



Weekly Briefing

North Macedonia social briefing:

**Plans to build ‘Skopje’s Manhattan’ in the middle of the capital
provoke public outrage**

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Plans to build ‘Skopje’s Manhattan’ in the middle of the capital provoke public outrage

Summary

Both the local and central authorities became targets of public discontent for their failure to prevent a construction project which intends to build three high-rise towers in the center of Skopje. Opponents claim that the plan would benefit only the private interests of construction companies at the expense of the public interests of the citizens and the urgent needs of the city. Various civic organisations, prominent architects and individual citizens have voiced their concerns with the project - detailing its detrimental consequences - from an urbanisation, environmental and a socio-political perspective. Instead of high-rise buildings, they have proposed alternative solutions for the space - such as the construction of a park - which would respond to the urgent needs of Skopje, a city with multiple problems including over-population, debilitating traffic jams and persistent air pollution.

The post-socialist transformation of the city of Skopje is reflective of various aspects of the broader socio-economic transformation which the Macedonian society as a whole experienced after the collapse of Yugoslavia. Following a devastating earthquake in 1963, the city underwent an internationally-supported reconstruction and Skopje became known as “the city of international solidarity”. The rebuilding largely followed the master plan developed by Japanese architect Kenzo Tange was inspired by the urban planning of the city of Tokyo and adapted to the spatial and structural requirements of Skopje.¹ Following the collapse of Yugoslavia and the ensuing political and economic shifts, the city began a transformation which erased most of the urban structures and plans established during the reconstruction following the earthquake. The devastation of the economy across the country triggered internal migration waves, with many leaving their villages and cities and moving to the capital. It is estimated that Skopje now has approximately one million inhabitants or over half of the entire country’s population.² The central and local Government failed to envision and implement a centralised

¹ 1963 Skopje earthquake available at https://www.wikiwand.com/en/1963_Skopje_earthquake#/Aftermath accessed on 21.04.2021

² Okno (2013). Kenzo Tange’s Plan for Skopje by Udo Kulterman, published on 24.10.2013 available at

plan for the city's development. More often than not new real estate developments followed the profit-seeking interests of construction companies, which violated the city's structural integrity and resulted in arbitrary and chaotic urban solutions. This process started to accelerate in 2010, when Gruevski's Government began implementing a grand revamp of the city under the title "Skopje 2014".³ One of the functions of the project was to erase the city's socialist architectural heritage as part of the broader neoliberal revisionism of Yugoslav history. The current Prime Minister Zoran Zaev came to power in 2017 partly on a promise to end the Skopje 2014 project and to put a stop on the uncontrolled and unplanned construction in the capital.⁴ However, in the three years since the current Government has been in place most of these promises have collapsed, resulting in a continuation rather than a disruption of previously set patterns.

In 2019, the Municipality of Centar adopted a decision on a moratorium on the Detailed Urban Plans (DUP) which meant that no building permits could be issued for construction projects in the center of Skopje.⁵ However, in December 2020, the Constitutional Court lifted the moratorium, opening the pathway for the construction of a controversial project to build three multi-storey buildings at a prominent location in the middle of Skopje.⁶ Originally, the idea to build skyscrapers on this site had been pushed in 2007 by former PM Gruevski under the nickname "Skopje's Manhattan". The project however remained on hold due to a range of reasons until 2018 when the Transport Ministry sold the state-owned land that formed part of

<https://okno.mk/node/32524> accessed on 21.04.2021

³ In 1961 before the earthquake, the population of Skopje was 172.000. Balkan Insight (2015). True Cost of 'Skopje 2014' Revealed published on July 27, 2015 available at

<https://balkaninsight.com/2015/07/27/true-cost-of-skopje-2014-revealed/> accessed on 21.04.2021

⁴ Balkan Insight (2021) North Macedonia's Plan for Manhattan-Style Towers Faces Backlash, published on 15.04.2021, available at

<https://balkaninsight.com/2021/04/15/north-macedonias-plan-for-manhattan-style-towers-faces-backlash/> accessed on 21.04.2021

⁵ Sloboden Pecat (2019). The Municipality of Centar will not issue construction permits until the holes that are being revised are harmonized with the general plan, published on 28.03.2019, available at

