

# AESTHETICS AS TECHNIQUE AND SPATIAL OCCUPATION IN HYBRID POLITICAL REGIMES

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## abstract

This essay is exploring the theoretical approaches on the applications of politics, space, and aesthetics in hybrid regimes in the work of Foucault, Lefebvre, and Rancière. It provides some empirical background by examining various projects in Skopje and Belgrade which can shed light on the use of aesthetics as a technique for spatial occupation. Further, I explore citizens' perceptions of this spatial redefinition. The essay presents a new reflection on aesthetics within the wider understanding of the role of political rhythms in hybrid regimes and further presents an idea of how a political establishment disposes a new set of spatial practices through the field of aesthetics. This theory can contribute to the ongoing debates about the relationship between politics, spatiality, and aesthetics.

**KEYWORDS:** Aesthetics, spatial occupation, hybrid regimes, North Macedonia, Serbia

Political disputes around different spatial arrangements underline the influence of aesthetics and the way they can extend politics spatially, beyond a strictly conventional deployment. From this perspective, “politics is first of all a battle about perceptible and sensible material”<sup>1</sup> – one that revolves around what can be seen and sensed and by which politics is brought to visibility, so that it “renders an object, event, practice, or person at once visible and available for accountability.”<sup>2</sup> Understanding the significance and meaning of a given space has introduced a new wave of power distributions arising from decisions, policies and values driven by governments and other powerful bodies. Political action, as a range of actors operating in order to impose their regimes on visibility and modes of perception, engages aesthetics that simply “provide the political life of sensation.”<sup>3</sup>

I use the term “aesthetic-political regime”<sup>4</sup> to refer to this contextual space in which aesthetical manifestations are embedded into politics or more precisely, give concrete shape to a political regime’s principles through a series of architectonic buildings, structures, and monuments in public spaces, sponsored by governments and local authorities. In this formulation, aesthetics, or more precisely aesthetics as a technique for spatial occupa-

tion, becomes a means of power and domination. In this sense, aesthetics is politically instrumentalized, takes many forms and versions, and is enacted in different ways. This distinction is important because it defines how organized forms, meanings, and top-down colonization of spaces by power elites to a certain extent disregards the will of the people. The relation between aesthetics and power relations is worth examining in some detail since it can provide important insights, especially in the context of the expression of power in politically authoritarian regimes. The article focuses specifically on hybrid regimes, states that are neither liberal democracies nor closed authoritarian systems, where a strong relationship between transition and the new meaning of the space, in terms of politically marked spatiality, becomes evident. It is worth noting that “the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw the rise of a great number of regimes that cannot be easily classified as either authoritarian or democratic but display some characteristics of both”.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, it can be argued that the visual manifestation of hybrid regimes is shaped through the field of aesthetics. In some cases, the governing elites reinforce contemporary right-wing populist conceptions which involve aspects of the politics of memory that are “materialized through the erection of monuments, a ceremony complex, memorabilia production, and official historiography production”.<sup>3</sup>

THESE CONDITIONS can be exemplified by the Western Balkan countries that are undergoing processes of transition and transformation and can be classified as “transitional governments or hybrid regimes”;<sup>4</sup> positioned between democracy and authoritarian regimes. The hybrid regimes that are in power in the region actively produce a certain spatial contextualization and visibility: a mixture of aesthetics, politics and populism. This essay discusses these points in the cases of the Republic of North Macedonia and the Republic of Serbia, exploring how the governments strive to change the cultural and historical continuum of public spaces and involve the population in a drive for a new symbolic momentum and identification, mainly by referring to neoclassical architecture and sculptures.

In the context of the frame set out above, this essay is organized as follows. I begin by exploring theoretical debates over the meaning of politics, space and aesthetics and develop theoretical approaches that have a particular resonance with the work of Foucault, Lefebvre, and Rancière who examine how political regimes have intervened in a concrete spatial and historical context. The next section provides some empirical background by examining various projects in Skopje and Belgrade which can be seen as establishing a series of architectonic buildings and monuments in an attempt to materialize a new historic view and promote alternative identity representations. In other

words, they shed light on the use of aesthetics as a technique of spatial occupation. Further, I explore citizens’ perceptions of this project in spatial redefinition, where the analysis is based on visual methodology and a variety of visual tools.

