

No place for Yugoslavia: memory politics in Macedonian museums

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Abstract: *Macedonia is experiencing an active phase of construction and fixation of its image through the cultural institutions and monuments. Skopje is leaving through the memory boom. The monuments surround pedestrian during all his way through the city center. Twenty two meters high Alexander Macedonian sculpture become the keeper of contested equilibrium and there appears the feelings, that in case of his displacement from the post the whole construct of the monument codes will collapse. Public space of Skopje became a field of symbolic struggle.*

In the following article, we analyze how the socialist Yugoslavian period is represented in such new constructed image of the national history in museums. For this purpose, we use visual analysis and apply it to the Skopje history museum's observation. We show how the "antiquisation" policy of the state re-defines the past within the historical revisionism approach and dismiss the particular period to the marginalized level.

Keywords: Macedonia, museums, Yugoslavia, representation, Skopje, history

'Skopje 2014' project

In combination with the absence of historical chronology in representation, the urban landscape of the city center is missing the orientation of the consonant architectural style. The inner problem is the dissonant architectural styles, materials and narratives leads to the "transformed into Las Vegas and Disneyland" the city center (Graan (2013): 171). The construction of the international image and attraction of the tourists, which was the main goal of the project, is heavily criticized by the opposition due to the problem of national authenticity and damage of the national image (Graan (2013): 171).

The present image of the city was laid in 2010 year with the beginning of the realization of the state project called 'Skopje 2014'. The organizer of the project –the Government of the Republic of Macedonia has spent the sum of 200-500 million Euros during the period of four years. The government made their first-ever report in April 2012, after the local elections and stated that the sum of 208 million Euros has been spent for the reconstructions of the buildings and erections of monuments so far¹. However, some of the experts think that the sum was much higher and varied around 500 million Euros or even more.²

¹ <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/gallery/skopje-2014>

² <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/gallery/skopje-2014>

The tension between the state and the critical public brought to the number of protests. Thus, in 2009, the group of students of the faculty of architecture, who have called themselves as “First Arhi (Architect) Brigade” organized the protest via the Facebook group against the construction of the Orthodox church based on the public financing on the main square of Skopje (Ignatova (2009)). However, when the students arrived to the square at the appointed time, “crowd of church supporters carrying flags and crosses”, were already there.³ Church supporters came with the organized for these purposes buses, police were present, but did not intervene in the conflict when the ‘supporters’ came into the clash with the students (Ignatova (2013)). Later, in a local TV show, protesters were called “gays and atheists”.⁴ The given conflict was reflected by the opposition media as a clear intervention of the state to the freedom of opinion and as usage of the state recourse to mobilize the pro-governmental position. The mainstream media presented the protest as having the political background, while the student protest was led by the “daughter of the chief of the campaign headquarters of SDSM presidential candidate”, the main opposition party to the VMRO-DPMNE (Ignatova (2009)).

It was not the single protest activity, just to mention the group of “Razpeani Skopjani” (Singing Skopjeans), who repeatedly gathered in central spaces in the city in order to sing children’s songs with new lyrics that,

³ Violence Disrupts Student Protests in Skopje: <http://history-of-macedonia.com/2009/03/30/violence-disrupts-student-protests-in-skopje/>

⁴ *ibid*

parodied 'Skopje 2014' (Janev (2011)). Another symbolic protest was organized by scholars (Mijalkovic and Urbanek) who have published a volume in English with provocative title "Skopje: The World's Bastard", which critically referred to the Skopje 2014 project "spatial and representational politics" (Graan (2013): 174).

The center is not designed in the single style and has brought a lot of critics from the side of different expert groups. Some call it historicist kitsch,⁵ some a theme park⁶ or megalomaniacal project⁷ and criticize the whole project as misplaced during the economical crisis and high unemployment rate in the country.

