

JOVAN STEFANOVSKI, THE MACEDONIAN ARCHITECT CAPTIVATED BY MALTA AND ITS CHRISTIAN LEGACY

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Abstract: *Through its long cultural history, Malta has long been a favourite of artists and scholars alike for various reasons ranging from the political to the aesthetic. Many have visited and left a memento in the form of literature and/or a work of art. Jovan Stefanovski, a leading contemporary architect from the Republic of North Macedonia, was one such personality. Following a short visit with his family in 2007, he got to know the topography of Malta, information which supplemented his knowledge on the history and culture of the island and its dependencies. He travelled to the islands a decade later, delivering a lecture at the University of Malta, revisiting a number of cultural heritage sites and holding meetings to identify a location for the erection of a Cross, a project for which he offered to waive his professional fees. This article concludes by providing an insight into his significant professional interest in Malta, effectively providing a cultural diplomatic bridge between his native North Macedonia and Malta.*

Keywords: Stefanovski, Macedonia, Malta, Millennium Cross, Skopje, cultural diplomacy.

“Малта беше бедем на Христијанската Европа против исламската Отоманска Империја” (Malta was the bulwark of Christian Europe against Islamic Ottoman Empire).¹ This statement was uttered by Jovan Stefanovski (1945 – 2019), a former colleague of the author at the University of Architecture, Civil Engineering and Geodesy (UACEG), Sofia, in a cordial discussion with Yordan Radev, at a café opposite the entrance to the foyer of the university.² It recalls a

¹ Translated by Ljubica Stefanovska, a graduate in English language and literature and daughter of Jovan Stefanovski.

² This was one of the rather long coffee breaks typical in the Balkans, where Stefanovski would smoke his Cuban cigars over conversations with themes ranging from Macedonian culture to architecture.

The author – introduced to Stefanovski in 2005 by Professor Yordan Radev – travelled to Sofia and visited UACEG to meet Radev and Professor Dimitar Andreychin, the son of the foremost Bulgarian linguist Lyubomir Andreychin. These academics were consulted in conjunction with research being undertaken to be able to direct Ina Meteva in her dissertation (I. Miteva, *The residential buildings in Sofia: past, present and future*. B.E.&A.(Hons) dissertation, University of Malta, Malta, 2007. Retrieved on 26 August 2021 from <https://www.um.edu.mt/library/oar/handle/123456789/80605>). She was a Bulgarian candidate at the Department of Architect and Urban Design at the Faculty of Architecture and Civil Engineering, the forerunner of the Faculty for the Built Environment, of the University of Malta.

publication which appeared a decade earlier by Albert Friggieri and Thomas Freller entitled *Malta: The Bulwark of Europe*.³ Whether Stefanovski was acquainted with this text is a question this author cannot answer; certainly he did not have a copy of it in his library. Yet this quotation falls squarely within the spirit of Friggieri and Freller's book.

Throughout the history of Malta, the island has attracted world-renowned artists and scholars alike. The reasons are varied – to escape justice (Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio);⁴ to advise on the design of fortifications (Cardinal Vincenzo Maculani da Firenzuola);⁵ to serve in government (Samuel Taylor Coleridge);⁶ simply as a traveller (John Henry Newman);⁷ to set up a holiday home (Sir Basil Spence),⁸ a cheap retirement (Edwin John Victor Pasmore),⁹ or as a semi-permanent home (Desmond John Morris);¹⁰ or to undertake a commission, public (Renzo Piano)¹¹ or private (Ian Ritchie).¹² The objective of this article is to

³ A. Friggieri and T. Freller, *Malta: The Bulwark of Europe*, Malta, Gutenberg Press, 1998. This book is a study based on the first comprehensive description of sixteenth-century Malta, which was undertaken by the German philologist and historian Hieronymus Megiser (c.1554 – 1618/9). In 1606, he published an extensive report on his stay on the island (H. Megiser, *Propugnaculum Europae: Wahrhaftige, eigentliche und ausführliche beschreibung der veil und weitberuhmten africanischen Insul Maltaeigen*, Leipzig, 1606). The translation of the Latin title 'Propugnaculum Europae' is 'The Bulwark of Europe' (Friggieri and Freller, *Malta: The Bulwark of Europe*, p. 1), a bulwark of Christian Europe against Muslim Europe, namely the lands forming part of the Ottoman Empire. Megiser, who travelled to Malta in 1588, later became a Professor of History at the University of Leipzig and, from 1613, held a position in the provincial library of Upper Austria – a post similar to a court historian – responsible for writing the chronicle of the province.

