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### **ART AND SOLIDARITY: EXAMPLES FROM SKOPJE AND ATHENS**

**Abstract:** The multifaceted concept of solidarity manifests through diverse practices in different contexts. One such manifestation lies in the aftermath of the 1963 earthquake in Skopje. Amidst the Cold War, Skopje became a symbol of Yugoslav and world solidarity. I got acquainted with this concept of solidarity in the summer of 2018 at the municipal events commemorating the earthquake. Coming from Athens, I was familiar with a somewhat different one: there, in the aftermath of the 2008 global financial crisis, the impact of which would be experienced two years later, pre-existing (ant)agonistic practices of solidarity were embraced by a broader segment of society vis-a-vis severe austerity measures. Initiatives such as anti-middleman and exchange markets, as well as migrants' and artists' squats, proved crucial in the face of unprecedented precarity. Solidarity concurrently fostered new forms of sociality. Discussions with contemporary art practitioners in Skopje, aspiring to an idea of Europe different from the one imposed by the Skopje 2014 urban regeneration project, revealed similar, yet distinct, notions of solidarity. Self-organized and self-sustained art initiatives emerged while others sought support from private funds, all operating outside state institutions.

This paper aims to comparatively examine variations of the notion of solidarity in contemporary art and in dialogue with activism in response to heterogeneous "crises" in Skopje and Athens.

**Keywords:** city, crisis, contemporary art, activism, art initiatives, Athens, Skopje, cultural economy, comparative

### **Manuscript**

The multifaceted concept of solidarity was not among the questions of my PhD research in social anthropology, which focused on contemporary art production in public space in Athens and Skopje in the 2010s. However, the word "solidarity" [solidarnost, alilegij] did come up during fieldwork.

The research took place in Greek, English, and partially Macedonian between 2018-2019, while I lived and often traveled between the two cities. Among the methodologies I employed for the PhD research, the ones that inform this article include participant observation in cultural events and informal discussions with (critical) artists and cultural workers, who were my main interlocutors. Equally, I approached relevant public texts (interviews, opinion texts, news related to art, social media posts and announcements, and artists and art institutions' websites). Lastly, this article is also informed by my engagement as an artist and a cultural worker in both cities, exceeding the research timeframe.

My “ethnography in motion” (Gefou-Madianou 2009) followed complex and dynamic threads, movements, and processes, observing and attempting (creative) connections among them (Gefou-Madianou 2009; 2011; Marcus 1998) in terms other than those of fixed categories and places. Taking into consideration that in anthropological comparison lies both political and epistemic authority, as well as that comparison, can be “both a resource and a problem” (Candea 2019, 50), the comparative perspective of my research illuminated aspects of art and social reality in Athens and Skopje in ways that focusing only on one of the two cities would not have.

The conceptualization of Greece and N. Macedonia as belonging to different spheres of influence after the Second World War, as well as the tensions between the two countries regarding the “Macedonian question,” has contributed to the cultivation of stereotypes and long-term mutual ignorance—the latter more prevalent in Athens than in Skopje, especially in the realm of art.<sup>1</sup> However, my research highlighted points of comparable interest, among which is the fact that the relationship of both countries with the EU and between each other occupied the public sphere, both locally and internationally. Developments in the political and socio-economic spheres greatly influenced the everyday lives of their inhabitants and the art produced and exhibited there. Public images –official or not– of both cities were significantly reshaped during the period under study. Skopje, once a city linked to post-earthquake world solidarity, among other things, went through an “antiquization” program narrating an ancient, glorious national past –a “rebranding” (Graan 2013a) which was met with massive protests. Athens, on the other hand, formerly visited mainly for its classical antiquities, was transformed into a city in “crisis” and, at the same time, an “interesting” place to be (Grigoriadou 2023) due to a thriving art scene and activism. The above developments took place in both cities in conditions of neoliberalisation, shrinkage of the welfare state, and the public character of public services and spaces. For many of my interlocutors, the already precarious work in the art sector became even more precarious. Long-term protests took place in both cities, in synergy (but not necessarily in dialogue) with “square movements” across the Mediterranean or “colorful revolutions” in Eastern Europe. To a large extent, artists and cultural workers meaningfully responded to what they experienced as inhabitants of Athens and Skopje in the 2010s. Memory and heritage, nationalism and patriarchy, public protests, working conditions, and (conceptualizations of) solidarity were among the issues artists in both cities were urgently concerned with.