The sculptural line includes the "antiquisation" policy as a major direction, continues with the commemoration of the leaders of anti-Islamic rebellions of the Ottoman period, goes further to displaying the National awakening period (middle of 19- beg. of 20th century) and diminish the socialist heritage (Graan (2013): 161). Monuments are either the personalized form of commemoration of some period or event or a sign which refer to the abstract concept of the long struggle for Macedonian independence. All of the heroes are meant to reflect their Macedonian ethnical origins which excludes

⁵ <http://edition.cnn.com/2011/10/04/world/europe/macedonia-skopje-2014/index.html>

⁶ *ibid*

⁷ <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/macedonian-culture-strategy-milestone-or-wish-list>

the ethnicity and multiple identities of other ethnic groups together with the Ottoman-era architecture.

The project is materializing the “nostalgia for the presocialist period” (Graan (2013): 169), both in the aspect of choosing the heroes and the style of reconstruction (Lafazanovski 2006: 67). The active or even the dominant role of the government in this trajectory is rarely discussed. “The government tries to erase the communist past from the visual appearance and replace it with the pre-socialist facade that would be reminiscent of a full European integration” (Mattioli (2014): 83).

Being part of broader entities, Macedonia did not have its independence until recently and as nearly- established country, it faces the problem of arising right to include the famous persons of world history or history, which is already formed in neighbor countries in the national history. In other words, there is debate on the nationalization of the hero and making it ‘Macedonian’. Such example consists of the monument to Justinian I, Tsar Samuil (Samuel of Bulgaria), Philip II of Macedon Alexan and others (Photo 1). The controversiality of the situation may be represented through the ‘main’ statue in the central square. Officially it is called “Warrior on a Horse” which was opened on September 2011 and had to symbolize twenty years of countries’ independence. It is rarely mentioned with such title, but is commonly known and called as the statue of the Alexander the Great.⁸ During

⁸ <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/aug/14/alexander-great-macedonia-warrior-horse>

the visit at the London School of Economics, Macedonian Foreign minister Nikola Poposki told that Macedonia wants “to be real, economic partners” with their neighbors.⁹ However, as critically remarks author of the interview (Prelec (2014)): “the towering 33-m high statue depicting Alexander the Great – which the government claims to be ‘just any’ warrior on a horse – seems to contradict this statement”.

Other example that come into the similar line is the statues of Saints Cyril and Methodius, who were born in 9th-century Thessalonica, Byzantine Empire and Mother Teresa, born in Skopje, Ottoman Empire and being of Albanian origin.

In the example of the spatial image of Skopje Janev (2011) shows how “ethnocratic regime” which is understood as “rupture the concept of the demos in favor of a single ethno-national group”(Janev (2011): 3) has emerged in Macedonia recently. The loss of democratization of the first decade of the 90th replaces with the “ethnic bargaining between ethnic elites. De facto, Macedonia is bi-national country, where the rule of law and “separation of power” is not working (Vankovska (2013): 99).

As shown by Trpevska and Micevski (2014: 308) there is visible intervention of the state to the media sphere and economics. The deterioration of the democratic initiatives, intervention of the state on

⁹ <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/lsee/2014/06/13/poposki-we-dont-want-to-win-against-greece-we-want-to-be-real-partners/>

different levels and politicizing of the past lead to the “continuous movement towards authoritarianism” (Trpevska, Micevski (2014): 308; Prelec (2014)).

“Macedonian political life has been reduced to the activities of ethnopolitical parties... the Albanians who form the second largest ethnic group in the country are not inactive, passive onlookers in this spatial reordering” (Janev (2011): 8). They also follow this trend. Thus, in January 2012, the leader of the most influential Albanian party - Democratic Union for Integration (the second largest party after VMRO-DPMNE) inaugurated the construction of Skanderbeg Square and the monument of Skanderbeg, the greatest Albanian national hero (Janev (2011): 9). The given party has emerged as a transformation of the National Liberation Army that ignited the military confrontation in 2001.

