

**Research Project: New and Ambiguous Nation-Building Processes  
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**THE TUNEFUL SIDE OF IDEOLOGY: OPERA AND NATION-BUILDING IN  
MACEDONIA**

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## **The Tuneful Side of Ideology: Opera and Nation-Building in Macedonia**

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### **Introduction**

On the morning of 26 July 1963, a devastating earthquake struck the city of Skopje. The main tremor occurred at 5:17 AM, killing 1,300 people. It destroyed three quarters of the city's buildings and left around 100,000 people homeless. This was the largest natural catastrophe that took place in the Yugoslav Socialist Federation since its formation.

The Yugoslav Federation was founded after the multi-faceted 1941-1945 struggle. It was simultaneously an anti-fascist struggle, a peoples' liberation war and, ultimately, a "successful" socialist revolution overthrowing the king and the Serbian Monarchy. This four-year period was celebrated as a crucial turning point in Yugoslav history, when the six republics (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Slovenia) officially had an equal status in the new federal political arrangement.<sup>1</sup>

As part of the Yugoslav Federation, Macedonia was officially encouraged to endorse, manifest, and further develop its own distinct national identity.<sup>2</sup> Macedonia, and Skopje, as the capital of the republic, grew and were promoted by the central government in Belgrade as one of the most successful examples of Yugoslav socialism where national identity harmonically coexisted with the Yugoslav one.<sup>3</sup> Situated between Bulgaria, Greece and Albania, the socialist republic of Macedonia bordered politically-contested neighbours. The sensitive diplomatic relationships with Greece, Bulgaria and Albania,

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<sup>1</sup> There is a vast body of literature dealing with the historical genealogy of the first, second and the third Yugoslavia, and the role of Macedonia in it. Some highlights of the most relevant works written in English are: Banac 1984, 1989, Borrowiec 1977, Brown 1994, 2004, Burg 1983, Danforth 1995, Denitch 1994, Lampe 1995, Ramet 2005.

<sup>2</sup> During socialism, the official version of the Macedonian national history, but also the popular view among everyday people, was that only during the Yugoslav federation Macedonia emerged as an officially-recognized national entity. Zarko Trajanovski's current research however has revealed some indications that nowadays it is hard to find an agreement among everyday people as to when "first" Macedonia appeared: the views are divided between ancient Macedonia and Alexander the Great, Macedonia from 1903 during the Krusevo republic, Macedonia in 1944 when it officially joined the Yugoslav federation, and the 1991 independent Macedonia.

<sup>3</sup> Hannes Grandits' research for this project has been examining precisely this aspect of the central Yugoslav government's policy to promote and encourage distinct national identities of the Yugoslav republics. For my larger project I will draw on his work on the Yugoslav attempt to negotiate the emerging tensions between Yugoslavism and the separate national identities and to accommodate their coexistence within the larger socialist project in Yugoslavia.

and their historical claims of the Macedonian territory, encouraged Tito and the government to invest significant planning and full support for promoting Macedonian nation that would insert itself as a serious actor in international politics of this part of the region. For instance, the University Cyril and Methodius was founded in 1948 along with new institutes promoting national identity. Folklore became one of the most crucial bricks in building a national identity and promoting rich folk dance and singing scene<sup>4</sup>. The central government's intention was to endorse Skopje and Macedonia as a regional centre that could demonstrate the neighbouring countries the potential and success of the Yugoslav project (Dimova 1998). With full support from Belgrade, Skopje had been transforming and turning into a national, cultural, political and economic centre. The main urban centre of Macedonia however was severely shaken by the 1963 earthquake. In addition to the large residential destructions, the earthquake demolished the railway station, the central post-office causing a complete communication blackout. The destruction of the national theatre and the army hall (*Oficirski dom*), the main city landmarks crucial in promoting Skopje as a *cultural* centre with a legacy of urban history.

Notwithstanding the tragedy and the devastation, the quake opened up a door for a whole new chapter in the history of Skopje and the larger international politics of the Yugoslav Federation. The city received unprecedented humanitarian assistance from countries belonging to the west and the east. Tito's diplomatic strategy to nurture relationships with the Western world and with the Eastern bloc, and also belonging to the non-aligned movement that connected him to third world countries, materialized in its best during the humanitarian assistance when the world met in Skopje to assist the rebuilding of the stricken city. It was in Skopje for the first time after the beginning of the cold war that Soviet and American soldiers worked side by side in rescuing the victims trapped under the rubbles. Tito visited Skopje shortly after the quake and stated the famous line inscribed on the shuttered railroad terminal which stands as a reminder of the tragedy with its broken clock marking the time of the quake, 5:17 am: "Skopje suffered an unforeseeable catastrophe, but we shall rebuild it again and it will become a symbol of the world solidarity" (Dimova 1998).

