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**Fluidity and friendship: the choir that surprised the city**

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**Introduction:**

At the moment Skopje, the capital of the Republic of Macedonia, is still undergoing one of Europe’s biggest urban design upheavals - a project dubbed Skopje 2014. Described as a ‘building bonanza’, by Guardian[[1]](#footnote-1), the Skopje 2014 project was planned by the Government for several years with a relative lack of transparency,. The plan was originally intended to transform the city centre into an area of concentrated development, with a wide range of interventions and numerous new buildings. The plan for Skopje 2014 provoked considerable protest activity, both online and offline. Since 2009, activist groups and self-organised groups of citizens have opposed the city authorities over the plans. One of the most prominent protest groups is the self-organised choir Raspeani Skopjani, who protest by singing. Over the last six years, I have had the privilege to follow their work, mostly on social media. I became interested in their work because it is performative, humorous and also represents the problem that Skopje faces as a city.

For that reason, I invited three activists and media researchers who are active in the cultural resistance in Skopje to elaborate their thinking on the choir Raspeani Skopjani’s activities. They all answered the same five questions about the choir’s strategies (on the streets and on social media) around the project Skopje 2014. The text is also interspersed with documentation (videos and images) of the choir’s activities that was widely circulated on social media.

**Interview:**

(Video link 1: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=abj7WstJmdM>

Caption: Raspeani Skopjani performing Bella Ciao 11 October 2010)

**EM: Raspeani Skopjani is a unique phenomenon in Macedonia. Their protest is playful, but direct and it involves historical references to both socialism and choral singing in Macedonia. What in your opinion is the contribution of the choir to the Macedonian democratic discussion?**

**JJ:** To be honest, I've never thought about Raspeani Skopjani as making deliberate references to socialism and choral singing, but it definitely is a very interesting and true observation. The birth of the choir was a spontaneous action: we started singing as a protest. It took a little while until the idea was shaped in the final form of the choir as we know it – a group of people who are inclusive, who want to point out aspects of society that are wrong, and who do it by democratically choosing songs for each situation, then sing in situ in a guerilla action, which is recorded and then posted on YouTube.
Our aim was to rethink and reshape protest, and to be inclusive (anyone could join). We practiced horizontal democracy and a system of voting for topics and songs – we were absolutely equal regardless of who we were and how long we had been in the choir. How much we actually contributed to the democratic discussion, and if we made an impact on the society is hard to say, since we still live in a polarised country with parallel values.

**KM:** Raspeani Skopjani are indeed a rare example of citizen self-organisation in Macedonia in the last ten years. They use choral singing as a medium to voice a political message, unlike the legacy of choral singing with the aim of entertaining prevalent in the 1980s. However, Raspeani Skopjani are not here to entertain but to protest (they make the audience feel engaged and comfortably amused). Choral singing, as they employ it, is a political act, a collective political protest, a manifestation of resistance to the dominant, cultural hegemony advocated by the government and its supporters.

**NÇ:** Raspeani Skopjani appeared as a reaction to the rapid and unsought changes happening to our city. They were a fluid group of fun, hip and dead serious youth. Their use of reference through selected local songs from a bygone era, as well as world hits such as *They don’t even care about us* (Michael Jackson) and *Guns of Brixton* (The Clash), to name a few, was a virtuous way of converging assembly, music, and text to convey meaning and spread messages. I would give them special respect for their performance of *The Internacionale*, the hymn of those who strive for change in society, for revolution. They were a voice that disrupted the silence.

(Video link 2: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_QRvYevSPIM>

Caption: Raspeani Skopjani performing *They don’t even care about us* 19 December 2009)

**EM: What in your opinion is the role of humour in the work of Raspeani Skopjani? And how do they use visual references?**

**JJ**: Humour is very important. You unmask and disarm your opponent with humour. In our case, the opponent was (and still is) a very conservative and restrictive regime that uses fear as a ruling mechanism.

