, only to be recaptured by the Byzantines in 1018. Two centuries of unrest followed, marked by a second short-lived period of Byzantine governance, after which the city once again fell under Serb control in 1282. Although Skopje became the capital of the Serbian kingdom of Stefan Dušan in 1346, it came under Turkish Ottoman rule in 1392, three years after the nearby Battle of Kosovo (Popovski, 1968; Ajdinski, 1976).

The Ottomans, who ruled the city (then renamed Üsküb) for another five centuries, left a profound imprint on its urban landscape. It gradually assumed a distinct Ottoman morphology, marked by the concentration of densely-knit residential quarters around a central market area – coinciding with the old mediaeval core of the city – that contained all of its key public buildings, including ‘triads’ of mosques, baths and caravanserais. The occurrence of yet another powerful earthquake in 1555 failed to impede Skopje’s further development, which continued at an even faster pace in the first half of the seventeenth century. But the earthquake did destroy all of the city’s churches and monasteries; the Ottomans’ refusal to rebuild them helped reinforce the city’s Islamic appearance. Still, the influx of a large contingent of Sephardic Jews expelled from Spain helped Skopje maintain a multi-ethnic character throughout this period (Asim, 2005).

One of the pivotal moments in Skopje’s history occurred in 1689, when the Austrian general Enea Silvio Piccolomini burnt the city to the ground, following a prolonged campaign against the Ottoman army in the Balkans. Fraught by the economic deprivation and political instability that followed, Skopje then went into a rapid decline that reduced its 60,000-strong population down to 5000 inhabitants by the beginning of the early nineteenth century. But the city gradually started to regain its importance during the decades that followed, partly aided by the revival of old trading routes and improved economic relations with Western Europe. The construction of numerous neoclassical buildings in the urban core, accompanied by the emergence of planned suburbs along a grid pattern on the greenfields along the southern bank of the river Vardar, meant that the city centre gradually began to lose some of its Ottoman
architectural and morphological features. Skopje’s economic development was further accelerated by the establishment of railway links with Istanbul (via Thessaloniki, in 1873) and Western Europe (via Belgrade, in 1888). At the same time, the city’s emergent merchant class assumed an increasingly Christian character, partly aided by the influx of a large Slavonic population from the rural hinterland (Popovski, 1968; Ajdinski, 1976; Asim, 2005).

Skopje reverted to Serbian rule after the Second Balkan war in 1913, only to be incorporated into the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (later: Kingdom of Yugoslavia) in 1918, after a four-year Bulgarian occupation. In 1929, Skopje became the administrative capital of the ‘Vardarska Banovina’ – Yugoslavia’s territorially largest and fourth most populous province – which further hastened its growth: the city’s population culminated at ca. 80,000 in 1939. The decades preceding World War Two were also marked by a radical transformation of the city’s physical landscape under the influence of Serbian urban planning, which started already in 1914 following an open competition for the inaugural master plan of the city, won by Dimitrije T. Leko. As a result of the policies pursued during this period, Skopje’s city centre was transferred to the south bank of the river Vardar, focussing on a newly-constructed square that was surrounded by an ensemble of monumental public buildings (Figure 1). New neighbourhoods were built along what was essentially a radial pattern around the square, replete with residential buildings in a historicist neoclassical, eclectic, secession and modern style. Even though this policy left much of the old Ottoman urban core of the city – located north of the river Vardar – intact, it did result in the demolition of a number of major structures from that period, including the well-known Burmali Mosque that was occupying the site of the newly-planned square (Popovski, 1965).

<insert Figure 1 about here>

Following World War Two – which was marked by significant bombing damage during the German raids in 1941, followed by yet another brief period of Bulgarian rule – Skopje was incorporated into the communist-run Federal People’s Republic of Yugoslavia (from 1963: the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia), becoming the capital of its southernmost constituent unit – the People’s Republic of Macedonia. This yet again transformed the face of the city in an unprecedented manner, as the authorities pursued an aggressive policy of rapid
industrialisation and modernisation, adopting master plans that introduced automobile traffic, modernist apartment buildings and new office blocks into the urban core and areas around it. But they were dramatically interrupted by the catastrophic earthquake that struck the city on the 26th of July 1963, killing over 1000 of its inhabitants and injuring a further 3000 (Ajdinski, 1976).