Despite the destruction of the theatre building on the bank of the river Vardar, which stripped Skopje from its most prestigious stage and disabled larger cultural events such as opera, ballet and more complex theatre performances, Skopje became a symbol of the

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<sup>4</sup> The role of the Institute for National History is analyzed by Irena Stefoska. Ermis Lafazanovski examines the Institute of Folklore and the official production of folklore, while the dance and music folk scene is the main focus of the research conducted by Ivona Opetceska-Tatrevska.

world solidarity changing its architectural and cultural outlook. In the years that followed, new residential districts were built by using foreign donations.<sup>5</sup> Government officials prepared elaborate plans to rebuild the cultural (urban) modern life in the city and show the world that Yugoslavia, Macedonia and Skopje emerged as a success story, “a symbol of the world solidarity” rebuilding a modernist version of the damaged city.

An extensive plan was designed to rebuild the venues that would house the cultural events in Skopje. In the immediate years after the quake, the national theatre was put in a temporarily-assembled building unsuitable for any serious performances. In these conditions, only the drama department of the Macedonian national theatre remained active while “opera and the ballet were waiting for better times.” After the Romanian government donated finances for the construction of the so-called Universal Hall (*Univerzalna Sala*), a large modern rotunda-style hall that could hold up to 1200 visitors designed to accommodate different performances, new events began to be scheduled and performed on the stage of this new venue.

In 1967, after several years of an almost complete withdrawal of the opera and the ballet, Vasil Kortosev, a tenor and opera director, submitted a proposition to the artistic board of the Macedonian national theatre to establish a festival that would allow the theatre, “its ensemble and the audience in Skopje and Macedonia again to be exposed to the art of opera.” The significant efforts invested in founding the Macedonian national theatre in 1946, and the national opera in 1947, so soon after the end of WW2 when the nation-building of Macedonia was in its earliest stage, appeared to be severely shaken by the devastating earthquake and the destruction of the theatre. “History has hardly ever known a nation, which, immediately after its liberation, with still undeveloped and unified literary language, managed, in the most rational manner, to put forth the foundations of a musical theatre,” wrote Kortosev in his review of the first 20 years of MOE (*Teatrski Glasnik* 1991, p. 5).

Kortosev’s 1967 proposition was initially declined by the artistic council of the national theatre with a vague explanation that the moment was not suitable and could not provide proper conditions for this kind of festival. Four years later, Kortosev had resubmitted the proposal which was then accepted. Notwithstanding the strong opposition and accusations that such an event would be a “pure utopia” and would be “aiming only at personal benefits for building someone’s own career...the event would be a waste of money and funds” (*ibid.* p. 8), the MOE festival received green light and its first edition was sched-

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<sup>5</sup> The district of Karpos, especially its parts such as Kozle, Taftalidze, and Vlae, were completely rebuilt by donations of different governments.

uled for May 1972. Kortosev forcefully argued that the proposed festival did not intend to have any political or economic aims. Rather, it was creativity and art that were at the forefront of proposing the May Opera Evenings (hereinafter, MOE). He pointed out that the “audience crisis” and the state of the opera and ballet after the earthquake were the main reason for initiating the festival.

The close cooperation with the director of Macedonian National Theatre, Stojmir Popovski, along with the unconditional support from the director of the *Univerzalna Sala*, Bosko Boskovski, who agreed to make the hall a host of the event, all conditions were secured that such festival could take place. Although some of the artists considered *Univerzalna Sala* not to be the most appropriate venue for staging operas, stating that it was hard for the artists and the orchestra to coordinate well, compared to the improvised building which prevented any opera performances, the new hall looked impressive (Teatarski glasnik 1991).

### **MOE’s origins and ideology: educating and bringing the western civilization in Skopje**

The opening night of the first edition of the MOE festival took place on May 9<sup>th</sup> 1972. The event was followed by an extensive media coverage, when *Nova Makedonija*, the major daily newspaper wrote that MOE appears to be “the cultural event of the year.”

Funding for the festival was secured from different authorities and on several levels.