As for the visual references, they consisted of choosing appropriate locations for the performances, and sometimes included “costumes”: gas masks when we addressed the issue of pollution, balaclavas when we sang for the freedom of Pussy Riot, balloons under our garments when we sang against the new law that made abortions more difficult for women, etc.

**KM:** They are, in a way, the political comedians, the satirists that we need so much. The verses and locations are in explicit relation to each other. Humour is a prop that complements this. Verses/ songs are carefully chosen to show the absurdity of political discourse in the country. In my view, the visual references, or the “locatedeness”[[2]](#footnote-2) (Dixon and Durrheim, 2000) of the performance, is the context that provides the meaning of the message. The embeddedness of the performance in the local context and the socio-political relations is what allows Raspeani Skopjani’s performance to be a reconstruction of social reality. For example, the remake of the “Every Sperm is Sacred” scene, from Monty Python's *The Meaning of Life* in front of the Central Orthodox church, was a comment on the religious position towards the sexual satisfaction of women, their role in society and the drivers behind the need for self-actualisation among women (being a mother). Without the locatedness, Raspeani Skopjani’s performance loses political value (the message) and emotional significance. Dixon and Durrheim (2000) note that the question of “who we are” is often intimately related to the question of “where we are”, and in choir’s performance this is evident. Their performance could easily be a political musical.

**EM: Communication technologies create new possibilities for self-organisation and self-mobilisation, bypassing barriers of censorship and repression imposed by the state. For Manuel Castells the possibility of protest relies on the affordances of technologies that he classifies as mass self-communication. Raspeani Skopjani makes use of mass self-communication technologies to generate documentation of their performances. What in your opinion is the significance of this online YouTube documentation?**

**JJ:** We should not underestimate the general phenomenon of social media, since we have been using Facebook to promote our video and to recruit new members. Both Facebook and YouTube are important as they serve as an archive of our actions. The fact that everything we have done is available to any audience is important in the sense that it can inspire others to react to social injustices in their own way, and take our story even further. What is also significant is that all the comments – both positive and negative – are documented under the videos.

**KM:** I see their YouTube archive as a testimony and inspiration for the future generations, as a proof of opposing voices to the homogenised voice that the current government is trying to forge us to believe in – that “we, the citizens and the government sing in harmony”. Yet, it may also become true that cyber space is also among the spaces where Raspeani Skopjani began the process of social transformation.

**NÇ:** It is an archive, as is the whole of the Internet. One could say it is a perpetually engaged public space that one can access at will. Or a memory. At the time when they performed, Raspeani Skopjani were very present online as part of a larger group of people taking critical stances on the same issues. As the group grew, a broader online discussion developed, apart from using social media as a means to mobilize. The availability of the archive is an asset always, however the archive is stagnant without the user, the point of deliberation lies within the user, the level of civic engagement- the public conscience.

(Video link 3: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7XcPmqX9T9I> Caption: Raspeani Skopjani performing *Every sperm is sacred* 13 May 2013 )

**EM: The choir is self-organised, and their actions are a revolt against the antiquisation of the Macedonian public sphere. Do you think that over the course of six years’ work its members have built an organisational model? What are the most significant elements that you can trace in their mode of practice both on the streets and online?**

**JJ:** The antiquisation was just the spark that ignited the forming of the choir. During the six years we addressed a myriad of other issues that are equally important.
As far as the organisational model is concerned, Raspeani Skopjani is a completely voluntary, horizontally democratic, fluid, and informal group. That kind of group relies solely on each individual's sense of responsibility: in terms of existence, dynamics, activity, issues and the musical and visual result. What I have personally learned through this experience (and the experience of protesting as well) is that personal involvement, responsibility towards the other(s), giving your best, is what will make any group stronger and more influential – be that a choir or a society.

