



## Skopje 2014 Project and its Effects on the Perception of Macedonian Identity Among the Citizens of Skopje

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## Executive Summary

Departing from the premise that, by way of producing symbolism with distinct historical references and esthetics through material culture production (monuments and architecture), the cultural Project of Skopje 2014 intends to affirm, strengthen and insure perseverance of a historical truth about the Macedonian identity as the only truth, the research report at hand aims to provide insight into the success of the Project with respect to its own ambitions. Its success can be measured by way of resorting to indicators that reflect the perception of the citizens of Skopje identifying as "ethnic Macedonian" regarding the Project's aspirations to reflect the truth about the ethnic identity, contribute to "the preservation of the cultural heritage"<sup>1</sup> and promote the historical truth about the Macedonian national and ethnic identity. The research team departs from the presupposition that any identity is a form of narrative, a matter of perception and not "an essence in itself." Therefore, the study aimed to compare the State's narrative and the citizens' of Skopje narratives about the Macedonian identity in order to find out if the former corresponds with the latter. With the centrality of the statues of Alexander the Great and his father Philip II, it is evident that the Project intends to convey a truth about an uninterrupted historic continuity of the "Macedonian self" from Antiquity via the Slavic period of medieval times to the early 20th century Macedonian national struggle against the Ottoman rule and the concomitant project of establishing an independent state. Considering that the references to Antiquity and the presupposition of uninterrupted historic continuity had practically not been questioned by the academic scene in the country - pace to a few of exceptions<sup>2</sup> - the research we conducted also involved participation of academics in the format of anonymous interviews and closed panel of scientists and opinion makers, conducted in the fashion of a focus group following a discussion guide. The academics were invited to discuss the results received from the focus groups with the ordinary citizens of Skopje which brought forth the popular perception of the identity narrative the Project purports to express as the national historic truth. It also conveyed what the citizens of Skopje themselves perceived as the truth of the Macedonian identity and intimately sensed it as such.

The study unravels blatant discrepancies between the ordinary citizen's perception of the "true Macedonian identity" and that professed by the State. It also uncovers the fact that the academics, when asked to comment anonymously, affirm the thesis about the constructedness of any national identity, express fundamental disbelief in any historical primordialism and fail to find means to justify the project when faced with the facts about the citizens' perception of the "identity truth." All the academics as well as the ordinary citizens which participated in the study requested and were guaranteed absolute anonymity. The fear to publicly problematize the project has been explicitly expressed by virtually all of them.

The research results we arrived at are intended to be presented to the institutions which are most invested in the promotion and realization of the Project, namely the Ministry of Culture, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (since it affects the EU integration processes and the relations with the neighboring countries), the academics in the country who silently legitimize the historic and identity related goals of the Project and, finally, those actors in the international community which seek to understand the "sensitive" aspects of the identity issue in the light of the name dispute with Greece.

The start of the Project Skopje 2014 corresponds with a series of disappointments by the NATO and

the EU implying an infinitely postponed accession to both organizations due to the "name dispute" between Greece and Macedonia, in spite of the fact that the country has been a EU candidate member since 2005, which culminated at the Bucharest NATO Summit in 2008. After having completed the qualitative research upon which this study is based, we argue that if Skopje 2014 Project seeks to "heal the wounded ego" of the Macedonians, it fails to do so since it imports an alien cultural paradigm which seems to deepen the sense of an externally imposed negation of what is intimately sensed as the truth of the Macedonian identity (as expressed by the citizens of Skopje which participated in this study).