Primary founder was city of Skopje and its official political bodies. Additional extensive funds were provided by the political “organs” of the Republic of Macedonia. Crucial donors were also the economic organizations, so-called collective labour organizations (*organizacii na zdruzen trud*), which were the basic cells of Yugoslav socialist economy and its self-management ideology (that the workers rule themselves)<sup>6</sup>. Kortosev observes that the cooperation between MOE and collective labour organizations was the “most organic and natural exchange of labour of two seemingly unrelated organizations.” This funding model, and the link between the socialist economic organizations and MOE, remained until 1991 when after the first 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of MOE, Kortosev asserts that “the organic cooperation between these two entities remains on a same level maintaining the agreement that Skopje needed a musical manifestation which has been attended by young and old audiences, as any other large and interesting physical (*fiskulturna*) manifestation” (Teatarski glasnik 1991).

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<sup>6</sup> For more on self-management see for instance Russinow 1977, Wodward 1995.

It was a deliberate decision to have 9 May 1972 as the opening day of the festival. It corresponded with the Victory over Fascism Day, a public holiday in the Yugoslav federation, also marking the foundation of the Opera and Ballet on 9 May 1947. To have the MOE's opening on the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Macedonian opera and ballet, was an important symbolic gesture that revealed the determination of the theatre authorities to make Macedonia a nation with serious artistic and cultural life that maintains its continuity. After the first edition of MOE and after assessing that 12000 visitors attended the 7 performances during that first year, with a unanimous decision the theatre committee agreed that the festival would become permanent and would always begin on May 9 (Kociski 2001)

The main idea behind the MOE festival was to have a défilé of opera artists without competition. The initial proposal listed that there would be pre-selected time slots for "evenings" of different opera houses from Yugoslavia, which would have a presentation of their main solo ensembles bringing along a conductor for the orchestra too. During the first two years, these evenings were primarily from the Yugoslav republics, although during the subsequent years they opened up to opera ensembles from other Balkan countries such as Turkey, Romania and Bulgaria.

In his introductory statement to mark the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the festival in 1991, Kortosev wrote that the primary purpose of MOE was purely artistic: there were no political intentions whatsoever. Notwithstanding this rhetoric, MOE was viewed by the main people involved in its organization as one of the most important segments of the "cultural growth and revival of our nation." Janko Konstantinov, one of the main figures on the MOE committee, observed that:

With this festival, we (Macedonians) have come closer to the civilizational tendencies of Europe. Through opera, especially through MOE, we, as nation and people, are creating more sophisticated reputation in the cultural layers of the Yugoslav and European meridians. Opera unites three artistic expressions: music, literature or the written word and painting, and thus it creates excitements affecting one's eyes and ears. This is the secret behind the centuries-long excitement with opera on the civilizational space of Europe and America. It is clearly evident that despite political systems and governments, securing state support for Opera is wide-spread everywhere. Other forms of art can find different solutions, but opera is supported by the state everywhere in the world.... (Teatarski Glasnik, statement by Janko Konstantinov, p. 53).

It can be successfully argued that this festival reconciled two important cornerstones of the nation-building ideology in Macedonia: on one hand it proved (and revealed) the tal-

ents of Macedonians to sing, a common view embraced throughout the Yugoslav Federation where Macedonia had a status of the most musically-talented republic. On the other hand, the festival indicated the intention to bring Macedonia closer to the west and western “civilizational values.” Moreover, Konstantinov stated that Macedonia has always been part of the larger European family and this manifestation would, actually, only reaffirm this role:

The beginnings of opera life in Macedonia came in an organic manner: across the Yugoslav and the Balkan territories, the Macedonian melos – songs and polyphonic abilities – is a widely known reality. Macedonian man knows how to enjoy singing and music, therefore, the formation of the Macedonian opera in 1947 was a logical consequence of his talents. MOE, on the other hand, arrived as a continuity in the development of the music opera activities in the Balkans: a parade of talented singing voices from opera scenes of Balkan countries (Konstantinov, p. 54).

The importance of MOE during its first two decades was revealed by the fact that this was *the only* manifestation on the “Yugoslav and Balkan territories that continued the tradition of the kind of musical production that in Europe had been nurtured for four centuries.” (Kociski 2001, p.51) Moreover, the organizational committee insisted that MOE was essential for the Macedonian cultural public and only this festival “could continue the centuries long opera tradition in the civilizational areas of Europe and America.” In addition to the intention to expose the Macedonian public to opera, the organizers believed that by having MOE in Macedonia, the Macedonian opera would earn an international name as a result of the contacts and exchange established during the month of May. Thus, opera became one of the key bridges that would bring Macedonia closer to the “cultural events and civilizational European development” (Kortosev, 1991, p. 52).

