

IVANA ANGELOVA

**THE CASE OF TWO RIVERS:
LESSONS OF CONNECTIVITY
AND SOLIDARITY IN SKOPJE
AND LJUBLJANA**

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Author:

Ivana Angelova

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The Case of Two Rivers: Lessons of Connectivity and Solidarity in Skopje and Ljubljana

Introduction

Public Space as a Political Place

Public spaces hold significant political value as venues that enable public discourse and social interaction through community engagement. They represent the public realm where people of all socioeconomic backgrounds can engage in communal life. Likewise, these spaces play a crucial role in fostering social cohesion by offering neutral grounds for interaction, helping to bridge social divides, promote mutual understanding, and build a stronger sense of community. Public engagement is a cornerstone of democratic societies, as it allows for the expression of diverse viewpoints and the mobilization of collective action.

Public spaces are *commons* that serve as arenas for protests, festivals, and mundane everyday social interactions. All those outdoor activities contribute to a vibrant public sphere that is essential for a democratic city (Mumford 1961).

Urban design is not the only prerequisite for a democratic public place. Other factors are at play such as its location (proximity to public transport, public and private facilities, diverse ethnic neighborhoods, etc.), its accessibility (easy connectivity), how safe they are (good lighting at night, etc.), multifunctional design (enabling public participation for all ages and genders), the level of public participation (citizens' engagement with the local authorities) and how well-maintained it is and so on.

All those attributes show how public spaces can serve as tangible symbols of democratic values, reflecting a society's commitment to inclusivity and civic participation.

Urban Waterflows

Nearly every city globally finds its genesis near a freshwater source, typically a river. Rivers generate life and represent the origins of civilization and settlements. The flow lines of rivers served to establish the core axes along which most of our cities developed. These waterways serve as versatile sources of life and act as unifying forces within urban landscapes, social dynamics, and political contexts. Urban streams and greenways offer vast potential to mitigate various urban challenges like heat island effects, flooding, air pollution, and degraded water quality. They connect natural areas and provide a variety of benefits to both the environment and the community. The countries in Southeastern Europe are one of the most water-rich regions of the world. Cities in the region have a cultural history where water and life complement each other. Water integrates the past and the present, tradition and modernity.

Urban water sources reflect the identity of the city, the customs of its people and provide a sense of belonging.

Linear public spaces inherited from rivers like green promenades and walkways generate the flow of activities and enhance the overall livability of a city. They play a pivotal role in a city's urban infrastructure, offering distinctive qualities that differentiate them from other urban spaces, such as traditional parks and squares. The linear shape provides more opportunities for access than parks and integrates areas with different densities and usages like residential and commercial.¹ These linear public spaces contribute significantly to enhancing the overall quality of urban life. They serve as multifunctional corridors, providing unique opportunities for residents to engage in a variety of activities.

One distinguishing feature of linear public spaces is their capacity to offer extended routes for walking, jogging, or cycling. These spaces, often designed with continuous, interconnected pathways, promote physical activity among residents. Studies have demonstrated that users with living proximity to such public spaces have better physical and mental health stemming from regular exercise and exposure to nature.² Moreover, the linear nature of these spaces enables the creation of green corridors within the city, which not only purify the air but also offer opportunities for rest and relaxation. The elongated form of

¹ See PKDA Architects publication "Let streams of linear open spaces flow across urban landscapes", <https://pkdas.com/published/Let%20streams%20of%20linear%20open%20spaces%20flow%20across%20urban%20landscapes-10.8.15.pdf>

² See [Anon.] "The Health Benefits of Parks: How Parks Help Keep You Healthy", <https://www.tpl.org/health-benefits-parks>

linear public spaces has unique effects on social cohesion. While traditional parks and squares tend to be centralized and concentrated, linear public spaces cover extensive areas, often traversing diverse neighborhoods of different ethnicities. As a result, they function as connectors, bringing people from different parts of the city together. This connectivity can foster a sense of community for residents from various socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds. Some of their controversial attributes are the increased land value along rivers and the tourist attractiveness that contribute to economic development but have consequences on the memory of the land and gentrification.