Since its start in the beginning of 2010 until April 2013, as part of the Skopje 2014 Project, a total number of 35 objects in predominantly neoclassicist style and some approximation of the baroque have been erected (buildings, statues and monuments) upon the decision and with the funds provided by the Ministry of Culture, several of the most monumental statues (including the "Warrior on a Horse" representing Alexander the Great) have been built upon the initiative of the Municipality of Center (with funds provided by the Government), whereas the Government was the investor of the new monumental buildings of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Constitutional Court, the baroque facade of the Government building and a couple of others. These numbers were presented at a press conference held on 22 of April 2013 by the Minister of Culture Ms Elizabeta Kanceska Milevska who informed that a total of 207.872.492 euro has been spent so far on the project.<sup>4</sup>

### **The background**

Skopje 2014 Project is a cultural and historical project with the goal of affirming national identity perceived as under attack through the deprivation of the Republic of Macedonia of the right to use of the name "Macedonia" as identification of the state, imposed by the UN Security Council in 1993,<sup>5</sup> followed by the Interim Agreement between the Hellenic Republic and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, adopted on 13 September 1995. Since the adoption of the UNSC resolution 817, institutions and international organizations of the European Union (such as the Council of Europe) have referred to the state under its provisional name "the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia." After 18 years of negotiations between Macedonia and Greece, a solution to the name issue has not been found and in the meantime Macedonia's internationally recognized name has been "The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia." In spite of the provision made in article 11 of the Interim Agreement that Greece should not block Macedonia in its processes of integration into international organizations and associations of states while negotiations are still taking place and could and should access to such international bodies under the name of "The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia," Greece practically vetoed Macedonia's accession to NATO at the Alliance's Summit in Bucharest on 3 April 2008.<sup>6</sup> The official summit declaration reads as follows: "Therefore we agreed that an invitation to the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia will be extended as soon as a mutually acceptable solution to the name issue has been reached. We encourage the negotiations to be resumed without delay and expect them to be concluded as soon as possible."<sup>7</sup> The frustration in the country rose, and an overwhelming sense of public revolt could be noted.<sup>8</sup> Resolution of the name issue has been added as the "ninth benchmark" the country should fulfill in order to start the accession negotiations. Macedonia has been a EU candidate country since December 17th 2005 under the provisional name of "Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia" and in spite of the Commission's positive reports and recommendations for a start of negotiations, the, European Council has not yet passed a decision to engage into an accession

negotiation process yet. In spite of the positive report of Mr. Richard Howitt, the appointed rapporteur on the country's progress in the EU integration processes, presented at the European Parliament's session on May 22nd 2013 and the Parliament's recommendation to the European Council to start the negotiations with the country, the issue of Macedonian accession to the EU did not even appear on the official agenda of the Council's meeting which took place 27-28 June 2013.<sup>9</sup>

The insistence on incorporating Macedonian ancient history into the formation of the contemporary Macedonian identity, seems to be an evident response to the frustration caused by the events that took place at the Bucharest NATO Summit in 2008 and the explicit requirement on the part of the EC that the name issue is solved before the official start of the accession negotiations. Skopje 2014 was announced at a press conference organized by the Municipality of Center of the City of Skopje organized in February 2010, in a joint presentation of the Mayor of Center Mr. Vladimir Todorovikj and the Minister of Culture Ms. Elizabeta Kanceska Milevska.<sup>10</sup>

### **Background regarding theoretical framework and the core of the methodological approach**

The complexity of the Skopje 2014 Project entailing esthetical and cultural processes, aided by academic legitimization, and aiming to profess a truth - or "the truth" - about the Macedonian identity requires analysis from several aspects and relying on qualitative research approach. The main research tools we have mobilized belong to the ethnographic and anthropological field studies whereas the interpretation resorts to cultural and political analysis of the multifaceted character of the object of study. Based on the findings and their interpretation of the cultural-political processes embodied by Skopje 2014 project policy mechanisms will be proposed to counter its effects on domestic and international politics, inter-ethnic and EU integration processes respectively.

