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NADÈGE RAGARU

## The Political Uses and Social Lives of “National Heroes”: Controversies over *Skanderbeg’s* Statue in Skopje

**Abstract.** The article analyzes the contentions over symbolic spaces and meaning in Macedonia’s capital Skopje/Shkup. At the center of the analysis stand the negotiations around the monument to Skanderbeg, unveiled in the city center in November 2006. The author contextualizes the political and social setting of the monument, highlighting both the 2001 conflict and its appeasement via the Ohrid agreement and the administrative redrawing of municipal boundaries of 2004 as the two key moments in re-establishing symbolic landscapes and meanings. As becomes obvious, the notion of a simple Albanian-Macedonian rivalry does not suffice to explain in depth the mechanisms at work. Altogether intra-Albanian competition, the reshaping of Albanian identities and solidarities across the Balkans, and Macedonian post-2001 politics have generated loyalties and differences that go well beyond ethnic conditionalities.

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The scene is November 28, 2006, the Albanian Flag Day,<sup>1</sup> at the entrance to the Old Bazaar (*Stara Čaršija / Çarshinë e vjetër*) in Skopje (alb. Shkup).<sup>2</sup> Several hundred Albanians have gathered for the unveiling of a statue dedicated to Gjergj Kastrioti Skënderbeu/Skanderbeg (1405-1468), a historical figure who for several years slowed down the advance of the Ottoman Empire into the Balkan peninsula and is perceived by Albanians as a national hero. The ceremony is attended by several Western diplomats (including an EU representative and a U.S. Ambassador), as well as by Daut Haradinaj, a brother of former Kosovo Prime Minister Ramush Haradinaj. The Macedonian government is represented by the Deputy Prime Minister for European Integration. Čair/Çair mayor Izet Mexhiti

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<sup>1</sup> Flag Day, which marks the anniversary of Albania’s declaration of independence from the Ottoman Empire in 1912, is celebrated in all Albanian-inhabited territories in the Balkans as well as in the Albanian diasporas in America and in Europe.

<sup>2</sup> *Stara Čaršija/Çarshinë e vjetër*, also known as *Turška Čaršija* (the Turkish bazaar), is located in the ethnically heterogeneous neighborhood of Čair/Çair.

(*Demokratska unija za integracija*, DUI / *Bashkimi Demokratik për Integrim*, BDI)<sup>3</sup> clears his throat and gives the floor to Ali Ahmeti, a former guerrilla leader who has become one of Macedonia's most prominent Albanian politicians, with these words: "Commander, I have fulfilled my pledge to you to bring Skanderbeg to this place. Welcome, lead Albanians from Skopje and from all of Macedonia."<sup>4</sup>

The seven-meter high bronze statue is wrapped in a huge red Albanian flag bearing the black two-headed eagle. As the flag is slowly removed, an imposing equestrian representation emerges. The crowd cheers. Some gun shots can be heard. Pictured sitting upright upon his horse, his sword in his sheath and his right hand raised, Skanderbeg seems to be gazing at a far away point in the distance. Any passer-by who meets his deep gaze is tempted to turn around to see what the bronze bust is staring at: Several kilometres away, at the top of a hill stands a gigantic orthodox cross silhouetted against the sky. The 66 meters high New Millennium Cross as it is known was erected on Mount Vodno, a mostly Macedonian-inhabited district, in 2002 on the initiative of the Macedonian Orthodox Church and with the support of the then Prime Minister, Ljubčo Georgievski (*Vnatrešna makedonska revolucionerna organizacija – Demokratska partija za makedonsko nacionalno edinstvo*, VMRO-DPMNE).<sup>5</sup> Day after day, night after night (the cross is floodlit in the evenings), every Skopje inhabitant sees and feels its presence when he or she strolls downtown. The monument has caused much resentment among the local Albanians and the other Muslim communities who comprise over a fifth of the capital's inhabitants and perceive it as a political proclamation by ethnic Macedonians that Skopje is exclusively "theirs".

All the ingredients of a successful exercise in symbolic politics seem to be interlocked here. These include attempts at marking one's national territory through engraving a material presence in it; confrontation between divergent readings of history, and a cycle of provocations and counterprovocations in which adversaries retaliate in kind. To grasp the intensity of this symbolic contention, one needs to bear in mind that a few years ago an armed conflict opposed some Albanian rebels to Macedonian security forces.<sup>6</sup> The conflict

<sup>3</sup> Democratic Union for Integration.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Laura PAPANIKU, *Simboli i rezistencës në mesin e Dardanisë* [The Symbol of Resistance in the heart of Dardania], *Lajm*, no. 485, 29 November 2006, 2-3.

<sup>5</sup> Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization – Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity.

<sup>6</sup> On the 2001 conflict, see Kristina BALALOVSKA / Alessandro SILJ / Mario ZUCCONI, *Minority Politics in South East Europe. Crisis in Macedonia*. Rome 2002 (Ethnobarometer Working Paper Series, 6); Ingrid VIK, *Conflicting Perceptions. A Study of Prevailing Interpretations of the Conflict in Macedonia Among Albanian and Macedonian Communities*. Oslo 2003 (Norwegian Helsinki Committee Report, 1). On post-2001 developments, see Nadège RAGARU, *Macedonia Between Brussels and Ohrid*, in: Judy BATT (ed.), *Is There an Albanian Question?* Paris January 2008 (Chaillot Papers, 107), 41-60, available at <<http://www.iss.europa.eu/uploads/media/cp107.pdf>>, accessed on July 10, 2009.

never escalated into a full blown civil war, but it has left powerful and divisive memories amongst the Macedonian majority, the Albanian minority, as well as Macedonia's smaller minorities (Turks, Serbs, Roma, etc.). The Ohrid Framework Agreement mediated by the international community put an end to the violence on August 13, 2001 while giving a major impulse to reforms aimed at redressing the power and symbolic imbalance between the Macedonian majority and the Albanian minority. Since then, peace and a form of "functional coexistence"<sup>7</sup> have returned to the country. Yet while most Albanians have welcomed the recent institutional and political transformations, many Macedonians resent the "privileges" Albanians have obtained through the war and fear they might one day ask for more.

Against this background, the story of Skanderbeg's arrival in Skopje might be perceived as a straightforward story of interethnic competition. However, I shall argue that the political uses to which the monument was put, as well as its public reception need to be grasped as the intersection of several stakes (not all of them ethnic), as different processes of identity reshaping (both across and within "ethnic" groups) and as a plurality of territorial scales (local, national and regional). More specifically, analyzing debates on Skanderbeg may help us to understand how the majority and minorities have attempted to renegotiate their relations after the war. During the controversy, political actors tested how far they could go and tried to make the best possible use of the new Ohrid political and institutional rules. Thereby they also established some shared understandings of the daily workings of ethnicity in post-conflict Macedonia and set the stage for renewed patterns of interaction across (as well as within) ethnonational groups. They mobilized a variety of solidarities and cleavages that were intra-ethnic, cross-ethnic and, for some of them, non-ethnic. In other words, Skanderbeg's case offers a lens through which one can study how politics work in today's Macedonia. And there is more than ethnic "outbidding", ethnic confrontation or even ethnicity.

Second, the initiative does not find its meanings in the Macedonian / Albanian relation only. It also contributed to the reshaping of the symbolic ties among the various Albanian communities in Macedonia proper, as well as between Macedonian Albanians and their fellow nationals in Albania and in Kosovo. Within the country, the project was part and parcel of intra-Albanian political competition, which had itself been deeply transformed as political, economic and social hierarchies were redefined during and after the war. Through the new statue, several Albanian political entrepreneurs tried to assert who could

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<sup>7</sup> On this notion, see Cécile JOUHANNEAU, *Everyday Voicing and Silencing of Ethnicity in a Multiethnic Laboratory: The Case of Brčko District, Bosnia and Herzegovina*. Unpublished Paper, Contribution to the conference on "Cities and Ethnic (non-)violence", Paris, CERI, September 23, 2008, 11.

best defend the rights of the Albanians and claim legitimacy for the positive changes in Albanian daily life following the 2001 conflict. At a regional level, Skanderbeg's bust also entered into a symbolic regional dialogue with existing monuments built in Tirana (Albania, 1968) and in Prishtina/Priština (Kosovo, 2001). While symbolizing the ties between ethnic Albanians who live in Albania, Kosovo and Macedonia, the arrival of Skanderbeg in Skopje also marked an effort to emphasize the particular contribution of Macedonia's Albanians to centuries of Albanian history.

Finally, elite-initiated symbolic undertakings often escape the original roles their promoters assign them. Everyday discussions and use of public space reveal how average people attempt to deal with the reshaping of public spaces and public life in divided societies. In this case study, ethnic Macedonians, Albanians, Turks and other people in Macedonia have devised strategies since 2006 to trivialize or to celebrate, to dismiss or to appropriate the new Skanderbeg statue. To conclude, we shall briefly return to *Stara Čaršija*, and describe the ways in which the statue has become rooted in the neighborhood. This return to the Old Bazaar will provide a welcome reminder that "dead bodies" do not only live "political lives"<sup>8</sup>; they also have social lives of their own.

### **Symbolic Contention after Ohrid: The Territorial Engraving of Ethnicity and Belonging**

#### *Why Then? The 600th Anniversary of Skanderbeg's Birth and the Post-2001 Flurry of Memorial Initiatives*

The launching of the initiative on November 28, 2005 coincided with Skanderbeg's 600<sup>th</sup> birthday. The son of a nobleman born in Krujë (today's Northern Albania), Gjergj Kastrioti had converted to Islam and enrolled in the Ottoman army where his military prowess earned him the title of "Iskender-Beg" (Lord Alexander). In 1443, Skanderbeg rebelled against Ottoman authority, converted back to Christianity and led an armed struggle against the Empire that was to continue for over a quarter of a century. He temporarily ruled over some parts of Albania until he died in 1468.<sup>9</sup> As Oliver Jens Schmitt has justly pointed out,

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<sup>8</sup> The expression is borrowed from Katherine VERDERY, *The Political Lives of Dead Bodies. Reburial and Postsocialist Change*. New York 1999.

