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### INSIDE SKOPJE: DOMESTIC SPACE AND THE MAKING OF EVERYDAY LIFE

**Abstract:** This text presents an ethnographic and analytical study of everyday life and domestic interiors in Skopje, based on long-term fieldwork. It explores apartments as material and social spaces in which broader urban, class, ethnic, and cultural processes of postsocialist Macedonia are reflected. Through detailed observations, conversations, and analyses of objects, habits, rituals, and social practices, the text reveals the dynamics of living as a relational network composed of human and non-human actors, infrastructures, material objects, and historical contexts. The ethnographic perspective demonstrates that the home is simultaneously a site of intimacy, identification, and resistance, but also a point where issues of class, taste, modernity, prestige, migration, and the everyday political economy intersect. Special attention is given to the impact of heat, communal infrastructure, informal networks (“connections”), market transformation, aesthetic classes, and the role of social media in the homogenization of interiors. The study argues that analyzing the home provides a key to understanding contemporary urban processes and the everyday strategies of survival, adaptation, and meaning-making in Skopje.

**Keywords:** domestic interior; Skopje; everyday life; ethnography; materiality; class; taste; postsocialism; anthropology of the home; actor–network theory; migration; prestige; urban transformations; cultural practices; non-human actors.

### Introduction

Since I began working on my doctoral project about apartment interiors in Skopje, I have been coming here more and more often, staying longer each time. My fieldwork is about looking at how people in the Macedonian capital live *from the inside*. I suppose the idea partly came from the fact that what is visible *on the outside* of Skopje has already been described many times and from many perspectives. Some of the most striking examples include the city’s reconstruction after the 1960s earthquake, or its more recent, gargantuan architectural makeover known as *Project Skopje 2014*.

There is no doubt that such massive transformations—especially within such a short span of time—make Skopje an endlessly fascinating subject of study for many disciplines. Individual buildings of brutalist architecture, as well as the recently erected monuments, have already been thoroughly examined. Yet I could not resist wondering about what remains unseen: the interiors of Skopje’s apartments—how they look, how they change, and what they tell us.

Many of the city’s inhabitants still remember the days when, after the earthquake, the capital turned into a heap of ruins. Since then, Skopje has absorbed hundreds of thousands of new residents, people who continue to arrive from villages and small towns in search of a better life. Among them are not only Macedonians and Albanians, but also Roma, Torbeši, and Kosovars—citizens of different sensibilities and cultural backgrounds, faiths and alphabets. Skopje—now a contemporary metropolis—thus provides an excellent setting for examining, within the limits of a single city, how different generations, social classes, and ethnic communities live side by side.

I also imagine my research as a kind of chronicle—or perhaps an alternative history—of the city and its inhabitants. At the same time, it is a collection of *biographies of objects* (Appadurai 1988; Kopytoff 2005), which I understand as full-fledged and active participants in interactions with people. After all, apartments themselves, and material culture more broadly, bear witness to social transformations—to the history and the trajectory of ideas about what is desirable and attractive.

From wooden furniture carved with Gothic or Biedermeier ornaments and red marble-inlaid tables once adorning the homes of Skopje’s early twentieth-century elites, to the modest and standardized pieces of Yugoslav production; from the emotional aesthetics of postmodern eclecticism to the minimalist, white, compact interiors of the modern middle class, furnished with light IKEA furniture and flat-screen TVs—this progression tells not only the story of passing time. It also traces the shift from *solid* to *liquid modernity*, reflecting a new vision of how ethics and aesthetics intertwine.

Through the analysis of apartment interiors and their furnishings, one can also reconstruct very concrete social transformations that shape everyday life. Take, for example, the flat-screen television — hung on the wall like a painting — which determines not only how we use the living room, but how we inhabit the entire home. It influences the way we relate to one another, how we eat, sit, look at each other, and how the rest of the furniture is arranged around it.

Here, too, a clear distinction emerges between private and public spheres, along with the shifting meanings of privacy itself and the evolution of social ties. The home mirrors the formation of the modern family — for instance, the changing role and position of women, or the separation of childhood from adulthood made visible through spatial division between children’s and adults’ rooms. The very way in which domestic interiors are arranged and how individual spaces are used reflects the system of norms and values of a given culture, as well as the specific character of its social relations.

The home becomes a site for the construction of class, racial, and ethnic identities — a space of negotiation and resistance, but also of oppression. The way we inhabit space positions us in the world: it can be a source of both limitation and possibility. Moreover,

domestic space can shape the entire structure of human life through the way it satisfies the basic need for housing — whether through rent, credit, ownership, or cooperative living.