⁴ Better known as Caravaggio (1573 – 1610), the artist fled Rome to Naples and then to Malta after killing Ranuccio Tomassoni.

⁵ Cardinal Maculani da Firenzuola (1578 – 1667) was the lead inquisitor during the trial and final condemnation of Galileo Galilei.

⁶ Coleridge (1772 – 1834) was engaged as Acting Public Secretary of Malta under the Civil Commissioner, Alexander Ball (1757 – 1809).

⁷ Newman (1801 – 1890) visited Malta in the early part of the nineteenth century. In 2019, he was canonised in the Catholic Church.

⁸ Sir Basil Urwin Spence (1907 – 1976) purchased a house in Fawwara, Malta, in the late 1960s.

⁹ Pasmore (1908 – 1998) settled in Malta on reaching retirement age, as it was less expensive for the family to live on the island.

¹⁰ Morris (1928 –) lived in Malta in the years 1968 – 1973.

¹¹ Piano (1937 –) was commissioned to design the City Gate Project (2011 – 2015). The project included the building of a new city gate for Valletta, the construction of the Parliament House, and the conversion of the ruins of the Royal Opera House into an open-air theatre.

document the professional and architectural interest of Stefanovski in the Maltese Archipelago. Archival research was undertaken to retrieve documentation, inclusive of images, contained herein.

The Man

Stefanovski was one of the main contemporary architects of the Republic of North Macedonia.¹³ Born in Skopje to parents from Debar, he was proud of his homeland – the birthplace of Philip II of Macedon (382 – 336 BC), the father of Alexander the Great (356 – 323 BC) – he was pro-nationalist and staunch defender of the Christian faith as a religious-cultural legacy of his native country.

Stefanovski completed his architectural education in 1973 at the Faculty of Architecture, Saints Cyril and Methodius University, then known as Skopje University.¹⁴ Soon after, he married Gordana neé Roshkova from Skopje, a primary school teacher of French.¹⁵ In 2002, he successfully defended his doctorate at the UACEG. He was Professor of Architecture at ABB University (Prishtina, Kosovo), the State University of Tetovo (Tetovo, Republic of North Macedonia), UACEG, and was the former Dean of the Faculty of Architecture at the European Polytechnic University (Pernik, Bulgaria) and of the Faculty of Architecture at FON University (Skopje, Republic of North

¹² Ritchie (1947 –) designed the rehabilitation and conversion of Farsons' Art Deco Brewhouse in Mrieħel into The Trident Park, an office development granted development planning consent by the Planning Authority (Malta) in 2017.

¹³ Obituaries published on his demise include *Porta3* [“Ин мемориум Јован Стефановски – Жан (1948-2019): Автор со плодно архитектонско творештво” (In Memory of Jovan Stefanovski–Zan (1948–2019): Author with fruitful architectural work), in *Порта3* (Porta 3), 1 August 2019. Retrieved on 10 September 2021 from <https://www.porta3.mk/in-memoriam-jovan-stefanovski-zhan-1948-2019-avtor-so-plodno-arhitektonsko-tvoreshtvo/>]; *Free Press* [“Почина Јован Стефановски – Архитектот кој е автор на Милениумскиот крст” (Jovan Stefanovski died – The architect who is the author of the Millennium Cross), in *Слободен печат* (Free Press), 12 June 2019. Retrieved on 10 September 2021 from <https://www.slobodenpecat.mk/pochina-jovan-stefanovski-arhitektot-koj-e-avtor-na-mileniumskiot-krst/>]; and *Republika* [“Jovan Stefanovski – Zan, one of the leading Macedonian architects, has died”, in *Republika*, 12 June 2019. Retrieved on 10 September 2021 from <https://english.republika.mk/news/macedonia/jovan-stefanovski-zan-one-of-the-leading-macedonian-architects-has-died/>].