<sup>9</sup> On the historiography about Skanderbeg, see Oliver Jens SCHMITT, *Skänderbeu*. Tirana 2008; IDEM, *Skanderbeg reitet wieder. Wiederfindung und Erfindung eines Nationalhelden*, in: Ulf BRUNNBAUER / Andreas HELMEDACH / Stefan TROEBST (eds.), *Schnittstellen. Gesellschaft, Nation, Konflikt und Erinnerung in Südosteuropa. Festschrift für Holm Sundhaussen zum 65. Geburtstag*. München 2007, 401-419; Nathalie CLAYER, *Aux origines du nationalisme albanais. La naissance d'une nation majoritairement musulmane en Europe*. Paris 2007, esp. 178-181.

no individual in the Balkans has achieved fame equal to that of Skanderbeg in Albanian historiographies (in Albania proper, but also in Kosovo and in the Albanian-inhabited lands of Macedonia).<sup>10</sup> His symbolic prominence grew at the time of the Albanian national struggles in the late 19th century. Progressively transformed into an Albanian national hero, Skanderbeg has since then been promoted by successive Albanian rulers and celebrated in popular oral history. Skanderbeg's deeds have been – alternatively or simultaneously – praised as embodying the fight for freedom against imperial rule, Albanian ethnonational pride, the wisdom of an early Albanian monarch, possible harmony beyond ethnic divisions in the Balkans, or as a major (Balkan) contribution to European history – while earlier references to Skanderbeg as a symbol of Christian resistance to the Ottoman (Muslim) invasion of Europe have been progressively downplayed.

In 2005, the 600<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Skanderbeg's birth was widely celebrated throughout the Balkans, most notably in Albania, in Kosovo and in Macedonia. In Skopje, the Institute for National History of the Macedonian Academy of Sciences and Arts organized a conference on Skanderbeg that resulted in a collective volume with a foreword by the Minister of Education, Aziz Pollozhani (DUI/BDI), which stressed Skanderbeg's all-Balkan and all-Macedonian stature.<sup>11</sup> Interestingly, since the early 2000s, beyond academic circles ethnic Macedonians seem to have taken a growing interest in Skanderbeg and, more precisely, in his "ethnic" origins.<sup>12</sup> In February 2007, Dragi Mihajlovski, a philosopher by training and a well-known translator, received the Macedonian Writers' Association award for a novel, published in 2006, in which he told stories about how thirteen ordinary people related to Skanderbeg.<sup>13</sup> In a 1200-pages volume, essayist Petar Popovski even contended he had found historical evidence of

<sup>10</sup> Oliver Jens SCHMITT, *Geschichtsmythen im albanisch-sprachigen Westbalkan: Gebrochene Erinnerung und Neuschaffung von Traditionen am Beispiel des albanischen Nationalhelden Skanderbeg*, in: Emil BRIX / Arnold SUPPAN / Elisabeth VYSLONZIL (eds.), *Südosteuropa. Traditionen als Macht*. Wien 2006, 165-176, esp.166.

<sup>11</sup> See Institut za nacionalna istorija, *Gjergj Kastrioti Skenderbeg (1405-1468). Materijali ot naučniot sobir po povod 600 godini ot negovoto ragjanje [Gjergj Kastrioti Skenderbeg (1405-1468). Materials from the academic meeting on the occasion of the 600<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of his birth]*. Skopje 2006. Among recent publications devoted to Skanderbeg in Macedonia see also the Albanian historian Muzafer BİSLİMİ, *Borbite na Skenderbeg so Osmanliite [The fights of Skanderbeg against the Ottomans]*. Skopje 2001.

<sup>12</sup> Interview with Todor Čepreganov, Institute for National History, Skopje, April 27, 2008. Dragi Mihajlovski himself has declared he developed an interest in Skanderbeg at the time of the 2001 conflict when some Albanian rebels were said to have named one of their military units after Skanderbeg. See Robert ALAGJOZOVSKI, *Our Skanderbeg*, *Transition Online*, May 9, 2007.

<sup>13</sup> See Dragi MAHAJLOVSKI, *Mojot Skenderbej [My Skanderbeg]*. Skopje 2006. His statement at the award ceremony appeared in *Kniževni nagradi ot Društvo na pisatelite*. Romanot na Dragi Mihajlovski nagrađen so 'Stale Popov' [The Book Award of the Writers's Union. Dragi Mihajlovski's novel wins the 'Stale Popov' award], *Dnevnik*, February 1, 2007.

Skanderbeg's Macedonian ethnonational roots and expressed his disapproval of Macedonian authorities for failing to include Skanderbeg in the Macedonian national genealogy.<sup>14</sup> Although most Macedonian academics dismiss the claim as contrary to historical evidence (one of the goals of the MANU conference was precisely to refute these theses),<sup>15</sup> the lively discussions in internet chat rooms on the issue suggest that Skanderbeg might be increasingly incorporated into Macedonian (but also Serbian) national narratives.<sup>16</sup> For some time, at the end of 2006 a rumor was even circulating that Prilep local authorities might consider erecting their own monument to the "Macedonian *junak*".

This – and other episodes – have taken place against a backdrop of intensified symbolic competition between Macedonians and Albanians. In 1991 the establishment of an independent Macedonian state opened a period of largescale myth-making, street renaming, monument building intended by their Macedonian promoters to break with the former socialist era and to celebrate Macedonia's statehood. At that time, though, the Macedonian elites understood this state-building process as a Macedonian nation state building.<sup>17</sup> Most of the symbols chosen for the new Republic – be it the Virginia star adopted on the Macedonian flag or the national anthem (*Dnes nad Makedonija se radja novo sonce ...*) – found little resonance in Albanian perceptions of history and identity. Most Albanians felt excluded from the Macedonian political project.

The post-2001 environment has significantly altered this configuration. To begin with, several provisions outlined in the Ohrid Framework Agreement have promoted better recognition for the Albanians as a constitutive people

<sup>14</sup> See Petar Popovski, Georgija Kastriot – Iskender. Kral na Epir i Makedonija i vtor Aleksandar Makedonski [Georgija Kastriot-Iskender. King of Epir and Macedonia, and Second Alexander the Great]. Skopje 2006. The Macedonian daily *Vreme* has devoted a series of articles to Popovski's theses. See Georgija Kastriot Iskender, *Vreme*, 674, 23 March, 2006; 675, 29 March 2006; 677, 31 March 2006; 678, 01 April 2006. The book has been much debated on Albanian internet fora. See for instance at <<http://www.forumishqiptar.com/showthread.php?t=54797>>, accessed April 24, 2009.

<sup>15</sup> Interview with Todor Čepreganov (above fn. 12).

<sup>16</sup> See <<http://forums2.vmaedonia.com/14801.html>>; <<http://p100.ezboard.com/fbalkansfrm97.showMessageRange?topicID=699.topic&start=1&stop=20>>; <<http://www.makedonija.com/dforum/DCForumID28/1910.html#>>; <<http://forum.kajgana.com/showthread.php?p=1142439>> and Albanian responses at: <<http://www.forumishqiptar.com/showthread.php?t=54797>>, all accessed on April 17, 2009.

<sup>17</sup> The Preamble of the 1991 Constitution presented the new state as that of the "Macedonian people" and the other "nationalities". The new post-Ohrid formulation reads as follows: "the citizens of the Republic of Macedonia, the Macedonian people, as well as citizens living within its borders who are part of the Albanian people, the Turkish people, the Vlach people, the Romany people, the Bosniak people and others" (Amendment IV). See Amendments to the Constitution of the Republic of Macedonia, available at <<http://www.sobranie.mk/en/default.asp?vidi=ustav#20>>, accessed on April 22, 2009.



of Macedonia<sup>18</sup> (through an amendment to the Preamble of the constitution), as well as for minority languages. A 20 % threshold at the state and municipal levels was introduced above which the language spoken by local minorities is recognized as a second official language (beside Macedonian) and ethnic communities are allowed to wave their own flag. In addition, any decision that touches upon the rights of the minorities is now adopted with the so-called Badinter majority, namely a majority of the deputies (in Parliament) or the municipal counselors (at the local level) plus a majority of those elected officials who represent minorities. Last but not least, based upon the Ohrid Framework agreement, the boundaries of the municipalities were redrawn in 2004 (bringing the total number of municipalities down from 123 to 84 plus Skopje) and new prerogatives were delegated to local authorities.<sup>19</sup> The legal and institutional changes created the feeling amongst Albanians that they were now able to inscribe in Macedonia's landscapes their own reading of its history.

Competitive efforts to shape the nascent memory of the war also played a prominent role in the flourishing of memorial initiatives in settlements with a significant Albanian population (for example, in Struga, Kumanovo, Aračinovo/Haračina and Ljuboten/Luboteni) – some consecrating Albanian historical figures, others fallen soldiers from the 2001 war. Several such initiatives have stirred up much debate among ethnic Macedonians, especially in municipalities where the recent border redrawing has given Albanians a local majority (as in Struga). Meanwhile, ethnic Macedonians also took an active part in the commemoration of war victims, especially after a new VMRO-DPMNE government headed by Nikola Gruevski was formed in August 2006.<sup>20</sup> All these policies highlight the persistence of divergent readings of the 2001 conflict, of its causes and its implications in the post-war era.