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<sup>1</sup> Exchanges in contemporary art do exist, even though they are scarce, especially between Skopje and Thessaloniki (see, for example, Sadiku and Jovanovik 2016).

As I argue in this paper, solidarity manifests in diverse yet comparable ways. I examine forms of art organization that evoke notions of solidarity in both cities in dialogue with “crises” experienced by my interlocutors in the period covered by my research. These “crises” are not only linked to the particular past and geopolitical conditions of each country but also to the international financial recession, as well as to the broader conditions in the Balkans and Europe, which bring together the rise of nationalism and state authoritarianism with the acceleration of neoliberalism, reinforcing austerity and precarity. Such “crises,” known to my interlocutors in post-socialist Skopje, in a way, forecasted the precarious conditions of neoliberal capitalism my discussants faced in Athens in the 2010s (Graan 2013b) –a point that makes a comparison between the two cities valuable. Although the term “crisis” has been problematized, rejecting the category would be contrary to ethnographic principles promoting reflection through the interlocutors’ own words (Kalantzis 2016). My discussants have often used the word when describing their lives in Athens and Skopje in the 2010s, especially in our informal conversations. What is more, it can be a “good” concept “to think with,” since what is understood as a “crisis” can bring about *critical* stances, too (Athanasidou 2012, 97; Papanikolaou 2011) and, with them, *critical* art, as in the case of many of the artists I discussed with. Today, this criticality, as well as the solidarity that was often linked with it, is often felt as missing.

### Art and solidarity in Athens

Artists I talked with in Athens mostly understood “crisis.”<sup>2</sup> In terms of the economic recession, austerity measures, the rise of unemployment, legitimization of state violence, and privatization of public resources. Mass demonstrations were among the responses to such developments in the 2010s and earlier. Various forms of protest and self-organization intensified after the murder of teenager Alexis Grigoropoulos by a police officer in 2008 and in the context of the so-called “movement of the squares.” Existing networks and spaces of “solidarity and sociality” (Rozakou 2017) were strengthened and created new ones. The years at the end of the 2000s and the beginning of the 2010s can be seen as pivotal for the development of solidarity networks, as new workers’ base unions, squats, social centers, non-monetary exchange systems, neighborhood assemblies, and other initiatives emerged spontaneously and quickly organized into longer-lasting formations (Dalakoglou 2012).<sup>3</sup>

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2 Different studies in social sciences use different terminology to refer to the period or the set of events and flows widely understood as the “crisis” in 2010s Greece. Except for the term itself, they also speak of “state of exception,” “recession,” “austerity,” or “trouble,” sometimes underlining continuities with the past (Papataxiarchis 2017), and other times identifying in these conditions something ‘new,’ or densification of strategies and exceptions that were foreseen in already existing modes of governance (Athanasidou 2012). For an overview, see Angelidou and Astrinaki 2023; Dalakoglou, Agelopoulos, and Poulimenakos 2017; Kalantzis 2016.

3 The murder of Grigoropoulos led to months of upheaval in Athens and other cities. According to the political scientist Nikos Souzas (2015), the protests and actions after 2008 have their origins in the ‘antagonistic movement’ [anarchist/anti-authoritarian and a significant part of the Left] already developing in the city since the 1980s, informed by the Italian, mainly, antagonistic movement

In the realm of the arts, two developments are worth mentioning. First, already since the Olympics in 2004 but more intensively after 2010, more and more artworks brought to critical light exclusions and myths that constitute the national narrative, neoliberal politics, and ethno-patriarchy (Anagnostopoulos and FYTA 2017; Fokianaki 2019; Rikou and Chaviara 2016; Sevasti 2017; Stafylakis 2017; Yalouri and Rikou 2021). In the 4th Athens Biennale (2014), the performative duo FYTA [plants], together with numerous collaborators, brought together a set of performances, installations, interventions, and texts defined by the deconstruction and subversion of both grand narratives about Greece and “high”/elitist art, pinpointing interconnections between the two. At the same time, they presented “suggestions for creative survival under conditions of social dystopia.”<sup>4</sup>

At the beginning of the 2010s, parallel to the noticeable shift in artistic interests and the multiplication of critical stances, the problem of artists’ survival (not only on a material level) became prominent. Different strategies of art production, organization, and distribution, as well as modes of “self-instituting,” were implemented (Argyropoulou 2018, 140).