Background and Rationale

Vardar and Ljubljana

The public spaces on the riverbanks of Vardar River in Skopje, North Macedonia and the Ljubljana River in Ljubljana, Slovenia are two very different cases, offering valuable lessons on how to unlock the potential of the democratic city.³ In line with the call, this research focused on the merits of urban waters in Southeast Europe and how they can facilitate a shared future in the public realm associated with the “social flows” of the following keywords:

emancipation

liberation or freedom

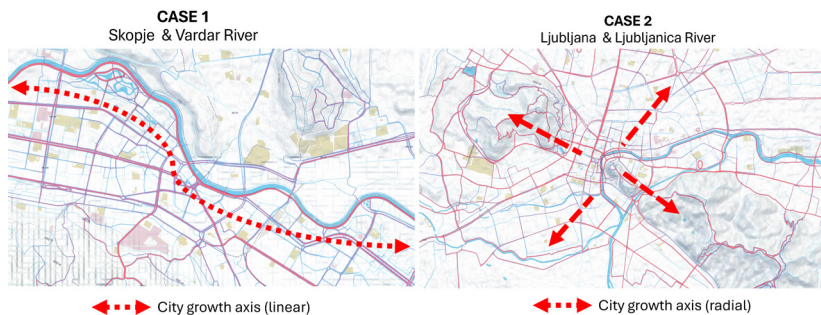
VS. oppression or subjugation

solidarity

unity or cooperation

³ Scholars like Henri Lefebvre, Jane Jacobs, Richard Sennett argue that truly democratic spaces should be open to all members of society and warn against the privatization.

VS. division or discord
collegiality
mutual respect and collaboration
VS hostility or antagonism



By examining these cases, we can understand the vital role that blue and green public spaces play in urban environments and how they can be harnessed to create more democratic, livable, and resilient cities.

The research delved into the evolution of public spaces along watercourses within the Balkan region, focusing on Skopje and Ljubljana as representative cases of urban development within the post-socialist context. Skopje, the capital of North Macedonia, and Ljubljana, the capital of Slovenia, offer contrasting trajectories of urban planning and development. Ljubljana is renowned for its successful integration of sustainable urban solutions, while Skopje faces ongoing challenges in incorporating similar strategies. By comparing these cities, valuable insights into the factors that contribute to the success or failure of urban public spaces can be drawn.

The research identified patterns in the usage of urban corridors in the Balkans. Moreover, it explored issues of inequality and shed light on disparities in access to resources, services, and opportunities across different

contexts. The findings show different solutions and innovations stemming from the cases.

The understanding of the topic of livelihood, commonality, and solidarity as ways to escape the ‘retrotopian’ circle is the verdict of this study.

How those can be used to envision a “culture of a shared future” in the region by fostering discussions on equitable urban development is discussed in this document. Moreover, it tries to bridge the gap between academic research and public policy, advocating for both explicit and implicit strategies, offering ideas of how to revitalize and manage those spaces, and offering insights that resonate with the broader urban context of post-socialist cities.

Findings

Vardar: (Dis)Connecting

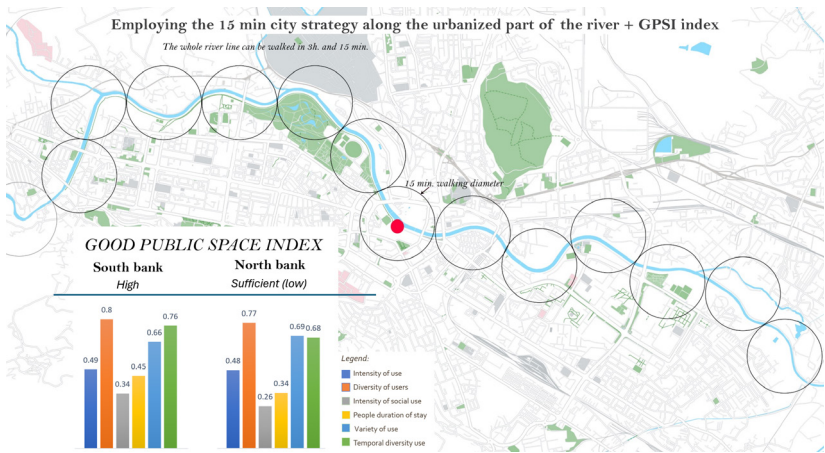
Skopje represents a fragmented city with a distinctive urban development trajectory. The Vardar River and its tributaries are vital to Skopje’s urban landscape and social fabric, intrinsically connected to the city’s identity and history. However, the river’s potential remains largely untapped due to fragmented urban planning and underutilization, especially on the north bank. Skopje’s designation as the European Cultural Capital for 2028 presents a unique opportunity to revitalize the Vardar River corridor and leverage its potential for urban renewal.