### *A Statue in Skopje? Symbolic Competition Between Albanians and Macedonians in Macedonia's Capital*

That the monument should be located in Skopje could have come as a surprise. The choice of Macedonia's capital needs to be viewed against a twin background. First, although there was no violence in Skopje in 2001 (the Albanian guerrilla advanced up to Aračinovo / Haračina, a suburb of Skopje where it was

<sup>18</sup> The text of the Framework Agreement is available in English at <[http://faq.macedonia.org/politics/framework\\_agreement.pdf](http://faq.macedonia.org/politics/framework_agreement.pdf)>, accessed on April 22, 2009.

<sup>19</sup> For further developments, see Nadège RAGARU, *Maillage communal, frontières et nation. Les imaginaires, enjeux et pratiques de la décentralisation en Macédoine*, *Revue d'études comparatives Est-Ouest*, 36 (2005), n. 3, 163-204.

<sup>20</sup> In April 2007, Prime Minister Gruevski inaugurated houses built in Bitola for the wives of four members of the Interior Ministry's special forces who had lost their lives near Vejce (Tetovo district) during the war. A monument for the victims was erected in Bitola in March 2006.



“exfiltered” with U.S. support, but did not reach the capital city), the city has developed into a major site of Albanian / Macedonian competition following the signing of the Framework Agreement. Before the redrawing of municipal boundaries in 2004, Skopje contained 467,257 inhabitants: 71.22 % Macedonians, 15.30 % Albanians, 4.97 % Roma, 3.05 % Serbs, 1.83 % Turks, 1.38 % Bošniaks, 0.54 Vlachs and 1.71 % others.<sup>21</sup> Of particular importance to Albanians was that their symbolic presence would be recognized in Skopje and that the capital officially would become bilingual. Macedonians were all the more reluctant to accept such a change as they tend to perceive Skopje Albanians as mostly *novodojdeni* (newcomers), having come either from Kosovo or from the northern villages of Macedonia in successive waves (after 1963,<sup>22</sup> but also in the 1980s when the political situation started deteriorating in Kosovo, and even more so in the 1990s). Macedonians also worried about the demographic strength of Albanians.<sup>23</sup> After much heavy-handed negotiations, the SDSM yielded to its Albanian coalition partner’s demand that two mostly Albanian-inhabited rural municipalities (Kondovo and Saraj) be added to Skopje so that the percentage of Albanians exceed the 20 % threshold.<sup>24</sup> This change (which brought the total population of the city to 506,926 – 20.49 % of whom Albanians) was welcomed as a major victory by Albanians. The Macedonians were left with the impression that not only were Albanians becoming increasingly visible in the city, but the capital itself was getting more and more segmented along ethnic lines.

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<sup>21</sup> See Republika Makedonija, Državen zavod za statistika, *Popis na naselenieto, domakinstvata i stanovite vo Republika Makedonija, 2002 godina – definitivni podatoci* [Census of Population, Households and Dwellings in the Republic of Macedonia, 2002 – Final data]. Skopje December 1, 2003, 22 and 25.

<sup>22</sup> Several times in its history the city experienced massive disruptions and catastrophes, including earthquakes. Under the Ottoman Empire the city developed as a trade and commercial center, but was burned down in 1689 by an Austrian general; it did not recover until the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. With the creation of the Macedonian Republic in socialist Yugoslavia and intensive industrialization, the city expanded rapidly. In 1963, though, a dramatic earthquake left over a thousand dead, over a 100,000 people displaced and over 80 % of the city damaged. It was reconstructed from scratch in the typical socialist architectural style of the time. A significant number of Albanians participated in this reconstruction project. Some were on their way to Turkey at the time, for the Yugoslav regime had after 1953 encouraged Albanians and other Muslims to declare themselves as Turks and to immigrate to Turkey. Some stayed in Macedonia when they realized there was a shortage of manpower to rebuild Skopje.

<sup>23</sup> On mutual stereotypes and the concrete negotiations of ethnicity in Čair, see Vassiliki Neofotistos, *Beyond Stereotypes: Violence and the Porousness of Ethnic Boundaries in the Republic of Macedonia*, *History and Anthropology*, 15 (March 2004), n. 1, 47-67. The author brings attention to the discrepancy between ethnic stereotypes and the actual social practices through which differences are managed at the local level (with other normative and symbolic categories coming into play).

<sup>24</sup> In January 2007, the widely watched Macedonian TV channel A 1 circulated the news that the Čair mayor, Izet Mexhiti, had asked that 20 % of Skopje’s street names bear the names of Albanian heroes and historical figures.

Skopje is indeed spread over both sides of the Vardar river. Although the neighborhoods that lie northeast of the river (Butel, Čair/Çair, Gazi Baba, Suto Orizari) have mixed populations including representatives of the Turkish and Roma minorities, they tend to be associated with the Albanians. The southwest districts, by contrast, have a Slavic majority (Aerodrom, Centar, Gjorče Petrov, Karpoš, Kisela Voda).<sup>25</sup> The architectural contrast between the right bank of the Vardar (where most of the pre-1963 urban design was destroyed at the time of the earthquake and rebuilt in typical socialist modernist style) and the left bank (with its Old Bazaar area whose well preserved small craftsmen shops and cobblestone streets have become a tourist destination for foreigners) is also striking. The Old Stone Bridge (*kameniot most*) that dates back to Ottoman times and crosses over the Vardar River had linked the two segments of the city – the “Ottoman” vs. the “modern”, the “historic” vs. the “socialist”, the “Albanian” vs. the “Macedonian”. Lately, though, it has been understood by majority and minority inhabitants alike as symbolizing the divide between the two halves of the capital.

This representational remapping of the city started prior to the 2001 conflict, but seems to have accelerated since. In the aftermath of the war, for several months Macedonians were reluctant to wander through Čaršija – an area associated with Albanians, “theft” and “dirt” -, and when going to Bit Pazar’s renowned market, north of Čaršija, they rather walked along boulevard Mirkov, farther East. Some people who used to live in the historically mixed area of Čair/Çair may have moved either to Butel (further North) or to the Southern part of the city (where new Macedonian residential areas have sprung up and public infrastructure is readily available).<sup>26</sup> As if to further claim “ownership” over the right bank of the Vardar, in 2004 a new metal plaque was sealed in the ground of *Plošad Makedonja*, the large socialist-looking square situated near the Old Stone Bridge. Under these circumstances, the decision to build the statue a few dozen meters away from the Vardar River and at one of the entrances to the Old Skopje Bazaar was bound to be understood as an attempt at signifying the slow “Albanization” of the neighborhood. This reading of the monument was all the more tempting because the 2004 redrawing of municipal boundaries has affected the Čair/Çair municipality too. The Albanians, which used to be in a plurality with other ethnocultural groups, then achieved an ethnic majority.

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<sup>25</sup> If one excludes the new Saraj municipality, southwest of the Macedonian-inhabited neighborhoods.

<sup>26</sup> It is extremely difficult to find accurate data regarding changes in ownership patterns. The remarks here are based on interviews conducted with Čair and Skopje inhabitants in April 2007 and April 2008. They should be taken with caution as they may reflect social representations more than actual practices.

*Local Majorities and the Remapping of Čair/Çair: Re-reading Space and History After the Redrawing of Municipal Boundaries*

Intercommunity relations have traditionally been fairly good in Čair/Çair.<sup>27</sup> Before the 2004 territorial-administrative reform, Macedonians were in a relative majority there (48.60 %) while Albanians made up 38.89 % of the inhabitants, followed by Turks (4.12 %), Bošniaks (3.40 %), Roma (1.46 %) and Serbs (2.11 %). In 2004, Čair municipality was divided into a new municipality of Čair (where Albanians comprise 57.01 % of the population) and a new municipality of Butel where Macedonians are the predominant population.<sup>28</sup>

Table 1: Čair/Çair's Population in the Pre-2004 (2002 Census) and Post-2004 Territorial Division

Total	Macedonians	Albanians	Turks	Roma	Vlahs	Serbs	Bosniaks	Others
Čair/Çair in 2002	48,60	38,89	4,12	1,46	0,25	2,11	3,4	1,63
Čair/Çair after 2004	24,12	57,01	6,94	4,75	0,12	0,95	4,55	1,53

Source: Results from the 2002 census (above fn. 21).

Since 1991, politics in Macedonia have been ethnically divided: Albanians vote for Albanian parties, while Macedonians vote for Macedonian parties, and elections often seem to resemble ethnic censuses. In this context, all communities in Macedonia believe that a change in the "ethnic" coloration of a given unit of government entails a change in the ethnic background of the mayor and that the latter is fated to apply community preferences. In his July 16, 2004 speech, the then President Branko Crvenkovski had rightly spelled out Macedonian dilemmas:

*According to me, the decisive question behind these arguments and alibi is the following: Do we trust each other? [...] If Macedonians do not want to live in a municipality where Albanians are in a majority, how are we going to convince Albanians to live in a country where Macedonians are a majority? If Macedonians and Albanians cannot live together in a municipality, they cannot live together in a state.<sup>29</sup>*

As a fact, in March 2005, for the first time since the creation of an independent Macedonian state, Izet Mexhiti, the local candidate of the Democratic Union for Integration (DUI), who won the vote in all but two Albanian municipalities, was

<sup>27</sup> See NEOFOTISTOS, *Beyond Stereotypes* (above fn. 23).

<sup>28</sup> In economic terms, Čair has lost in this trade off, since the former industrial zone that used to provide most of Old Čair's budget has been adjoined to the new Butel municipality.