The preponderance of anthropological and ethnographic research tools and the emphasis of cultural-political analysis are dictated not only by the nature of the phenomenon subject to study, but also by the fact that the nation-state structure and its institutional system rely on "cultural capital" (Bourdieu). The latter is societal structure and process in which both "the elite" and "the ordinary people" participate equally. It also entails the official cultural profile a nation intends to present internationally, but also the everyday cultures which operate through codes of "cultural intimacy" (Herzfeld) which are the main means to identify oneself and the others as belonging to the same collective. "Cultural intimacy" relates to the culture and its symbolism one most immediately identifies with as familiar yet again not the face of the collective self one would want a foreigner to see. The everyday culture and its codes of intimacy are what the state institutions mobilize and appropriate in the building and consolidating of the official national narrative.<sup>11</sup>

According to Herzfeld's theory of cultural intimacy, "the embarrassing" (and intimate) side of the national sense of selfhood and its symbols are "sanitized" through assigning them functional position in the pure narrative of internationally presentable self. In other words, *the everyday culture must be invoked and mobilized* – or incorporated – in the official national narrative in order to enable its endorsement or identification by the collective it purports to represent.<sup>12</sup>

### Research Questions

- Does "Skopje 2014" as a cultural and nation-building project instituting a "truth" about a national self operate with the existing codes of cultural intimacy, i.e., the everyday culture and the immaterial cultural heritage? ("The truth" at stake is not only historical but also esthetical or civilizational since the styles of quasi-baroque and neoclassicism are the only styles permitted within the project.)
- What are the effects of the esthetical-cultural, academic and nation-building project "Skopje 2014" on the perception of national identity? Namely, are there changes with respect to the sense of and modes of identification with the national self prior to the start of the project?
- Is there convergence between the official narrative's truth about history and national origins and the everyday appropriation of it? If there are discrepancies between the official narrative and the everyday discourse and cultural re-coding, what are they?
- Provided anonymity is guaranteed, would the experts and academics from relevant fields (cultural studies, anthropology, history, ethnology) argue that the "national poetics" crafted by the institutions of the state should pursue an identity building agenda notwithstanding the perception of the population of Skopje (regardless of whether there is consonance or dissonance between the two)?
- Does the "Skopje 2014" project reflect the predominant sense or perception of the national identity shared by the average citizen of Skopje or does it introduce cultural codes that are perceived as alien with respect to what is intimately sensed as the "Macedonian identity"?
- Does the Project, as a reaction to a series of disappointments with respect to EU and NATO accession, represent an effective form of defense of the "national dignity" by way of affirming and asserting the Macedonian identity?

### Description of the field research process and its findings

The qualitative research phase consisted of the following combination of models: focus groups, interviews and (closed) expert focus group. A total of 56 people participated in these three forms of qualitative research stage of a more comprehensive study, which will at a later stage apply a quantitative research approach consisting of conducting a survey upon a representative sample of 1400 respondents. Building on the findings produced by a recent survey conducted by Brima Galup Skopje which show the majority of the population in Macedonia does not approve the Project,<sup>13</sup> our planned quantitative research seeks to unravel the reasons for this disapproval which might range from identity related reasons to economic reasons.



## **I. Focus groups**

I.1. The sample: Four focus group discussions, involving a total number of 40 people, were carried out. The groups formed a representative sample of the society: level of education, social status, gender, age, political inclination and ethnicity. One of the four groups consisted only of ethnic minority representatives which provided insight into the convergences and the divergences between Macedonians and other ethnic groups as far as the perception of the Macedonian identity is concerned and the effects of "Skopje 2014" on it.

### **1.2. The questionnaire**

We designed a questionnaire applicative to all levels of education, social status, age and gender. The questions could be answered from the point of personal experience, perception and do not require any level of academic expertise in history or politics. The sense of history – embedded in the sense of ethnic/national identity – we invoked in the questionnaire is the one acquired mainly through everyday culture. By everyday culture, we understand the informal, oral interaction within and among individuals and groups, and the specific forms of exchange and transfiguration of the grand narratives of origin and truth of a collective identity. Methodologically, this position is in line with the historical and cultural studies approach of the history of everyday life (Alf Lüdtke; Paul Vayne). In the context of the contemporary society, what is mediated through everyday informal interaction (which can be both via any communication medium) certainly involves the effects of institutions and mainstream media (including the internet).