Historically, the river has served as a physical and symbolic boundary between the predominantly Macedonian south and the largely Albanian north. Following the 1963 earthquake, reconstruction efforts reinforced this division, with modernist planning emphasizing the river as a central axis. The city witnessed a profound transformation under Kenzo Tange’s master plan, which

advocated for monumental, modernist structures and disjointed public spaces.

The river saw the introduction of its first bicycle and pedestrian pathways in 2009, although certain peripheral areas have remained undeveloped. The Skopje 2014 project further strengthened these differences by concentrating development on the south side with government buildings and cultural institutions reflecting Macedonian identity, while the north side received less investment, fostering perceptions of neglect among minority groups. This uneven development has led to cultural and socio-economic segregation. Although new bridges and shared public spaces have been introduced to promote integration, critics argue that projects like *Skopje 2014 prioritized aesthetic and nationalist goals over social cohesion*. There were a few civic movements and urban initiatives that held back against such development along and in the proximity of the river like the 'First Archi Brigade' in 2009, 'I love GTC' in 2015, and 'Colorful Revolution' in 2016. Interestingly, there was one notable governmental initiative, the moratorium of construction, established by Center Municipality in 2018, where construction of the project Skopje 2014 was put on hold to reevaluate its legitimacy. The common theme for all those initiatives is the stress on inclusive urban planning and the need for equitable investment and public spaces that encourage inter-ethnic communication to create a more cohesive urban environment.

Below are the results from the research, based in Skopje that utilizes an empirical method designed to demonstrate a specific public open space ability to perform its role: The Good Public Space Index (GPSI) has a set of measures that can assess the quality of the space by "responsiveness and diversity of usability" that has a direct correlation with how 'democratic' or 'autonomous' the public space is, showing inconsistencies between the two banks.



Ljubljana: A Model of Success?

Ljubljana stands as a testament to the successful evolution of urban planning paradigms over the centuries. With its origins dating back to Roman times, the city has undergone numerous transformations in response to changing societal needs and ideologies. One of the key milestones in its urban development was the implementation of a car-free city center in the 20th century, led by architect Jože Plečnik. This initiative prioritized pedestrian spaces, green areas, and connectivity, preserving the city's cultural heritage while fostering a vibrant, walkable urban environment.

The Ljubljanica River, often referred to as the city's lifeblood, plays a paramount role in urban renewal and quality of life. The extensive riverside promenades, lush greenery, and carefully integrated pedestrian and cycling paths create a unique urban experience. The river also serves as a natural cooling system during the hot summer months, plays a crucial role in flood prevention, and provides opportunities for recreational activities such as kayaking and swimming. Ljubljana's commitment to preserving and enhancing the Ljubljanica River as an

integral part of its urban fabric showcases the city's dedication to sustainable development and improving residents' quality of life. One of the most significant projects was the "Restoration of the River Ljubljanica (Ljubljanica Connects)" project, launched in 2014, and aimed to revitalize the riverfront and enhance its role in the urban and social life of Ljubljana. This was a comprehensive project that focused on ecological restoration, urban renewal, and the creation of inclusive public spaces.

However, despite the seemingly successful story of the case, there are some inevitable challenges. There is the gentrification concern and the potential displacement of long-time residents and businesses. Another big problem is tourism, increasing overcrowding and prices while decreasing the will of the locals to use the central spaces along the promenade. As well, there is the issue of maintaining the balance between modern development and the preservation of historical and cultural heritage, which is crucial to sustaining the river's role in supporting social cohesion.

Resemblances and Differences Between The Cases

Common traits: pedestrian only, one significant bridge, adjacent tourist attractions & central square, running, cycling and walking promenades

Not so common traits: adjacent governmental institutions, longitudinal VS. transverse axes, clean waters, sailing

Policy Cycle Analysis

Placing this research within the policy cycle helps to clarify its role and potential impact on policy-making processes related to urban public spaces.

1. The *agenda setting* stage involves bringing the concerns stemming from the cases to the attention of policymakers and stakeholders to prioritize them on the public agenda. The findings emphasize the fragmented nature of urban development in Skopje, particularly the underutilization of the Vardar River's potential, and highlight Ljubljana's success in leveraging the Ljubljanica River for urban renewal. To prioritize these issues on the public agenda, it is essential to draw attention to socio-economic segregation in Skopje and the gentrification challenges in Ljubljana. Advocacy efforts should focus on promoting equitable investment in public spaces and sustainable urban planning that enhances social cohesion and environmental resilience.