<sup>29</sup> See the president's intervention at <<http://www.president.gov.mk/info.asp?SectionID=4&InfoID=181#top>>, accessed September 12, 2007.

elected mayor of Čair/Çair. In the municipal council, DUI and the Social Democrats (*Socijaldemokratski sojuz na Makedonija*, SDSM) formed a coalition. Representatives of the Democratic Party of Albanians (*Partia Demokratike Shqiptare*, PDSH / *Demokratska Partija na Albancite*, DPA) and its Party for Democratic Prosperity (*Partia për Prosperitet Demokratik*, PPD / *Partija za Demokratski Prosperitet*, PDP) coalition partner, of the VMRO-*narodna* (a splinter party from the VMRO-DPMNE) and of the United Coalition sat in the opposition. Shortly thereafter, on August 11, 2006 a new coat of arms and flag were adopted by the city council against the wishes of the eight ethnic Macedonian counselors who voted against the proposal. The design of the new coat of arm and flag bears the image of Skanderbeg with the Old Bazaar and Saat Kula mosque at the background. By having the ethnic Albanian counselors outvote their ethnic Macedonian colleagues, the Badinter's double majority principle was violated. In doing so, the new mayor sowed fears that Albanians might respect minority rights no more than ethnic Macedonians when in a majority.

The building of a monument for Skanderbeg raised similar issues concerning respect for minority rights and the political uses of in-group feelings. Let us now consider this controversy in greater detail. Three levels of analysis will be taken into account – the Albanian / Macedonian relation, intra-Albanian political struggles, and regional Albanian dynamics.

### **The Symbolic Scales of a Memorial Initiative: Beyond Albanian-Macedonian Rivalries, the Multiple Threads that Bind and Divide**

#### *Testing and Building a New Relationship After Ohrid*

From its inception, the Skanderbeg project was intensely disputed in the public sphere. Interestingly enough, the arguments used by the Macedonian officials who opposed the project were primarily formulated in legal and / or procedural terms.<sup>30</sup> This absence of ethnonational categories stood in stark contrast to

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<sup>30</sup> The exchange of views between Albanian columnist Daut Dauti and Kole Manev, an architect and member of the Skopje City Council (*Demokratska Alternativa*, DA; Democratic Alternative) is telling. Dauti wrote a paper in which he stated that Albanians might accept inscribing Skanderbeg's name on the future statue in three languages in case ethnic Macedonians did the same with Mother Tereza's monument in Skopje. While dismissing the idea of a trade-off as indecent, Kole Manev recalled that there was no law regarding the existence of two official languages in Skopje at the time when Mother Tereza's plaque was laid (1997). Hence no parallel between the two situations could be drawn. See Daut DAUTI, 'Go davame' Skender-beg za Majka Tereza [We will give Skender-beg for Mother Tereza], *Dnevnik*, January 13, 2007; Kole MANEV, Reagiranje. Nepristojni 'trampi' [Reaction. Indecent 'Trades-off'], *Dnevnik*, January 27, 2007.

columnists' newspaper articles and private conversations where Skanderbeg's issue was explicitly posited as a locus of ethnonational competition.<sup>31</sup> The three major bones of contention concerned the location of the statue, its size and the decision-making process. Several actors took part in the controversy: the Čair municipality (the mayor, Izet Mexhiti, the Sector for legal matters, the *glaven arhitekt*), the Skopje municipality (the mayor, Trifun Kostovski, the city council and the Department for the Protection of Cultural Heritage in the City of Skopje<sup>32</sup>), the State Cultural Heritage Protection Office<sup>33</sup> (a new legal agency within the Ministry of Culture) as well as other government officials, and party leaders.

Let us briefly sketch the main developments.<sup>34</sup> On November 22, 2005, the Čair mayor announced that a decision regarding the building of a statue dedicated to Skanderbeg at the entrance of Stara Čaršija had been approved by the municipality council.<sup>35</sup> Ten days later, on December 2, the State Cultural Heritage Protection Office director, Jovan Ristov, denied such a possibility arguing that the chosen location belonged to a historical protected site. In such cases decisions regarding the erection of a monument are to be approved by the ministry of Culture. On February 17, 2006, the Skopje City Council urged the Čair municipality to bring the construction to a halt. The Skopje mayor's spokesperson, Maja Muhić, declared that the monument might be considered illegal (*divogražba*). Izet Mehiti replied that his initiative was in keeping with a

<sup>31</sup> See, for instance, Petar ČULEV, Skender-beg ke go nadviši Aleksandar Makedonski [Skender-beg will be higher than Aleksandar the Great], *Dnevnik*, November 16, 2006. Skenderbeg's statue is compared to a list of Macedonian monuments – that of Aleksandar Makedonski in Prilep, Gotse Delčev in *Gradskiot park*, the Saints Cyril and Method in front of Skopje University. See also Milan BANOV, Spomenici i simboliki. Gjergj Kastrioti na konj [Monuments and symbols. Gjergj Kastrioti on a horse], *Dnevnik*, December 2, 2006, who is even more explicit: "On a horse (I believe this is the only one in Macedonia), with his powerful sword and his look towards the Old Stone Bridge ... on his way to conquer it. In the name of DUI and all the Albanian radicals whose intentions are already clearly expressed, even without symbols."

<sup>32</sup> *Zavodot za zaštita na spomenicite na kulturata na grad Skopje*.

<sup>33</sup> *Uprava za zaštita na kulturno nasledstvo*.

<sup>34</sup> The author wishes to thank Bernard Segarra and Isak Vrenezi (both with OSCE) for their help in the establishment of this chronology of events.

<sup>35</sup> The program for marking significant events and personalities with monuments / memorials was officially adopted by Čair's municipal council on December 28, 2005, and signed by Musa Zuka, chairman of the Council of Čair municipality on December 30, 2005 (N°. 07-1895/7). The document refers to art. 17, par. 1 of the Law for Memorials and Monuments (O. G. na R. M., N° 66/04). The Program emphasizes the "multiethnic" character of the municipality; Skanderbeg is the only personality mentioned in the list of "significant events and personalities" to be honored. The exact location, the engraving on the base of the monument as well as the deadline for the construction are not provided. On the same day, a Decree for unveiling, keeping, maintaining, protecting and using the monument of Skanderbeg (N°. 07-1897/7, December 30, 2005) was adopted that specified the location (on the end of Bitparzarska street, art. 2) and the size of the sculpture (7 meters high and 13 meters wide, art. 3), and determined that the sculptor would be chosen by an *ad hoc* commission (art. 5).

decision reached by the Skopje City Council on November 20, 2004 establishing a list of historical figures who might be honored in Skopje.<sup>36</sup> While the construction was proceeding, in June 2006 the Skopje Department for the Protection of Cultural Heritage claimed that the project should be postponed until the exact boundaries of Stara Čaršija were drawn and a Law on its protection adopted. A few weeks before the unveiling ceremony, Čair mayor brought up a new legal argument. Skanderbeg's monument belonged to categories 3, 4, and 5 as defined by the Law on monuments and memorials (adopted in 2004)<sup>37</sup> and, as such, Čair municipality was solely responsible for issuing a construction permit. At the very last minute, two decisions brought an end to the deadlock. On November 23, the Skopje City Council legalized the monument thanks to the votes of DUI, DPA (DUI's Albanian competitor) and – more surprisingly perhaps – the right-wing nationalist VMRO-DPMNE.<sup>38</sup> Three days later, a similar resolution was passed in Čair. This time, DUI was supported by the Social Democrats, whereas a majority of the DPA counselors (5 out of 7) failed to attend the vote.<sup>39</sup> This is quite a surprising voting pattern if one believes in the automaticity of ethnic solidarities and the irreducible depth of inter-ethnic rivalry.

In fact, the monument initiative was launched at a time when Ali Ahmeti's party was a partner to the ruling Social Democrats. Following the July 2006 parliamentary elections, the winning VMRO-DPMNE chose Arben Xhaferi's DPA as its coalition partner despite the fact that DUI had won a majority of the votes amongst the Albanian electorate. The relationships between DUI and DPA plummeted to an all-time low point, whereas Ali Ahmeti and some of his

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<sup>36</sup> See Skopje City Council, Program for Marking Significant Events and Personalities with a Monument-Memorial. Skopje 30 November, 2004, N°. 09-3293/1. The Program listed the names of several personalities: Alexander the Great, Justinian, Tsar Samojl, Skander-beg, Karpoš, General Apostolski, Kzman Josifovski Pitu, Macedonian and Ohrid Archbishop Dositej and L Lazar Tanev.

<sup>37</sup> The decentralization process had a significant impact on the local management of culture. The new Law on Memorial Monuments and Plaques (O. G. n°. 66/04) adopted by application of the Badinter rule, envisages enhanced competences for units of local self-government in the area of libraries, museums and monuments among others. However, the most ambitious projects still depend on the state budget.

<sup>38</sup> During the meeting, the Council finally decided that the erection of the monument was "in accordance with the Program for Marking Significant Events and Personalities with a Monument-Memorial, published in the official gazette of the City of Skopje, n°. 12/04."

<sup>39</sup> The City Council comprises 27 counselors, ten DUI, seven DPA in coalition with PDP, one PDK, four SDSM, four VMRO-DPMNE and one VMRO-*Narodna*. Seven counselors did not take part in the vote on November 24 ("5 Albanians", "2 Macedonians"). "6 Macedonians" and "1 Bošniak" – this is the way they are presented in the Council's decision – voted in favor of the statue, which guaranteed that the Badinter rule was respected. See Këshilli i Komunës Čair, N°. 07-1225/3, prej 27.11.2006, Shkup. Procesverbal nga mbledhja e Tridhjetenjë e Këshillit të Komunës Čair Të mbajtur me 24.11.2006 në ora 16.00 [Proces verbal from the 31th Session of Čair municipal council on November 24, 2006, at 4.00 p.m.].



closest aids started brandishing the threat that violence might return to the country in case the democratic will of the people was not respected.<sup>40</sup> Against this background, the DPA leaders were extremely reluctant to help DUI bring the statue project to completion. Yet, they were also under pressure not to let down their fellow Albanians on a matter of high symbolic salience to all. For a year, DPA did little apart from denouncing DUI's attempts at appropriating Albanian national symbols for petty party objectives. When, in a sudden reversal from its previous position, the Skopje City Council confirmed the legality of the monument, DPA officials let it be known to the media that they were to be thanked for the policy shift.<sup>41</sup> A decision regarding *Skanderbeg's* statue, they claimed, had been reached a couple of weeks earlier during an interparty congress (VMRO-DPMNE / DPA) in Mavrovo. Once the coalition partners had made a deal, the electoral balance of power within the Skopje City Council was bound to change.