Considering that more than 100,000 of its residents were left homeless and 80 per cent of the building stock was destroyed, the United Nations General Assembly took a political lead in spearheading the rebuilding of the city, in one of the few examples of concerted action at this level of governance. Skopje was soon declared an ‘international city of solidarity’, which resulted in significant global interest and aid toward the reconstruction process. Governments, citizens and humanitarian organisations from over 80 countries contributed to the mitigation of the earthquake’s consequences, resulting in, inter alia, the urgent repairs and strengthening of over 16,000 dwellings, schools and other earthquake-damaged buildings in the period immediately after the earthquake, as well as the provision of urgent shelter for the 40,000 inhabitants who had been left homeless. Soon after, detailed urban plans were drawn up for 18 settlements with 14,063 residential units of prefabricated wooden houses, allowing for 70,100 inhabitants to be housed within two years (Petrovski, 2004; Milutinovic, 2007). Among the many world leaders who came to Skopje after the earthquake was UN Secretary General U Thant, who stated that ‘the visit had enabled him to see the international solidarity manifested in Skopje’, concluding that ‘there exists a human connectedness which is a stimulus to greater and more efficient international cooperation between countries, towns and villages’ (Ajdinski, 1976, p. 9). Even Jean Paul Sartre is known to have remarked that ‘Skopje is not a film, not a thriller here we guess the chief event’ but rather a ‘concentration of man’s [sic] struggle for freedom, with results which inspire further struggle and no acceptance of defeat’ (ibid).

Given that both the earthquake and reconstruction process received wide international publicity, the rebuilding of Skopje quickly became a showcase for Yugoslavia’s intention to take a leading international position as a ‘non-aligned’ state bridging the tensions brought by the Cold War. This was reflected, for example, in the leadership structure of the new master plan for the city, which was drawn up in 1964 under the combined guidance of Konstantinos
Doxiadis and Adolf Ciborowski: well known planners from, respectively, the Western and Eastern blocs. They introduced a radical and comprehensive concept for the future development of the city, which was further backed by the detailed city centre planning blueprints provided by the Japanese architect Kenzo Tange, who had otherwise played a pivotal role in the rebuilding of Hiroshima. While Doxiadis and Ciborowski envisioned a fundamental reorganisation of the metropolitan area – moving industry to the urban fringe and proposing new traffic corridors that would allow for the construction of extensive housing estates outside the urban core – Tange’s ideas completely restructured the historical centre of the city. Even though his plan retained part of the old Ottoman market with its numerous historical buildings, as well as the mediaeval Kale citadel and twentieth-century central square, most of the remaining residential quarters and public buildings on the south bank of the Vardar were completely demolished (see Figures 2 and 3). In part, they were replaced by a number of monumental brutalist structures (see Figure 4), which gave the city, in the words of the Lonely Planet country guide for the Western Balkans, a ‘superb period ensemble of concrete apartment towers, vast avenues suitable for tank parades and weird space age public buildings’ (Plunkett et al., 2006, p. 236).

It is worth noting that rebuilding of Skopje resulted in the construction of 35,500 new dwellings during the 10-year period after the earthquake. These were supplemented by the 4,250 private family homes built by the city’s inhabitants with their own private funds. The urban transport network was lengthened by 2.8 times during this time, thanks to the construction of an entirely new set of road and railway corridors. Petrovski (2004) has estimated that the reconstruction process cost approximately 980 million US dollars in 1963 terms, which was equivalent to ca. 15 percent of Yugoslavia’s GNP in 1963, and up to 3 billion US dollars in 2003 terms. However, public finance gradually started to dwindle during the 1970s, which led to the downscaling – and in most cases, cessation – of construction activities aimed at implementing the urban development provisions of the 1964 Master Plan. As a result, many of the key transport corridors intended to support the growth of the metropolitan area were never built, despite the rapid construction of state-supported housing
estates at the periphery of the city. Plans to construct several large complexes of monumental residential and public buildings in the city centre met a similar destiny.

At the same time, the northern and western parts of inner-city Skopje – as well as a few settlements at its periphery, such as Shuto Orizari – effectively became social and ethnic ghettos as a result of the inability of the city’s authorities to develop equitable and culturally-sensitive housing and neighbourhood development policies. This was, in part, a result of the 1964 Master Plan’s naive and misguided understanding of the city’s social dynamics (for a further discussion, see Home, 2007). The demise of communist central planning further accentuated some of these shortcomings, by exposing Skopje to the vagaries of capitalist development in ways that its authorities could hardly foresee and regulate. The apparent rise in social inequality and segregation transpired despite the fact that the disintegration of the Yugoslav federation gave the city an entirely new level of international importance as the capital of the now independent Republic of Macedonia. Thus, Skopje’s current urban landscape is largely a product of the successes and failures of the policies that guided the post-earthquake reconstruction of the city, coupled with the deep economic, social and political changes that engulfed it after the fall of communism and the break-up of Yugoslavia in the early 1990s.