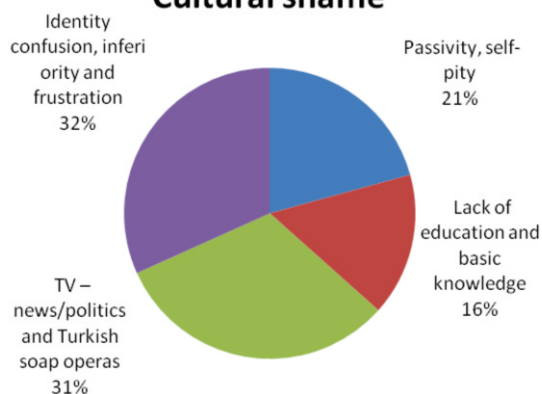
### **1.3. The main findings:**

- There is pronounced homogeneity (but not absolute: exact data is presented below) among the respondents regarding virtually all of the major clusters of questions, such as "what elements of the culture you find emblematic of the Macedonian identity," "which historical period do you see as the one defining for the national identity," etc.

- The sense of "cultural shame" is predominant: "inferiority," "weakness," "not knowing who we are," "lack of assertiveness and self-respect," "lack of education" and "higher awareness" (by which, it is obviously, meant adherence to what is habitually considered European values) are presented not only as the shameful aspect one would hide, but also as the "defining essence" of the Macedonian identity. It is interesting to note that the focus group consisted of ethnic minorities expressed the same perceptions. Therefore, the aspect of cultural intimacy inciting shame is granted the status of the "core of the national identity." Below is the data illustrating the finding at issue.

- Passivity, self-pity 21 %
- Identity confusion, inferiority and frustration 32 %
- TV – news/politics and epidemics of watching soap operas 31 %
- Lack of education and basic knowledge 16%

### Cultural shame



As far as the mobilization of everyday culture and its “codes of cultural intimacy” are concerned, the findings demonstrate complete detachment of the “Skopje 2014” project from what is recognized as the codes of cultural intimacy which are perceived as the unquestionable characteristics of the Macedonian culture imbedded in its cultural heritage. The defining and most valuable marks of the Macedonian culture, according to what seemed to be a consensus among all of the respondents is belong to the immaterial culture: the traditional folk music and dances, the food, the language and the traditional lifestyle linked the Orthodox Christian values. It is important to note that there was no exception among the respondents in this respect. The ethnic minorities group confirmed having the same perception. It is interesting to note that the codes identified as defining of the culture are traditional, going back to history rather than contemporary and/or urban.

To the question “What elements of the culture you find emblematic to the Macedonian identity?,” we received the following responses:

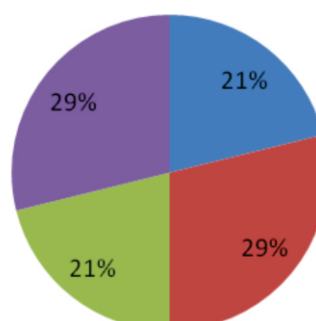
- The language 29%
- Folklore and customs 29%
- Music 21%
- Food 21%

Ethnic minority focus group identified the following elements of culture as emblematic to the Macedonian identity:

- Food 40%
- Music 40%
- The Language 20%

### Codes of cultural intimacy

■ Food ■ Folklore and customs ■ Music ■ Language



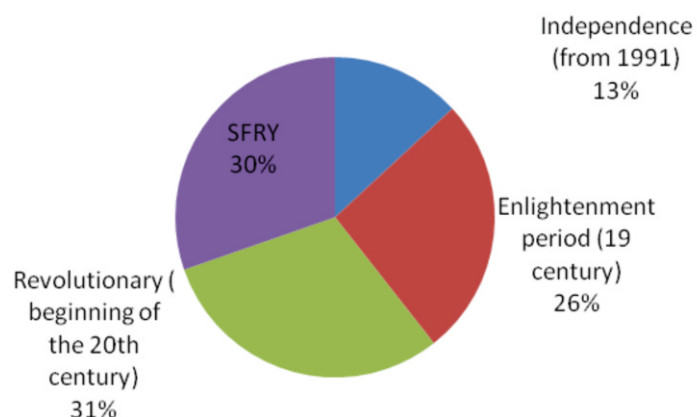


Regarding the historical period defining the Macedonian identity, all of the respondents singled out the following periods as the most significant: the period of “komiti”, i.e., the era of guerilla struggle for an independent state championed by IMRO/TMORO in the period of end of 19<sup>th</sup> century – beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup>, the period of the so-called enlightenment (intellectual national awakening preceding or coinciding with the “komiti period”), and, finally, the partisans (the fighters for a recognized state as part of Yugoslavia championed by the Yugoslav Communist party). The respondents expressed either a sense of opposition or indifference to the period of Antiquity. The feelings of indifference were present also with those who have nothing against or support the building of the statue of Alexander the Great at the central square of Skopje.

Which historical period do you see as the one defining for the national identity:

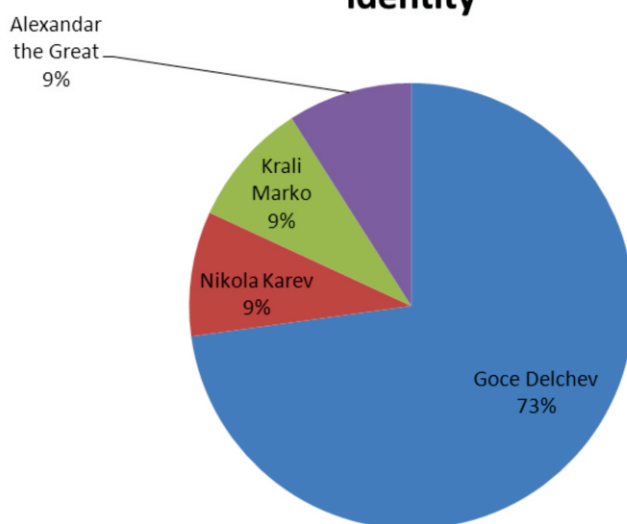
- Independence (from 1991) 13%
- Enlightenment period (19 century) 26 %
- Revolutionary ( beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century) 31 %
- SFRY 30 %

### Historical periods that define the Macedonian national identity



The most important historical figure, according to the respondents, is Goce Deltchev (an IMRO revolutionary of the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century). Nikola Karev an IMRO revolutionary, Krale Marko (a medieval mythic character) and Alexander the Great are also mentioned (by one respondent each).

### The most important historical figure for building the Macedonian national identity



The characters of the oral literary heritage that mark Macedonian mentality are Itar Pejo (a mythic trickster from the Ottoman period, a character appearing in the folklore of other neighboring Slavic nations, such as Bulgaria and Serbia) and Krale Marko (also a mythic character, present in the heroic epic poetry, shared with the other Slavic national folklores of the region of SEE).

- Macedonian folk stories 31%
- Krale Marko 18%
- The partisan period of WWII 18%
- Itar Pejo 18%
- Other (pecalbarski, patriotski) 15 %

Regarding the monuments themselves and the architectural projects, there was no such great homogeneity among the respondents as with regard to the above questions. A great majority disapproves them (67%) whereas a certain percentage approves with reservation (16%) with regard to: excessiveness in number, style, spent money and finally, as far as cultural intimacy is concerned, and most importantly – the marginalization of the more important historical periods and figures in favor of Antiquity

## **I. The interviews with academic and civil society activists**

The interviews served to provide confirmation or introduce a degree of reservation regarding the findings of the focus groups. All of the 10 interviewees express no surprise regarding the findings. The predominant view among the interviewees is that the national identity is a discursive construct or rather a political one, whereas the cultural identity is rooted in the predominantly orally transmitted history and tradition. The predominant position is that impositions from a position of power in order to intervene and reconfigure the sense of cultural belonging and its symbolic are possible. Consequently, that greater presence of Antiquity in the educational system could produce such change. Also, the majority of the interviewees are not surprised by the negative definition of the "Macedonian self", and they think it is the result of history. In other words, there is always a historical process which promulgates certain historical myths at the expense of others: a history marked by a contestation of identity produces a "cultural self" marked by a self-negating stance. Couple of interviewees noted that this situation is often used to elevate the negative self perception into an exaltation of self-victimization and transmute it in a nationalistic pathos (the recently build museum of the Macedonian Revolutionary struggle could be a confirmation that such processes are currently promoted and carried out by the state institutions).