For decades, state cultural policies focused on promoting Greek antiquity, marginalizing contemporary artistic production (Yalouri and Rikou 2021). Austerity measures in the 2010s meant (even greater) precariousness for the artists, as very limited (if any) governmental funding was cut off, following the broader policies in the socioeconomic sectors. With the recession, many private galleries—the main points where art was showcased in Athens until then—closed down (Rikou and Chaviara 2016; Rikou and Yalouri 2018).<sup>5</sup> Artists turned to collective action, thus filling up the already existing but increasingly evident institutional vacuum and compensating for the destabilization of the art market.

Although art collectives were quite active in Athens before 2010, collective practices in the field of art intensified. In the early-mid 2010s, words coming from genealogies of the left, such as “collective”/“collectivity” [syllogikotita], “resistance,” “self-organization,” and “the commons” entered public debates on art, curatorial texts, announcements of art events, and everyday discussions among art practitioners. Solidarity was among these words, and it was understood, in contrast to top-down philanthropy, as mutual support among art practitioners and within “society” —often put generally— and collective support to marginalized groups.

Towards the middle and the second half of the decade, another “crisis” entered the spotlight of engaged artists not only based in Athens and elsewhere in Greece but also

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of the 1960-70s. After the murder of Grigoropoulos, the processes that had already been taking place became more visible (see also: Melucci 1996), while cultural characteristics and ways of organizing the movement diffused through the wider adoption of forms of self-organization but also the radicalization and participation in mobilizations of a more significant part of society.

4 <https://fytabianella.wordpress.com/en/>

5 While the recession did not mean any substantial changes to the visual arts sector’s already almost non-existent funding, practitioners in the theater sector experienced large cuts between 2010 and 2015, which led to the radicalization of many. Indeed, among squatted cultural centers in that period were (public and previously privately run) theaters.

coming from abroad –a significant number of them from the EU–. The latter spent long periods volunteering, working in NGOs, or becoming part of the “solidarity” autonomous movement. The massive movement of people from Africa and Asia to Europe through Greece during that period was often termed “refugee” or “migrant crisis” in mainstream media. Although my artist interlocutors did not refer to it as a “crisis” –unlike they did with the “economic crisis”– the movement itself and the hegemonic ways the State and international organizations dealt with it did motivate acts of “protest and solidarity.” Artists and art initiatives declared solidarity with migrants and refugees; in some cases, collaborations with artists already based or working in Athens and newcomers emerged.<sup>6</sup> In one such event, where I participated as an artist, a young performer from North Africa thanked his Greek counterparts for their “help .” A lengthy discussion among the group members followed, where artists long-based in Athens explained that it was not about giving or receiving help; it was instead meant to be an equal collaboration. I witnessed or heard this concept of mutuality or solidarity being explained several times –often not without an instructive tone. Solidarity, in this case, meant that mutuality, engagement, and committed work were required, in contrast to the (understood as) idle role of the beneficiary of philanthropic help (see Rozakou 2017 on the “gift taboo”).

The activity of grassroots and solidarity networks and initiatives did not emerge merely as a spontaneous response to the “crises,” but it can be traced in pre-existing local and international political movements and anarchist/autonomous or leftist genealogies (Dalakoglou 2012; Souzas 2015). Art lent not only their vocabulary but also practices, such as assemblies. The Arab Spring and the Occupy Movement were the latest examples of reference. (Squatted) cultural centers and newly-formed legal entities that produced or exhibited art –often self-identifying as “collectives,” and, later on, art institutions, such as the Biennale of Athens and Documenta 14, adopted the form of the assembly. It functioned as a working mode for decision making, especially for squats and collectives–legal entities or not– to develop a project or debate current socio-economic issues (as in the cases of d14 the Biennale of Athens). Open or closed assemblies would take place regularly or on a short-term basis.