<https://www.slobodenpecat.mk/en/%D0%BE%D0%BF%D1%88%D1%82%D0%B8%D0%BD%D0%B0-%D1%86%D0%B5%D0%BD%D1%82%D0%B0%D1%80-%D0%BD%D0%B5%D0%BC%D0%B0-%D0%B4%D0%B0-%D0%B8%D0%B7%D0%B4%D0%B0%D0%B2%D0%B0-%D0%B4%D0%BE%D0%B7%D0%B2%D0%BE%D0%BB%D0%B8/> accessed on 21.04.2021

⁶ Sloboden Pecat (2021). After the Constitutional Court lifted the moratorium on constructions, the Municipality of Centar will continue with the revision of the plans, published on 04.03.2021 available at

<https://www.slobodenpecat.mk/en/otkako-ustaven-go-ukina-moratoriumot-za-gradbi-opshtina-centar-ke-prodolzhi-so-revidirane-na-planovite/> accessed on 21.04.2021

the envisaged building site to private investors.⁷ Activists from the citizen association ‘In Defense of Debar Maalo’ reacted to the sale: "The government's decision to sell the land in order to build 60-storey buildings is unconstitutional. The constitutional right of the citizens of Centar to live in a healthy environment has been violated. Skopje is the most polluted city in Europe and decisions that do not support the establishment of normal living conditions are illegal. In the future, government officials and local authorities will be brought to justice for such decisions."⁸ Although opposition to the project has been sustained for several years, all calls for its cessation have been left unanswered. The final barriers to construction were lifted with the Constitutional Court’s decision to lift the moratorium in December 2020. As it became clear that the construction project is likely to be realised, public opposition started to pile up. It took various forms all of which expressed a strong opposition to the plan.

29 civic organisations including prominent architects sent an open letter to the Prime Minister urging him to stop the project: “We demand that you show that you are against the final destruction of the capital through the carrying out of bad [urban] plans” the letter said, adding: “This location deserves an open architectural competition and a fully inclusive process for the passage of the urban plan.”⁹ Furthermore, the letter urged the Government to support the municipality of Centar in their suspension of the detailed urbanisation plan (DUP) pertaining to the project, but also in the suspension of all other urbanisation plans which are not aligned with the general urbanisation plan of the city. They have also stated that support is required for the legal work of the inspectors for urbanism and construction, the State Attorney who should protect state property and all institutions that have so far approved the plans that are contrary to the General Urbanisation Plan of the city.¹⁰ By 21.04.2021 over 10,000 citizens have signed an online petition titled “NO to the construction of an inhumanly large object in the parking lot

⁷ Balkan Insight (2021) North Macedonia’s Plan for Manhattan-Style Towers Faces Backlash, published on 15.04.2021, available at

<https://balkaninsight.com/2021/04/15/north-macedonias-plan-for-manhattan-style-towers-faces-backlash/> accessed on 21.04.2021

⁸ Mkd.mk (2021). published on 27.11.2021 available at <https://www.mkd.mk/makedonija/skopje/vo-odbrana-na-debar-maalo-park-a-ne-60-katnici-na-parkingot-pred-holidej-in> accessed on 21.04.2021

⁹ 360 Stepeni (2021) Zaev to stand against the destruction of the city with the high-rises - citizen organisations and professors demand, published on 14.04.2021 available at <https://360stepeni.mk/zaev-da-zastane-protiv-unishtuvaneto-na-gradot-so-visokokatnitsite-kaj-holidej-in-baraat-graganskite-organizatsii-i-profesori/> accessed on 21.04.2021

¹⁰ Ibid

in front of the Holiday Inn Hotel.”¹¹ It states that “concrete monsters will be built on 83.000 square meters opposite the hotel Holiday Inn” in the “absence of a public debate and contrary to the basic urbanistic rules for a decent life in the Municipality of Centar.”¹² Neither the national nor the local authorities have been able to adequately respond to these calls. Mayor of Skopje’s Centar municipality, Sasa Bogdanovic, insisted that his hands were legally tied and he sought the help from the State Anti-Corruption Commission on the matter. However, various organisations that have been tracking the case have informed that there had been multiple occasions when the mayor of Centar could have stopped the process but failed to do so.¹³