That is why the home becomes a key site for studying the contemporary condition. As Daniel Miller reminds us, “*it is difficult to imagine a future for anthropology that excludes itself from the very place where so much of what matters to people actually happens.*”

## Fieldwork

In this text, I would like to present a brief account of my fieldwork. Due to space limitations, I will include only a small part of my observations and excerpts from my notes. They take the form of rather free and spontaneous reflections that sometimes focus on detail and then shift toward theory or abstraction. I believe that this zigzagging form of movement between them also reflects what I began to understand myself — namely, that Macedonian interiors, or indeed any others, cannot be comprehended without an understanding of the wider context of local culture. But as Bruno Latour observes, anthropology is well suited for this task because it “does quite well in grasping everything at once.” As an example, he cites a passage from Philippe Descola’s ethnography of an Amazonian tribe, where in a single section the anthropologist describes “the definition of forces at play; the distribution of power among humans, gods, and non-human beings; the procedures of reaching agreements; the connections between religion and power; the ancestors; cosmology; property rights; and the taxonomies of plants and animals.”

Because of the generosity and ubiquity of the Macedonian custom of welcoming guests, visits to private homes were a pleasure. More than once, the kindness and warmth of my hosts left me embarrassed. Sometimes I left those visits with gifts, well-fed and well-watered, and reassured that I could come by anytime — that whatever I might need in Skopje could be arranged with just one phone call. As I once heard, a woman, the hostess, should *da se odsrami* — to “redeem herself” by offering something to eat. Thus, *meze* and *rakija* would appear before me, or beer and snacks: meats, cheeses, vegetables, bread, and an ashtray. The men would then make their patriarchal bow to the gendered division of roles and offer the so-called “men’s meze,” distinguished from the ordinary kind by the thickness of the slices, lesser attention to detail, and the speed of serving.

At the same time, the home in Macedonian culture is an almost sacred place — guarded, intimate, and of utmost importance. It is not at all easy for strangers to enter someone’s house. I was usually invited through personal connections — by acquaintances — and then through the snowball method.

Among those I visited during my fieldwork were also long-time friends. Eventually, our closeness reached the point where I had my own set of keys to one apartment, and in another, I could help myself to anything in the fridge.

Most of the people I met only during the research visits themselves. I am convinced that being a foreigner excused or compensated for the somewhat unusual nature of my interest. Although I always tried to explain the aims of my project as clearly as possible

— and although some of my hosts seemed to understand me quite well — I feel that I was not always convincing. Some would look around their own homes as if seeing them for the first time, then shrug and explain tautologically: “A home is a home.”

Each of my conversations was different, primarily due to the degree of familiarity and the quality of mutual understanding. The structure of my interviews was never rigid. In fact, I think it would be difficult to call them interviews at all — they resembled more informal conversations. Although I was equipped with a basic set of questions and tried to keep the dialogue within my field of interest, the most common digressions concerned politics. These were interwoven with almost ritual complaints or anecdotes meant to illustrate the everyday struggles of my interlocutors. I adjusted my expectations each time to the pace and general mood of the meeting. The length of these encounters also varied — from at least two hours to repeated visits during which I could get to know their lives more closely.

What mattered most to me was to experience the interiors of these homes personally — their smells, light, and atmosphere, their comfort and space. Yet in many cases, these visits proved utterly exhausting. The attention and focus I wished to devote to my interlocutors had to be divided between my own reflections, politeness, tact, and sociability.

I never recorded my conversations, though I often took notes. I took photographs only when I felt that the hosts would not mind and only after obtaining their permission. However, I was more interested in having the residents themselves take pictures of their homes for me. I believe this approach has the greatest diagnostic value — they would show me what they themselves considered worth showing. In total, I visited 21 homes.

Between visits, I spent time browsing the offers of furniture stores. I leafed through catalogs and talked with salespeople. I looked at shop windows displaying home accessories — or simply immersed myself in the local color and the rhythm of the city’s various neighborhoods.

### **Anthropology of everyday life**

When I arrived in mid-May, the lawns, bushes, and fields around Skopje were still green. Then I felt the scent of linden blossoms—so intense as never before. Not long after, the famous Macedonian sun would draw all the moisture out of the plants, leaving behind only dry sticks, straws, and scorched shrubs. The leaves would begin to fall. The world would start to resemble an overexposed film. The green would fade into pale yellows and browns. It would look like a hilly planet covered in something resembling coarse fur or a coconut mat. At times, one could see smoke rising over the mountains from burning forests. Sometimes, the fire would descend toward the city from the slopes surrounding Skopje.