KEY ECONOMIC, SOCIAL AND POLITICAL FEATURES OF THE CITY

The official population figure for the city of Skopje, as reported by the latest census (held in 2002), stands at 506,926; however, it is worth noting that this number is the simple sum of the total populations of the ten municipal authorities that officially fall within the remit of the special local government unit that corresponds to the entire metropolitan area. As such, the figure is highly problematic since it includes a number of rural settlements in the rural hinterland, which, while being functionally and – very often – physically connected to the city, do not fall within the boundaries of the current Master Plan. At the same time, the rural populations of the remaining seven municipalities that are part of the wider NUTS-3 regional entity around Skopje – with a total population of 571,040 – are not included within its official population figure, even though they also share close links with the city and live in villages that do not have a clear boundary with its outer suburbs and exurbs. A further problem with
relying on census data lies in the potentially high proportion of Skopje inhabitants who are not registered by this statistic, either because their official place of residence is in another location, or because they are stateless refugees from the wars in the former Yugoslavia. Therefore, the *de facto* population of the city may reach 800,000 people, according to some of the higher estimates (see, for example, Kolar-Panov et al., 2007, p. 196).

Skopje’s intense demographic growth over the past six decades – as noted above, the city had 80,000 inhabitants in 1939 – was mainly fuelled by intense dynamics of rural-to-urban immigration during the 1960s and 1970s (Institut za informatika, 2006). Improved employment opportunities in the rapidly enlarging industrial sector, coupled with the availability of cheap newly-built housing, attracted migrants from the entire southern half of the former Yugoslavia to the city; as a result, its population had already overshot the 1964 projections by at least 50,000 residents in the early 1980s. This led to persistent shortages of housing space, despite the fact that the total number of dwellings increased from approximately 37,000 in the years before the earthquake to more than 100,000 in the early 1980s (Home, 2007).

The fact that Skopje and its host region became a population magnet for large parts of Southern Serbia, Kosovo and even Bosnia and Montenegro further diversified its ethnic structure, while increasing segregation patterns within the city and its rural hinterland alike (a similar situation could have been observed in other post-communist cities: see Ott, 2001; Pojani, 2010; Tölle, 2001). In this context, it is worth noting that Skopje had lost its sizeable Jewish population during World War Two, while experiencing several waves of out-migration of ethnic Turks throughout the twentieth century. The post-war period saw an influx of ethnic Albanians and Bosniaks, who mainly migrated to abandoned villages at the metropolitan fringe (although many of the former moved to the city itself, supplementing older strata belonging to this population, see West, 1994). As a result, Skopje has an ethnic Albanian-dominated municipality (Chair) deep in the inner city: a rare occurrence outside Kosovo and Albania.

The city also attracted a large ethnic Macedonian population, as a result of which a few of its local authorities – most notably, Kisela Voda, Karposh and Aerodrom – currently contain some of the highest concentrations of this ethnic group in the country. Such municipalities
include Skopje’s inner-city areas and housing estates south of the river Vardar, which are more ethnically homogeneous compared to the rest of the city, even though they are also fringed by ethnic Albanian and Bosniak villages in the rural hinterland. Conversely, the northern part of the metropolitan area contains a mix of different ethnicities, both in the inner city and the areas around it (see Figures 5 and 6). Apart from the ethnic Albanian-dominated municipality mentioned above, this part of Skopje is also notable for containing Shuto Orizari: one of the few local authority units in Europe with a majority Roma population (and therefore governed by ethnic Roma parties). As such, the city is a microcosm of its host country’s variegated ethnic landscape (see Johansen, 2004).

The rapid post-World War Two expansion of the city’s manufacturing base turned Skopje into Macedonia’s economic powerhouse, particularly thanks to the construction of sizeable steel, glass-working, metal refining, oil processing, cement, chemical, vehicle assembly, pharmaceutical and food industries. The sheer size of some of these plants meant that over a third of all jobs in the city’s host region remained in the industrial sector throughout the 1990s and 2000s, despite the downsizing and factory closures induced by the post-communist economic transition (VRM 2009, p. 29). The loss of industrial employment was, to a certain extent, compensated by the expansion of the service sector, which has been mainly represented by construction, retail, trade, and finance: for example, Skopje currently hosts more than 80 per cent of the country’s banking industry, with total assets exceeding 3.5 billion Euro (see Table 1 for an overview of regional development indicators for the Skopje region). The city’s host region currently produces about half of Macedonia’s GDP, attracting almost 90 per cent of all new investment in the country (Changova, 2007). Still, the official unemployment rate in many parts of the city remains above 30 per cent, even though the veracity of this figure remains unclear, as the informal economy is estimated to be currently contributing to more than 40 per cent of Macedonia’s GDP (ESM, 2008).