## How can politics be extended spatially?

It is an essential aspect of the political to continually intervene in space. Henri Lefebvre and Michael Foucault have provided theoretical elaborations by resorting to a constitutive ontology of power and spatiality where the act of politics embodies spatial extension and determines what might constitute the spatiality of power. The French Marxist philosopher and sociologist Lefebvre highlights the inherent dynamic of politics and space, noting that “there is a politics of space because space is political”.<sup>5</sup> Elaborating further on this point, “in a conference given in 1970, Lefebvre broadened that analysis and argued that space is the ultimate locus and medium of struggle and is therefore a crucial political issue”.<sup>6</sup> Further, as he argues, “space is political; it is not a scientific object removed from ideology or politics; it has always been political and strategic”.<sup>7</sup> Thus, extending politics spatially means developing “techniques of spatial occupation”, which can be viewed as the instruments of social and individual control and which are also mobilized around certain political and historical narratives. Foucauldian studies on the spatial distribution of institutional power in asylums, hospitals, and prisons can be widely extended to consider the political role of space in general, and his insights can be extended to the city and to entire territories. Foucault’s work was always “filled with implications and insights concerning spatiality”,<sup>8</sup> and he claims that “a whole history remains to be written of spaces—which would at the same time be the history of powers”,<sup>9</sup> and that there is always a dialectical interplay between these two modes that converge so frequently throughout history.

A trajectory towards the spatiality of politics structures my argument about spatial occupation; there is a way to take this forward in thinking aesthetics in this sense, and it raises the question as to how an analysis of the aesthetics

of spatiality may be conceptualized. Aesthetics as a technique for spatial occupation, therefore, is concerned with the conceptual and material accord between politics, power, and spatiality. A step towards broadening the notion of aesthetics to the concrete context is close to Rancière’s notion of the distribution of the sensible.<sup>10</sup> Rancière argues that politics can be understood, most generally, to be “[...] the configuration of a specific space, the delimitation of a particular sphere of experience, of objects established in common and coming from a common decision”,<sup>11</sup> which delineates a specific political presence. Rancière goes on to state, “if aesthetics is understood in its broad sense as a dis-

tribution of the sensible rather than the domain of artistic practice in the restricted sense, then the realm of the political (le politique) is fundamentally aesthetic in nature”.<sup>12</sup>

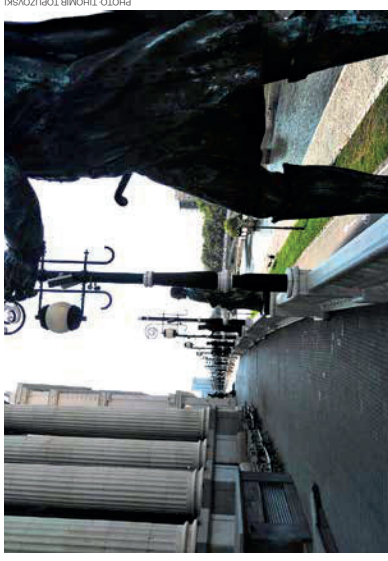
If we accept that the politics of space means developing techniques of spatial occupation driven by a powerful combination of factors, then aesthetics is part of “the function of politics as a world-building activity”.<sup>13</sup>

In some transitional historical contexts, aesthetics in the sense of various artistic forms, styles, and architectonic objects creates a new spatial significance and historical connotations which are triggered by moving from one political condition to another. Under political change the entire field of aesthetics is at stake. As noted above, the notion of aesthetics relates to the outcome of geopolitical changes and the processes involved in (re)arranging territories.

The effects of such transitional changes contribute to establishing the criteria for the new culture, art and “forms of correspondence that designate both the nature of perception and what counts as a subject of perception”.<sup>14</sup> In this interpretation, aesthetics can be a mode of populist politics of identification available to any political actor operating in a particular public sphere. The (re)arranging of the spatiality and “the marking of historical sites means that we equip them with memorials, signposts and other informative symbols”<sup>15</sup> and refers “to the spaces and processes of negotiation about whose conception of the past should prevail in the public realm”.<sup>16</sup> This suggests the importance of aesthetics in providing a particular political contingency of the spatial and shows how political imaginaries work to produce historically and geographically distinct aesthetics or bring new ones into being. As such, aesthetic technique is mainly evident in the account of authoritarian regimes. This shift has been important in redefining what it means in the case of “the hybrid regimes [that] are often labelled by the flaws in democracy, such as the concept of defective democracies or competitive authoritarianism”,<sup>17</sup> where aesthetics is characterized with authoritarian features and embedded nationalistic narratives.

## A comparative note on the capital cities in North Macedonia and Serbia

In approaching these aspects of aesthetics and political continuity, the specific focus of this study is on the recent history of Western Balkans, which has been marked by ongoing processes of transition. As a result, the countries of the Western Balkans have remained hybrid regimes or unconsolidated democracies.<sup>18</sup> Under the conditions of hybrid societies, the political regimes have used the cultural domain in order to gate-keep the view of history. The significance is that according to the political representatives of governments, a new narrative needs to be visualized through the field of aesthetics and it is important to say that most figurative imagery from historical architectural styles has