¹⁴ Jovan Stefanovski Archive, Skopje. EU_CV_JovanStefanovski_2017.

¹⁵ They had three daughters: Ivana, an architect and later partner at her father's bureau, Zhana and Ljubica.

Macedonia).¹⁶ He was chief architect and advisor on architecture and urbanism to the Major of Skopje. He worked at the design bureau ADG Granit (1973 – 1994) and Euroarch (1994 until his demise). Over 500 projects are associated with him. Nearly twenty of them were through anonymous competitions, in half of which he ranked first. His iconic executed designs include the Millennium Cross (Fig. 1, left)¹⁷ and the National Theatre (Fig. 1, right),¹⁸ both in Skopje. The former was co-designed with his nephew, architect Oliver Petroski,¹⁹ and the latter with his daughter, architect Ivana Stefanovska Cvetkovska.²⁰ A comprehensive study of his work and his philosophy of architecture has been recently published in *Arta*.²¹

¹⁶ Jovan Stefanovski Archive, Skopje. EU_CV_JovanStefanovski_2017.

¹⁷ This project was awarded a special prize of the Major of Sofia, a silver medal and an honorary diploma at InterArch2003, the World Triennial of Architecture held under the auspices of President of the Republic of Bulgaria and UNESCO. There were 223 entries from 21 countries; the Millennium Cross was one of 28 projects which received honours. The international jury was composed of Georgi Stoilov (Bulgaria) as chair and the following members: Jan Hoogstad (The Netherlands), Kiyonori Kikutake (Japan), Aymeric Zublena (France), Yuri Gnedovski (Russia), Pierre-André Dufétel (France) and Agustín Hernández (Mexico) (Archive of the International Academy of Architecture, Sofia. IAA: IX Assembly of the International Academy of Architecture, 2006).

¹⁸ The project, advertised by the Ministry of Culture in the *Financial Times*, formed part of the initiative Skopje 2014 [D. Stoyanoviċ, “ВладаТА објави тендер за изведувач на стариот театар” (The government has announced a tender for a contractor for the old theatre), in *Becm* (News), 26 October 2006.] This initiative was described by Iskra Geshoska, an academic and activist, as “a comprehensive plan to ‘beautify’ the city centre of Macedonia’s capital (in either Neoclassical or Baroque style)” [O. Hatherley, “Story of cities #31: Skopje plans for the future by fixating on its ancient past”, in *The Guardian*, 27 April 2016. Retrieved on 10 September 2021 from <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2016/apr/27/story-cities-skopje-plans-future-ancient-past>]. Initially estimated at around €6 million, the final cost for the construction of the National Theatre reached €37 million, that is, an increase from circa €6,500 to €40,000 per seat [G. Mihajloski, “Како Стариот театар стана најскапиот објект од Скопје 2014?” (How the Old Theatre became the most expensive building of Skopje 2014), in *24 Becmu* (24 News), 23 April 2013].

¹⁹ Petroski (1970 –), currently Professor of Architecture at AAB University (Prishtina, Kosovo), worked with Stefanovski from 1994 until he set up his professional studio, Arhi Grup Plan A, in 2000.

²⁰ Stefanovska Cvetkovska (1979 –) worked at her father’s Euroarch Studio, Skopje, from 2001 until his demise.

²¹ L. Bianco, “From idea to realisation: The architecture of Jovan Stefanovski”, in *Arta*, 30 (2021), no. 1, p.87-97.

Skopje's Millennium Cross and National Theatre

The Millennium Cross, one of the largest crosses in the world, is on Vodno mountain, southwest of Skopje. Completed in 2002, it is Stefanovski's opus magnum. Its concept is grounded in the following three facts recognised in the history of the Church: (i) Christ's temporal life spanned 33 years, (ii) He had 12 apostles and (iii) there were four evangelists.²² Thus, the structure of the Cross is 33 x 2 metres in height and 12 x 2 metres in span. The Cross rests on four columns which, in turn, rest on a platform supported by 12 columns. The site location is Krstovar peak, the highest point of the mountain.