Macedonia, although is a small country, is open to the world and nurtures close and tight cultural-economic contacts with many European countries. Therefore the MOE festival has become a ‘jewel in the crown’ of the culture of our capital city of Skopje. In time, this jewel will glow stronger and stronger, only testifying to the music life in this part of the Balkans and their civilizational connection with European cultural trends (ibid. p. 52).

One of the main aims of MOE was to educate the audience about opera by exposing it to the best quality from Yugoslavia, the Balkans, and later from Europe. Equally important was to assist the Macedonian opera in its promotion and networking with other ensembles. It became clear however that to revive and reintegrate opera in the cultural life of Skopje, a close attention would have to be given to education and promotion of novices who would spread on the tradition of opera in Macedonia. Rather than reducing the

audience to passive consumers, MOE set up an ambitious aim to be a generator of a new trend and assist the production of a new generation of opera artists. In 1973, only one year after the premier of the first edition of MOE, “young opera talents” competition *Tomce Grcarovski*, named after the early deceased opera singer from the Macedonian national theatre, was introduced within the framework of MOE.

Several of the people whom I interviewed in May 2007 asserted that for them this event was even more meaningful than the opera evenings. It was this event that ensured that opera would be popular among young people. The jury consisted of representatives from different opera houses from Former Yugoslavia thus securing that the award would be objective (*bez vrski*), while the competitors came from all over Yugoslavia but also from other Balkan countries primarily Bulgaria and Romania.

Not surprisingly, the other opera centres from Yugoslavia or the Balkans had much better opera quality than Macedonia, which inevitably disclosed the “young and undeveloped opera environment in Macedonia” and the absence of attention to discovering and nurturing young and talented singers. Similarly, that first year (1973) when the young talents’ event began, it became clear that the students in Macedonia were not on equal footing with their Yugoslav counterparts. Gradually, the *Tomce Grcarov* segment of MOE was gaining popularity and reputation. The young opera talents evening turned this event into a significant competition that allowed promotion of young opera talents. Many successful future opera soloists from Yugoslavia had their first performance in the *Tomce Grcarov* competition. In the first year there were only 12 participants, primarily students from the music academies in Belgrade, Sarajevo, Zagreb, Ljubljana and Skopje. During the subsequent years, this event became well-known and the interest of the young artists grew. The competition became international with guests from Turkey, Bulgaria, Hungary and Romania. To select the best participants who would perform during MOV, there was a preliminary selection accompanied by piano. The best were then selected to perform with an orchestra and one of the MOE evenings was devoted to the young talents competition concert when the winner was announced. The organizers were determined that this competition should not be predicated on rigid standards, but to be a more relaxed opportunity for the those selected to perform during the final evening, to spend time attending the May performances, and socialize with their more experienced colleagues. Due to financial reasons, this event was discontinued in 1983.

## **The 80s Crisis**

In a separate volume that came out to mark the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of MOV in 2001, Veljo Kociski writes that in the early 80s the audience attendance suffered significant drop. Immediate measures were undertaken and the MOE committee launched a well-planned initiative which involved more intensive sponsorship with so-called *abonamenti* (free tickets given to the sponsors thus ensuring sufficient audience), organized collective visits of the collective labour organizations which were mandatory and often strictly evidenced by a responsible person, or organized visits of college and high-school students, a practice highly resented by the artists because of “immature behaviour of the youngsters who often would whistle and scream during the performances.”

Another important event that presumably would have revived the interest in MOE was the anticipated move into the new national theatre building on the river Vardar. With its original design by the Japanese architect Kenzo Tange, the new building was a pure contrast to the earlier mansion destroyed during the 1963 earthquake. The previous neo-classical building built in an Austro-Hungarian style, was replaced by a modern white structure in an asymmetrical shape that dominated the left-side of the river Vardar and engulfed a large plateau along the river bank. The technical achievements of the new theatre venue were claimed by media to be remarkable, allowing experiments and novelties in staging even most complex opera performances. The move to the new theatre building did not occur in 1982 as was initially planned to mark MOE’s tenth anniversary, but in 1984, with a two years’ delay. Although the new building had a much smaller audience capacity than the Universal Hall, the daily *Nova Makedonija* reported dramatically that “the new theatre was full again and that the audience’s interest for MOE was successfully revived.” (NM May 10, 1984).