The artistic activity I examine here can be linked to existing international genealogies in the field of art itself: artist avant-gardes of the 20<sup>th</sup> century had already expressed the need to operate outside the gallery space. They proposed ephemeral actions incompatible with the so-called “white cube,” such as happenings and artist interventions in public space and the public sphere. Moreover, they explored and experimented with connections between the arts and social reality, often in non-conventional exhibition spaces. Later developments in contemporary art, such as “relational aesthetics.”<sup>7</sup> had promoted values such as participation, community, and coexistence. In Athens, already-known practices in the repertoire of artists and artist groups included public performances

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6 See, for example, the work of Nomadiki Architektoniki (Tzirtzilaki and Sinopoulou 2018), events such as the installation DOME Experience: Traces (2016), directed by Martha Bouziouri and Yolanda Markatopoulou (Bouziouri 2023), and the Greek and Syrian Youth Forum [<https://www.facebook.com/SGYF2019/>].

7 The term was coined by curator Nicolas Bourriaud in the 1990s to describe art based on or inspired by, human relations (Bourriaud [1998] 2009). For a critique, see (Bishop 2012).

as well as the short-term occupation and/or “reactivation” [epanenergopiisi] of “vacant” [kenoi] urban spaces, as artists have described their practice.

Many artist initiatives that emerged (or intensified their out-of-the-art gallery actions) in Athens in the early 2010s consisted of people participating in broader demonstrations and mobilizations of that same period. Artist or art-centered initiatives sometimes evolved out of such mobilizations. Among the many new initiatives was the 2011 squatted, self-organized Embros Theater.<sup>8</sup> On its Facebook page, it describes itself as an open public space for creation, resistance, and dignity. It has expressed solidarity with refugees and often calls for solidarity with other initiatives and squats that are under threat of closure.

At least initially, many initiatives still needed to receive state, EU, or private funding. For most, the main reason was that there were hardly available sources. Others, especially but not exclusively those within the autonomous spectrum, wanted to avoid institutional links and possible dependencies. Whatever the reason, many artists and activist initiatives have mentioned the word “solidarity.” “It usually meant that they relied on the “bottom-up” economic support by their publics, which often came in the form of “the box” [to kouti] for anonymous contributions by event visitors. It also meant the work and mutual support of those participating and collaborating, usually functioning in what they called “anti-hierarchical” ways. Inevitably, hierarchical relations and clashes emerged, too. However, in many cases, participants have been reflexive about their ventures’ fallacies and limitations (see Argyropoulou 2018).

### **Art and solidarity in Skopje**

As an art student in Athens and later an artist participating in this realm, my notion of solidarity was mainly informed by such initiatives and the wider radicalized, anti-humanitarian, grassroots discourse based on mutualism (Rozakou 2017). When I arrived in Skopje in the summer of 2018 for my PhD research, I was introduced to a pretty different manifestation of solidarity, in which the state held a central role: “solidarity” had been an integral part of the official socialist state internationalist vocabulary. In contrast with my experience of solidarity in Athens, which was often referred to as “bottom-up,” the notion of solidarity encompassed by the socialist state (both discursive and bear legal, institutional and infrastructural consequences) aimed to inspire feelings of “brotherhood and unity” among its citizens—members of the different ethnic groups composing Yugoslavia (Vasiljević 2021). Governments, international organizations, architects, urban planners, and other actors from different geopolitical spheres were officially invited to contribute to the reconstruction of Skopje after the devastating earthquake of 1963. In the following decades, Skopje became a field for experimentation in architecture and urban

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<sup>8</sup> Also, the National Opera occupation (2009), the Parking/Navarinou Park in Exarchia (2009), the Syntagma Square encampment (2011), the occupation of the National Radio and Television building after a governmental suspension of its operation (2013), and the Green Park Café squat (2015) (see: Fotiadi 2017).

planning, a long-term and unfinished process that nevertheless provided the city with a modernist face and a new narrative of solidarity that tied Skopje with the world.