## **III. The Expert Focus Group's debate of the results of the first four focus groups**

Six professionals from related fields (cultural studies, anthropology, ethnology, history, political science, media and communication) commented the results from the focus groups. Precaution was taken to choose academics who have no history of participating in the public political debate, who are not involved in any form of political party activity and have not published as columnists. All of the experts have international academic careers and are, therefore, not confined to the Macedonian academic scene exclusively. They find the identity confusion to be the result of the complexity of the Macedonian history, which has entertained the idea of a Macedonian state but never really created one till the dissolution of Yugoslavia in 1992. The problem is exacerbated by the fact that the contemporary society is devoid of uncensored critique and the proponent of the public discourse continue to focus on creating new myths which historical. We need urban contemporary myths. The experts think that Macedonia never had the chance to build its own identity as a state and/or nation, and that the recent efforts to do so end up in desperate attempts to erase elements of the past by virtue of carrying out "de-ottomanization" and "de-yugoslavization". This is one of the core goals of "Skopje 2014." All the experts share a negative view about the project "Skopje 2014." One of them defined it like "revenge from the province." For them, the project does not have any aesthetic value, not even political effects. According to them, its main purpose is spending money and the quick building objects and sculptures reflects the totalitarian approach. They all share the following main insight: If the aim of "Skopje 2014" is to build or strengthen the Macedonian identity it's been done in a totally wrong way, violating the existing sense of identity and, thus, creating utter confusion.

## Conclusion and policy recommendations

As a nation building project, based on defining or redefining national culture, "Skopje 2014" does not operate with the cultural codes of everyday culture which are enabling of communicating the identity message in modes that can be appropriated by the cultural majority and integrated into the dominant perception of the identity. The result is an alien and alienating cultural formation in the middle of a cultural perception which remains indifferent to it. The sense of cultural intimacy has been violated by an imposition which remains a "foreign body" with relation to it. The expert focus group and interviewees are unisonous regarding the lack of aesthetics (labeled as "kitsch") and inadequate mythologisation of history. According to the experts involved in this study, "Skopje 2014" does not correspond with the predominant sense of national or ethnic identity and the perception of historical periods and esthetics as formative of the Macedonian identity.

### Policy recommendations

1. In order to prevent a sense of imposition (and repulsion or indifference created by it) of alien culture as one's one, architectural and artistic projects with a nation building ambition should respect and operate with the existing cultural codes to be identified in the everyday culture and history.
2. The above proposed recommendation can be accomplished through an adoption of bottom up approach, whereby an open discussion of the widest possible public will inform the cultural policies carried out by the Government. The forms of public discussion can range from organizing debates at local government level, to organizing referenda, but also allowing the civil society to debate the issue and concrete proposals in an independent way, involving not only NGO activists but also scholars and other opinion makers (of all political affiliations). Surveys should be done in a thorough way which will enable accurate measuring of perception of the wider public.
3. To circumvent the virtually unisonous view of the expert public about the historical and aesthetic deficiencies of projects of this sort, it is crucial to delegate all authority over aesthetical and historical matters to the organizational bodies, institutions and individuals possessing the expert authority.
4. In order to accomplish recommendation nr.3, it is indispensable that the debate over historical, cultural and artistic issues take place only among academics, professionals and artists. It should be carried out in academic and/or expert forms of debate instead of the predominant public rhetoric which represents a hybrid of pseudo-academic and national romanticist political discourses. Academic, expert and artist autonomous debates should be transposed into cultural policy discussions and recommendations, made by professional organizations and the civil society, to be followed by the institutions of the State instead of the other way around.
5. In order to accomplish recommendation nr. 4, it is necessary to provide autonomous spaces and forums of debate for the academics and other experts (symposia, academic publications, etc). In order to convey their conclusions to a wider public, uncensored and unrestricted access to media should be provided in order to insure experts' participation in the public debate and dialogue with the institutions that carry out cultural policies in the country.
6. Integrating the perspective of interculturalism (or sensitivity to the ethnic minority groups) should be carried out in way which also adopts the "bottom up" approach and informs itself by mobilizing the existing cultural codes operative in the ethnic groups at issue.