The 80s was the decade when the financial crisis was encroaching every domain of the Yugoslav society, leaving arts and culture in a particularly vulnerable condition. As pointed earlier, in 1983 for instance, the *Tome Gincarov* young talents competition was cancelled. Despite my insistence to find out why, the interviews and inquiries conducted in May 2007, during the 35<sup>th</sup> edition of the MOV, did not disclose specific reasons. I suspect that financial issues were critical and impaired this event: it was too costly to stage the preliminary concerts and to cover the expenses of the participants. The interruption of the talent competition was mourned by many members of the Macedonian opera. Despite the crisis, the MOE committee insisted that the impressive statistics of the first dec-

ade: the 123 performances, the 185 937 visitors were sufficient to justify the necessary existence of MOE (Kociski 2001).

Another novelty introduced at the 11<sup>th</sup> editions of MOE in 1983, with the aim to attract more audience and to bring fresh breath to the festival, was the invitation of the ensembles from other European countries: Athens (La Traviata), Nürnberg (Cavalleria Rusticana), Warsaw (Don Carlos), and from Budapest (Carmen). This shift in the selector's policy was followed by major media coverage: an article in Nova Makedonja observed that MOE's 11<sup>th</sup> edition broke the Yugoslav-Balkan borders and became an acknowledged and recognized European festival.

An interview with a retired soprano, a soloist who participated in many MOE editions, revealed that the members of the opera ensembles from the Yugoslav centres such as Belgrade, Zagreb, Ljubljana and Sarajevo, had always had correct and respectful attitude towards their Macedonian colleagues. Moreover, most of them expected the MOE with great anticipation and excitement since the bonds, professional and personal, between opera and ballet artists remained strong. Their colleagues from Europe, however, did not have the right perception of MOE: the opera houses sent second-rate soloists who were then surprised by the high standards of the other MOE participants from Yugoslavia and the Balkans. She stressed that in any case the Macedonian ensemble was almost never invited to perform either in the Yugoslav centres or in Europe. Some soloists would get invitation, but never the ensemble as a team, the way the teams would perform during MOE.

In addition to the ideological ("civilizational") aspect of MOE "to bring Europe to Macedonia," its educational efforts established by staging the young talents' competition along with the repertoire politics of MOE until 1991 revealed another crucial dimension: a forceful and well-planned promotion of the national Macedonian production. The first edition of the festival in 1972 was opened with the opera *Car Samoil* written by Kiril Makedonski, and was closed by the opera *Razdelba* (Separation) by Trajko Prokopiev. The Macedonian tenor Georgi Bozikov was the main star of these two operas and for his performance in *Car Samoil* he received the award 11 October of the city of Skopje.<sup>7</sup> Until 2001 there were total of 5 Macedonian operas and 6 ballet performances by Macedonian composers and artists performed within the framework of MOE and most of these were performed before the 1991 independence of the country. Most of the program of MOE

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<sup>7</sup> The annual award ceremony when remarkable persons received prizes for different achievements was established to mark the day of the beginning of the anti-fascist struggle in Macedonia in 1941 that began in Prilep and Kumanovo, a major holiday during socialism.

in these 35 years however has been dominated by performing primarily western (and with some exception Russian) composers.

### **Audi in Aida: the 2007 edition of MOE**

By having the opportunity to follow the 35<sup>th</sup> edition of the May Opera Evenings this year, from May 9 until 31 2007, I went to Skopje curious to see the changes that took place over the years. This was the 35<sup>th</sup> anniversary of MOE, and 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary from the establishment of the Macedonian Opera and Ballet in 1947. My last visit of the performance of MOE was in 1982, which, as I mentioned, was a year of significant crisis when the audience seemed to be fed up with the performances of the same Yugoslav and Balkan ensembles, and did not attend the event with the same enthusiasm and curiosity as earlier. This was also the beginning of a profound economic crisis in Yugoslavia. The cooperation between MOE and the collective labour organizations remained strong and this link was used to generate larger attendance of the audience. Those organizations which donated funds, received free tickets that were then distributed to their workers. My father's organization received significant number of tickets and I, with three other friends from the neighbourhood, attended the 1982 performance of Aida.