Earthquakes, widely perceived as “natural” phenomena, are ultimately also “cultural,” as they interfere with processes of identity construction and reproduction (Schwartz 1996, 27). The Berlin Wall (1961), the Cuban Missile Crisis (1962), and the Congo Crisis (1960-65) demonstrated that UN peacemaking had limited possibilities. The 1963 earthquake provided the proper diplomatic context for the United Nations to restore its image by actively promoting international cooperation. More broadly, possibilities for connection in an otherwise divided world emerged for the wider international community (Kritikos 2018; Mijalkovic and Urbanek 2011; Véron 2015). For its part, Yugoslavia could not have undertaken the task of redesigning and rebuilding an entire city without external assistance. What is more, amidst the Cold War, in Yugoslavia, a socialist federation that played a pivotal role in the non-aligned movement, Skopje strategically became “a symbol of brotherhood and unity, of Yugoslav and of world solidarity” (Ivanovska Deskova, Ivanovski, and Deskov 2018; Korobar 2018; Tolić 2018). These were the words of Josip Broz Tito, displayed today<sup>9</sup> On one of the external walls of today’s Museum of the City of Skopje, the city’s former train station, where they had been initially delivered. The building, parts of which were deliberately left unrepaired, stands as an effective memorial of the earthquake and Skopje itself as a city rebuilt with solidarity. In the realm of the arts, the modernist building of the Museum of Contemporary Art<sup>10</sup> and offered by the Polish government. Its collection, mainly based on donations initiated by international associations of artists, art critics, and historians, is exemplary of the spirit of “world solidarity” with earthquake-stricken Skopje and its inhabitants.

In my interlocutors’ narrations of events when it comes to both the city and the museum, the concept of solidarity is largely linked with institutional or civic help (pomoš) and donations (donacii) without this compromising their taking pride in the city and what was donated to it—quite the opposite. In the case of austerity-ridden, indebted Greece, Rozakou (2017, 196-7) observes a shift regarding the former “gift taboo” among “solidarian” initiatives and groups involved with migrants and refugees. In the light of the multiple “crises” I examined earlier, middle-class participants in these groups may also have had to rely on donations and resort to (parental or other) support. They, therefore, do not condemn one-way donations equally as they used to or fear the debt gifts may tie the receiver with. In earthquake-stricken Skopje, it was perhaps another (humanitarian) crisis, resulting in my discussants appearing less burdened by the otherwise familiar gift taboo than I had expected them to.

Notions of the post-earthquake solidarity did interfere with my research in critical contemporary art in the previous decade, still acting upon my interlocutors, even more so in the light of another “crisis.” Although research draws links between the country’s economy and liquidity issues in the early 2010s on the one hand and the international

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9 With an interval of years due to neglect, linked to the post-socialist establishment of the nation-state with a different set of constitutional narratives and Tito’s consequent fading away from the public sphere (Crvenkovska Risteska 2020).

10 The Museum was established only months after the earthquake, and the building was inaugurated in 1970 (Petkovski 2001)

economic recession on the other (Mattioli 2020; 2018), my interlocutors did not particularly describe Skopje as a city in “economic crisis” the way it was understood in Athens.<sup>11</sup> In contrast, they referred to a “*political* crisis” in the mid-2010s in terms of authoritarian violence and corruption, digital surveillance scandals, as well as nationalist and patriarchal agendas promoted (also) in public space by the then composition of the Christian-democrat VMRO-DPMNE government (Çavolli 2012; Graan 2013a; Grigoriadou 2021; Janev 2011; Risteski 2016; 2018).

The ideological, architectural, and urban regeneration program “Skopje 2014” (2009-2016), often described as another “earthquake” (Amygdalou 2018; Softić 2017), developed with the involvement of large construction companies. The program represented an “investment” in the international recognition and competitiveness of the country on the global market, for which the nation is a branded commodity (Graan 2013a). It followed and was justified by the degradation of public spaces and buildings in the post-socialist period (Janev 2017; Mattioli 2018; Vangeli 2011).<sup>12</sup>

Under Skopje 2014, extensive changes were imposed on the city, redefining its symbolic landscape and collective memory (Risteski 2016). The program included street renaming, new buildings, bridges, other structures, white facades on socialist buildings, and hundreds of public monuments and sculptures with neoclassical, baroque, and historicist references. The authorities appeared well-acquainted with the politics-aesthetics nexus (Rancière 2006), the enchanting power of art (Gell 1992), and its longstanding role in commemorating and glorifying regimes, events, and subjects – although it is worth noticing that my discussants often challenge the status of the Skopje 2014 sculptures as art (Grigoriadou 2021). The statues depict leaders, revolutionaries, and literary and scientific figures — predominantly Christian men — who contributed to the formation of national identity and history, according to the new narrative.