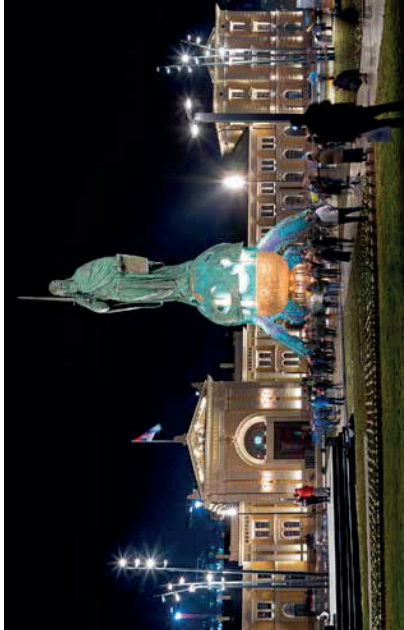


Statues in front of the Archaeological Museum of the Republic of North Macedonia.

been implemented in the capital cities, in which “constructed statuary, memorials, museums, grand boulevards, public squares, and ornate buildings ... function as ‘theaters of memory’ where selective histories about the state could be ritually enacted”.<sup>19</sup> In the context of the overall transitional restructuring, a strong relationship between the reframing of public spaces and the hegemonic authoritarianism narrative of hybrid regimes is evident in Skopje, capital of North Macedonia, and Belgrade, capital of Serbia. The most debated and visible of these projects were commissioned under the right-wing and populist governments between 2006–2016 in Skopje, North Macedonia, and throughout 2021 in Belgrade, Serbia.

FOR EXAMPLE in the case of Skopje “the visual manifestation of nationalism, corruption, and authoritarianism came in the launch of the Skopje 2014 project”.<sup>20</sup> The project is designed to strengthen national identity using neoclassical and baroque architecture and numerous sculptures and by renaming public spaces and streets. This illustrates how aesthetics can be used as a technique of spatial occupation. The project reflects the exercise of power in framing a new meaning for urban spaces and also involving the population of the Republic of Macedonia in the drive for identification<sup>21</sup> in which the Government wants to remove all traces of the past and rewrite history in Macedonia’s capital city and the nation. The combination of architectural styles is an important signifier of the political and ideological allegiance of this period, given historical connotations and the discursive aspects of cultural production. This project consists of 137 urban structures (buildings, a triumphal arch, façades, sculptures, bridges, fountains and public squares) and the cost is around 700 million euros.<sup>22</sup>

The plan not only created new buildings but also involved considerable revamping, or reshaping new façades



The monument to Stefan Nemanja in Belgrade.

has often been compared by critics to examples from Skopje, as noted above; it includes monuments and sculptures and is intended to serve the interests of the populist and autocratic government in Serbia.<sup>29</sup> This new nationalist imagery and the associated political narrative can be illustrated by considering the monument to Stefan Nemanja, Grand Prince of the Serbian Grand Principality in the 12<sup>th</sup> century. The monument in Belgrade is coupled with a statement by allies of President Aleksandar Vučić, declaring that “the 23-meter-high (75-foot-high), 70-ton bronze sculpture of the legendary founder of the Serbian state will be a new landmark of the Serbian capital and a symbol of Serbian statehood and unity.”<sup>30</sup> A similar example in Belgrade is the monument of Stefan Lazarević and related monuments by the head of Serbian foreign affairs, Selaković, that the new monument represents a true celebration of the capital of Serbia, since Belgrade became the royal seat for the first time during the reign of Despot Stefan.<sup>31</sup> These monuments, unveiled in Serbia in 2021, are coupled with several other similar statues erected in Belgrade, and the government plans to introduce other similar monuments and sculptures. At this point it is worth noting that these monuments can be considered in conjunction with the controversial urban project launched as Belgrade Waterfront (Beograd na vodi) by Vučić soon after taking office in 2014 which involves multiple large urban projects along the Sava river. This belief in the political capacity of aesthetics has taken many forms and visualizes the relationship between populism and nationalism in Serbia.

over old modern buildings. Thus, “the new façades form part of the wider government-sponsored plan known as Skopje 2014, which aims to give the neglected-looking capital a more monumental appearance by drawing inspiration from the styles of classical antiquity.”<sup>32</sup> The process started with the replacement of building façades in 2011, targeting some of the most iconic modern buildings in Skopje. For example, the Government of the Republic of Macedonia building was revamped with a new façade that changed it from a modern building to a structure that contained components from classical antiquity. This act was contrary to the legal and formal procedures of the country. The architect of the original building, Perar Mulickovski, recognized in former Yugoslavia for his work, “has opposed the idea of a new façade, citing his rights, as author of the original design, to be put in charge of any revamp if officials are determined to go ahead.”<sup>33</sup> This case suggests a drive to eradicate traces of modern architecture in Skopje, or what could be identified as part of the Yugoslavian legacy. Such destruction involves the demolition of the cultural values of a previous historical epoch of the country. In the case of monuments and sculptures in Skopje, most of the structures have commemorative functions, referring to certain historical periods, or situating them in the new narrative of Macedonia’s identity. Through monuments, officials evoked myths of a timeless nation;<sup>34</sup> thus the project adopted historical figures and symbols from various epochs such as Macedonia’s revolutionaries from past centuries, as well as sculptures that represent the Byzantine and Christian period. This symbolism includes other figures from antiquity, including the statue of Philip II in a victorious pose, with a statue of Alexander the Great nearby, captioned Warrior on horse. The mention of these various monuments and statues displayed in public places is to serve as a medium through which a new historical narrative is made tangible in the everyday lives of the citizens.