All in all, a very complex picture emerges. The Social Democrats voted "yes" in Čair, "no" in Skopje, and decided to send only low level representation (city counselors) to the inauguration. They explained their decision by referring to the gross political manipulation of the initiative. Yet President Crvenkovski privately came to visit the monument with Izet Mexhiti prior to the unveiling. The VMRO-DPMNE voted "no" in Čair, "yes" in Skopje, but party leader and Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski did not attend the ceremony. Officially, the reason was that Gruevski had not been invited in his capacity as a prime minister but as a simple "citizen" (DUI officials said they did not recognize the legitimacy of the government set up after the July 2006 elections). Last but not least, most DPA representatives boycotted the vote in Čair, while they said "yes" in Skopje. Meanwhile they refused to attend a ceremony they said was used by DUI to mask its lack of concrete efficiency with regard to improving Albanian minority rights.

The examination of the politics around *Skanderbeg's* monument thus brings several observations to mind. Firstly, there is little denying that since the early 1990s Macedonian politics have been structured around "ethnic blocs". At the same time, though, since 1992 – and even more so after the signing of the Framework Agreement –,<sup>42</sup> interethnic cooperation has been institutionalized. Cross-

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<sup>40</sup> For further information on the 2006 elections and their aftermath, see Nadège RAGARU / Assen SLIM, Macédoine. Fierté nationale et fragilités économiques, *Le courrier des pays de l'Est*, n. 1062 (July – August 2007), 163-175.

<sup>41</sup> See Mitko JOVANOVIĆ, Otkrien spomenik na Gjegj Kastriot. Skender-beg postroen pred komandantot Ahmeti, *Dnevnik*, November 29, 2006; Petar ČULEV, So poddržka na gradskite sovetnici od VMRO-DPMNE, trgnati site prečki pred spomenikot na Skender-beg, *Dnevnik*, November 24, 2006.

<sup>42</sup> Chiefly as a result of the new institutional rules (the Badinter double majority in particular) and of greater international monitoring.



ethnic alliances are made both at the central and the local levels. Regardless of their ethnic background, all political actors have internalized the existence of these trans-community coalitions and do not hesitate to instrumentalize them in order to weaken their adversaries within their own ethnic bloc. During the Skanderbeg controversy, the DPA / PDSH leaders found out they could rely on the VMRO-DPMNE to prevent DUI from claiming sole legitimacy for the celebration of a national hero.

Secondly, discussions on Skanderbeg have taken place at several different levels (central government, Greater Skopje, Čair municipality). At every one of these, the structure of the cleavage patterns also reflects the particular political (and interpersonal) history of the various administrative units. Čair, for instance, has been ruled by a coalition between the Democratic Union for Integration and the Social Democrats (DUI/SDSM) since March 2005. DUI's reversal of fortunes after the 2006 national vote has not put this alliance under question. In addition, locally the personal relations between the two coalition partners have been rather good. Beside the disagreement over the coat of arms, most ethnic Macedonian citizens tend to perceive Izet Mexhiti as a rather balanced political leader who has not ostensibly favored the new Albanian majority. In Skopje Trifun Kostovski was elected mayor as an independent, but thanks to the support of the VMRO-DPMNE – a fact, which most local Social Democrats perceived as a betrayal since Kostovski had long been a political companion to the SDSM. Although, as a rule, the SDSM is less nationalistic than the VMRO-DPMNE, once the latter decided to support the legalization clause, the former felt compelled to oppose a decision their Macedonian adversary had promoted.

Thirdly, the stakes around which political actors rally are more complex and diversified than a simple consideration of ethnic issues might suggest. They include the definition of power relations between institutions and political parties, on the one hand, and between center and periphery, on the other. Mayor Kostovski who publicly opposed the legalization of the monument was overruled by the city council as a result of the Mavrovo deal. He subsequently denounced the ways in which the Skopje municipal arena had been held hostage to central level interparty games. Which logic should indeed prevail – that of party or institutional allegiances? The mayor's position is all the more understandable as his influence over interparty negotiations has been limited. But, more broadly, beyond the Skanderbeg case, what was at stake in his view was his ability to exercise local power. Skopje is indeed a separate unit of self-government. Over the past decades, its status, its boundaries and its prerogatives have undergone several changes. From 1976 to 1996, Skopje had five municipalities. Later, this number increased to 7. Currently, Skopje encompasses ten municipalities (Aerodrom, Butel, Čair, Centar, Gazi Baba, Gjorče Petrov, Karpoš, Kisela Voda, Saraj, Šuto Orizari), which all have a mayor, a municipal council and the same

prerogatives as other municipalities in the country. At the time when the Skanderbeg controversy unfolded, the capital city and the smaller municipalities were engaged in a slow and protracted attempt at renegotiating their respective prerogatives within the framework of the ongoing decentralization process. Against this background, Skanderbeg provided a test case. By insisting that a decision be adopted at the level of Skopje City Hall, Mayor Kostovski was also trying to prevent other future encroachments on Skopje's municipal powers.

In the end, contrary to expectations, intra-ethnic solidarities were far from automatic. It might even be argued that during the Skanderbeg dispute, intra-Albanian political competition was the fiercest. A look at the transformations in the political landscape and the social and symbolic Albanian hierarchies fostered by the 2001 war may help to understand why.

*When Albanian Political Actors Construe the "Albanian Cause":  
Intra-Albanian Competition and Post-War Politics*

Across the Albanian communities in Macedonia, the 2001 conflict brought about several dramatic changes, first and foremost to the Albanian party landscape. After having failed to unify the Albanian political spectrum under his aegis, former guerilla leader turned politician, Ali Ahmeti, decided to set up his own political formation, the Democratic Union for Integration (DUI/BDI) in June 2002. Two months later, DUI won an overwhelming majority of the Albanian votes in the national elections. Within a couple of years, the divide between the Party for Democratic Prosperity (PDP) and Arben Xhaferi's Democratic Party of Albanians (DPA) that had structured Albanian political competition in Macedonia since 1994-1995 was replaced by a DUI-DPA cleavage.<sup>43</sup> In the March 2005 local elections, DUI won the mayor's race in all but two Albanian inhabited municipalities. Its advance on the DPA was further confirmed in the 2006 legislative vote, although it did not translate into political participation in the Gruevski government. At least in part, this success may be attributed to DUI's ability to claim legitimacy for the recent war and for the consecutive improvement in minority rights.<sup>44</sup> Although DPA – which was in government at the time of the war and had failed to take sides for the rebels early on – managed to recruit a few former UÇK (*Ushtria Çlirimtare Kombëtare*) fighters, DUI could much more convincingly claim a link to the former rebel movement. Beside Ali Ahmeti himself, DUI attracted some well-known former combatants, such as

<sup>43</sup> On Albanian party development in Macedonia, see Ulf BRUNNBAUER, *Les partis albanais en République de Macédoine: le cercle vicieux de l'ethnopolitique (1990-2006)*, *Revue d'études comparatives Est-Ouest*, 38 (December 2007), n. 4, 83-114.

<sup>44</sup> DUI's promise that it would do away with DPA's corrupt practices was also instrumental in achieving support among the Albanian voters.

Fazli Veliu, Gëzim Ostreni (whose fame dated back to the Kosovo UÇK), former deputy Hysni Saqiri and Sadulla Duraku.<sup>45</sup> In addition, at least until the summer of 2006, DUI also succeeded in presenting itself as a staunch defender of the Ohrid compromise and the sole guarantor that the Ohrid reform package would be fully implemented. Arben Xhaferi, by contrast, not only downplayed the symbolic, legal, institutional and social transformations that the Framework Agreement created, but also insisted that multiethnic states had no future – a position most Albanians from Macedonia did not identify with.

The post-war environment has not only reordered political competition in the Albanian bloc; it has also significantly heightened its stakes. Several provisions in the Ohrid deal aimed at promoting equitable representation of minorities in the state administration as well as in public enterprises.<sup>46</sup> These clauses have made new clientelistic resources (in terms of allocation of public sector jobs, budgets and public purchases) available to the political parties who participate in governing coalitions. In the more prosperous urban centers, with the transfer of new competences to the municipalities, decentralization too has increased the spoils of power. Although several variables have come into play here,<sup>47</sup> these changes might help to illuminate the intensity of intra-Albanians political rival-

<sup>45</sup> Issues concerning the status and the social rights of former combattants have also loomed large in interethnic and intra-Albanian contention since 2001. While in government, DUI failed to convince its then coalition partner, SDSM, to pass a law on pensions for war veterans. Following the July 2006 elections, the question remained on DUI's agenda (then in opposition), alongside the use of languages, the drawing of a list of laws for which approval by a Badinter majority would be requested, and the composition of the committee on interethnic issues. In late May 2007, after much international arm twisting, Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski and Ali Ahmeti signed an agreement that included the discussion of a law for the "victims of the war" (note, not the "war veterans"). Criticized by his own majority, Gruevski later denied having considered a deal on the issue.