(Image RS1: Caption: Raspeani Skopjani Facebook page)

**KM:** To my knowledge, this self-organized platform maintained their horizontal structure. As I see them, there was never an ambition to eventually emerge as an organizational model. Fluidity and friendship. These were the main features that I noticed in how they operate. The structure was fluid, without delegate tasks, thus this may have been a detriment to the future of the group. They showed persistence in the face of external pressure; raised the debate on how the society was changing under nationalistic policies; they managed to mobilize “new” generation of critical minds in Skopje. However, I would need to note that one characteristic of this group has been negatively perceived by the general public. It has been viewed as “elitist”, a closed group, in contrast to their ability to mobilize. It seems that their message was received by a selected “mind-set” in Skopje.

**EM: We have a new generation of protestors who continue to resist the Government’s re-ordering of space and they are using art/colour to protest against the technocratic re-ordering of the city. What is the connection to Raspeani Skopjani? Or is this new protest movement indirectly the legacy of Raspeani Skopjani?**

**JJ:** The newest protests were triggered by our President's decision to pardon politicians for crimes they might have committed. Part of those crimes could have involved Skopje 2014, but even if they hadn't, the dissatisfaction and revolt comes from the same core – a very corrupt and aggressive government. In that sense, Raspeani Skopjani as a choir, and most of the protests around Macedonia do share the same values.

(Image RS2 Caption: Raspeani Skopjani performing at the Choir Festival "Vsi v en glas" Ljubljana, Slovenia 8 June 2013 )

**KM:** In recent years, new generations of self-organised citizens’ micro networks emerged in Skopje, and other smaller cities across the country. And they are using diverse means to firstly mobilise the citizenry and secondly, to voice their message. The destruction of their immediate environment, such as parks and small unmanaged spaces within the neighbourhoods, motivated citizens to occupy the streets and also the targeted locations. Research undertaken on self-organisation in the urban sphere reported that urban planners working in local urban departments are fully unacquainted, blind to the grass-root resistance of citizens who are defending their neighbourhoods. The government, both at local and national level was blind to the authentic character of self-organisation. These initiatives have managed to make less impact on the physical environment but have surely succeeded in creating a sense of belonging and social responsibility. I would not claim that these initiatives are the legacy of Raspeani Skopjani per se, but I would agree that the transferred knowledge is that of social responsibility, ownership, building neighbourhood ties and participation. The only direct link between these new initiatives and the choir that I could establish is that people who have been mobilised though the choir are protesting on the streets of Skopje. This means that the choir have achieved mobilization and “audience-development”. These initiatives, including Raspeani Skopjani, are not only resisting a current cultural/political practice of planning public space and the city in general, but protesting against the principle of a representative democracy and the ballot vote as the sole legitimate political engagement of the citizens. Participation, deliberation, citizens as decision-makers not user/customers, these are the qualities of the system sought by these grass-root initiatives. These initiatives question the institutional designs and the willingness for power-sharing among bureaucrats. In this sense, the legacy of Raspeani Skopjani is the revisiting of the idea “right to a city” [[3]](#footnote-3), a space “where citizens can act to potentially affect policies, discourses, decisions and relationships that affect their lives and interests”[[4]](#footnote-4).

**NÇ:** The Colourful Revolution was a massive protest which utilized paint as its weapon of choice. It was cathartic to experience the release of citizen power onto the city through colour. In comparison to Raspeani Skopjani, the Colourful Revolution was a spectacle, the energy was immense and the media covered it globally. Both may be related as modes of creative protest and there is definitely continuity between them. However, music and colour did not succeed to awaken people here. They did not even bother to clean all the paint, so we are uncomfortably left with reminders of a lost battle.

(Image RS3 Raspeani Skopjani performing in Skopje, summer 2014)

1. Helena Smith, ‘Macedonia statue: Alexander the Great or a warrior on a horse?’ Guardian, 14 August 2011 <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/aug/14/alexander-great-macedonia-warrior-horse> [accessed 20 November 2012]. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. John Dixon and Kevin Durrheim, Displacing place-identity: A discursive approach to locating self and other. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 39 (1) (March, 2000) 27-44 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Henri Lefebvre, *Writings on Cities*. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1996) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. John Gaventa, Finding the Spaces for Change: A Power Analysis, *Institute of Development Studies Bulletin*, 37 (6) (November 2006) 23-33. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)