The project, which took place during a period of increasing authoritarianism (Staletović and Pollozhani 2022), was part of a process of “antiquization” [antikvizacija] whereby eclectic architectural and sculptural interventions weaved a cohesive national and patriarchal narrative connecting antiquity and the European dream. Following the ethnocentric policies pursued by post-socialist regimes, Skopje 2014’s purity politics obscured the city’s Islamic and socialist heritage while largely excluding women and non-dominant ethnic groups (Amygdalou 2018; Dimova 2019; Janev 2015; Mattioli 2014; Risteski 2016; Skoulariki 2017; Vangeli 2011).

The program was interrupted in 2017 by the successor social-democrat government after a prolonged period of massive protests that led to governmental change. Arriving

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11 Since the dissolution of Yugoslavia, economic failure has not been widely perceived as an exception but as an inherent part of everyday life, according to a common post-Yugoslav [and, more broadly, post-socialist (Kofti 2023)] narrative of an ongoing crisis (Mattioli 2023).

12 The utopian ideas of the post-earthquake reconstruction had not been fully implemented due to the economic challenges arising in the 1980s and the ideological change after the dissolution of Yugoslavia (Tolič 2018). The neglect of public spaces and global criticisms of modernism led to dissatisfaction and disappointment among residents. The deteriorating condition of socialist buildings and the city’s “gray” aura became central arguments for implementing the program.

in Skopje for my research in July 2018, amidst events commemorating the earthquake, I could trace (interpretations of) the official Yugoslav narrative through the lens of citizens' initiatives and the new, social-democratic government's politics of remembering. Indicatively, Tito's message was restored on its original wall at the former train station after years of neglect (Crvenkovska Risteska 2020).

Except for current understandings and implementations of the socialist state notion of solidarity, in my research, I encountered agonistic, grassroots conceptions of solidarity and mutuality and ways of cooperation similar to those I was already familiar with in Athens. Those were often linked with my discussants' collective and personal responses to Skopje 2014. One such response was the "Colorful Revolution" in 2016, during which inhabitants came together and massively threw paint on the then newly installed historicist public sculptures, buildings, and facades. In public and private discussions within art and culture, the "Colorful Revolution" was thought of as blurring the boundaries between art and everyday life or protest (Topuzovski and Andres 2020; Risteski 2018; Teodosievski 2017). What is more, according to my discussants and participants' views published in the media, the mobilizations allowed for the cultivation of solidarity among members of different ethnic communities (Macedonians, Albanians, Turkish, Roma, and more). The intensity of this coming together was described as rare and did not seem to continue in the following years. Perhaps in the protests against the Skopje 2014 project, one can trace the obligation of world solidarity: to take care of the socialist city, its gifted buildings and infrastructure, and with those, the concept of solidarity itself.

Except for the protests, there were plenty of artist responses to the project and the "political crisis." Artists considered solidarity (with each other and with broader categories such as "society" or "the citizens") as a counterpoint to the dominant post-socialist, ethnocentric, and neoliberal narratives they understood as dividing. It was through the invocation of socialist aesthetics (and concepts) that young, critical artists and groups envisioned Europe, a Europe different from the one the aesthetic regime of Skopje 2014 had sought to refer to (Mattioli 2014).

Critical artistic production often aspired to change peoples' lives today by invoking (and interpreting) solidarity in socialist times without necessarily idealizing or identifying with all aspects of the socialist project. Along these lines, architect and artist Filip Jovanovski, member of the Faculty of Things that Can not Be Learned, has co-ordinated a series of interventions in socialist buildings that offer possibilities (large shared patios, theatre rooms, unified balconies) for gathering, exchange, and participation. Inhabitants of such buildings, citizens, visitors, and artists gather to re-narrate the spaces' (possible) histories and rethink their possible futures, where mutuality, solidarity, togetherness, and exchange hold a central place.

In the first part of the previous decade, many of my discussants felt that state institutions were reserved or indifferent to contemporary critical art, which could only tactically "sneak in" [protnuva] the museums. In these conditions, and considering that the art market and galleries are almost non-existent in the city, artists sought to fill what they felt was an "institutional void." Such was the action of initiatives like the artist collective KOOPERACIJA, the art group and space Art I.N.S.T.I.T.U.T., and the activist

choir Raspeani Skopjani (Blackwood 2016; Georgieva 2016). These and other artist initiatives operated in public spaces or held exhibitions in unexpected, non-conventional spaces—a friendly flat, for example.