<insert Table 1 about here>
Many of the problems faced by the Skopje’s governing authorities stem from the idiosyncrasies of its territorial and administrative organisation, coupled with the generally poor state of local government in Macedonia, which has been one of the most fiscally and politically centralised states in Europe (ESI, 2002). As noted above, the built-up area of the city extends across ten municipalities, which represent the basic units of local government in the country. Despite being part of the wider metropolitan area, however, these municipalities have individual powers to regulate a number of spheres of ‘local significance’, such as urban planning, education, and municipal services. In order to recognise Skopje’s special circumstances in this regard, an intermediate layer of governance corresponding to the ‘City of Skopje’ has been in existence since 1976; it has power over a limited number of matters and spaces that normally fall within the remit of the local authorities. However, even though the City of Skopje possesses a separate institutional structure with an elected council and mayor, in reality it is hardly much more than an umbrella organisation for the ten municipal governments within it. While the City does have the overriding authority to govern policy matters pertaining to a limited set of services that are relevant to the entire urban area – such as pest control, public transport, municipal services on the main squares and boulevards, or the development of non-binding strategic spatial plans and urban development strategies – its ten ‘constituent’ authorities have the power to manage the same sectors and many more – including council taxes and education – in geographical areas that are considered of purely ‘local significance’.

This situation has created a unwieldy and convoluted division of competences, which means that, for example, the City of Skopje is responsible for street furniture and public lighting along the main boulevards of the city, but not the smaller streets that feed into them. As such, it hampers the city’s ability to formulate and implement a coherent and functional urban management policy. Efforts by successive governments to change this regulatory framework though legislative reform have been unsuccessful to date, mainly as a result of the peculiar balance of power among different levels of governance that it has created (Rexallari, 2008).

CURRENT DEVELOPMENTS: ‘REURBANISING’ SKOPE’S INNER CITY
The post-communist transition has increased the role of private capital in the evolution of
Skopje’s urban landscapes, while bringing about a *de facto* relaxation of planning controls.
The combined effects of these changes have been particularly pronounced in the inner city,
which saw, in relative terms, the slowest pace and least amount of development after the
1963 earthquake. Just like other communist cities (see, for example, Sailer-Fliege, 1999), the
lion’s share of housing and infrastructure investment in Skopje during this period was
focussed on the newly-built residential estates located on greenfield sites at the outskirts of
the city. This policy allowed completely new street grids, utility networks and large
residential quarters to be built within a relatively short space of time, as noted above.

Simultaneously, however, the band of low-rise, compact and – generally speaking –
substandard housing that encircled the urban core became physically ‘frozen’ in time due to
planning restrictions and the lack of investment capital (a common legacy of communist
planning: see Bouzarovski, 2009; Kotus, 2006). This was particularly true in the Ottoman-era
neighbourhoods that extended north and west of the city centre: their winding, narrow streets
with shoddily-built houses had seen very little change for over a century. Many such districts
(including Karadak, Gazi Baba, Chair and Madzhir Maalo) occupy sites that were intended to
host the large intra-urban transport corridors, public buildings and residential estates foreseen
by the 1964 Master Plan, but never materialised due to the lack of finance. Local residents
were denied planning permission to extend or rebuild their homes, as it was foreseen that the
quarters would be eventually demolished. The chronic absence of maintenance and
investment that resulted from this situation led to a gradual decay of the quality of the
housing stock in such areas.

While the twentieth-century districts on the south bank of the river Vardar – such as Debar
Maalo and Bunjakovec – were in a comparatively better position due to, in part, being
included in the Master Plan, they too saw very little new investment and growth. But all of
this began to change after 1990, when the housing stock became privatised and the state lost
its primary role as the source of urban development capital. The inner city soon became a site
of vibrant neighbourhood change and renewal. Thanks to the proximity to the city centre and
the wide range of amenities offered by its leafy and quiet streets, Debar Maalo became an
attractive residential quarter that soon attracted the interest of private housing developers,
who began to convert its low-rise family homes into multi-storey tenement buildings. A similar process, albeit at an initially slower pace, unfolded in the districts of Kisela Voda and Bunjakovec, which were also planned and built during the twentieth century, thus possessing better infrastructure services and an urban morphology that was more conducive to the construction of larger residential developments.

It is worth noting that Ottoman-era districts were also subject to residential conversions, upgrading and infill, albeit at much slower pace. This situation may stem from the lack of infrastructure provision, investment income and urban amenities in such areas, accompanied by their non-rectilinear urban form and the lack of an adequate planning framework more generally. The effects of the transition were also expressed by the expanding commercial, retail and business functions of inner city areas, which started to concentrate a wider range of service activities, including office uses, shops, restaurants and cafes. The latter is especially true, once again, in Debar Maalo, which assumed a distinctively bohemian character thanks to the large number of newly-established bars and restaurants.