**THE RULING PARTY** in Serbia has also attempted to change the narrative of its public spaces. In Belgrade, the Serbian capital, there has been a significant increase in the use of monumental sculpture in public places, sponsored by the government. This project



Notes and cartogram of spatial violence. Author’s own animations.

citizens of Skopje. The visual questionnaires originated from the idea of developing an effective visual research instrument. Those involved in this survey were asked to indicate their responses on maps and mark aspects that they considered to be spatial violations of public spaces. In most cases, they indicated similar locations of spatial violations. Along with their graphic responses, they were asked to include brief explanations. I also combined respondents’ explanations with statistical data from the official institutions concerning the Skopje 2014 project schedule from 2007 to 2016. To illustrate these points, I created a cartogram which included brief examples of spatial violations in the city center which illustrate the use of aesthetics as a technique for spatial occupation. A cartogram is a map in which thematic problems are spatially distorted or visualized in terms of present data and various issues in their particular geographical and spatial context. The cartogram created for this purpose presents how the project Skopje 2014 violates the city center. It is made by using different colors for time periods and distortion of spatiality (see images 3 & 4).

**USING VISUAL** methodology opens new possibilities for tracing spatial violence and allows for perspectives from photos, images, drawings, and visual investigations, thus presenting a new form of public truth as in one of the Forensic Architecture collective’s cases.<sup>35</sup> This particular visualization aims to illustrate how politics is distributed spatially, embedded in certain aesthetic styles and material structures that violently disrupt the previous meanings of public spaces.

Further evidence supporting the view of spatial violation emerged when citizens of Belgrade protested against the local authorities on April 16, 2021, claiming that the monument of Stefan Nemanja is a megalomaniac and expensive token of Vučić’s populist and autocratic rule that should be removed. The



monument was unveiled in Belgrade, causing delight among the regime and disgust among many artists and activists because of its size and location – just outside the old railroad station in Belgrade.<sup>36</sup> The banner presented by the protesters read: “Stop the destruction of the city”, referring to the phenomenon of spatial violence.

It is important to realize that these aesthetic political projects lack transparency and quality and are widely considered as a form of systemic political corruption, where political interests and private benefit have significant influence on their realization. Furthermore, the range of criticism against these projects can be summarized in the statement that identity representation under certain political conditions as an illusion, leading us to the core idea of instrumentalism, that identity representation “is neither inherent, nor intrinsically valuable, but masks a deeper core of interests,”<sup>36</sup> or that the projects are useful for gaining political power or for drawing resources from the state<sup>37</sup> and shaping certain policies. Local authorities are involved in the creation and mapping of new cultural memories in public spaces, simultaneously creating a new form of identification for the citizens.

It can be seen as a kind of material commodification of a political view that definitively breaks with the previous logic of historical perception and introduces a new configuration of aesthetics using combinatory artistic forms with particular historical connotations.

## Conclusion

The essay presents a new reflection on aesthetics within the wider understanding of the role of political rhythms in hybrid regimes. Aesthetics and politics “are not two permanent and separate realities about which it might be asked if they must be put in relation to one another.”<sup>38</sup> On the contrary, the argument

## “MOST OF THE STRUCTURES HAVE COMMEMORATIVE FUNCTIONS, REFERRING TO CERTAIN HISTORICAL PERIODS, OR SITUATING THEM IN THE NEW NARRATIVE OF MACEDONIAN’S IDENTITY.”

I have proposed in this essay presents an idea of how a political establishment disposes a new set of spatial practices through the field of aesthetics. This theory can contribute to the ongoing debates about the relationship between politics, spatiality and aesthetics. Given the formulation of aesthetics as a technique of spatial occupation, this type of analysis considers how aesthetics in public spaces functions as a political tool, and how it can be used to reshape issues of identity and history by combining them with populism and nationalism. Skopje and Belgrade offer evidence of how spatial violence plays a constitutive role in the formation and sustenance of hybrid regimes. These projects are the outcome of new cultural policies, new models of spatial organization, different historical connotations and instrumentalization of the past. I suggest that in complex political and historical circumstances, the field of aesthetics can be employed to practice politics spatially where the meaning is always in flux: Where aesthetics as a parameter of the political has entered a novel stage. ✕

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