In June, people would begin to move more slowly. Or not at all. They would stop leaving their homes. Middle-aged men in faded t-shirts and flip-flops would sit silently, hardly gesturing at all, so as not to waste unnecessary energy. I would sometimes watch them play chess in Karpoš or doze off with a can of Skopsko at their feet, gathered on benches and chairs in the neighborhood shade, near one of the betting shops called APEX or MOZZART. Perhaps daydreaming of the golden rule: “Pij si tutun, pij si kave, aznoto samo kje si dojde” (“Smoke your tobacco, drink your coffee, and the money will come on its own”).

Watermelon sellers along the roads would fall asleep on old sofas while watching something on their phones.

By August, one gets the impression that half the city has gone to Ohrid. Or to Greece. In Karpoš, it becomes so quiet and empty that, in the early morning, through the open window one can hear the traditional call of the muezzin, mixed with the modern growl of a motorbike rushing somewhere—driven by some young gaser. On Plasticharska Street, the outer lane by the shops, theoretically meant for traffic but in practice serving as a parking space, fills with expensive cars belonging to *pechalbari* with German and Swiss plates. They come for weddings, summer holidays, or a *sunnet*—sometimes all at once—and take the opportunity to load their trunks with jars for the winter.

During my several-month stay in the summer of 2025, I realized above all that this city is not some kind of “machine for living in,” but a living organism. One must come to terms with it, submit to it, negotiate with it, and adapt. It became increasingly clear that no apartment interior can exist as it does without taking into account the context—the world outside. The heat itself became a tangible example of this.

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Within my field of interest were therefore the everyday practices woven around daily life and materiality—around objects, things, and artefacts. Their social potential can, of course, be identified in many ways. Yet again: the role of material goods as “humanizing” elements does not depend on “didactic” objects created to transmit values, ideas, or norms of a community. It is realized primarily through ordinary, prosaic objects that form the material context of our lives. Beds, tables, cutlery, or lamps shape our social life far more than flags, monuments, emblems, or history textbooks. As Ernesto Rogers once said, a close examination of a soup spoon can tell us a great deal about the cities built by the society that produced it.

The anthropology of everyday life thus suggests that our identity is not shaped by grand, abstract ideas, but by daily activities and banal objects. We come to know the economy through shopping, urban space through everyday movement within it, and national identity through small rituals and culinary practices. Moreover, as Tim Edensor argues, “national identity resides in the banal and the everyday” (in: Jewdokimow 2011: 51).). According to his concept, individual or family practices become legitimized and sustained because they can be verified at the local level—within a single neighborhood or community. The next step is the supra-local level, which stabilizes and reinforces these practices within the national imaginary. It is precisely this process of repetition that shapes what is culturally conditioned as “common sense”—“the pervasive sense that this is how things are and how they are done” (in: Jewdokimow 2011: 51).

That is why practices which may at first seem highly particular or peculiar become recognizable among members of a given culture. Like keeping breadcrumbs in a used Nescafé jar, or parsley in an ice-cream container. The same goes for the dishcloth draped over the oven handle. Together with several other elements, it contributed to

the image of the “typical Polish home” constructed in the study *Polish Everyday Life*. Among its common features were a garbage bin under the kitchen sink or—according to respondents—at least one wall painted in a color other than white, as well as fridge magnets, a wall calendar, and a plastic bag filled with other plastic bags.

My Macedonian interlocutors mentioned, for instance, the widespread practice of decorating television sets with lace doilies, and told numerous anecdotes about the disappointment caused by opening an ice-cream box only to find it filled with *sarma*. The most vivid confirmation of Edensor’s thesis about “the common sense that this is how things are and how they are done” came when I asked one of my interlocutors—a man in his mid-forties—why he covered the clean dishes on the drying rack with a kitchen towel. At first, he tried to rationalize the habit by searching for a practical explanation (protection from dust, speeding up drying), but then he gave up and said: “I don’t know—everyone does it!” The details of everyday life are often so obvious that they become practically invisible from within.

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The practice of collecting plastic bags is perhaps one of the most widespread habits among the households I visited. Its importance is also evidenced by the fact that some of my interlocutors owned a special plastic-bag holder from IKEA—or at least knew about it. The practice of storing disposable bags can be justified from several perspectives: ecological, in terms of recycling and reuse (for example, as garbage bags), or as a manifestation of a certain memory of a culture of scarcity, or even as a symbol of modern convenience.