Aside from sporadic improvements to street furniture and utility services, local governments responded to these changes by introducing planning regulations that allowed for the densification of all inner city quarters throughout Skopje. The adoption of a new Master Plan in 2002 further facilitated this process, by streamlining some of the large projects envisioned in 1964; it is currently under revision to allow for further residential development within the city limits and the restructuring of transport infrastructure (Naumovska, 2008). However, the local governments’ efforts to relax planning restrictions were with different responses in different parts of the city – while many residents of Madzhir Maalo and Karadak welcomed the local municipality’s desire to displace the intended route of a major intra-urban highway 500 metres to the west so as to create possibilities for the gradual upgrading – rather than the demolition – of existing housing in the neighbourhood, the intention to allow additional multiple-storey buildings to be constructed in Debar Maalo in the place of individual detached family homes encountered fierce resistance by local residents (Tasev, 2006).

There is insufficient space within the confines of this review to discuss the implications of Skopje’s inner-city densification and residentialisation in significant detail. One of the few
general observations that is relevant to the entire process, however, is that the city authorities neither anticipated the scale of the dynamic nor were able to respond to it in a systematic manner. The construction of the multi-storey infill tenement buildings that now line the streets of many such neighbourhoods, therefore, often proceeded in the absence of coherent urban development and planning policies. As a result, many of the newly-built apartments lack the necessary living and architectural standards, including parking, street access, utility services, light and green space. The streets in these areas often end in unplanned dead-ends, with some of the developments’ windows and balconies facing dark and narrow chasms created by the chaotic nature of the construction. The inability of the municipal authorities to keep up with the pace of urban growth is also reflected in the overall inadequacy of infrastructure provision and urban management in such areas, manifested by potholed roads, pavements covered by construction materials and parked cars, and interruptions in electricity and water supply (see Figure 7).

<insert Figure 7 about here>

The traffic arteries of Skopje’s inner city are also plagued by major congestion problems, as a result of the dramatic rise in car ownership during the transition, coupled with the overall densification of residential, retail business and commercial functions in this part of the metropolitan area. The chronic lack of investment in Skopje’s transport infrastructure – including the inadequate provision of public transport – has further exacerbated the problem. Recent efforts to construct a tram network and to improve the city’s bus fleet have been unsuccessful due to, inter alia, political rivalries and the lack of funding (Kostovski, 2008). Still, the future introduction of such forms of mobility into the city will be facilitated by the urban morphology created by the post-earthquake Master Plan, which provided ample space for the construction of new intra-urban transport corridors.

ICONIC STRUGGLES OVER THE CITY CENTRE

The renaissance of the inner city of Skopje has been accompanied, if not preceded, by the revitalisation of the urban core itself. The post-earthquake demolition of many of the neoclassical neighbourhoods planned and developed during the early twentieth century had
left Skopje’s city centre full of empty plots of land that remained ‘fallow’ for decades as a result of the lack of investment capital and clear planning regulation. Even though many of the buildings that occupied the area had not been damaged by the earthquake, Tange’s plans foresaw the complete demolition of this tissue to make way for large modernist structures, many of which were never built. Considering that such areas contained some of the most attractive land in the city – including several large plots immediately next to its central square – the restitution and privatisation processes that commenced with the fall of communism made them highly attractive to private investors. This led to the expansion of commercial, business and retail functions in such areas, as evidenced by the construction of new shopping centres such as the ‘Ramstore mall’ south of the city centre, as well as a number of new office blocks. The urban core, which was previously devoid of significant urban functions, also gained new life thanks to the construction of a new pedestrian walkway and cycle path along the entire course of the river Vardar, as well as the extensive reconstruction of the central square of the city (Kolar-Panov, 2007).

The local authority of the Centar municipality that encompasses this area supported the systematic revitalisation of the city centre through the adoption of a new detailed urban plan in 1997 (Anon., 2002). By envisioning the construction of a wide range of high-density residential, public and business developments, the plan led to a radical transformation of earlier conceptualisations of the morphology of Skopje’s urban core. It abolished many of the broad streets and open public spaces foreseen by the conceptual framework of the 1964 reconstruction, effectively reverting the area to the urban form it possessed prior to the earthquake. But the continuing lack of investment capital meant that very few of the structures foreseen by the plan were built in the years following its adoption. With the exception of a few residential and office buildings, the empty land in the city centre failed to attract any significant developments.

All of this changed very rapidly in 2007, when the newly-elected right-wing national government declared the erection of large public buildings and monuments in the city centre of Skopje a key political priority. As a result of this policy, the area saw an unprecedented influx of public funds towards the construction of a number of iconic projects, including new buildings for the Museum of the Macedonian Struggle, the Constitutional Court and State
Archives, as well as the Macedonian Philharmonic. Using a replica of their original plan, the government also provided full financial support for the complete rebuilding of several missing sections of the Kale citadel, as well as the monumental National Theatre in the centre of the city; the latter had been constructed in the 1930s but was pulled down in 1963, mainly due to having sustained heavy earthquake damage (see Figure 8). The trend of recreating previously-destroyed buildings based on a re-imagination of their original design was already underway at this point, however, thanks to the privately-funded rebuilding of a nineteenth-century church that had been burnt to the ground after a World War Two bombing raid at the eastern edge of the city centre.