- II. At the *policy formulation* stage, specific strategies and proposals should be developed to address the issues identified during agenda setting. My research provides evidence-based insights and analysis of the effectiveness of public space. This can guide policymakers in designing new or modifying existing policies.
 - SKOPJE:
 - Develop *inclusive urban revitalization* plans for the Vardar River corridor, incorporating zoning changes to support mixed-use development such as cafés and public amenities such as playgrounds and sport fields to promote inter-ethnic communication.
 - Encourage *community engagement and cultural activities* through informal meetings and participatory design workshops. Citizen's involvement in the creation of urban design fosters the feeling of belonging to a place which in turn promotes higher responsibilities among the users.

- Implement *flood management* regulations that *integrate green infrastructure* solutions to enhance the health of the river and biodiversity and through that the health of the people.
- Incorporate *ecological restoration projects*, such as the “Restoration of the River Ljubljana,” to enhance the riverfront’s role in urban and social life.
- LJUBLJANA:
 - *Manage gentrification and tourism* by implementing policies that balance development with the needs of long-time residents and local businesses. This can include ensuring that housing remains affordable, providing incentives for local businesses, and developing strategies to manage tourism in a way that minimizes overcrowding and preserves the quality of life for residents.
 - Expand the *sustainable mobility plans* by promoting cycling and pedestrian pathways along the periphery of the Ljubljana River, ensuring connectivity and accessibility to all the areas of the city.
 - Foster *informal collaborations* between city departments, NGOs, and community groups to manage and maintain public spaces effectively. Promote informal practices that celebrate and integrate the Ljubljana River as a natural heritage.

III. While this research primarily contributes to agenda-setting and policy formulation, it also plays a secondary role in the *decision-making stage* by providing data and clear recommendations to help policymakers make informed choices.

The decision-making stage can greatly benefit from the data-driven proposals in the policy formulation stage that use the findings from the Good Public Space Index method to formulate policies that address the

underutilization and fragmentation of public spaces along the Vardar River.

- IV. At the *policy implementation stage*, the formulated policies are put into action. This research can support this process by developing detailed implementation plans that outline the steps needed to achieve policy goals, including timelines, resource allocation, and each stakeholder's responsibilities.

Fieldwork analysis using the Good Public Space Index has been implemented on the case of Vardar River in Skopje. Based on the observations it was concluded that a revitalization project would be highly beneficial.

- EXAMPLE:
NORTH BANK REVITALIZATION PROJECT OF VARDAR RIVER FOR SOLIDARITY

Revitalize the underutilized north bank of the Vardar River to create inclusive public spaces that foster inter-ethnic communication.

Stakeholders and their tasks:

- Local Government: lead the monitoring and evaluation process, ensure transparency at all stages of the project, and act on findings and recommendations from evaluations (made by autonomous evaluators).
- Public (NGOs and Civilian Groups): participate in the planning and implementation process, provide insights based on grassroots experiences, advocate for transparency and responsibility throughout the project, and collaborate with other stakeholders to ensure that the project meets the needs of diverse community members.
- Other stakeholders are the Urban planners and architects, the task force and the contractors.

Steps:

- Initial *consultations with key stakeholders*, including local government, community leaders, urban planners, architects, and residents.
- Make a *feasibility study* to assess the current state of the north bank and identify potential challenges and opportunities for development.
- Organize a *design competition* for innovative ideas for the revitalization of the north bank, emphasizing inclusivity and sustainability, and based on that develop detailed architectural and landscape plans. The winning solution should include cultural and recreational areas and facilities for community events, among others. It is prime to focus on connectivity to the south bank by using bridges and thus reactivate the peripheries and not only the central part.
- Allocate potential *funding sources*, including municipal budget, government grants, international aid, private investments, and public-private partnerships.
- Develop a *budget plan* outlining the estimated costs for each phase of the project. Allocate resources for construction, maintenance, and community engagement activities.
- The *construction* should be phased, starting with key infrastructure such as pedestrian paths, green spaces and benches, and drinking fountains. It should ensure the involvement of local contractors and labor and sustainable building practices.
- Develop *programs and events* to activate the new public spaces, such as cultural festivals, community markets, sports events, and educational workshops that promote engagement. Foster partnerships with local cultural and educational institutions to provide regular activities and programming.