“The total dominance of ethnopolitical parties and their respective policies and public discourse lead to the conclusion that Macedonia has stepped out of democracy into ethnocracy” (Janev (2011): 9) and Skopje 2014 is the representation of this politics through the social urban landscape.

Paradoxically, Macedonian nationalism was constructed, encouraged and implemented with the dominant help of the Yugoslavian governance. “The Socialist Republic of Macedonia, as part of the Yugoslav Federation, was formally encouraged to develop a national identity that would distinguish it from the neighboring republics”(Dimova (2012): 238). In 1945 official Macedonian orthography was implemented, the language was distinguished from Bulgarian by the efforts of the Yugoslavian linguists who selected the central Vardar dialect as a central point.

Together with the construction of language the unique national identity was implemented by the constructionist power of scientists. Consequently, the Yugoslavian project encouraged the emergence of a Macedonian national identity; however, it was oppressing “the nationalist claims to the larger region of Macedonia Antiquizacija and the Greek – Macedonian Conflict” (Dimova (2012): 238) as not relevant for the geopolitical needs.

After the disintegration of Yugoslavia FYROM continued the rhetoric of Macedonian uniqueness and non similarity to neighboring countries, but at the same time, the socialist period which constructed the discursive preconditions for such statements was disappearing. At the same time, previously forbidden statements of Macedonian antiquisation were expanded through the political narratives and became actual in 1999 when VMRO-DPMNE came into power. When in 2007, the same party received its victory once again, it became visible their “clear agenda to enforce and purify the national identity of the country (zajaknuvanje na makedonstinata), by undertaking a number of activities in the domain of culture” (Dimova (2012): 238).

We mentioned the contemporary Macedonian ‘monument boom’ phenomena which requires broad separate study in order to show that the exclusion of Yugoslavia from the ‘heritage map’ of the ‘worth mentioning’ periods of the past is clearly confirmed by the overall state politics involved in the discourse of antiquization of the country and tied to the discourse of nationalization of the transnational memory. In the following section we shall

demonstrate how such politics intervenes into the museum space and how does it deal with the socialist past.

For the purposes of our research, we have made our analysis in two main history institutions: the recently established Museum of the Macedonian Struggle and the oldest institution in the country- History Museum. We will show how differently the Yugoslavian period can be represented in the same city, and how clearly it is interdependent with the political sphere.

Museum as a space of analysis

The museum as an object of social analysis is grounded in the idea of the functioning of the given institutions in a political field. Such institution function not only for displaying the material and preservation objects chosen as the heritage objects, but also as the space, which helps different groups of interest to use it for ideological purposes and to compete with each other (Crane, 2000). We define museum as a place of the concurrences of the power and meanings (Williams, 2007)

History museums work as the public institutions which transmit the constructed history and are involved in representation and maintaining the national identities (Ostow, 2008, Anderson (2006), Bennet (2008)). Visitors are being educated in the objectified narratives of nationality and ethnicity. And consequently, the history museum is an important actor in the construction of national identity. In such role it would be analyzed in the article.

Another important aspect needed to be mentioned is the fact that the individual memories are usually substituted by the official interpretation or the “official history” in the museums (Kavanagh (1996): 2). In contemporary museum practice such exhibitions when the individual memory are encouraged to be represented are rising, however, the successful cases of transmitting the material through the personal hi (stories) are still rare phenomenon and our research will show how the history is displayed in two main history museums located in Skopje.

We are applying method of visual analysis by which it is relevant to see the ways by which the material is sorted and visualized. The titles of the plaques and any other auxiliary material are also taken into account. The overall view, image framing and actualization of the nodal points through the events or main heroes is taken into account when doing such visual observation.

The field trip was conducted in December 2013 and the visual material supporting the given article consists of the personal “photo notes”.