<insert Figure 8 about here>

In order to accommodate the government’s policy within the existing planning framework, the detailed urban plans for the municipality of Centar – where the right-wing party that runs the country also has a majority in the local council – were changed four times during 2008 and 2009 (Anon., 2009a). The expeditiousness with which the council implemented the modifications, however, was criticised for lacking transparency and quality, especially as they were not universally welcomed by the local population and expert public. The most controversial and well-publicised change stemmed from the government’s intention to erect a large church on the central square of the city; despite its gargantuan proportions (the bell tower is expected to reach 50 metres, well beyond the height of all surrounding buildings) the altered urban plan foresaw that the church would be wedged in a narrow space between two existing buildings, in order to allow its entrance to be positioned directly on the square, and the altar to face East (Jovanovska and Angelovska, 2008).

The fierce opposition to this proposal culminated on the 28th of March 2009, when a public gathering against the church – mainly led by students and staff from the University’s Faculty of Architecture – was interrupted by a right-wing counter-demonstration, resulting in violence that injured some of the original protesters (Anon., 2009b). In part, the student initiative had been motivated by the controversies surrounding an earlier initiative to build a memorial home for Mother Teresa, who was born in Skopje in 1910 and lived in the city for 18 years before joining the Sisters of Loreto. Even though the Ministry of Culture opened an
international competition for the project – which was eventually won by the Portuguese architect Jorge Marum – the government eventually chose to rely on the work of a Macedonian architect who designed, according to Pencic (2009, p. 21) a building that offends ‘with its pretentiousness, with its arrogance, with its tastelessness’, mainly ‘by totally ignoring any architectural correlation with the life and work of Mother Teresa’.

It is too early to judge the long-term effect of the latest round of construction projects on the urban landscape of the city, as Skopje’s city centre is currently a veritable construction site: apart from the monumental projects mentioned above, the area is host to a much wider range of building activities, including a number of new office and retail developments, the privately-funded Museum of the Holocaust that occupies the site of the former Jewish Quarter immediately north of the central square, as well as the construction of two new 6,000-seat stands at the national football arena, located at the western fringe of Skopje’s city centre. In addition, the Ministry of Culture has commissioned the sculpting and placement of 30 large pieces of public art on the city’s public spaces (see Figure 9), generating a great deal of criticism due to the massive expenditure required by the undertaking, the nature of the artist selection process, and the quality of some of the work that has been produced (Bugjevac, 2009).

<insert Figure 9 about here>

In early 2010, the national government's efforts to reshape the city centre in line with a contemporary re-interpretation of the visual principles of baroque and neoclassical architecture were branded under the common banner 'Skopje 2014', in line with the year since the various projects and construction activities associated with this undertaking were meant to be completed by 2014. A promotional video accompanying the initiative attracted more than 20,000 hits within the first one month of being posted on youtube, provoking a new set of controversies as a result, in part, of its right-wing political undertones. Even though the project was met with vigorous criticism from the expert public and architectural community, the government has shown no intention of abandoning its plans. As a result, the city centre continues to see a scale and pace of development that is unprecedented in its recent history.
SKOPJE’S PERIPHERY: SUBURBANISATION, SPRAWL, AND THE CHANGING CHARACTER OF COMMUNIST HOUSING ESTATES

Macedonia’s difficult economic and political situation – stemming, in part, from the decline in GDP brought about by the post-communist transition, the 2001 armed insurgency in the northwestern part of the country, and its delayed accession to the EU and NATO as a result of the ‘naming’ issue with Greece – has meant that the country has consistently attracted the least amount of foreign direct investment in ECE. As a result, Skopje’s outskirts have not underwent the rapid expansion of new office parks, retail facilities and industrial enterprises experienced by neighbouring capital cities in the region. But this should not be taken to mean that such processes have been entirely absent from its urban landscape, as substantial greenfield industrial zones have emerged at the northwestern, eastern and southeastern fringes of the city, mainly containing new office buildings, small factories and shopping facilities owned by a mix of national and international investors. More recently, Skopje’s outskirts have been targeted by several major foreign companies interested in financing large retail and business developments (Stojanovska, 2007).