- Launch a *public awareness campaign* to promote the project and its benefits. Use social media, local media, and community meetings to engage the public from all cultural and ethnic groups and gather feedback.

Monitoring and Evaluation:

- Evaluation *tools* to be used for this matter are surveys and interviews with diverse community members like local university students, trained volunteers from NGOs, and independent researchers to gather feedback on the project's impact. Other tools include observations on usage, environmental monitoring, and community workshops. One step to ensure the project meets its goals and adapts to new challenges is to develop *Key Performance Indicators* (KPIs) such as the number of public spaces created, the level of community engagement, and the impact on inter-ethnic communication. Another step is to do *surveys* and data collection before the project begins on current usage patterns, community needs, and environmental conditions. A *mid-project review* is an important step to assess progress and make any needed course corrections. At the end, the *final evaluation* shows the overall impact and success and gathers feedback from different stakeholders. Continuing to monitor the project for at least two to three years is advised to ensure long-term sustainability.
- V. At the *policy evaluation stage*, the impact of executed policies is looked at. This is crucial for understanding their success and identifying areas for improvement. This research can contribute to this stage by providing a framework against which the impact of new policies can be measured and assessing the long-term effects

of policy interventions on urban public spaces and residents' quality of life.

- VI. Finally, policies may need to be maintained, adapted, or terminated based on their evaluation outcomes. At the stage of *policy maintenance or termination*, the study can inform these decisions by identifying best practices, suggesting modifications to policies that are not achieving desired results, and proposing new policy measures to address emerging challenges.

Formal and Informal Policy Advocacy

This research is advised to be placed equally in both formal and informal types of policies.

To effectively advocate for policies that enhance urban public spaces along the riverbanks as places that can foster connectivity and inclusivity, it is crucial to address both explicit and implicit aspects.

Explicit policies that this research can contribute to are the urban zoning and planning regulations like the GUP (General Urban Plan) and DUP (Detailed Urban Plan) for Skopje can define land use categories, specify permitted building types and activities, and govern building heights, densities, and setbacks. For example, urban plans and guidelines should be used for the North Bank Revitalization Project of Vardar River. Here belong transportation policies that promote sustainable modes of transport, implement pedestrian-friendly infrastructure, and regulate vehicular traffic and parking.

Another type of formal policies is the public space management plans that outline the development and maintenance of parks, plazas, and waterfronts, setting standards for amenities, landscaping, and public art. Also, environmental protection laws mandating the preservation of natural habitats, regulating pollution levels, and requiring environmental impact assessments can be used.

- Skopje: Formal policies on enhancing the Vardar River corridor, like urban revitalization plans that incorporate zoning changes to support mixed-use development and public amenities and flood management regulations that integrate green infrastructure solutions.
- Ljubljana: Expanding the formal and already implemented policies by adding sustainable mobility plans that promote more accessibility and easy connectivity along the Ljubljanica River with a focus on the peripheral and yet to be developed riverbanks. Moreover, legal protections for natural habitats should be strengthened.

Implicit Policies like cultural norms and practices represent informal expectations about the use of public spaces and social norms regarding maintenance and cleanliness. Institutional practices can also be implicit if they are internal procedures within urban planning departments and, also, unwritten agreements between stakeholders, adopting an “Investors First” logic in policy advocacy to align with the interests of potential investors. This will emphasize the financial viability and long-term returns of such projects.

Community engagement or public participation represents a very important informal practice that involves local residents in the planning processes and the role of community groups in activism. In both cases, there are active NGOs fighting for the protection of rivers and the urban public space that belongs to all.

- Skopje: Public participation on a local level, meaning participatory design workshops together with other state bodies like local governments to foster a sense of ownership of the public space should be encouraged. Also, cultural activities like events and ethnic festivals to activate public spaces

- along the river and boost their social significance should be promoted.
- Ljubljana: Informal collaborations between city departments, NGOs, and community groups should be fostered to manage and maintain public spaces effectively. Moreover, informal practices that celebrate and integrate Ljubljana's cultural heritage into the design and use of public spaces should be promoted.

Conclusion

By learning from the successes and challenges of Skopje and Ljubljana, cities across the region can harness the power of urban rivers to create more sustainable, livable, and equitable communities.

It is time for policymakers, urban planners, and citizens to prioritize the revival of these vital public spaces and embrace the transformative potential of urban rivers for social cohesion.

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