This year however, I was about to attend an opening night for the first time. Usually, the opening evening would be an event of "a closed character," when most of the tickets were distributed between VIP persons: the Macedonian political, financial, diplomatic and "show-biz" elite. When I went to pick my block of entry tickets for the entire festival, the cashier at the theatre told me that the opening evening was also available for retail as the rest of the tickets, attracting significant interest among "the real opera lovers in Skopje." The speculations present in media in the course of April 2007, whether this year's edition of MOE would take place at all, "due to the debts accumulated by the uneconomical handling of the finances of the previous minister" kept the public in Macedonia wondering whether the government would keep up its promise, as the spokesperson of the Ministry of Culture had promised in the daily newspaper *Vreme* on 20 April 2007, that the bank account of the Macedonian opera and ballet would be deblocked, subsidized and "this festival of crucial national interest for Macedonia would take place." Since 1991 and the pluralistic system, MOE and its budget have been regularly affected by the changes of the ministers and political parties. With exception of 1997, however, when the 25<sup>th</sup> edition of MOE was cancelled, this festival has always taken place, creating a legacy "that has to be maintained and that is of vital national interest," as the director

of the Macedonian opera and ballet has stated in an interview on the Macedonian Television. Ever since, regardless of the political party or coalition, efforts have been made to keep the MOE going.

This year, prior to the reassurance issued by the spokes person that MOE would take place, media reported of a major effort to embellish the building and do „what was supposed to be done for a long time: to mount a large neon sign and name the house that has hosted this festival for 35 years: Macedonian Opera and Ballet.” Although planned for a long time, this project took place on May 8 and 9 2007, and had been finally completed around 17:00 o'clock, only two hours before the opening ceremony, leaving traces of debris and construction material all over the theatre plateau (see picture 1 in appendix 1). In addition to mounting the sign, three sculptures were displayed in front of the main entrance of the venue. These sculptures had once embellished the old theatre building destroyed during the 1963 earthquake. A reporter of the daily *Vreme* wrote several articles trying to trace the life of the sculptures. From the total of 16 sculptures that existed, 5 were sheltered in the new opera building, in a corridor behind the toilette, hidden and deteriorating. Two of these five sculptures were damaged and only three were repaired and displayed in front of the building on the day before the opening ceremony. Although their artistic value is not significant, the director stressed that they carry “important sentimental and historical value.” What had happened to the remaining 11 sculptures is still unknown. The director confirmed that a couple of these sculptures were decorating the entertainment pool complex *Playa Vista* under the Skopje Fortress (pod skopskoto Kale) but the “whereabouts of the other sculptures has to be still determined.”<sup>8</sup>

Since its 1984 opening, the once-impressive, white modernist theatre building, has been regularly criticized by experts and the public for the bad materials used in its construction. The deteriorating facade made of white limestone of extraordinarily bad quality, has reacted badly to the extreme weather conditions of Skopje's boiling summers and freezing winters. The venue has lost its whiteness, revealing large cracks and wholes, which,

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<sup>8</sup> The initiative of the opera and ballet to place sculptures in front the building resembles the similar initiative undertaken in front of the government when in March 2007, when 7 antic sculptures from the archaeological excavation site Stibera near the town of Prilep. This was a joint initiative between the governing party VMRO-DPMNE and the archaeologist Kusman Pasko who argue that the best way to show to those who visit Macedonia, mainly foreigners (politicians, artists or visitors) should have direct encounter with Macedonia's continuous antic heritage. The conflict over the name Macedonia that has been going with Greece since 1991 and over the “copy rights” of the antic part of the history of Macedonia has initiated numerous efforts, official and unofficial, attempting to prove that on Macedonian soil there have been many ancient archaeological sites which testify to the direct lineage of contemporary Macedonia and its ancient version of history.

on May 9 this year, were full with water from the rainstorm that swept Skopje that very afternoon.

The main decor on the plateau, in addition to the neon title and the three sculptures, were two gleaming AUDI cars placed there by the general sponsor of this year's MOE: the main representative of AUDI dealership for Macedonia . Traditionally, the main decor on the plateau would consist of only the festival's fire, lit by a prominent artist, and the national flag. This year the MOE fire was lit by Slavica Petrovska-Galic , but the visitor's eye was distracted by too many components of the decor: the neon light from the sign, the statues and, most of all, the two AUDI cars (see pictures 2 and 3 in appendix 1). The speech delivered at the opening by the minister of culture Arifikmet Jemaili, appointed a week prior to the beginning of the festival, was hard to follow due to the bad audio equipment. The chattering clusters of visitors, who could not follow the speech, were approached by a young man who was distributing booklets, which I logically assumed that were the festival program. When I received my copy however, I was surprised to see the booklet was a pocket edition of "your own personal" bible.