The word *solidarity* was common in the discourses around urban mobilizations and the activities of such initiatives. Like in Athens, those mentioned above and other initiatives worked largely outside official institutional frameworks, self-organized and self-financed. Others, legal entities related to art and human rights, who were equally active during that period, depended on (private or EU) funding while not abandoning the discourse and practices of mutuality and solidarity [with citizens, workers, the (art) community]. This way of functioning was known to practitioners in art and culture in ex-Yugoslav countries since the post-socialist 1990s and was officially promoted with the idea of an active and engaged “civil society” (Schwartz 1996).<sup>13</sup>

### Changes in the art sector

Toward the end of the decade, both cities saw changes in the art field. In Skopje, after the change of government in 2016-17, the social democratic successors made administrative changes in cultural institutions. People who had participated in the struggles and could potentially “understand”—as I was told—the needs of contemporary art took on administrative roles in relevant positions in the cultural sector. Also, the civil society sector is no longer under the threat of the so-called “desorosification”<sup>14</sup> the campaign” began to enjoy more peace and funding opportunities (Blackwood 2020).

Nevertheless, my interlocutors expressed “numbness” and stagnation, or “being in limbo” in this new setting. They often said they had been tired of “waiting” (see also Janeja and Bandak 2018; Veselinović 2021) while the changes they had hoped for were taking place too slowly or eventually not at all. Some even mentioned that they “had lost hope” and did not know whether they would participate in protests again, as they observed a movement from struggles that exemplified solidarity to others that prioritize segregation and ethnic/national hatred—motivated, in turn, by disappointment. Sometimes, my discussants “missed” or felt “nostalgic” for the years of mass protests and the proliferation of collective, critical art production. They admit that despite the

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<sup>13</sup> The elusive concept of civil society is rooted in the Enlightenment and early modern (Marxist, Liberal) political thought in Europe, linked with the emergence of a private economic and legal realm outside of and often in contrast with state power (Hann 1996). After the fall of communism in Eastern Europe, the concept commonly appeared in the context of Western aid programs and external intervention. More nuanced understandings of civil society engage with the multiple and complex forms of social relationships and societal organization (Hann 1996).

<sup>14</sup> A word used by the then-prime minister in a public announcement at the end of 2016. The campaign consisted of intensive financial and anti-corruption controls of 22 non-governmental organizations supported by the Open Society Foundations, founded by George Soros. People from the NGO sector saw it as a campaign against (critical) civil society that unfairly exercised political pressure on targeted organizations. See: <https://sdk.mk/index.php/makedonija/antikoruptionskata-komisija-prva-ja-pochnala-desorosoizatsijata-shto-ja-naracha-gruevski-pobarala-kontrola-za-21-nevladina-organizatsija/>.

oppression they had been experiencing, “everything seemed possible,” there was a lot of “exciting” creative action, utopian vision, and a “strong feeling of community” and “solidarity.” What they referred to is, perhaps, a manifestation of the potential for *critical* stances that can come along with “crises” (Athanasίου 2012) –and with a lot of shared hard work in this direction.

Back in Athens, the initial (political) movement of participation and self-organization in the art sector was succeeded by “immaterial and unpaid work” (Fotiadi 2017, 121) in the framework of the numerous invitations to art collectives to participate in exhibitions and events. Among such events, the Athens Biennale in 2015 aspired to become a “stage for the experiments of grassroots democracy and economic solidarity that are spreading throughout Greece and in Europe,” according to the statement of its artistic director, anthropologist Massimiliano Mollona.<sup>15</sup> The participating artists received no fee. Their precarious position, which had once motivated them to form collectives, was largely the reason for accepting such work models. What is more, the Biennale itself (a non-profit organization) was insufficiently funded back then, as was the contemporary art sector in general (Zefkili 2015). However, this was about to change.