The urban fringe has also been subject to dynamics of residential suburbanisation, although, once again, this has hardly reached the scale of analogous processes in ECE cities of a similar size and importance. The construction of new homes at the urban fringe is most prominent in the Karposh and Kisela Voda municipalities (see Figure 1), although there are plans to construct a large greenfield suburb at the southeastern edge of the city (see Figure 1). One of the key differences between suburban developments in Skopje’s and those in other ECE cities of a similar size is that most homes in the former are significantly larger and more luxurious (see Figure 10), even involving an upscale gated community in one case (Figure 1). This is primarily a result of class and income differences, as it appears that suburban dwellers in Skopje are significantly more affluent than the rest of the population in the city (see Bouzarovski et al. 2009). It could mean that, unlike their counterparts in many of the more developed ECE states (see Nuissl and Rink, 2005), Skopje’s middle-class residents are less likely to relocate to the suburbs. But social differences are just one part of the story: the suburbanisation process has also been hampered by the cumbersome planning permits, as well as inadequate municipal service and infrastructure provision.
At the same time, many older neighbourhoods with collective apartment housing and individual family homes have witnessed a gradual process of upgrading and infill, mainly as a result of their continued residential significance. The inability of low- to middle-income households to relocate to a new home in response to new ‘household events’ (a typical situation in post-communist countries, see Mandič, 2001) has forced them to undergo multiple housing episodes in the same dwelling. In such conditions, alterations of, and additions to, the existing housing stock have effectively taken the form of coping strategies expressed through alternative economic practices. In the communist-era housing estates with a higher proportion of middle-income residents this process has resulted, inter alia, in the emergence of ‘vertical building extensions’ to individual apartments, mainly built with the aid of separate construction frames constructed alongside the external perimeter of the apartment blocks. Post-earthquake suburbs consisting of prefabricated family homes – built en masse thanks to in-kind assistance from various donor countries – have also seen the upgrading of their residential stock through horizontal and vertical extensions (see Figure 11). In some cases, the older stratum of housing has been completely demolished in order to be replaced with new family homes and even some apartment buildings, as many such neighbourhoods – particularly Kozle and Taftalidzhe – have become attractive for well-off households. This process is particularly pronounced in the districts – such as Vodno – which already had a high social status during communism (see Figure 12).

CONCLUSION

If there is one consistent theme in the story of Skopje’s economic, political and social development to date, it is precisely the lack of consistency: the city’s history is one of repeated discontinuities and radical breaks. From the physical damage inflicted by natural disasters and war, to the mutually-conflicting planning ideologies imposed by its successive governing authorities, Skopje has seldom benefited from a stable and consistent urban policy.
extending over a sufficiently long period of time. Yet the specificities of its geographical position, which are the main causal factor behind all such disruptions – whether indirect or direct, physical or social – have also enabled the city to spontaneously find new ways of dealing with the challenges posed by each structural change. In a way, Skopje has constantly been able to reinvent itself and resurrect a new metropolitan structure from the ruins of previous urban layers over the course of more than two millennia, not very much unlike the Phoenix that adorns the coat of arms of the Centar municipality.

Today’s Skopje is a site of differentiation and contradiction. Its core is subject to heated political and ideological struggles over the meaning and use of public space, as well as the underlying paradigms that face the evolution of its urban morphology. The inner city – once a site of disinvestment and urban decline – has become a vibrant hub of commercial, retail, business and food service activities. The transformation of this part of the metropolitan area has been underpinned by its rising residential attractiveness, which has been effectuated through a wide set of construction activities aimed at replacing and upgrading the housing stock. But the densification of the inner city has unfolded in an uneven and chaotic manner, deepening existing patterns of socio-spatial segregation, while decreasing the quality of the urban environment. To a lesser extent, the same holds true in the more peripheral parts of the city, which have been subject to intensifying dynamics of industrial and residential sprawl. Skopje’s housing estates and suburbs have also seen far-reaching changes during the past 20 years, as a result of processes of infill through the construction of new housing, as well as extensions to existing buildings as a result of the low housing mobility of the population.

Despite all of these changes, however, there is very little evidence that successive city authorities and national governments have been able to comprehend, let alone respond to, the rapid pace of urban transformation. This is indicated, in the first instance, by the lack of policy-driven systematic research about its multiple social, economic and political dimensions: there is an almost complete paucity of published work about the debates over the future of the urban core, the reurbanisation of the inner city, or the specific nature of residential upgrading in the housing estates and suburbs. Skopje’s unpreparedness to deal with the vagaries of post-communist urban growth is also illustrated by the inability of its development strategies and planning frameworks to manage the social and environmental
consequences of urban densification and suburban sprawl. The inadequacy of the city’s political frameworks in this regard may have been a key contributing factor towards the degeneration of public debates about planned iconic projects in the city into street violence. Clearly, Skopje’s governance capacity and financial power will need a significant boost in the years to come, if they are to attain the ability to manage urban affairs in a manner and style commensurate to the international importance of the city, and the sheer scale of the changes it is experiencing.

