Accommodation of Cultural Diversity in Public Spaces:

The Case of Skopje (Macedonia)

Diversity, accommodation, interethnic conflict, public space, urban citizenship, urban planning, Skopje

Summary

Access to publicly shared space and accommodation of cultural diversity in public spaces pose challenges for urban planning and management in multicultural cities with an experience of violent inter-ethnic conflict. Responses to these challenges require an understanding of the mechanisms that facilitate integration at a city level and improve social interaction between ethnic groups. Ethnic diversity and cultural heterogeneity are a reality for the city of Skopje, the capital of Macedonia. The changing ethnic demography and redressed power-balance between majority and non-majority groups on a local level have spurred a turbulent conflict – that of governance of diversity in public space. Therefore, it is imperative to investigate under which conditions cultural diversity in multicultural cities and neighbourhoods can affect the lives of the residents, and with what impact (Low, Taplin, and Scheld, 2005).

In the Macedonian context of recognising diversity, the popular belief of politicians, academics or ordinary people is that accommodation of diversity in public space implies the right of the dominant group and that the ethnic identity of its members be visually represented in the territory they occupy. Symbols of a group`s ethnic history and cultural memory facilitate recognition and identification with space, which recreates it as an

ethnic space. The new cultural nationalism capitalised in the project *Skopje 2014* installed mono-ethnic narratives in public spaces and removed the "dangerous" memories of the Other, reducing the role of citizens as mere spectators of how spaces, communities and the city are created.

Hence, this research aims to understand how citizens of the city of Skopje perceive the practices of accommodation of cultural diversity in public spaces. In particular, it aims to understand citizens' views on how language, ethnicity, religion and collective cultural symbols are legitimised through the physical form and the political, social and symbolic (cultural) value of public spaces in their neighbourhoods.

Despite the significant groundwork in the field of political science, sociology, cultural studies and social psychology on the philosophical and pragmatic aspects of multiculturalism, in Macedonia there is relatively little knowledge of how the general public understands multiculturalism and how it understands fair and *just* accommodation of diversity, including citizens` participation in decision-making of the city's urban space (Research question 1). Furthermore, a comparative analysis of citizens' perceptions of practices of accommodation of diversity in ethnically more homogenous and ethnically mixed neighbourhoods can reveal where potential transformative power lies. It can also ascertain if citizens in ethnically mixed neighbourhoods nurture more inclusive practices of recognising diversity in public spaces and if such neighbourhoods represent a way toward the production of more shared public spaces in a multicultural city (Research question 2). Exploring what citizens perceive as appropriate in regards to representation of diversity in public space may inform how the concept of "the citizen" is constructed (Research question 3). Finally, this work lays the ground for an elaboration of specific

principles that provide a framework for governance of diversity within a multicultural city (Research question 4).

Theoretically, the overarching goal to develop a concept for the planning of public spaces of diversity in multicultural cities has three pillars, namely: public space, identity and diversity. The transversal themes are politics of recognition, multiculturalism, ideology, power and deliberation. This research adopts a social constructivist paradigm and interprets the constructed relationship between public spaces and their users starting from three main theoretical frameworks, namely, the contact hypothesis (Allport, 1979), the theory of the production of space (Lefebvre, 1991) and the social identity theory (Tajfel, 1974). According to the contact hypothesis, contacts between groups are facilitated and structured under conditions of equal status. In addition, working on activities that share common goals, promoting cooperation instead of competition, and being supported by authorities and institutions all are effective ways to reduce intergroup anxiety, hostility and prejudice, and hence, may moderate intergroup bias. An inevitable aspect of the contact situation is its locatedness. This research focuses on the physical setting of the contact –urban public spaces. Lefebvre (2009), however, does not recognise space as a pure material reality but as produced and fundamentally bonded to the social reality – social space. He argues that any analysis of social space should begin with physical space and its users and the experience of space as directly lived in everyday life. Finally, experiences, perceptions and feelings raised in/of public spaces become symbolised in the urban landscape and they may reinforce individual identification and, in particular, facilitate the building of a local identity. Social identities, as part of the self-concept, derive from the knowledge of what it means to be a member of a certain group or groups,

including the value and emotional significance of the membership that is often related to belonging to a certain space.

The research is focused on the city of Skopje. It uses quantitative and qualitative methods. The quantitative methodology involves a two-stage probability sampling approach in two ethnically more homogenous (the municipality of Kisela Voda and the municipality of Saraj) and two ethnically mixed neighbourhoods (the municipality of Chair and the municipality of Butel). 403 randomly selected household members are interviewed using a structured questionnaire. In order to further understand citizens` responses, 30 interviews based on an open-end questionnaire with residents of the selected neighbourhoods are conducted. The selection of interviewees is based on convenience sampling.