The very gesture of packing purchases into disposable plastic bags—especially among vendors at Skopje’s markets—seemed to carry an aesthetic and moral dimension. For instance, when I bought a melon at the bazaar and declined to have it bagged, the saleswoman initially agreed, but in the end could not resist her own sense of propriety: “Ne e ubavo,” she said, placing the fruit into a bag. The phrase can be translated both as “it’s not nice” in an aesthetic sense, and as “it’s not proper” in a moral one—it might reflect badly on her as someone providing a service.

A similar fate befalls the five-liter water bottles that are common in Skopje, purchased mainly because of the city’s hard, mineral-rich tap water, which can be damaging to appliances such as coffee machines. These bottles also inspire vernacular or makeshift solutions: they are often used as containers to collect water dripping from air-conditioning hoses. I have also seen them serve as supports for nets covering tomato plants.

It is also worth noting that the fate of overproduction of (not only) plastic waste is a very real problem—one that became one of the central issues in this year’s debate among Skopje’s mayoral candidates. According to Eurostat, the level of municipal waste recycling in North Macedonia is among the lowest in Europe. Informal plastic collection is carried out primarily by Roma people. According to 2019 estimates, there may be as many as five thousand individuals engaged in this work—forming a crucial link in the recycling chain, responsible for between 70 and 90 percent of the materials that end up being recycled. Waste collection thus becomes a matter of

survival—an impoverishing form of labor. At the same time, the accumulation of waste around residential buildings—especially in the neighborhood of Shuto Orizari—directly affects the health and safety of residents. It also forces them to organize their private spaces accordingly, which may take on the function of storage areas.

Thus, the city’s municipal responsibilities have effectively been offloaded onto an ethnic minority that also constitutes the lowest social class within Skopje’s structure. The result is a vicious circle that forces Roma people into degrading and poorly paid labor, which in turn perpetuates the low social status of the environments in which they live.

The problem of waste management in Skopje can therefore serve as an example of a reaction “directed toward the state for its inability to provide services that, in socialist times, were taken for granted”—an illustration of how dysfunctional public institutions have led to growing indifference toward the quality of shared space. Notes hung on stairwell walls warning residents not to throw garbage out of the window could be seen both in Aerodrom and Chair. The attitude one takes toward waste and leftovers thus becomes a visible illustration of class stratification.

According to my observations, pro-environmental attitudes are represented primarily by individuals with higher social capital—those who belong to the educated middle and upper classes. They are the ones who, following the principles of modern “ecological awareness,” express concern for the environment, recycling, and responsible consumption.



Figure 1. Shuto Orizari, plastic bottles prepared for collection.

It was also among representatives of these social strata that I noticed how even the act of water consumption—a resource supplied in the city by the same public utility—can differ in practice and signal class distinction. The use of water-filtering pitchers was justified by a combination of concerns: for the environment, for health, and for taste.

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I am therefore interested in how people experience intimate, private space and the processes through which it is organized—processes shaped by many factors: cultural capital and individual dispositions, belief systems, gender roles, purchasing power, and so

on. Everything that ultimately falls under the term “*the social*” (religious taboos, fashion, gender divisions, elements of tradition or superstition) is interwoven with the material sphere as its outward expression. For, as one author writes, “(...) even the seemingly innocent act of choosing and arranging furniture in a flat is a testimony to our personality and imagination. In short, it constitutes a way of externalizing our inner life—our interiority.” At the same time, an analysis of that furniture can reveal the owner’s position within the class structure and their level of cultural capital.

In my doctoral project, I would like above all to examine the differences in style, furnishing, daily practices, and domestic spatial organization among representatives of different faiths and social classes. As cross-cultural and comparative studies of everyday life show, the ways people organize space, assign value to objects, and define social relations also shape their understanding of fundamental categories such as cleanliness and dirt. Therefore, invoking the popular saying “*show me your home and I’ll tell you who you are*” requires some caution—I will only be able to tell you once I know what counts as normal for different environments, in this place and at this time.

### **Aesthetic classes**

A crucial moment in Macedonia’s history was the systemic transformation that resulted in the reorganization of its class structure. Gradually, this structure began to overlap with ethnic categories. Albanians became wealthier through their own entrepreneurship, but also thanks to labor migration (already during socialism) and remittances sent from abroad. In this way, they were able to enjoy an increasingly favorable economic position.

The emergence of newly rich groups who displayed their rapid ascent on the social ladder through the exhibition of luxury material goods—as Vasiliki P. Neofotistos (2010) writes—was interpreted by many Macedonians as involvement in illegal activities such as trafficking in women, weapons, and drugs. As a result of the links between the mafia and “the excessive role of glamour in post-socialist societies,” anthropologists simultaneously observe the withdrawal and decline of the intelligentsia’s significance.