Once the audience was allowed to get inside the opera building, we were greeted by another, latest model of AUDI R-8, placed on a special pedestal, fully overshadowing the poster retrospective exhibition set up along the foyer of previous years of MOE. The program had an interesting appendix on the last page, outlining ten rules required while attending the MOE opera performances. For instance, "no weapons and shooting allowed during the performances," "no pets allowed," "no immoral behaviour," etc.

The opening opera *The Italian Girl in Algiers* by Gioachino Rossini, with its comic scenes and the under experimental direction of Uchi Horner, a director from Graz, featured in the main role a singer from the Graz opera, Sanja Anastasia, a native Serbian who moved to Graz ten years ago, and the Macedonian singers who have managed to establish themselves abroad: Blagoja Nacoski, Igor Durlovski and Goran Nacevski. The performance was well received by the audience. It was funded by the Austrian foundation "musical theatre for Central and Eastern Europe" and left the audience impressed by its experimental layout of the director and the costume designer who was also from Graz. This, along with the remaining 6 operas and the one the performance of the Giselle ballet in this year's edition of MOV, were, according to my humble knowledge of this art, and the reviews written in the print media, satisfactory, despite the sporadic discoordination between the orchestra and the singers.

The press conferences that I attended, along with the interviews I conducted with several people involved in the organization, disclosed that the main soloists were invited through the mediation of several professional agencies which specialize in “art brokerage” and negotiate on behalf of the artists. Even the main guests from Macedonia who now live and perform abroad (e.g. Ana and Igor Durlovksi) finalized their performances and negotiated the price of their performances through their agents. This principle, introduced in MOE as late as 2004 is so vastly different from the socialist method of negotiating on the level of directors of the opera houses with intention of promoting entire ensembles instead of only individual artists. The market-driven festival, I was told, has reduced the exchange of artistic capital to pure economics when “the –most-affordable voice for a particular role is the only criteria in which major sponsors become necessity and the man force of the festival.”<sup>9</sup>

The presence of sponsors therefore has changed the material outlook of the festival, especially in the exterior decoration and material symbols displayed on the plateau. The presence of the main sponsor struck me as especially conspicuous on the closing evening on May 31<sup>st</sup> 2007, during the performance of Verdi’s Aida. The presence of the AUDI cars that grabbed the audience’s eyes throughout the festival was emphasized even more by adding extra lights from all sides. Young women dressed in provocative dresses with the brand AUDI written over their left side, were distributing packages with a promotional material Audi-Porsche: “Pure energy born of powerful ideas,” and inviting the visitors to get inside the cars. AUDI representatives were also inside the foyer, chasing the visitors and offering promotional material throughout the breaks. After the fourth offer of the same promotional material, I truly felt that the sponsor crossed a boundary between promoting its product and encroaching on the performance of Aida.

I tried to arrange a conversation with the manager of the AUDI dealership in Skopje to inquire about his involvement and the profits from this sponsorship, but I was told by his secretary that he was too busy. I also did not have the possibility to interview the director of the Macedonian opera to ask him for the rights of the sponsors and how far they could push for their corporate presence at the event. The director of the AUDI dealership in Skopje attended the closing and the opening evenings, however, accompanied by a rather wide circle of business partners. I was surprised by the presence of the

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<sup>9</sup> The market principle to negotiate an artist’s participation through her/his agents was introduced in the domain of Jazz and popular music since 1991, when Oliver Belopeta, the director of the Skopje Jazz Festival managed to establish connections with the agents of the leading jazz musicians and to bring them to Skopje.

*nouveaux rich* representatives, primarily the sponsors, whose appearance struck me as most conspicuous. By having the power to finance the festival these people have also tried to negotiate their symbolic capital in the society through the domain of high arts (Bourdieu 1984).

Although the old socialist elite was also visible, the now-aging and once-powerful, leading class seemed modest and stripped of glamour in contrast to the expensive designer clothes of the *nouveaux rich* who, I felt, overshadowed even the contemporary political elite. The symbolic status of high culture and the desire to show the presence of opera in one's life, to be more culturally integrated, grows to be a significant marker with a clear class ambition. The intention to be closer to the "European civilization" was alive during socialism and remains to be equally strong in the last edition of MOE that I had attended. Cardinal difference however that distinguishes the social role of opera from its earlier editions was the strategic effort undertaken during socialism to promote opera to wider audience, to the "real working class" as one employee of the theatre told me, by providing free tickets and promoting organized visits to the performances through the collective labour organizations' unions or high schools. The market principle nowadays has prohibited giving out free tickets to anyone. The ticket for one performance was 500 denars (8 EUR) and for Macedonian standards where an average salary is 250 EUR, attending the performances turns into an unaffordable extravaganza.