The results indicate that the political value of public spaces to stimulate contact, deliberation and debate among citizens on issues of their concern is undermined. Public spaces in the neighbourhoods in Skopje are not planned and managed through a wide forum of citizen engagement nor is meaningful discussion stimulated among residents on needs, attitudes, perspective and worldviews. Less than a quarter of the citizens have been to a council meeting to deliberate on public representation of diversity while less than a third have participated in any deliberation activity on the topic at a local level. Citizens argue that they have been neither invited nor informed of any deliberation activity. This suggests that citizens in Skopje neither discuss, talk or debate on policy issues of common interest with their co-citizens, nor debate such issues with their elected representatives in the municipal bodies. Citizens even doubt if deliberation in any form is happening in their neighbourhood and also lack civic consciousness of participation as

both a right and a duty. Decision-making in the accommodation of diversity in politically and socially fragmented contexts is a process solely within the hands of the politicians. The ethno-based model of accommodation facilitated through the political elites does not allow equal participation of all concerned individuals. As a result, citizens do not feel ownership over decisions taken on how to accommodate diversity in public spaces.

Employed and economically inactive persons are more likely than unemployed persons to participate in deliberation activities on the accommodation of diversity in public spaces at a local level, while those with higher educational qualifications are less motivated to participate in such deliberative discussions. Furthermore, ethnic groups in a numerical minority show a greater level of participation than ethnic groups in a numerical majority.

The results indicate that participation in local decision-making processes on how to accommodate diversity in public spaces is not affected by the homogeneity of the neighbourhood. Levels of participation between ethnic and mixed neighbourhoods in deliberation on public representation of diversity do not differ. However, the level of participation is very low. In homogeneous areas, it may be easier for residents to come to common solutions but a rising problem lies in motivating citizens` participation in policy-making *per se*.

Exclusion from discussions does not only occur in mixed neighbourhoods and with less numerous or less powerful groups, it seems to be part of a broader political culture and demonstrates how democracy *works* in post-transitional societies. Powerlessness, distrust in politicians, political passivity, atomised citizenry and clientelism are some of the results of an elite-based model of governance of diversity practiced in Macedonia. Although highly politicised, public spaces in Skopje are excluded from any discussion on

change and transformation of the dominant ethno-cultural content of belonging and the homogenising ideology of the citizenship, thus leaving no opportunities for citizens to openly discuss their fears, common concerns and possible joint actions.

In regards to the social function of public spaces, the results indicate that the potential of public spaces to catalyse "everyday multiculturalism" is not fully utilised. The colliding ethnonationalism and symbolic power struggle between the major ethnic groups in Skopje result in co-ethnic preferences in socialisation and selection of public spaces. In particular, members of different ethnic groups living in mixed neighbourhoods tend to avoid intercultural contact and prefer events and traditions celebrating their own ethnic culture. More diversity could result in more inclination for interethnic contact and solidarity, as suggested by contact theory. Instead, in the multi-ethnic neighbourhoods in Skopje, self-segregation of ethnic groups is prevalent. In particular in ethnically mixed areas, segregation and particularisation of activities of ethnic groups in public spaces hinder meaningful multicultural encounters that although may be superficial are nevertheless direct.

Co-ethnic socialisation is not a preference for specific ethnic groups. Macedonians, Albanians and Others share a similar pro-social attitude towards their own ethnic group. There are decisions that are ethnic-neutral, such as the selection of public spaces for rest and recreation and, in general, people in ethnic neighbourhoods show greater curiosity and preparedness for intercultural ventures in events and spaces with diverse ethnic groups than those in ethnically mixed neighbourhoods.

In Skopje, people accept diversity as a fact but still choose to remain within their own ethnic boundaries and comfort zones of ethnically marked spaces. The tendencies for out-

group homogeneity and in-group favouritism practised by the citizens in Skopje shape their personal behaviour and attitude towards Others and, in that respect, where and with whom to socialise. This is not to say that public spaces are not important in the daily lived experiences. Rather, public spaces in the neighbourhoods in Skopje are not planned to support multicultural exchange and the conditions that lead and sustain intergroup contact are not systematically conceived as part of a wider policy on socio-spatial integration.

The concept of "the appropriate citizen" constructed through the symbolic meaning of the objects accommodated in public spaces perpetuates ethnonational rhetoric and produces an effect of "staged multiculturalism". In the case of Skopje, the practices of accommodation of diversity in public space support expressions of citizenship that are limited to the nation-state and ethnic identification. Public spaces in both mixed and ethnic neighbourhoods provide comfort and positive experiences with diversity but do not generate acceptance and visual recognition of symbols of other ethnic histories and cultures. Conformity of language(s) used in public space generates disagreements between residents in ethnic and mixed neighbourhoods. Macedonians more often than Albanians and Others support majority language normativity. The use of languages of other ethnic groups is considered as a matter for the private sphere. Albanians are more divided on this issue, with an almost equal proportion of people supporting and rejecting majority language normativity, both in ethnic neighbourhoods where they represent a majority and in mixed neighbourhoods. This division parallels an aversion to seeing signs in public spaces written in the languages of ethnic minorities. Ethnic groups in majority are particularly sensitive to the disrespect shown by ethnic minorities for national

symbols, such as the official language or national flag. This is interpreted as a threat to national unity. The need for more co-ethnic symbols in public space triggers a fear of over-domination but also reflects a deeper fear of redistribution of power and resources between groups, discomfort in challenging the dominant worldview and of the homogeneity of the political community. These fears fortify ethnic belonging as the guardian of a group`s survival.