The Museum of the Macedonian Struggle

The capital city has six main museums. The core one is the Museum of the Macedonian Struggle, located at the center of the city. It has a perfect location: the heart of the city, near the main bridge. From one side there starts

tourist attraction- the Old Town, from the other- the main Square, on the left is the National Theater and the Holocaust Memorial Center for the Jews of Macedonia. At thirty meters is the Archaeological Museum, which was under the reconstruction and has opened its doors in October 2014 (Photo 2).

The Holocaust Museum is also newly established institution and is in a good condition both outside and inside. It is important to describe the location of the institution which we observe because in the following text, we will find out that the conditions of other historical museums in the same city dramatically differ: they are subjected to oblivion whether they are still open or already closed for the indefinite period.

The whole title of the museum is rather long, but very symptomatic: "Museum of the Macedonian Struggle for Sovereignty and Independence – Museum of VMRO – Museum of the Victims of the Communist Regime"(Photo 3). It has opened its doors in September 2011 as part of the 'Skopje 2014' project.

The staff of the Museum of Macedonian Struggle has a clear division of responsibilities where everybody has its allocated tasks: security, ticket office, guide-tours. It may look like an obvious fact, but it is not, if compared to the situation in some other museums in Skopje. Thus, in Macedonian History Museum one will find the security guard who at the same time serves as a ticket seller and an information cell.

The museum's subject is the representation of the battles and uprisings organized by Macedonian people, which are interpreted as the long-

term process of Macedonian fight for the independence. The victimization of the history and glorification of the imagined national community is the main tool provided by the museum. It is not surprising that the Yugoslavian period is reduced to the single issue of Naked Island prisons, sadly known for being used as a place of political imprisonment (Photo 4,5). The exhibition specified the period of 1945-1956 as the time framing of the display and is the only mention of Yugoslavia at the given museum.

The reduction of the broad layer of the recent history into the single issue works as the best explicit illustration of the non-neutrality of the museum, and on the contrary of its ideological constructionist power.

Main visual instruments to be used for demonstrations are the panoramic pictures and the wax statues. Both of them are newly made. Panoramic pictures concentrate on the displaying the battles; statues make accents on the individuals taking part in the battle. All of the panoramic pictures were made by the Ukrainian and Russian painters. Afterwards, during my talk with a guide, I've asked why there were no Macedonian painters and received an answer that in contradiction to Russian and Ukrainian long-term panoramic tradition, Macedonian one is not developed.

All materials are fixing up believe in the existence of the national community with its organic aspiration to be independent. It's important to mention, that the only way to visit the museum is to have a guided tour. Tours can be provided in both Macedonian and English languages. Perhaps, at the beginning the idea was meaningful, but was spoiled when implemented because the visitors are not able to walk along, spend even a minute after the

guided tour has finished walking through the exhibition on their own: to read the plaques, to see considered artifacts and stands. When the tour is over all are obliged to get out of the exposition hall together with the guide. Additional inconvenience which haunts the visitor is the ongoing flows of people following their guide. If two groups appeared in one room, one of guides tries to tell the material more quickly in order to go to the next hall. Such situation not only leads to the reduction of the material, but creates the impression both of the conveyor and Disneyland attraction.

In the described situation the visitor becomes the object of ideological manipulations because he is limited in his rights and time-spending. The visitor does not have time to read the plagues, to observe carefully the material, to have as much time as he personally wants to spend at the museum. This produces the feeling of conveyor; the diversity of images and fullness of pseudo-artifacts which surrounds the visitor, who has however limited time to see it and has to move further make the exhibition look like a Disneyland attraction. In Disneyland the visual imagery that surrounds the visitor is made for helping him to feel himself in some imagined time and place. The objects and the whole picture do not intend to represent the real world, the items do not need to be original. The whole entourage is done as an extra bonus for the main goal- delivering adrenaline and feeling certain emotions. Museum initially had another main goal: to display the unique, bizarre, important artifacts. At the Macedonian museum, the originality and authenticity are replaced with the creation of the atmosphere with the model “pretend to believe it was so”. Due to this aspect museum has similarities to the Disneyland.