## **Conclusion**

This initial, and primarily descriptive, attempt to sketch the MOE festival and its role in the nation-building process in Macedonia provides important insights into the complex and convoluted role of arts during socialist Yugoslavia and in the period after the independence of the country. Art, as Benjamin reminds, is always inextricably linked to ideology and to politics.<sup>10</sup> During socialist Yugoslavia art has to be contextualized within the framework of the Yugoslav "socialism with a human face" that opposed the Stalinist vision of real-socialism and "total state." Marked by open borders, free movement of people, more liberalized lifestyle and introduction of market elements into the economy, intensive exchange with the world on many domains and free artistic expression, Yugoslav socialism was "something else, something in between" (Blazevic 2000: 85).

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<sup>10</sup> In the larger project on art and ideology I will draw Walter Benjamin's ideas formulated in his works where he explores the link between art and ideology, especially in the books *Illuminations* and *Reflections*. In addition I will use Balibar's ideas on the mutually constitutive process of constructing class, national and racial identity during nation-building processes (Balibar 1991).

Artistic production during socialist Yugoslavia was indeed something “in between:” in contrast to prevalent art practices in real socialism, Yugoslavia did not recognize its interest or representation in the arts by imposing an aesthetic canon. By revising the notion of the “working class,” and by recognizing the role of the worker and the citizen as central in its version of socialism, and not the monolithic collective construct of “working class” prevalent in the Soviet Union, Yugoslav socialism allowed new possibilities of expression to emerge in the domain of culture and arts. In contrast to the western world, there was no market influence to regulate artistic production based on its acceptance or rejection, but there were also no obvious external pressures to regulate the artist’s act of creation (Blazevic 2000). Hence, art existed in an “interest-less” space which was nonetheless saturated with more subtle ideological infusions.

In practice, art remained under the ideological control of the League of the Communists and under the financial control of the Self-managing communities of interest for culture, who, by determining the use and distribution of state funds, essentially decided the existence of art and the dominant value system. Blazevic (2000) argues that the dominant value system placed modernism at the top of the scale, which, actually, was not modernism in its historical sense, but was rather a modified version of it: one in which the ideological and political elite found their new representation. This new form of modernism preferred “pure art engaged only with itself, which did not touch the social or political sphere and was harmless to the regime” (Blazevic 2000: 87). This Yugoslav version of modernism initiated counteraction in the avant-garde movement which rejected the understanding of art as the production of aesthetic objects, but radically questioned and engaged with the society, the system and ideology within which it acted.

The MOE festival fully belongs to the modernist artistic tendency. Emerging in the context of a larger architectural, social and economic modernization of the city of Skopje after the 1963 earthquake, MOE was a modernizing project *par excellence* from modernizing the audience in Skopje and bringing it closer to European tendencies, to improving the quality of the Macedonian opera and ballet ensembles. As such, MOE had never had any subversive or critical elements that could contradict the larger Yugoslav and Macedonian socialist projects. Even the national operas such as *Car Samoil* or *Ilinden* should be viewed within this context of modernization as well as the young talents’ competition which, again was supposed to reform and improve the role of young artists.

The introduction of the market principle did not strictly follow the 1991 independence of Macedonia. The period between 1991 and 2004 is the one when MOE has suffered most

drastically, endured the 1997 cancellation, was characterized by shortest repertoires, and had shown utter inability to catch up with the new time. After introducing market principle in 2004 that conditioned promotion of main sponsors, the festival again exists but now fully complying with the capitalist, market-oriented system in which education and reaching out to wider audience is dismissed and compromised at the expense of earning profit and gaining cultural capital.

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## Appendix 1:



Picture 1. The mounting of the sculptures and the neon sign on the opera plateau on May 8 2007.



Picture 2. The combination of the neon sign, the sculptures and the two AUDI cars displayed at the entrance of the opera and ballet building.



Picture 3. The Macedonian opera singer Slavica Petrovska-Galic lights the traditional festival fire on 9 May 2007..