<sup>46</sup> The implementation of the Ohrid agreement has opened up new professional opportunities for representatives of the Albanian communities. Before 2001, of particular concern was the limited presence of Albanian representatives in the police (about 3%), the army and the judiciary. By the end of July 2003, 1,065 new recruits from non-majority communities had been trained by the OSCE. In 2006, data from the Ombudsman's office suggested that Albanians accounted for 14.9% of the 12,076 employees of the Home Affairs Office (80.6% were ethnic Macedonians). As a whole, Albanian representation in the public sector increased from 11.65% in December 2002 to 17.42% in September 2007, whereas the share of Macedonians dropped from 83.27% to 77.39%. Representatives of the smaller minorities (Turks, Serbs, Roma) have mostly been left out from this process of job reallocation. For further details, see Ombudsman of the Republic of Macedonia, Annual Report. Skopje 2006, 24-25, available at <[http://www.ombudsman.mk/comp\\_includes/webdata/documents/IZV-2006-so%20procenti-ang.pdf](http://www.ombudsman.mk/comp_includes/webdata/documents/IZV-2006-so%20procenti-ang.pdf)>, accessed 10 July, 2009; Center for Research and Policy Making, Budget Watchdogs. Skopje February 2008, 10-16, available at <<http://www.crpm.org.mk/Papers/BudgetWatchdogsENG.pdf>>, accessed 10 July, 2009.

<sup>47</sup> Including interparty deals where ethnic Macedonians rely on their Albanian coalition partners to make sure that a "proper" majority will be achieved in Albanian electoral districts, regardless of the means they use.

ries as well as the process of brutalization they have undergone, evidenced by an increasing number of violent episodes during election campaigns.<sup>48</sup>

Finally, the war and its aftermath have encouraged a redefinition of the social hierarchies between the various Albanian elites – notably the ‘post-war’ elites (i. e. those Albanians who can claim a contribution to the war effort) and the ‘post-Ohrid’ elites (i. e. educated Albanians who have been promoted to high level positions rely to varying degrees on technocratic competences and party protections. The symbolic relations between the various Albanian-inhabited regions (Tetovo, but also Struga, Debar, Gostivar and Skopje) in Macedonia have also evolved, not the least through such internationally promoted measures as the opening of a South East European University in Tetovo, the legalization of the now publicly funded Tetovo university, the territorial reform and the decentralization process (the latter is bound to enhance socio-economic differences between the wealthiest Albanian urban settlements and the poorer rural municipalities).

DUI’s memorial initiative needs to be viewed in this specific political and social context. On one level, Ali Ahmeti’s association with a mythical figure such as that of Skanderbeg was instrumental in strengthening his political prestige by drawing a timeline between the Albanian struggles of the distant past and that of the present. The entire choreography of the unveiling ceremony was designed to establish a symbolic affiliation between Skanderbeg and Ali Ahmeti. Izet Mexhiti’s use of the expression “commander” rather than that of “party leader” when he gave the floor to Ali Ahmeti is telling in this respect. Like his glorious predecessor, he, Ali Ahmeti, dared to stand up for the Albanian cause.<sup>49</sup> The choice of the DUI officials who stood by Ahmeti’s side during the celebration was also deliberate. Rafiz Aliti, Gëzim Ostreni and Fazli Veliu are all associated with the former UÇK. As if to make the point even more forcefully, DUI’s leader gave a short speech in which he thanked the representatives of the international community who had come to participate in the celebration and

*on this great historical day for the Albanian people ... NATO’s former General Secretary, George Robertson, ambassadors [Lawrence] Butler, [Nicolaas] Biezman, [Robert] Serry, [Pieter] Feith, the chief of NATO’s forces in Europe, our friends Nicholas Burns,*

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<sup>48</sup> The role of clientelism in Macedonian politics has been further developed in Nadège RAGARU, *Le mode de financement des partis politiques en Macédoine*, in: Jean-Arnault DÉRENS et al., *Modes de financement des partis politiques dans les Balkans occidentaux, Étude pour la Délégation aux Affaires stratégiques*. Paris July 31, 2008, 182-229.

<sup>49</sup> As if it were not enough, the day before the unveiling of the statue, Ali Ahmeti was awarded the “Skanderbeg medal” by the Čair municipality to thank him for his role in the statue project.

*James Pardew and [Xavier] Solana, [Stefan] Lehne and all the others in Washington and Brussels.*<sup>50</sup>

The adoption of this aggressive posture might have come as a surprise on the part of a political leader who, despite his participation in the 2001 war, has often shown limited liking for a boisterous warrior attitude. Yet at the time when the Skanderbeg project was launched, Ahmeti needed to bolster his war legitimacy. DPA activists, and some DUI rank and file members as well, were becoming critical of what they perceived as Ahmeti's too lenient attitude towards the Macedonians. They deplored his persistent calls for appeasement – both in the DPA-DUI relations and in majority / minority interactions – as well as his support for compromises. Some war veterans also circulated rumors that Ali Ahmeti, having spent most of the war either in the safe premises of his mountainous headquarters at Šipkovića (near Tetovo) or in Prizren (Kosovo) where some of the peace negotiations were going on, had done little of the actual fighting during the 2001 war.<sup>51</sup> Engaging in symbolic policies designed to prop up Albanian self-esteem was a way for Ali Ahmeti to secure his authority with DUI's activists and supporters.<sup>52</sup> The Skanderbeg initiative also carried a winning card in the competition with DPA. By having the statue travel and be acclaimed in all the Albanian-inhabited cities prior to its arrival in Skopje (Debar, Gostivar, Tetovo, etc.), by standing in the middle of the capital city (where DPA has obtained its best electoral results in March 2005, winning the mayoral seats in Kondovo and in Saraj) with several hundred Albanian supporters by his side, Ali Ahmeti demonstrated his all-Albanian political stature, his acumen and his leadership. He who was born in Zajaz, a village near Kičevo, which showed that he was the Albanian leader in Skopje too.

The prowess of the warrior hero, though, was not the only feature in Skanderbeg's mythical figure and, by association, in Ali Ahmeti's political profile that was singled out. That of the unifier was of no less importance – a unifier of all Albanians in Macedonia, on the one hand, of all Macedonian citizens beyond

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<sup>50</sup> Ali Ahmeti's intervention has been partially reprinted in, Një Shkup inagurohet monumeti Gjergj Kastrioti Skenderbeu [In Skopje, the Gjergj Kastrioti Skenderbeu monument is inaugurated], November 28, 2006, available at <<http://www.shqip.dk/modules.php?name=News&file=print&sid=1957>>, accessed April 27, 2009.

<sup>51</sup> Former UÇK fighter Hysni Shaqiri is a case in point. An ex-history teacher from Otlja (a village near Lipkovo), he was a DPA deputy when the war broke out. In March 2001, he left parliament and joined the rebels in the Kumanovo area. After the war, he was elected deputy on DUI's lists, until he defected to create his own political party, New Democratic Forces (*Forcat E Reja Demokratike*, FRD), in the Summer of 2005.

<sup>52</sup> Since its formation, Ahmeti's party has been divided between a former military / more militant wing (associated with Fazli Veliu, Gëzim Ostreni and Sadulla Duraku, for instance) and some more moderate figures (Teuta Arifi, Aziz Pollozhani, and, at some point, Agron Buxhaku).

ethnicities, on the other.<sup>53</sup> In his speech, Ahmeti's first words were for the collective Macedonia's Albanian "we":

*We, Albanians from Macedonia, for the first time all together, from Struga up to Kumanovo, from Debar to Bitola, Skopje, Tetovo have all come here to celebrate together our hero from our country, the Balkans and Europe, to celebrate Gjergj Kastrioti-Skenderbeu.*<sup>54</sup>

By naming one by one all the Macedonian cities with a significant Albanian population, Ali Ahmeti was calling for unity beyond local differences and, at times, rivalries.<sup>55</sup> Simultaneously, he was drawing a symbolic mapping of Albanianness in Macedonia. Later on in his intervention, though, Ahmeti also insisted that "this November does not mark the victory of the Albanians only, but of all citizens of Macedonia".<sup>56</sup>

More generally, the Skanderbeg hero that was celebrated in public statements by DUI officials was shown to be a wise man who knew how to wage war but also when to make peace, who was able to bridge differences and who embodied European values. As vice-president of DUI, Teuta Arifi put it in a long article:

Skanderbeg is not identified only with war, he is also identified with learning, and in particular learning political lessons. In his last words just before he died, Skanderbeg recommended:

*Your kingdom, strengthen it and look after it through friendship, because the shield of a kingdom is neither wealth nor war, but the friend one makes not with weapons, not with gold, but through loyalty and good deeds.*

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<sup>53</sup> This does not preclude the existence of various symbolic registers, depending on the context. On the day before the unveiling, during the ceremony organized to welcome the statue in Skopje, there were no "internationals" around, and the national anthem played on that occasion was Albanian.

<sup>54</sup> See Në Shkup inagurohet monumenti Gjergj Kastrioti Skenderbeu (above fn. 50).

<sup>55</sup> Relations between the various Albanian communities in Macedonia are complex. Until 2004, Tetovo was the only large city with an Albanian minority. A large commercial center with a rather prosperous upper-middle class (but some poor surrounding villages), Tetovo is geographically, economically and socially close to Kosovo. Before the 2001 conflict, Albanians from Tetovo often resented the fact that Albanian politicians, once in Skopje, forgot the promises they had made when in Tetovo. Struga, a city by the Ohrid Lake that has acquired an Albanian majority as a result of the 2004 territorial-administrative reform, has been historically closer to neighboring Albania. It is also famed for its traditional Albanian bourgeoisie. Albanians from Skopje, who were proud to live in the capital city, have occasionally been perceived, in particular from Albanians who live in Tetovo, as less authentically Albanian, for they live in a mixed environment and allegedly interact more with ethnic Macedonians. These mutual social representations explain why it was so important, in the eyes of Albanians from Čair, to participate in a monumental initiative that emphasized the role of Skopje as a center of Albanianness. Finally, let us recall that there was already a small statue of Skanderbeg in Debar (Western Macedonia).

<sup>56</sup> See Në Shkup inagurohet monumenti Gjergj Kastrioti Skenderbeu (above fn. 50).