The National Theatre of North Macedonia, completed in 2013, was the winning entry of a public competition. It recalls the baroque legacy of Skopje, which was significantly damaged during the 1963 earthquake, with built heritage casualties including the Macedonian National Theatre, erected in 1927. Stefanovski's building is on the original site of the former theatre, located along Vardar river. Its design is not a replica but recalls the collective memory; using Norberg-Schulz's concept of *genius loci*,²³ it recalls the spirit of place, or in Shulevska's words:²⁴ *"The reconstructed theatre, in its revival of the old one, is accurate only in the style of the building and not in the entire architecture of it. Putting the accent on the image, its purpose is to produce nostalgia for the past of its original, giving priority to chosen segments of history"*.

Visits to Malta

Stefanovski visited Malta twice: in the first week of 2007 and again from 25 to 29 April 2017. The first visit was a private one with his spouse; he travelled over the islands of Malta and Gozo experiencing their architecture and noting their natural and socioeconomic-political contexts. Being an avid swimmer, weather permitting, he undertook a plunge prior to going sightseeing and ended the day with a traditional Maltese dinner and Maltese beer. He visited official tourist and other historical sites, including the megalithic temples Hagar Qim and

²² J. Stefanovski, *Od ideja do realizacija* (From idea to realisation). PhD thesis. University of Architecture, Civil Engineering and Geodesy, Sofia, 2002, p. 82-84.

²³ C. Norberg-Schulz, *Genius loci: Towards a phenomenology of architecture*, New York, Rizzoli, 1980.

²⁴ A. Shulevska, *(De)constructing Architectural Memory*. Master thesis. DIA Graduate School of Architecture, Dessau, 2015. Retrieved on 17 September 2021 from <https://www.shulevska.co/buildings/macedonian-national-theater-mnt/>

Mnajdra,²⁵ as well as private traditional residences in Mqabba and Zabbar.²⁶

The April 2017 visit followed an invitation by the author to deliver a lecture per bono on his philosophy of architecture to undergraduate students reading history and theory at the Department of Architecture and Urban Design, Faculty for the Built Environment, University of Malta.²⁷ He was accompanied by his daughter Ivana. The lecture was held on 27 April 2017 from 18:00 to 20:00 hrs at the Students' House Conference Room.²⁸ Each course had a question on the lecture in the May/June 2017 examination session of the University of Malta.²⁹

During this second visit to Malta, Stefanovski visited several sites, including Haġar Qim Temples and Limestone Heritage Park and Gardens.³⁰ He undertook photographic surveys of some of them; the

²⁵ Haġar Qim and Mnajdra Megalithic Temples are UNESCO World Heritage Sites (UNESCO, *Megalithic Temples of Malta*, 1992. Retrieved on 17 September 2021 from <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/132/>).

²⁶ Visits to the following residential tenements were arranged: 5 and 7, Triq il-Parroċċa, Mqabba, and 20, Misraħ is-Sliem, Zabbar. The latter property is a winning entry at InterArch2012 [Anon, "A home for an architect", in *The Architect*, 61 (2013), p. 17]. A model of the house is available in the Heritage Homes of Malta collection.

²⁷ The invitation was dated 10 March 2017. The original suggested period was between 11 and 20 May 2017. Given that there was no budget for the lectures, neither an honorarium per diem nor monies to cover airfare and accommodation, Stefanovski accepted the offer to reside at 20 Misraħ is-Sliem, Zabbar.

The courses are 'History and Theory Studies 2' (course unit code AUD1202) and 'Contemporary Approaches to Architecture 1' (course unit code AUD3222). The respective course descriptions are outlined in the website of the University of Malta (Retrieved on 15 September 2021 from <https://www.um.edu.mt/courses/studyunit/AUD1202> and <https://www.um.edu.mt/courses/studyunit/AUD3222> respectively).

²⁸ All students were notified through the Faculty Office of the Faculty for the Built Environment, University on Malta, via an email dated 25 April 2017 sent through the Student Information Management System (SIMS).

²⁹ In each paper, the candidates had to answer two out of three questions, each carrying equal marks. With respect to AUD1202, question 2 read "Jovan Stefanovski is a lead contemporary architect of Macedonia. State and briefly discuss two (2) themes which are present in his architectural works" whilst question 3 for the course AUD3222 read "State and discuss two architectural projects undertaken by Jovan Stefanovski making reference to at least to two (2) publications which appeared post the Second World War literature on architecture".