The form, shape and objects accommodated in public spaces in the neighbourhoods in Skopje narrate a "story of citizenship" that becomes "more about the norms and values of a homogeneous culturally defined community" (Slootman and Duyvendak, 2015: 148) than about the differences in the political community or "the constantly reconfigured collective identities" (Parekh, 2008: 41). Public spaces and the symbolic representation of cultures and ethnic histories have become part of the emotionalisation of citizenship (Slootman and Duyvendak, 2015: 152). Developing feelings of home, identification and acceptance of the established order represented in the form and the symbolic meaning of objects accommodated in public spaces purport loyalty to the nation-state and undermine other forms of collective identification, particularly with the immediate locality, the neighbourhood and the urban city identity.

So, where does the transformation towards the production of more shared public spaces in a multicultural city lie? Which specific principles provide a framework for governance of diversity within a multicultural city?

Transformative experiences of diversity in inclusive public spaces lie in the social planning that stimulates convivial instead of cohabited living. In the current context such examples are multicultural education environments and open public spaces used for

rest and recreation. While there is formal equality and unrestricted access in spaces in the neighbourhoods in Skopje, self-segregation between ethnic groups persists and effectuates in ethnic spaces. And this is more than just an effect of poorly planned physical spaces. It is a reflection of the lack of social planning of spaces, differences in social status and a reflection of the divided society on many levels: linguistically, in education and cultural consumption. Social planning of public spaces can compensate some of the deficiencies in technical urban planning. It can shift urban planning from the vision of abstract place makers towards the lived experiences of people and, in particular, to the recognition of diversity accommodated in public spaces. A major challenge of urban planning in a multicultural context is the accommodation of a politics of recognition that accepts cultural independence within an individualistic framework of equality, equity and respect for difference. The basic principles of the planning of public spaces that recognise diversity should include: *Interpretation and recognition of difference through deliberation and active urban citizenship*; *Habitual engagement and interdependence of goals and actions*; and *Social planning of public spaces as places of conflict and negotiation, in contrast to technocratic, "staged" multiculturalism*. More so, "constructed" spaces of deliberation that allow multiple associations should be available in both an informal setting of self-organisation of citizens and formal citizen engagement. In socially and ethnically diverse contexts, institutionalisation of accommodation mechanisms and promotion of deliberative political culture need to avoid essentialist consequences.

There are challenges in making these principles a "lived" practice. Among them is dealing with the internalised political powerlessness among citizens and the top-down

elite-based planning practices. Citizens of Skopje lack knowledge of the technical side of urban planning, lack motivation to get engaged in decision-making on issues that affect their lives, and lack knowledge on the available mechanism for citizen participation within the institutional framework. They also lack social solidarity and civic consciousness to react when those different from them are affected because diversity is not perceived as a potential to redress social injustice and discrimination.

This research contributes to an understanding that the context where contacts between different and often opposing groups happen can be more important than previously accentuated in the literature and practice. In opposition to contact theory, this research indicates that self-segregation of ethnic groups can be prevalent in multi-ethnic neighbourhoods. This should make us think of the context where the contact is established and not only in situations where the content of the interaction is based on activities with common and interdependent goals that can only be achieved through cooperation among groups. The changed ethnic demography of the neighbourhoods in Skopje has included other socio-cultural and visual transformations of the public spaces that may have intensified the mistrust between groups and reflected a deeper fear of redistribution of power and resources and challenged cultural values and worldviews. Such a context is not a favourable condition for developing positive intergroup contacts.

This research also confirms the important role of citizens and their mobilisation in the production of public space. The process of production of space (actors, roles, power hierarchies) should not be reduced to the activities of the abstract space makers/urban planners but be installed as a process of the public production of space.

In the end, the citizens of multicultural neighbourhoods and the city of Skopje need to rethink their urban identity and impose urban citizenship as an important dimension of identification within space/place. As Van Bochove, Rušinović and Engbersen (2009: 117) observe, the local level "offers the primary site for active citizenship and for processes of social identification". The political implementation of the planning principles that recognise diversity based on deliberation mechanisms necessitates a new planning culture and an enabling environment, as well as urbanists who "look beyond power relations" (Yiftachel and Huxley, 2000: 923), and citizens who are prepared to push personal and collective boundaries, to ask, debate and critically observe the multicultural reality of our city.