To this day, a fondness for ostentatious logos, clean and fashionable shoes, suspended ceilings, or expensive German cars—according to both my Macedonian and Muslim interlocutors—is associated with the Albanian minority. Such shifts in aesthetic preferences can serve as an important measure of the scale of economic transformation, “especially when the new cultural form constitutes a reproach to past styles and a clear break with the recent past.” That past, of course, was represented by socialist austerity and egalitarianism.

The transformation of the class structure led to the reversal of the pre-transition order. Macedonians experienced the loss of the privileges and positions they had once enjoyed as members of the dominant group within the Yugoslav system. They began to grow steadily poorer, while the economic status of members of the national minority improved significantly. This gave rise to a social distance in which ethnonationalist culture began to operate as both a homogenizing and demarcating force. Class inequalities became increasingly pronounced, revealing “how social differences are intertwined with ethnonational tensions and with conflicts from the recent past. These tensions are produced and reflected through

visually attractive ornaments and are closely tied to affect and a sense of subjectivity.”

During the conflict, young Albanians in Skopje began to publicly perform a modern identity—walking through the main square, drinking coffee in fashionable cafés, or shopping in malls—in order to draw the attention of Macedonians and influence how their presence in the country was perceived. These practices, which had not previously been so visible, emerged in the context of post-socialist transformation and strong anti-Albanian prejudice. “Modernity” thus became simultaneously an aspiration, a strategy, and a ritual response to the contradictions generated by social and cultural transformation.

The success of the furniture factory *Barok* can also be read as part of these aspirational practices. As Dimova writes, it “became an ethnic brand, symbolizing the taste of wealthy nouveaux riches (or those aspiring to wealth), particularly among many ethnic Albanians” (Dimova 2013a: 3). The aesthetic character of its designs was not meant to leave much room for reflection. The only requirement, as one interior architect from Skopje was told, was that “it should look expensive.”

The visual presentation of the furnishings I examined in furniture showrooms located in districts and municipalities with an Albanian majority left no room for doubt either. For instance, in nearby Arachinovo, I counted more than twenty furniture shops along a single street. Inside, the imagination of luxury materializes in gold, ornamentation, or the *Royal* lounge set. On display stand mock books whose spines, instead of titles, bear the names *Versace* or *Rolex*. Another telling example is Dame Gruev Street, nicknamed “Plastic Street” because of the abundance of shops selling plastic household goods. One can find there a great variety of domestic items, most of which are gold-colored and decorated with diamond-like ornaments. The shop signs and brand names also leave no doubt about the appetite for prestige: *Empera*, *Dekor-Invest*, *Golden Doors*, *Comfort Center*, *Kashmir*, *Harmony*, *Sweet Home*, and *Crystalite*, as well as a lighting boutique called *Royal*. A carpet shop named *Balkan Carpet* adds an encouraging tagline: “comfort for your feet.”



Foto 1 – Interior of a furniture shop in Arachinovo.

In the window on the upper floor of one of these stores hang crystal chandeliers as tall as two, perhaps three, grown men. I wondered how high one's ceiling must be at home and asked the salesman whether people really bought them. "Of course they do, why not?" he replied, surprised by my question.

As the Norwegian archaeologist Bjørnar Olsen claims, "things are more obtrusive than thought." One can only imagine what an undertaking it must be to replace a burnt-out bulb in a crystal chandelier hanging several meters above one's head. Or how such an interior shapes everyday gestures and movements within it. It is perhaps equally intriguing how radical and impermeable the boundary between private and public space must be: does the desire for gold and Louis XIV-style furniture grow stronger the less the public sphere resembles any kind of order?

A similar tendency toward the categories of "luxury" and "exclusivity" is also evident in a brief review of apartments for rent on one of the popular online platforms. It is enough to browse the listings added within the past two hours to realize that *luxury* has become the keyword most likely to attract potential tenants or buyers.

The tension described above—emerging between the aesthetic and ethical ideals of socialist consumption and the new realities of the free market—thus became an opportunity to express independence and distinctiveness. Yet, more importantly, it also became "evidence of a failure to integrate into the recognized cultural models."

As a result, there coexist today in Macedonia different logics leading toward the same goal—"normality" and prosperity—understood mainly through the lens of (still) Western Europe or (still) Yugoslavia.

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The development of the market economy and the spread of consumer culture have led to a situation in which behavioral models are no longer shaped by cultural tradition. Lifestyle has become an individual choice rather than a heritage passed down from generation to generation.

In the past, dwelling practices were predetermined by tradition and embedded in a broader cosmological order. They did not require a reflective attitude toward one's own space. With economic and cultural transformation, however, the arrangement of an apartment, the choice of style, or the act of changing it have become subjects of education, training, and social evaluation. The "art of living" is therefore not devoid of normative content – on the contrary, it has become a field of pedagogization.