As the logical completion of the conveyor type of the exhibition is the reduced role of the guide, who as being the insider, though does not know or does not see as possible to share information on the plans of the museum. I did not succeed to know the guide's personal opinion on the presented topic, on the politics of museum and even on the plans for the upcoming exhibitions. I received answers that showed the limited responsibilities that the guides had. They were not aware of any information regarding the new exhibition which at the moment of my observation was literary under the noisy reconstruction of the last floor where none of the visitors was allowed to go. All answered were reduced to the formula: "I have no idea what it will be there, I'm the guide and can answer on the questions about the history".

In this way, the limitation of functions, vertical model of decision making without taking into consideration the guide's opinions on of the displayed period (who then work as social agents of spreading the verified and standardized information), conveyer type of presentation makes the museum seem to be the visible instrument of the state ideology. In this regards, the reduction of the Yugoslavian period (the recent past of the country) into the narrative of repressions works as the instrument for creating the image of independence as a teleological development. Such approach of displaying the history has dangerous signals because the orientation of the museum includes into its main function not the function of showing the history, but showing the history in an ideologically correct manner. Being the national museum subsidized from the national budget, we may conclude that the museum does not have its independent policy in producing the knowledge and is closely tight with the request from the ruling VMRO-DPMNE political party in "leveraging

nationalistic sentiments and partially recreating the history of their own party, while reaffirming themselves as the true bearers of the Macedonian spirit” (Prelec (2014). The vanish of the socialist past which is visible in the architectural scope of the city (Graan (2013), Mattioli (2014)) is replaced in museum with the reduced model of referring to the Yugoslavia as a ‘prison of the nations’ and Tito Broz as a tyrant.

Museum of Macedonia

It was rather difficult to find this museum. It is located at the periphery of the Old center in the area where elderly men drink Turkish tea in the street cafes. Even when I found the street where the museum had to be located, it was still problematic to recognize the building as the cultural institution dealing with the heritage because of somewhat neglected appearance and the unusual social practice notices in front of it. Children were playing football on the spontaneously organized just in front of the museum football field (Photo 6).

The museum is the oldest in the country. It was opened in 1924, consisted and remains to consist of three parts: archaeological, historical and ethnological museums.

The practice to smoke inside the buildings, even at the museum buildings where special temperature conditions have to provide is widespread by the security guards at several museums we have visited. I would interpret it as an additional sign of the institution which ceases to work according to its

functions, loses its social significance and consequently requires reorganization.

The historical part is located at the two-storey building, quite huge, but urgently in need of renovations. It has a lack of light and order. The only prominent exposition was dedicated to the Orthodox icons (Photo 7); it was organized with the financial support of the European Union. This information was specified on the huge plaques near the entrance and constantly repeated on the plaques accompanying the exposition. The area had a special temperature regime and inscriptions in Macedonian and English. The icons might be auspicious material to represent because it is easy to change the perception of the religious objects into the other non-religious connotation by putting them into the discourse of cultural or world heritage. Such tendency also allows avoiding reinterpretations of the history. However, the non-visibility of the similar heritage of the Islamic culture, might be a clear element of the politics of exclusion and cultural dominance of a single national narrative. Especially, it might be questioned at the museum, which is physically located in the area of the Ottoman architectural visual regime, whose silence is rapidly intervened time to time by the invitations for namaz from the mosque adjacent to the building.

Contemporary science is usually discussing the idea of the museum as a space of inclusion of the broader audience. The museum works in the opposite way: the exclusion of the minority interests, the absence of the history which might be interesting for them, the concentration on the singularity.

The next room demonstrates the liberation movement of 1878 and the Ottoman Empire period. Some plaques are made only in Macedonian, some are duplicated in English. As becomes clear from the plaques, the Ottoman period has a negative connotation while the central focus of the exposition is the liberation from it.