Big “philanthropic”<sup>16</sup> Private foundations dealing with art and culture (such as the Onassis Foundation Stegi, NEON, and The Stavros Niarchos Foundation) have announced their engagement with art and their spatial expansion in the city since the 2000s (Souliotis 2013). Since then, such institutions have opened new cultural spaces in the city via private-public collaborations.<sup>17</sup> These developments are part of broader economic policies in the past decades in the EU, assigning goods previously considered public (education, health, culture) to the private sector. As part of this tendency, the Greek State and the Municipality of Athens are handing over a large part of the city’s cultural management to private entities (Liakos, 2023). While Athens attracted international cultural and artistic interest in the mid-2010s (Rikou and Chaviara 2016; Rikou and Yalouri 2018), these institutions emerged as central actors forming cultural policy at a larger scale and offering connections and international recognition to young artists, thus largely shaping the economy of culture in Greece (Rikou and Yalouri 2017). They project a socially engaged face, promoting goals such as empowering participation, diversity, and mutual understanding per national or European cultural policy principles. Last but not least, they incorporate and monetize the vocabulary of solidarity and social struggles.<sup>18</sup> But, if “solidarity” lies “in the DNA” of big private foundations, at the same time, public interventions, discussions, and festivals on institutional critique, such as *He(a)Evans*,<sup>19</sup> self-organized in 2023 by several art initiatives in Athens, keep an active critical eye.

15 <https://www.biennialfoundation.org/2015/08/massimiliano-mollona-appointed-programme-director-of-the-athens-biennale-2015-2017/>

16 A term often contrasted with grassroots “solidarity” in discussions with interlocutors.

17 For example, the Stavros Niarchos Foundation Cultural Center has hosted the national opera and the national library since 2016.

18 <https://www.onassis.org/el/foundation/presidents-address>.

19 <https://heavens.gr/en/english/>

Many of the art practitioners who participated in artist and activist initiatives at the beginning of the decade are now beneficiaries of these institutions, admitting—at times with some discomfort—that they do not have another choice (Anagnostopoulos 2021), as they can not afford to work for free anymore. Discomfort may derive from ideological discrepancies with private institutions, moral “compromises” they had to make, not consistently favorable working conditions within or in collaboration with institutions, and the perpetuation of their precarious project-based labor.

The word “projectariat” (Szreder 2021) is circulating among art practitioners and workers, as it aptly describes their stressful everyday life, saturated with applications, constant deadlines, and uncertainty. What is more, in addition to large private institutions, art is developing in Athens all the more also through European (and lately state too) funding, which requires one to learn the “magical” (Sampson 2007) language of “civil society.” Artists in Skopje had already been familiar with it since Yugoslavia’s dissolution. This is indicative of how the comparative study between societies with a socialist past and others across the Cold War border can be informative, challenging old but persistent transitional narratives of backwardness regarding the former socialist countries (Graan 2013b).

In both cities, in the 2010s, there has been a non-linear, not absolute, trajectory from grassroots initiatives to a return to the gallery space or to institutionally supported art. At the same time, in both cities, some collaborations and initiatives insist on collective and self-funded ways of production and decision-making. In most cases, this does not necessarily mean breaking ties and collaborations with private (and public) art institutions and funds. In Athens, this initial turn to collective and self-funded activities relates to the closing down of exhibition spaces due to the recession and the historically low interest of the state in contemporary art. It testifies to the collaborative practices and critical tactics or strategies developed by artists in response to international art developments and to survive, express, protest, and intervene in the public sphere. In Skopje, private galleries were few; in the 2010s, state institutions avoided exhibiting critical art. For their part, audiences and critical artists moved away from those exhibition spaces to nonconventional ones.

In many cases, they opted for self-funding in addition to (or instead of) international/private funding, both because the conservative government would not support them and because they felt, as in Athens, that the circumstances demanded different responses. In Athens, solidarity initiatives and networks developed in response to the “economic” and “refugee crises,” whereas in Skopje, as a means to collectively respond to developments in public space, divisive narratives, and the debt to protect the gifted socialist city. What does the future hold? It is a question yet to be answered. New groups and forms of instituting keep developing; new and older initiatives engage in public critical dialogue, research, and action, pointing out power dynamics dominating the art world. There are interventions in solidarity with victims of war atrocities or survivors of sexual abuse that make international news. In any case, both art institutions, public or private, and grassroots or “independent” initiatives announce more solidarity and care. In this realm, we need nuanced observations and perhaps a new vocabulary to describe the tensions and shades in the vast array of expressions of solidarity in the art sector and the constantly changing relations that develop around such expressions.

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