The formation of contemporary tastes is influenced not only by tradition or social status but also by the work of specialists in interior design, marketing, and advertising. It is they who, within the so-called expert discourse, now set the boundaries between what is considered "good taste" and what is perceived as an aesthetic mistake or a sign of bad taste.

Possession is not a passive state – it is a process of continuously defining one's identity through objects. Who we are can be read from the things we choose to display publicly.

My attention to the unified tastes of the Macedonian middle class was drawn by one interior designer. She expressed frustration with the generic, beige-toned photographs her clients brought her as sources of inspiration. If we look closely at these images—widely circulated across social media platforms like Instagram and Pinterest—a decade or two after these tools were invented, we can observe the homogenizing effect social media has had on interiors. Paradoxically, this influence may be as strong as the limited furniture offer of socialist times. The prevailing furniture trend back then was known as the *kombinovana soba*—a matching set consisting of a sofa, armchair, coffee table, and shelving unit. This trend, present in nearly every Yugoslav living room, led, as the lexicographers of the Yugoslav dream ironically noted, to a situation where “all homes began to look the same.” (Adrić, Arsenijević, Matić 2004)



Figure 3 – One of the generic, popular photographs sent to me by the interior designer.

Contemporary apartments have become both setting and product, achievement and backdrop – spaces to be displayed and shared online. Social platforms, dedicated groups, and internet forums where people post photos of their homes seeking advice or wanting to show them off have become a new aesthetic and social norm. Yet within this process lies a danger: our domestic interiors increasingly resemble layouts from furniture catalogues. They begin to function like transitory spaces – airports, offices, hotels – governed by the logic of standardization and interchangeability. In this way, we start to inhabit spaces that Michel Foucault described as *heterotopias* – places that exist simultaneously within and beyond reality, embodying the tension between the private and the public.

### Problems with everydayness

“Everyday life is a highly predictable context of human behavior,” writes Roch Sulima (2022). One can thus break free from this banality of experience “when something unpredictable happens in the chain of sequences.” Everyday life itself “becomes present as a problem when its routine and repetitiveness are disturbed, when we perceive things as being out of place” (emphasis mine – M.M.). What, then, does everyday life become

within the framework of constant unpredictability of social trajectories? What are the fates of an everyday life in which the system (mal)functions at random moments, when unpredictability itself becomes the content of the very frames within which life resists at unexpected times? When did bomb alarms one spring become part of everyday life in Skopje? Or the bus drivers' protest? The strike of municipal services?

While the certainty and predictability of late modernity in the global North guarantee the functioning of institutions and public services in an almost invisible manner (transport, sewage systems, bureaucracy, waste management, etc.), in Macedonia, the functioning of the state as such—constantly opaque—resists routine and everydayness. Growing economic inequalities and the decline in purchasing power among large segments of society create the sense of a constantly problematic everyday life—one that simultaneously provokes both nostalgia and frustration. Macedonian everyday life is therefore tied to emotions such as loss, fear, and uncertainty.

The words (key terms) I heard most often in conversations in Skopje were “*katastrofa*,” “*cirkus*,” and “*politika*.” In my view, these are not merely diagnostic articulations. They also reveal the role played by the *practice of lamenting and mourning over a collapsing, ailing world*. To describe this almost ontological sense of disintegration and degradation of the life-world—decidedly à rebours of the “neoliberal newspeak”—Fabio Mattioli (2014), paraphrasing Ilka Thiessen’s (2007) book on the ethnography of post-socialist transformation in Macedonia, uses the phrase “*a series of everyday crises*.” Biljana Milanovska (2019) puts it even more sharply: “Citizens of Skopje (at least most of them) lead tense, desperate, hopeless lives in the eternal now of the reality called Macedonia. Their future, like their present, is extremely uncertain, uncomfortable, constantly burdened with new worries, new bank rates, old expenses, and the question of how to survive.”

## Actors and networks

I increasingly began to notice that my conversations with my Macedonian friends often returned to one recurring theme: that the key to functioning effectively within the system lies in *vrski*—that is, connections, relationships, and networks of mutual dependency and favors. As Eda Starova writes (2023: 81), “to solve a complicated administrative problem, people look for acquaintances within an institution, beginning a kind of collective intellectual exercise—‘Who do we have there?’” *Vrski* represent a form of intentional community, a constitutive part of the world itself. Maintaining these ties is a parallel, informal system through which one can gain access to goods and services, but also secure employment, obtain a building permit for a balcony, or get a loan.