The political party “Levica” said that “Bogdanovic should resign if he is unable to deal with the real estate mafia”.¹⁴ They argued that his resignation would result in the stopping of the process as there would be no one authorised to sign the construction permit. Furthermore, they outlined further reasons against the project: “In addition to the violent suffocation of the center of Skopje with the construction of concrete monsters, that part of the city is particularly unsafe for the building of such a megalomaniac project. Namely, the downtown area is located on seismic land and groundwaters, which make it susceptible to future earthquakes and make safety protocols impossible to implement in such potential scenarios.”¹⁵

¹¹ Link to a petition on Change.Org, available at https://www.change.org/p/%D0%BE%D0%BF%D1%88%D1%82%D0%B8%D0%BD%D0%B0-%D1%86%D0%B5%D0%BD%D1%82%D0%B0%D1%80-%D0%BD%D0%B5-%D0%B7%D0%B0-%D0%B8%D0%B7%D0%B3%D1%80%D0%B0%D0%B4%D0%B1%D0%B0-%D0%BD%D0%B0-%D0%BD%D0%B5%D1%85%D1%83%D0%BC%D0%B0%D0%BD%D0%BE-%D0%B3%D0%BE%D0%BB%D0%B5%D0%BC-%D0%BE%D0%B1%D1%98%D0%B5%D0%BA%D1%82-%D0%BD%D0%B0-%D0%BF%D0%B0%D1%80%D0%BA%D0%B8%D0%BD%D0%B3%D0%BE%D1%82-%D0%BF%D1%80%D0%B5%D0%B4-%D1%85%D0%BE%D1%82%D0%B5%D0%BB-%D1%85%D0%BE%D0%BB%D0%B8%D0%B4%D0%B5%D1%98-%D0%B8%D0%BD?recruiter=656178911&utm_source=share_petition&utm_medium=facebook&utm_campaign=psf_combo_share_abi&utm_term=psf_combo_share_abi&recruited_by_id=2b10a1b0-cb19-11e6-a030-61777a4b2b2f&utm_content=mit-28294873-10%3Av2 accessed on 21.04.2021

¹² Ibid

¹³ Samo Prasaj (2021) Municipality of Centar, published in 2018, available at <https://samoprasaj.mk/naacik/1212-2018-12-06-13-12-29> accessed on 21.04.2021

¹⁴ Levica (2021). Bogdanovic should resign if he is unable to deal with the urban mafia, published on 14.04.2021, available at <https://levica.mk/2021/04/13/bogdanovik-da-si-dade-ostavka-dokolku-ne-mozhe-da-se-spravi-so-urbanata-mafija/> accessed on 21.04.2021

¹⁵ Ibid

A survey on a sample of 1019 residents of Skopje conducted by the Investigative Reporting Lab in February 2021, found that 96,4% consider the constructions in the last decade to have been illegal and criminal.¹⁶ 76% responded that they “suspect corruption to have played a role in the granting of building permits”. The majority of Skopje residents believe that the main reason for the urban chaos in the capital is the non-transparent adoption and amendment of the Detailed Urbanisation Plans, for which only formal public hearings are organized without significant and substantive citizen participation. Over 90% have answered that the constructions have increased the pollution by blocking air circulation. Around 70% have complained about the reduced sunlight. Nearly two thirds reported problems with communal hygiene. 86% confirmed that their neighbourhoods have faced an usurpation of the parks and greenery. Over 95% stated that the new buildings have no parkings spots. Overall the results confirmed the broader complaints of the public which are frequently expressed in informal settings and on social media.

The lack of accountability and the complete absence of responsiveness on behalf of Government officials and local authorities with regards to city planning and development have thrown new light on the socio-political system and the absence of substantive democracy in the country. The so-called ‘Skopje Manhattan project’ is only the latest in a series of violent and destructive urbanisation plans, which affect not only the center but the broader spatial environment of the city. As a result Skopje is expanding in a chaotic and an unplanned manner which is converting it into an inhumane urban space. In the absence of planned sustainable urbanisation construction projects serve to reproduce and amplify problems such as overpopulation, air-pollution and the low quality of urban life in the capital. Undoubtedly, the city has fallen victim to the broader post-socialist destructions, brought on by the socio-economic and political transformations of the past 30 years.

¹⁶ IRL (2021) 96,4 percent of citizens of Skopje consider buildings of the last decade to be illegal and criminal, published on 03.02.2021 available at <https://irl.mk/anketa-na-irl-za-96-4-protsenti-od-skopani-gradbite-od-poslednata-detsenia-se-nezakonski-i-kriminalni/> accessed on 04.04.2021