Finally, we are moving into the rooms of the greatest interest for us: the representation of the socialist period. The idea of the exhibition can be described in several words: 'socialistically positive'. The Yugoslavia is shown as the peaceful time, a time full of optimism for the future. The exposition starts with the stands showing the period of the fight against the Nazism during the WW2 with the glorification of the Macedonian partisan movement together with mentioning partisans of the whole Yugoslavia. After several stands presenting the WW2 period, the public space continues to narrate in a rather chaotic way about the chronologically unbounded topics. There emerge stands about the 19th century Macedonian national movement, then arise the artifacts from the year 1925 year: first officially published book in Greece on the Macedonian language. After come again stands telling about the WW2, Holocaust and it is followed by illustrations of 'the spirit of progress' during the first socialist after-war period. Parts of the physical space are lacking any expositions at all: they were taken away once and now have been left with the empty walls. The WW2 period and Yugoslav stands are clearly glorifying the given period. It is happening because the exposition has not been subjected to any changes since the socialist period: old plaques, old-style ("socialist type") of narrative (glorification and special use of words: "comrades" e.t.c), old (a bit faded) pictures make us think

that the place went out from the actuality. It lacks the very basic financial support and is experiencing the times of uncertain transition. As a coincidence which cannot be understood as a representative knowledge, but however, confirms our statement, I would like to mention an artifact which has appeared in my hands the same day. I bought a plate with the title 'Macedonia' on it. The seller has wrapped it into the piece of newspaper. On a closer inspection, the article in a newspaper was informing the reader about the disappearance of forty seven golden artifacts from the museum I have recently visited. The article described the lamaneble state of the museum, which lacks financial support and renovation (Утрински весник, 8 November 2013: 3).

All given observations help to understand that the museum is stuck in the unclear division. From one side it needs reorganization of the expositions, refreshment of the stands, the addition of the factual material, systematizing of the space (Photo 8, 9). The building and the exposition inside seems to be currently frozen, and that's the reason why the Yugoslavian version of the historical representation without the switch to the revisionist national narrative of the independent Macedonia is still alive.

At the moment of observation author was the only visitor of the museum. According to the guide whom I have found in another section of the museum, there could be approximately 80-100 visitors per day. To my question, or rather sad sympathy regarding the feeling of oblivion and visibility of no financial support, my interlocutor answered: "I don't know what to answer... They are there and we are here". The feeling that the museum went

into oblivion remained with me during the whole visit. The guide said that at the current moment another institution- the Archaeological Museum, which is now under reconstruction, takes all funding.

Conclusions

Analyzing these two museums what kind of conclusions shall we draw out? The complex presentation of the Yugoslav period is not favorable for the recent construction of the contemporary history project. By itself, by the matter of historical fact of Macedonian history, Yugoslavia is not an actual period to concentrate on it. Yugoslavia is needed as an auxiliary material for establishing some broad picture or concept of history being largely ordered by the state. The Museum of the Macedonian Struggle selects the piece from very broad and complex period and reduces it to the single issue: the political imprisonment. Hence, the Yugoslavia is represented with the minus sign, as a kind of horrible short sleep, which the individual wants to escape from recollecting it. Another museum- the Museum of Macedonia, which demonstrates the researched period in a glorious way, goes into oblivion with the lack of funding and, consequently, its interpretation of Yugoslavia follows it. Yugoslavia's removal of favor fits into the broader issue of cityscape image and related to the national identity construction through the visual texture of the city.

Both museums avoid inclusions of national minorities. From one side it fits the politics of homogenizing the Macedonian identity; from another it does

not stress any actual history for Albanian minority which constitutes more than 30 percent of the whole population.