Sometimes amusing or frustrating, unjust and absurd, often also intricate and multilayered—the anecdotes my friends shared reveal the underlying principles upon which Macedonian everyday life operates. I recall one interlocutor who, after buying an apartment with a mortgage, became trapped between the bank and the state administration for a year—an experience marked by stress, weight loss, and a smoking habit. Today she calls that period a “*circus*,” though at the time it was, for her, a “*catastrophe*.”

In any case, these complex stories of interdependence eventually led me to Bruno Latour and actor-network theory (ANT). According to this approach, the social world should be understood as a dense web of relations among people, things, animals, technologies, and discourses that together compose what we call “the social”:

“[...] no science of the social can even begin if the question of who and what participates in the action is not first thoroughly explored—even though this may mean letting in elements which, for lack of a better term, we would call nonhuman factors.” (Latour 2010: 102)

ANT is not a ready-made theory to be “applied,” but rather a method for studying the relations among these elements. It does not define their character—as patriarchal, neoliberal, or ethno-nationalist—but focuses instead on tracing the connections and negotiations among those elements that, in a given context, can be recognized as agents capable of shaping changes in the social world. Such a collective situation encompasses a whole spectrum of nonhuman actants. Consequently, Latour attributes agency to a remarkably wide range of entities—such as Islamic head coverings, genetically modified food, architecture, financial markets, or the tragic *Columbia* space shuttle disaster.

To imagine this more concretely, one might think of an everyday phenomenon such as speed bumps—known as “sleeping policemen”—and realize how effectively they influence the flow of traffic.

In traditional approaches, causality would typically be interpreted within two poles—either as the result of human action or as a consequence of technological determinism. ANT, however, following the *principle of symmetry*, does not ascribe agency in advance to any specific class of actors, such as humans or social institutions. Instead, its location and character are established empirically. For this reason, scholars working within ANT insist on careful, detailed, ethnographic inquiry (see Latour 2005a). From a distance, one perceives only simplified relations; yet when observing closely, or participating in events, one can discern all the tiny streams that together form the wide river.

With this in mind, I was delighted to read Keith Brown’s (2013) observation in his book on the Macedonian revolutionary movement at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries:

The circulations through which things, people, and ideas moved — including anarchist publications, sworn oaths, written orders, rifles and ammunition, but also migrant workers and the women they left behind, charcoal, peppers, and bread — form the sinews of organization, discipline, and solidarity that, more than the fog and vapors of nationalism or other ideological projects, make coordinated human action possible and intelligible.

One must not forget, then, that no actant operates independently. In practice, this means that agency is not an inherent property of any actor but the outcome of the functioning of an entire network of relations in which objects and people interact and influence one another.

It was becoming increasingly clear to me that I could not study Skopje's apartments without taking into account a multitude of factors that are not directly related to housing itself. In line with the core premise of the sociology of associations, the question of what constitutes the social world is, in essence, an open — and metaphysical — one, to which no final answer can or should be given. The home, after all, constitutes a dense network of relations that allows us to move beyond older semiotic conceptions of reality as text. It is a conglomerate in which identities, agencies, resources, and biographical choices intertwine, giving everyday life a dynamic, relational, and multidimensional form (Pink 2004).

I realized this once again when I noticed one of my friends turning on a bit of cold water before pouring hot water from boiling potatoes into the sink — so as not to scare away the *djinn*s. These bodiless beings of folk belief turned out to be rather influential actors in Muslim culture — regulating gestures, behaviors, habits, and fears, as well as practices such as going out into the street at night, trimming nails, or looking into mirrors. As Latour puts it, “Religious actants — from angels to gods — simply perform a certain kind of existential work.”

In a similar way, another moment of agency appeared in the masculine pride of one of my interlocutors, who — despite having much better living conditions — refused to move into his wife's house solely to avoid bearing the stigma of being a *domazet* (a man who lives with his wife's family).

The sewage system, too, turned out to be an actant — a network of actions. The automated, reflexive gesture of waiting a few seconds before filling a glass of water reflects an embodied knowledge of the condition of the pipes, a kind of “*knowledge in the hands*,” as Michel de Certeau once wrote. The complexity of this network of connections was further confirmed by the three full weeks during which one of the apartments I visited had no running water. The fact that I helped carry five-liter bottles from a nearby hydrant up to the fourth floor was said to be the result of the construction of neighboring *divogradbi* — illegal buildings — which had overloaded the water supply network. These, in turn, had come into existence thanks to yet another web of interpersonal, party, and family connections and favors.