## ENDNOTES

1. „Запрени сите шпекулации за Скопје 2014, Владата со детален отчет“ [“End of all speculations for Skopje 2014, Government gives detailed report”] available at <http://www.sitel.com.mk/zapreni-site-shpekulacii-za-skopje-2014-vladata-so-detalen-otchet>, accessed on 22 April 2013 “Skopje 2014 created jobs, broad funds into tourism and fulfilled it's historic obligation to the Macedonian heroes. The project is the backbone to the Macedonian identity.”
2. Војислав Саракински [Vojislav Sarakinski], „Дискретната смрт на методологијата,“ [The Discrete Death of Methodology] Историја 42.1-2 (2006), стр. 165-17.
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4. „Отчет: Скопје 2014 чини 207 милиони евра,“ [“Public Accounting: Skopje 2014 costs 207 million euro”] available at [http://kanal5.com.mk/vesti\\_detail.asp?ID=5050](http://kanal5.com.mk/vesti_detail.asp?ID=5050), accessed on 30 June 2013; see also: „Околу 207 милиони евра се потрошени за Скопје 2014“, Нова Македонија (22 април 2013), available at <http://www.novamakedonija.com.mk/DetalNewsInstant.asp?vestInstant=17304>, accessed on 29 June 2013.
5. The UN Security Council (UNSC) adopts Resolution 817 (1993).
6. Although not formally, since there was no official veto but rather firm opposition to Macedonia's accession to the Association and making a consensual decision of the member states to grant the country membership impossible. Macedonia's application to NATO was submitted as on the part of the "Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia."
7. "Bucharest Summit Declaration: Issued by the Heads of State and Government Participating in the Meeting of North Atlantic Council in Bucharest on April 3 2008," available at [http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official\\_texts\\_8443.htm](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_8443.htm), accessed on 28 of June 2013.
8. „ЦРПМ: Кај Македонците се бележи пад во поддршката за зачувување на името“ [“CRPM: Macedonians decline the support for keeping the constitutional name”] available at <http://www.netpress.com.mk/mk/vest.asp?id=35308&kategorija=1>, accessed on 18 July 2008.
9. "European Council Meetings: 27 June 2013 - 28 June 2013 in Brussels," available at <http://www.european-council.europa.eu/council-meetings>, accessed on 29 June 2013.
10. „Преродбата го преродува Скопје“ [The Rebirth Brings Back to Life Skopje], Дневник (Фебруари 4, 2010), available at <http://www.dnevnik.com.mk/default.asp?ItemID=C9593E0AA8335641B88ADD0EC18566E6>, accessed on 28 June 2013; "The Skopje 2014 Project Presented," Macedonian Information Agency(February 4, 2010), available at <http://www.idividi.com.mk/vesti/makedonija/578522/>, accessed on 29 June 2013.
11. Michael Herzfeld, Cultural Intimacy: Social Poetics in the Nation-State (New York and London: Routledge), 3-5.
12. Ibid., 4.
13. „Brima Gallup“: Дури 57,8 проценти од анкетираните граѓани се против „Скопје 2014“ [“Brima Gallup: Even 57,8 percent of the population is against Skopje 2014”] available at <http://www.plusinfo.mk/vest/62004/Brima-Gallup-Duri-427-procenti-od-anketiranite-gragjani-se-protiv-Skopje-2014> accessed on 29 June 2013.
14. Alf Ludtke, The History of Everyday Life: Reconstructing Historical Experiences and Ways of Life, Princeton University Press, 1995; Paul Veyne, Comment on écrit l'histoire : essai d'épistémologie. Paris: Seuil, 1970.



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