The imagination of the Yugoslavia as a country with a stable economy and as the relatively secure period was the matter of the pre-independence politics of representation, but is not topical anymore. The period after the Second World War is inscribed into the canvas of the narration, but the circumstances of such presentation are simply the lacking of finance to re-organize the exposition. The History Museum that ties with such vision is experiencing the lack of financial support and hence cannot be analyzed as an important player that indicates the state policy.

Pictures



Photo 1: Main Square, Skopje, December 2013

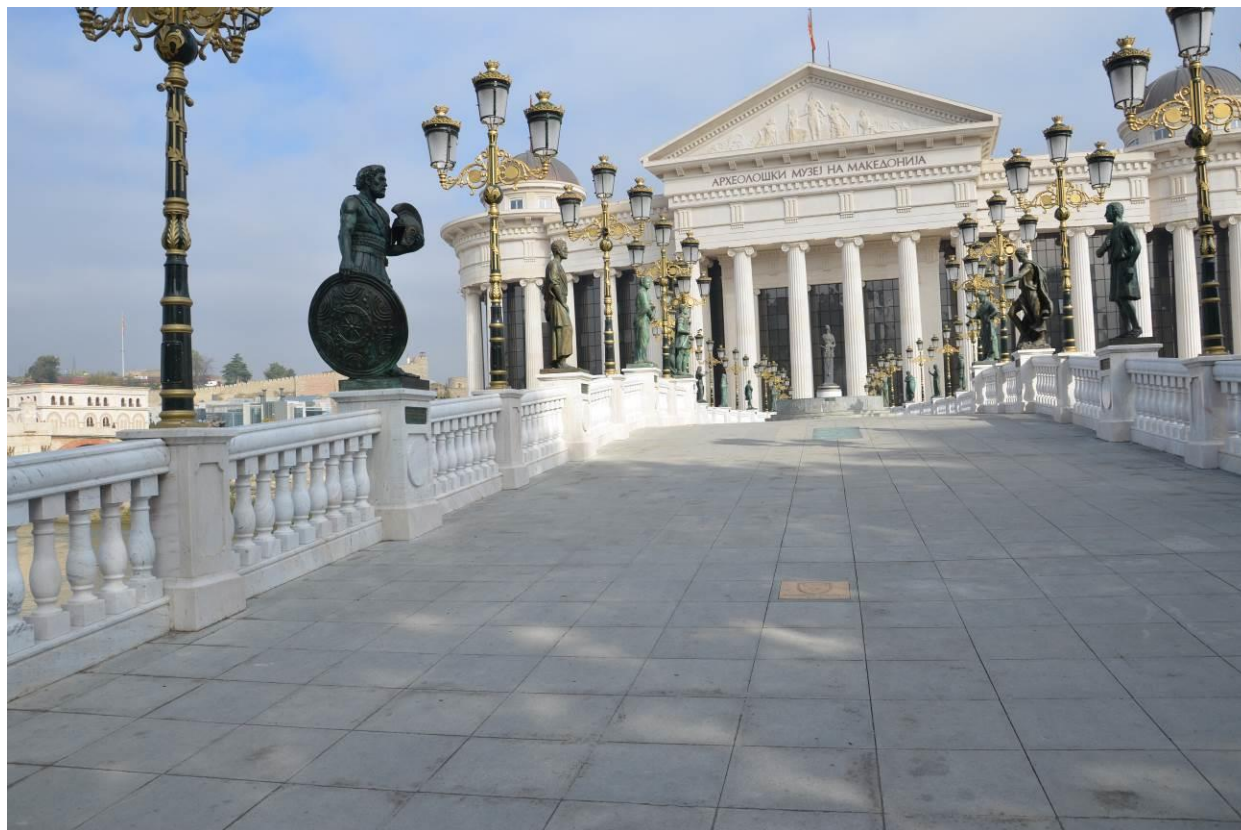