I also experienced firsthand that in summer, everyday life in Skopje cannot be described without taking into account the high temperatures that, during the hottest months of the year, discipline both bodies and surroundings. Danilo Kocevski called this Skopje heat a “miracle” — perhaps because the sun could at times melt the lead roof of Kurshumli An. People would ask me why I didn't go to Greece, or at least to Ohrid. But I remained loyal to the City. For, as one anthropologist notes, “long-term and profound immersion in fieldwork — a total experience — demands all of the anthropologist's resources: intellectual, physical, emotional, political, and intuitive.” And through this immersion, I discovered a variety of ways people cope with the heat.

In those moments, certain elements became privileged and accentuated against the background of reality: shade, fans, blinds, and ice trays. The diet changed too — people began eating *letna mandža* instead of *skara*, and compulsively watering concrete with hoses, causing water consumption during summer months to rise to 350,000 cubic meters.

I sometimes took three showers a day and began to have trouble sleeping. During one lunch visit, I heard: “Honey, turn on the air conditioning, look, Marek is all sweaty.” Yet attitudes toward air conditioning are rarely neutral. Some people keep it running day and night; others deeply dislike it, explaining their aversion through sinus sensitivity. With great care, they test the airflow with their wrist to make sure it’s not too strong and won’t harm anyone nearby.

At the same time, I was struck by how diverse the methods — and what kinds of things — people mobilized to construct the conditions in which they would spend the night. One person slept with a fan blowing directly in his face; another believed the best form of nighttime cooling was to have a fan directed at the bare feet sticking out from under the blanket.

Although these observations might seem trivial, it is worth noting that the accumulation of such habits and embodied knowledge of climatic conditions has given rise to specific architectural forms and solutions. Here is how Petar Mulichkovski (2020) described the architecture of the Macedonian house in relation to the rhythm of weather and the seasons in *Kreativniot duh na makedonskata kukja*:

(...) a characteristic feature of the Macedonian house is its built-in bioclimatic effect, making use of natural factors such as sunlight, ventilation, shade, and appropriate humidity levels. The house provides flexibility in everyday functioning — allowing household activities to take place both in summer and in winter, during the day and at night: cooking and eating, sleeping and resting. There are separate summer and winter kitchens, summer and winter dining rooms, summer and winter sleeping areas. In summer, life unfolds in the courtyard and on the veranda (chardak), while in winter — in the upstairs rooms with fireplaces or stoves that heat the interior.

The study of homes also showed that materiality is only one dimension of everyday culture. The experience of the home is multisensory and multilayered — it encompasses not only objects and spaces, but also smells, sounds, rhythms, and emotions that co-constitute everyday existence. As the temperature changes, so do the smells and the dust (never before had I felt the scent of linden trees so intensely. It is no wonder they have become a symbol of this city). In winter, the air is heavy with smog, while only in memory remains the scent of *ajvar* that once hovered above the city in autumn.

## Conclusion

It is worth returning to the microsociological level, where — as anthropologists argue — the most significant things happen. It is precisely the “grains of being,” the material details of everyday life, so obvious that they become almost transparent, that shape our individual and collective identities. “Everyday life has paradoxical properties: brutally concrete and tangible, and yet largely unnoticed.” We experience the economy by shopping, urbanism by walking through the city, and the Macedonian community by sitting in a *kafana*.

My aim was to show that the study of homes cannot be conducted without considering the many — often complex and non-obvious — cultural phenomena and political practices that at first glance do not belong to the private sphere. Dwelling is an active process, in which “the daily ritual is also a form of aesthetics, something that imparts order, balance, and harmony to the world in which people live.” In this way, our homes “produce” us more than we produce them. They are sources of possibilities and constraints. It is the walls and chairs that “tell” us how we can sit or stand. This is why it is crucial, in the course of research, to examine the material orders that shape individuals.

I also sought to highlight that the home is composed not only of architecture, objects, scents, sounds, light, and the relations among them, but also of non-human actors. Our being in the world is shaped by non-human factors — such as, for example, *djinn*s. “The home is probably one of the few truly universal categories on which an interdisciplinary research program can be built — a category that in recent years has transformed into a distinct analytical concept with significance that transcends disciplines, eras, and cultures.”

Thus, my intention was to emphasize the importance of ethnographic methods in the study of dwelling. Ethnography allows us to capture the meanings and practices that constitute social life, and, in the context of social transformation, the everyday ways these changes are experienced and negotiated. By emphasizing the dialogical and conflictual nature of knowledge, ethnographic research helps us better understand the complexity of these processes and challenges our assumptions about the world. For it is precisely in the details of everyday life that the full meaning of the reality surrounding us may be found.

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