Building friendship is a *condition sine qua non* for small countries and small peoples to the extent that they wish their voice to be heard in major political relations. Thus it was one time, and thus it is now. Skanderbeg must be among us, because his personality and his deeds do not divide us, on the contrary they unite us. His fight was not only for Albanians, but also a fight for others, a fight that was supported by other Balkan peoples who shared the same aspirations to freedom. His image is praised in Albanian literature by Naum Frasheri, but also in Macedonian literature by Grigor Prličev. Skanderbeg must be among us also because of the common Balkan peoples' aspiration to Europe as the cradle of culture and civilisation at a time of confrontation between the values of the Orient and that of the West. I believe that so long as we do not realize that we need more work and more mutual understanding to be part of today's Europe, it is not bad that Skanderbeg's figure reminds us how we were appreciated and respected by Europe then. A proof of this is that several squares in European cities, as in Rome, Paris and Brussels, bear the name of Skanderbeg. Having in view how difficult it is for us to find common cultural elements in the present time, it is good to look for such common values in the past, so as to find a real, common path to the future. Not to be ashamed before our forefathers.<sup>57</sup>

The interpretation of Skanderbeg's deeds thus echoed Ali Ahmeti's political project – that of a European future for Macedonia above narrow ethnic identifications. However, the reading that was put forth also participated in the production of a national narrative that was intended to give meaning to the historical experiences of Macedonia's Albanians. It was as if Skanderbeg offered a mirror in which they were invited both to contemplate “a chosen, inspirational past”,<sup>58</sup> and to remember their own, more recent, socialist and post-socialist past. Meanwhile, Skanderbeg's sheer monumental presence in Skopje was said to bear testimony to the new freedoms and the new self-esteem Macedonia's Albanians had acquired since 2001. Here again, Teuta Arifi's article is illustrative:

Skanderbeg-Gjergj Kastrioti travelled the last portion of the road that led him home, that led him to Skopje. On a large truck, he took the Gostivar-Tetovo road, through the Polog valley, where according to historians his mother was

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<sup>57</sup> See Teuta ARIFI, Kolumna. Skender-beg vo Skopje, *Dnevnik*, November 27, 2006, available at <<http://www.dnevnik.com.mk/?itemID=489588A59438EF4C8E9242E52CC504C9&arc=1>>, accessed July 10, 2009. A similar approach was adopted by one of DUI's most influential figures, the then Minister of Education, Aziz Pollozhani, in his foreword to the collective volume on Skanderbeg. See Institut za nacionalna istorija, Gjergj Kastrioti Skenderbeg, 1405-1468 (above fn. 11).

<sup>58</sup> This expression has been coined by Anna Di Lellio and Stephanie Schwander-Sievers in their analysis of memorial policies devoted to Adem Jashari in Kosovo. See Anna Di LELLIO / Stephanie SCHWANDER-SIEVERS, The Legendary Commander: the construction of an Albanian master-narrative in post-war Kosovo, *Nations and Nationalism*, 12 (2006), n. 3, 513-529 (esp. 518).



born. The ways of God are unfathomable. Two decades ago, for a book, for a picture of him, one could be sentenced to a few years imprisonment. History teachers who, during school hours, mentioned his name were differentiated and dismissed from work, simply for a word – Skanderbeg –, while in the children's readings the poetic works were censured and his name not mentioned. For these reasons too, he was expected with great joy and deference by people who for years believed and hoped that the great name of Skanderbeg would win over the small assimilationist policies and that his image and his deeds would once more mean reconciliation, unity, wisdom, prowess and humility.<sup>59</sup>

Although in DUI's speeches, this Macedonian-Albanian historical narrative was not explicitly related to an all-Albanian narrative transcending today's geographic borders,<sup>60</sup> the Skanderbeg monumental initiative connected local experiences with that of the other Albanian communities in the Balkans. In effect, this memorial project provided an opportunity to underline the symbolic ties that unite ethnic Albanians at a regional level. On the day of the inauguration, guests from Kosovo and from Albania were invited. Daut Haradinaj – who is said to be close to Ali Ahmeti, and who supported the 2001 rebellion – came down from Prishtina. Albania's president, Alfred Moisiu, although he did not attend, sent his congratulations to the participants. Yet Skanderbeg's statue has a more complex story to tell us about mutual representations and the renegotiations of identities among Albanians from Macedonia, Kosovo and Albania.

### *Reshaping of Albanian Identities and Solidarities Across the Balkans*

In order to give the widest possible echo to its initiative prior to the inauguration, the Čair municipality printed out postcards featuring the new statue with the following caption: "Skenderbeu ... edhe në Shkup" (Skanderbeg ... in Skopje too). As early as 1968, socialist Albania had indeed commissioned the erection of a horseman statue in honor of the mythical Albanian figure in the capital city, Tirana.<sup>61</sup> In 2001, Two years after they were freed from Serb dominion, Kosovar Albanians followed suit with an impressive Skanderbeg monument in the

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<sup>59</sup> See ARIFI, Kolumna. Skender-beg vo Skopje (above fn. 57).

<sup>60</sup> By contrast, such a symbolic reunion of the various Albanian historical trajectories has been suggested by Daut Haradinaj. In one article, he brought together in a single national narrative Skanderbeg's struggles and the wars in Kosovo, in the Preševo valley, and in Macedonia.

<sup>61</sup> Later a Skanderbeg statue was built in Kruja, alongside a Skanderbeg museum housed in a large castle-looking building (opened in 1982). Outside the Balkans, there is also a bronze horseman statue portraying Skanderbeg in Rome (1940, Romano Romanelli). The first Skanderbeg statue in the United States was inaugurated in 2006 in Rochester Hills (Michigan).

middle of Prishtina.<sup>62</sup> Skopje was therefore the third “Albanian capital” in the Balkans to dedicate a horseman statue to the warrior. By choosing to honor him, Macedonia’s Albanian elites were thus drawing on shared Albanian imaginations and cultural maps. The symbolic dialogue between the three monuments is obvious when one considers their iconography: All three bronze statues are equestrian and share a similar socialist-modernist aesthetic. The few differences between them mostly relate to the position of the horse (it seems more menacing with its right leg up in Kruja and in Prishtina than in Skopje), as well as to Skanderbeg’s sword (up to the sky in Tirana, out of its sheath but turned to the ground in Prishtina, in its holder in Skopje).<sup>63</sup> The fact that a sculptor from Albania, Thoma Thomai,<sup>64</sup> was chosen to design the statue, was readily interpreted – among both majority and minorities in Macedonia – as bearing witness to the close ties between the ethnic Albanians who live in Albania and in Macedonia. No less powerfully expressive was the way in which the statue travelled from Tirana on a truck through every single Albanian-inhabited city in Western Macedonia before it reached Skopje. The bronzified Skanderbeg thus revisited the various lands where the historical warrior, in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, had fought his battles on the territory of present-day Macedonia. At every single stop, the statue was acclaimed – thus drawing a symbolic connecting line between the various Albanian lands.

At the same time, though, DUI’s Skanderbeg project also reflected a desire to stress the particular contribution of Macedonia’s Albanians to the overall Albanian history. A few days before the inauguration, Ali Ahmeti made this point plain:

*With Skanderbeg, Skopje will reach the level of the other Albanian capitals and the level of European metropolises, who have erected a statue for Skanderbeg much earlier and have honored the achievements of our national hero.*<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> The statue was brought all the way from Kruja up to the center of Prishtina. The journey lasted four days.

<sup>63</sup> Architect Xhavit Gashi, from Čair municipality, explained that this posture was chosen to convey Skanderbeg’s peaceful wisdom rather than his military valor. His right hand raised was intended to greet visitors as well as Skopje inhabitants. Gashi said that the members of the Commission who selected the project were very cautious – in choosing the statue’s iconography – not to hurt ethnic Macedonian sensitivities. Interview with Xhavit Gashi, Čair, April 24, 2008.

<sup>64</sup> Thoma Thomai is also the sculptor who was commissioned in 2006 to realize the Adem Jashari statue in Tirana. On both projects, he was assisted by Edmond Papatimiu.

<sup>65</sup> See the forum entrance *Një shtatore e Gjergj Kastriotit – Skënderbeut, do të vendoset më 28 nëntor në Shkup, në komunën e Čairit* [A statue of Gjergj Kastrioti Skanderbeg will be established in Skopje on November 28, in the municipality of Čair], Skopje, November 8, 2006, available at <<http://www.alba-world.ch/viewtopic.php?p=22523&sid=e9a1ed11ace11942d1aed65dbd9956d4>>, accessed July 10, 2009.

In order to understand this wish to claim an equal share in the all Albanian narrative and to be treated on par with the other Albanian communities in the Balkans, one needs to recall that for many decades Macedonia's Albanians were perceived – in Kosovo as in Albania – as poorly educated and conservative. In the early 1990s, on a political level, Albanians from Macedonia often resented what was perceived as Tirana's interference in domestic party quarreling. Simultaneously, Macedonia's Albanian politicians often turned to neighboring Albania in order to settle their scores. Although relations between Albanians from Kosovo and from Macedonia – who once lived in a common state, Yugoslavia – are very close, mutual stereotypes are not totally absent there either. Some Macedonian Albanians, for instance, felt that their contribution to the military effort in Kosovo, in 1997-1999 – where several dozens, possibly thousands, fought side by side with their fellow brothers – had not been fully acknowledged.

The changes brought by the 2001 armed conflict have partially altered this situation by fostering greater self-confidence among Macedonia's Albanians. With a political leader such as Ali Ahmeti, who proved himself on the battlefield, some Albanians felt they could now stand with Prishtina and Tirana on a more equal footing. In Tetovo, the recognition of the University of Mala Rečica, long considered by the Macedonians as a "para-university" and now acknowledged as a state university, was extremely important for Albanian self-esteem. The opening of the South East European University (SEEU) where courses are taught in English, Albanian, Macedonian and other languages, also contributed to a greater self-awareness. While in the past Albanians from Macedonia used to travel to Prishtina to pursue further education (some still do), for the first time several students came from Kosovo to attend the new international university. Several other developments – such as Macedonia achieving EU candidate status in December 2005, whereas Albania waited until April 2009 to apply for membership – have additionally boosted Albanian-Macedonian self-esteem. Against this background, the Skanderbeg initiative may also be viewed as embodying and symbolizing the wish of higher profile Albanians from Macedonia to renegotiate intra-Albanian relations in the Balkans.