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FIGURE CAPTIONS

1. Salient features of the Skopje metropolitan area. Local authorities mentioned in the text include: A – Centar, B-Karposh, C-Shuto Orizari, D-Chair, F-Kisela Voda, and E-Aerodrom. Urban neighbourhoods include: 1 – Karposh 4, 2 – Taftalidzhe, 3 – Kozle, 4 – Bunjakovec, 5 – Debar Maalo, 6 – the old Ottoman market, 7 – Gazi Baba, 8 – Karadak, and 9 – Madzhir Maalo. Please note that some urban neighbourhoods mentioned in the text (Kisela Voda, Chair and Shuto Orizari) coincide with the respective local authorities.

2. The southern bank of the Vardar river in Skopje’s city centre is dominated by several brutalist buildings constructed after the earthquake, including the Telecommunications centre and Goce Delchev bridge. The long blocks of the ‘City wall’ – a ring of high-rise residential panels and towers encircling the urban core, envisioned by Kenzo Tange – can be seen in the background.

3. The part of Skopje’s urban core that lies to the north of the Vardar river mainly contains the old Ottoman market with its numerous historical buildings, such as the Murat Pasha mosque in the centre of the photo, and the domes of two Turkish baths from the fifteenth century, in the lower right and upper left. Also visible in the extreme upper right and the centre left are the bell towers of, respectively, nineteenth and eighteenth-century churches.

4. The central campus of the Ss. Cyril and Methodius university contains one of the largest post-1963 brutalist complexes in Skopje, whose architecture contrasts sharply with the nearby minaret of the Sultan Murat mosque and the red-brick clock tower in its forecourt, dating, respectively, from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

5. Ethnic structure of the municipalities in the Skopje urban region and the city of Skopje (shaded light gray): Macedonians (black columns), Albanians (white columns), others (gray columns). The thicker line at the northwest boundary of the region marks the international border between Macedonia and Kosovo.

6. Skopje’s northern inner-city neighbourhoods contain a dynamic mix of land uses, ethnicities and social classes. Pictured here is the ‘Bit pazar’ open air market, which is fringed by a fifteenth-century mosque, residential tissues dating back from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, a modernist theatre building from the 1980s, and numerous residential and retail developments from the 1990s and 2000s. The mountains and apartment blocks in the background provided the backdrop for many scenes in Emir Kusturica’s Time of the Gypsies.

7. The rapidity of new housing infill and upgrading in Debar Maalo has meant that streets often end in unplanned cul-de-sacs, while public spaces and infrastructure are poorly maintained.

8. The Stone Bridge – dating back, most probably, from the fifteenth century – spans the river Vardar in the heart of the city, linking the northern and southern parts of its
historic urban core. Visible behind the bridge are the buildings of the National Theatre (to the left) and the Museum of the Macedonian Struggle (to the right) which are currently under construction, as well as the some of the newly-erected towers and walls of the ‘re-imagined’ Kale citadel above them.

9. Skopje’s recently-refurbished main pedestrian thoroughfare is crowded with shops, cafes and the oft-criticised public art commissioned by the government. The controversial memorial house of Mother Teresa can be seen in the background.

10. Suburban settlements in Skopje often contain opulent Nouveau-riche family homes which tend to incorporate an incongruent medley of architectural forms, styles, and materials. One of the more tasteful examples is pictured here.

11. The external facade of this 1970s prefabricated panel apartment block in the ‘Karposh IV’ housing estate is almost completely covered with vertical building extensions.

12. Several large residential developments have recently started to encroach on the forested slopes of Mt Vodno at the southern edge of the city.
Figure 6
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Figure 8
Click here to download high resolution image
Table 1: A comparison of key social and economic development indicators for the Skopje NUTS-3 region and the Republic of Macedonia (Source: RMSSO, 2007; VRM, 2009). Note: all data are for 2006 unless stated otherwise.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indicator</th>
<th>Republic of Macedonia</th>
<th>Skopje region</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Surface area (in square kilometres)</td>
<td>25713</td>
<td>1812</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total population (2002 census)</td>
<td>2,022,547</td>
<td>571,040</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population density</td>
<td>81.9</td>
<td>325.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total fertility rate (in 2000)</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>1.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Share of population younger than 14</td>
<td>19.2</td>
<td>19.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Share of population older than 65</td>
<td>11.2</td>
<td>11.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social assistance recipients per 1000 pop.</td>
<td>42.5</td>
<td>30.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total number of active businesses</td>
<td>60800</td>
<td>23781</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total value of exports (in $ million US)</td>
<td>2401</td>
<td>1088</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total value of imports (in $ million US)</td>
<td>3763</td>
<td>2506</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gross value added (in million denars)</td>
<td>243</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total number of completed residential dwellings</td>
<td>6493</td>
<td>1828</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total length of paved roads, in km</td>
<td>8995</td>
<td>1192</td>
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