Photo 2: Archeological Museum, Skopje, December 2013



Photo 3: Museum of Macedonian Struggle, Skopje, December 2013

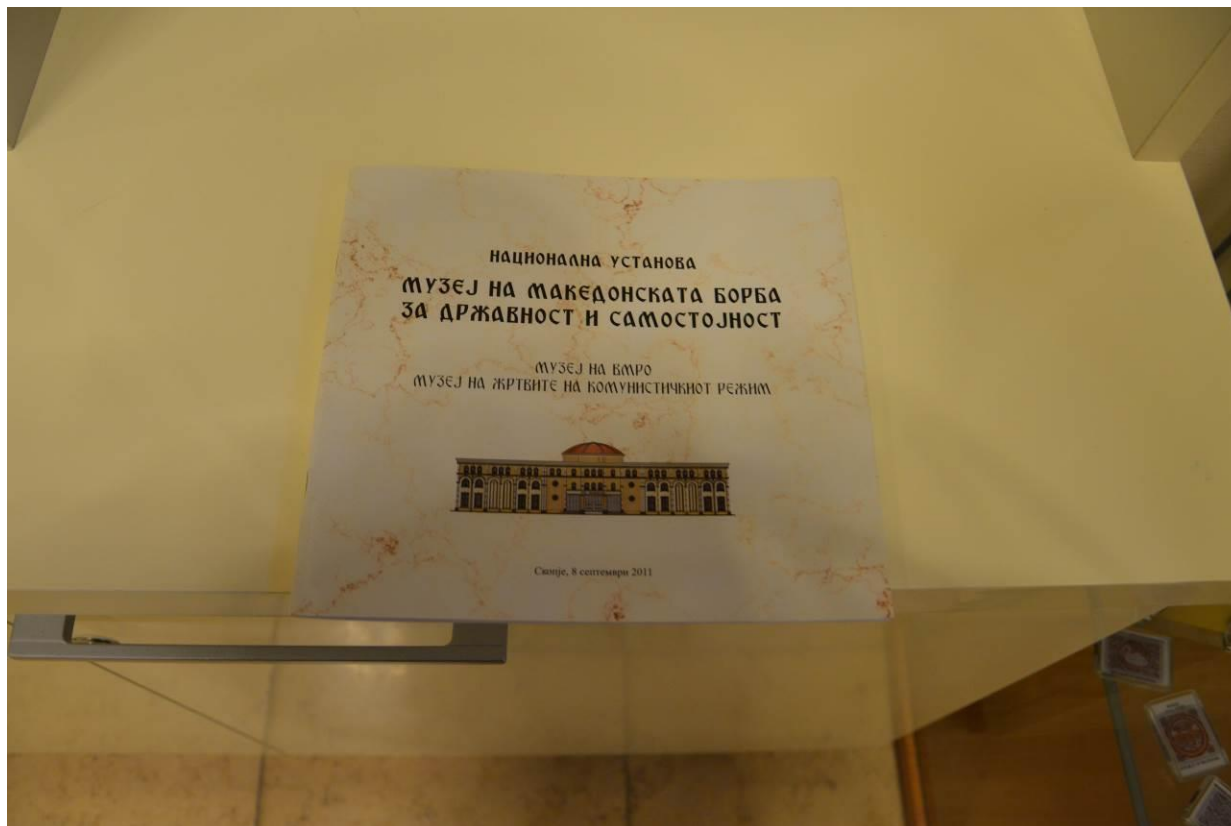


Photo 4: Brochure sold at the shop of the Museum of Macedonian Struggle, Skopje, December 2013



Photo 5: Section from the brochure titled: “Victims of the Communist regime”, Skopje, December 2013



Photo 6: Entrance to the Museum of Macedonia, Skopje, December 2013



Photo 7: Collection of Orthodox Icons, Museum of Macedonia, Skopje, December 2013



Photo 8: Inside view, Museum of Macedonia, Skopje, December 2013



Photo 9: Inside view, Museum of Macedonia, Skopje, December 2013

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