## Epilogue

Nearly three years after the Skanderbeg monument was inaugurated, how has the new statue taken root in *Stara Čaršija*? In Skopje, members of the majority have devised different strategies to accommodate, if not to appropriate, the sculpture. While some claim that the orientation of the statue (toward the South-West, i. e. Albania) is intended to remind ethnic Macedonians that Albanians wish to join Albania in a single state some day. They also view the statue in the context of what is perceived as a re-islamization of Skopje's Albanians,

and emphasize the religious symbolism inherent in Skanderbeg, as well as the Muslim-Orthodox divide ingrained in the cities' geography and political culture. In their eyes, these religious processes serve as a "proof" of the cultural incongruity of the two ethnic communities. Other Macedonians, though, relativize the importance of what is viewed as a banal political ploy. Haven't ethnic Macedonians done the same in Strumica, for instance, where a Gotse Delčev bust looks to Bulgaria to claim ownership over Pirin Macedonia (in today's Bulgaria)? "We are ok with it, so long as they do not go too far", is a statement one may often come across in Skopje. Other local inhabitants insist that Skanderbeg is not only an Albanian hero, but also a Balkan and even a European historical figure. As such, he deserves to be celebrated. The stress is then laid on Skanderbeg's embodiment of the struggle against the Ottoman Empire and defense of European values: "There is even a statue in Rome, so why not here?"

Understandably, ethnic Albanians were the first ones to appropriate the new landscape. The square where the statue is located – quickly renamed "Skanderbeg Square" in daily parlance – has become a rallying point for those who wish to celebrate political and cultural events of significance. On February 17, 2008, Albanians came from all over the city to celebrate Kosovo's independence, whereas two flags – one Albanian, one American – were flown on the bust. Albanian visitors too have become more numerous. They come from Macedonia, from the neighboring countries or from the European and American diaspora to discover the monument, and shoot pictures with their friends and families in front of the huge bronze. But the presence of the statue has not attracted Albanian tourists only. Foreigners too have found in the new monument one more reason to visit an area otherwise renowned for its narrow cobble-stone streets, its handicraft shops (selling jewelry, leather items, copperware or textiles), its cafes and restaurants often hidden in the beautiful retreat of internal yards, as well as its rich Ottoman urban architecture with its mosques and its baths. Some new cafes have opened whose eclectic clientele includes ethnic Macedonians as well.

To some extent, the statue has impacted the ways in which people experience Čaršija and wander about the district. True the equestrian monument is not to be credited exclusively for the slow revival of the Old Bazaar area. There were several measures promoted by the Čair municipality that played a role, such as the opening of a new House of the *esnafi* (the professional guilds whose origins date back to Ottoman times), that of a hall dedicated to music and to the arts, the launching of a jazz festival and sustained efforts at restoring the district's architectural patrimony. All these initiatives have contributed to a wider vision for Skopje's historic core. In the view of Čair's (Albanian) urban planners, Čaršija is defined by its Ottoman past and by an Ottoman identity that was partially destroyed or ignored by socialist and post-socialist architects

alike.<sup>66</sup> The most prominent examples of Ottoman architecture in *Čaršija* were preserved, the former religious, cultural and social coherence of the *Čaršija* – where the mosques were associated with Islamic elementary schools, libraries, water fountains, burial chambers, *karavan-saraj*, etc. – was lost, as urban planners, especially after the 1963 earthquake, engaged in a museification of an area destined for international tourists, for reasons that had to do both with the secular project underpinning Yugoslavia's socialism and the socialist definitions of modernity.<sup>67</sup> By contrast, the policies implemented since 2005 are designed to restore *Čaršija* as an Ottoman whole with clearly delineated boundaries. Seen from that perspective, the location of Skanderbeg's statue at the South-East corner of *Čaršija* acquires new significance. In the 1970s, the area situated east of Bitpazarska street indeed witnessed the construction of socialist buildings that are now perceived as having eroded the architectural coherence of the district. In this urban plan, the Skanderbeg monument plays a role similar to that of the new "Ottoman door", which was built in 2007-2008 in order to mark the separation between *Čaršija* and Bit Pazar – the extremely lively market, north of the Old Bazaar where food, groceries and all sorts of other items are sold – and to enhance *Čaršija's* singularity.<sup>68</sup>

As is often the case, "roots" and the claiming of particular "roots" are here intertwined. For the current urban policy is grounded in a reading of the district's recent history ethnic Macedonians may not share. In the Albanian narrative, under socialism, although *Čaršija* suffered from neglect as it did not fit into the socialist definition of architectural modernism – the means necessary for a comprehensive restoration of the Ottoman religious heritage were not made available. The development of international tourism allowed the area to prosper. Somehow the district reached its acme around 1985 after which the economic crisis prevailing in Yugoslavia started hurting local businesses. Yet, the worst had yet to come: after Macedonia achieved statehood in 1991, the new ruling elite adopted a nationalist course. Since it was perceived as dominated

<sup>66</sup> Interviews with Xhavit Gashi (above fn. 63).

<sup>67</sup> On the social representations of the Macedonian urban planners of *Čaršija* and their policies after 1963, see the excellent study by Brian SHOTT, *Space and Society in the Southern Balkans: Understanding the Čaršija in Skopje*. PhD in Political Anthropology, University of Virginia, 2000, esp. chapters 4 and 5. Shott's description of the Macedonian socialist reading of space is not without echoing that of Dijana Alić and Maryam Gusheh in their analysis of Neidhardt's Baščaršija project in Sarajevo (Bosnia and Herzegovina). Cfr. Dijana ALIĆ / Maryam GUSHEH, Reconciling National Narratives in Socialist Bosnia and Herzegovina. The Baščaršija Project, 1948-1953, *The Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, 58 (March 1999), n. 1, 6-25.

<sup>68</sup> Considering this particular reading of *Čaršija's* identity, one better understands why Čair's architects resent the fact that in the new territorial-administrative plan, the medieval Kale fortress – which overlooks the Old Bazaar – and the Ottoman Old Stone Bridge (*Kameniot most*) crossing over the Vardar have remained under the responsibility of another municipality – that of *Centar*.

by Albanians, *Čaršija* was left to decay. Furthermore, in the 1990s restoration work was started on the Old Stone Bridge. For several years, people could not cross over the bridge. This proved devastating for a large number of *Čaršija*'s craftsmen. In this Albanian narrative, the 2001 war – and even more so the 2004 redrawing of municipal boundaries – represents a decisive departure from the past, which has allowed *Čaršija* to thrive again. Despite the limits imposed by shortage of funds, the new prerogatives attributed to municipalities and the mayor's personal dynamism have paved the way for a new urban development proposal and for the launching of several positive initiatives, one of them being the Skanderbeg statue.

In Skopje, Macedonian narratives about *Čaršija* are likely to espouse a different symbolic chronology. Back in the 1960s, the storyline goes, the Old Bazaar used to be a disorderly but industrious and colorful area where members of the various ethnic groups (Albanians, Turks, Roma and Macedonians) used to work, trade and even live together. In the last two or three decades, however, the district has become Albanianized – a change that is revealed in the numerous Latin script and Albanian names found on *Čaršija*'s picturesque shops. In the early 1990s, the Old Bazaar became associated with Albanian "speculation" and "illegality", as a new black market currency exchange blossomed in the area.<sup>69</sup> Nevertheless, until the late 1990s *Čaršija* remained a fashionable area where Macedonian youngsters used to hang out with friends. The historic center was deemed more congenial than the anonymous socialist-built southern half of the city. There were lots of restaurants and cafes, which the few "Internationals" who worked as expatriates in Skopje loved to visit. In this narrative too, the 2001 conflict stands out as *the* decisive turning point in *Čaršija*'s history. Yet, more often than not, the ending of the story bears little resemblance to that of the Albanians. After the war, ethnic Macedonians deserted the area, a trend that accelerated after new bars and restaurants opened along the right bank of the Vardar. *Čaršija* took on a distinctly Albanian taint.

Despite these contrasting imaginations, the Ottoman project for Old Skopje is one around which many a Macedonian may rally, in particular among the Turkish community, which has made a major contribution to the history of *Čaršija*. One last example may provide some grounds for hope in that respect, all the more so because it reminds us that political initiatives undergo multiple, often unanticipated appropriations. On June 15, 2008, as part of the Euro soc-

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<sup>69</sup> This is vividly depicted in SHOTT, *Space and Society in the Southern Balkans* (above fn. 67), chapter 2: *The Politics of Money*, 90-112. As the author notes, "with the black market currency exchange, a paradoxical situation was obtained in which significant local (if not national and international) control over the flow of one of the primary symbols of independence and statehood was exercised by a population that was by definition excluded from participating in the country's creation" (91).

cer cup Turkey played against the Czech Republic.<sup>70</sup> On that very same day, the Macedonian legislative elections were re-run in many Albanian inhabited constituencies, following serious irregularities in the previous round. Some DUI supporters had come to Skanderbeg Square early, hoping to celebrate the probable victory of their party. Yet, there were very few people around the statue. Most men had gathered in the local cafes to watch the soccer game. At the very last moment, in an incredible reversal of fortune Turkey scored two goals, winning the match 3:2. Within a matter of minutes, the Skanderbeg monument was flooded with a delighted crowd of Turkish and Albanian supporters. And there Skanderbeg stood, the warrior known for his struggles against the Ottoman Empire, surrounded with Turkish and DUI flags.

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<sup>70</sup> The author wishes to thank journalist Thomas Claus for having brought to my attention this anecdote.