³⁰ Following a request filed via email to the Chairman of Heritage Malta Dr Joseph M. Buttigieg (Lino Bianco, email to Joseph M. Buttigieg, 27 April 2017), the Stefanovskis were granted complimentary tickets to visit Haġar Qim. Similar tickets were issued by the Management of Limestone Heritage Park and Gardens, a private initiative of

Old Parish Church of Saint Mary, Birkirkara, is a case in point (Fig. 2). Certainly, he had his own agenda – to propose a design of the Cross to commemorate Malta’s Christian legacy.³¹ A meeting was held with the First Gentleman, Edgar Preca, on the 26 April 2017 at San Anton Palace (Fig. 3).³² During this meeting, he shared with the First Gentleman the idea of designing, per bono, an iconic Cross on a selected site in Malta and of a public building for the Republic of Malta. During this visit he presented a photo of the Cross which is presently hanging in the President’s Kitchen Garden.

Relevant documented evidence

The meeting with the First Gentleman is referred to in an email with the Head of State, H.E. Marie-Louise Coleiro Preca, entitled ‘Offer of architecture services at no cost to the Republic of Malta’.³³ It reads, *“Your Excellency, On Wednesday 26 April 2017 Professor Dr Arch. Jovan Stefanovski and his daughter Arch. Ivana Stefanovska Cvetkovska had a meeting with the First Gentleman at San Anton Presidential Palace. Prof. Stefanovski, the lead architect of the Republic of Macedonia, was in Malta to give a lecture on his philosophy of architecture at the University of Malta. He was the former Dean of the Faculty of Architecture at the European Polytechnic University, Pernik (Bulgaria) and the former Dean of the Faculty of Architecture at FON University, Skopje (Macedonia). He was professor of architecture at ABB University, Prishtina (Kosovo), MIT University and at the State University of Tetovo (Macedonia). Since 2002, Stefanovski has been professor of architecture on a part-time basis at the University of Architecture, Civil Engineering and Geodesy, Sofia (Bulgaria). His professional career is marked by over 500 realised buildings and monuments. Notable examples are the theatre and the millennium Cross, both in Skopje, the hometown of Mother Theresa. He won several architectural awards. During this meeting he offered*

Manuel Baldacchino and his family. Website of the later was retrieved on 17 September 2021 from <https://limestoneheritage.com/the-attraction/>

³¹ Article 2(1) of the Constitution of Malta states that “The religion of Malta is the Roman Catholic Apostolic Religion” (Retrieved on 10 September 2021 from <https://www.parlament.mt/media/82078/constitution.pdf>).

³² The meeting was arranged by the author. The brother of the great-grandfather of the First Gentleman is St Ġorġ Preca, the founder of the Societas Doctrinae Christianae, M.U.S.E.U.M. (K. Chetcuti, “Edgar Preca, the shy First Gentleman”, in *Times of Malta*, 1 April 2014. Retrieved on 25 August 2021 from <https://timesofmalta.com/articles/view/edgar-preca-the-shy-first-gentleman.513049>).

³³ Lino Bianco, email to H.E. Madame President [of Malta] (29 April 2017). The First Gentleman was copied in.

to design (1) an iconic Cross on a selected site in Malta and (2) a building which your esteemed office requires. In either case he will not be charging his architectural fees. Kind regards”.

H.E. replied within hours, enquiring until when Stefanovski would be in Malta. By 3 May he had already left the island. H.E. was duly informed that “*if need be he can travel over [to Malta] again*”.³⁴ The author had taken up Stefanovski’s proposal of designing a Cross in Gozo with Cardinal Mario Grech, then the Bishop of the diocese of the sister island.³⁵

Final Comments

There has been a trend in the last two decades for countries to aim to be on the international map of architecture. Offices of star architects are commissioned to design buildings in different parts of the globe; even developing countries are following this trend. Malta, the smallest member of the European Union in size, is no exception. Renzo Piano Building Workshop was commissioned to design the City Gate by central government,³⁶ whilst Zaha Hadid Architects designed the highest tower in the island’s Mecca for entertainment for a private investor.³⁷ The architects who established such offices have risen to fame in counties run by capitalist ideologies. Countries from the former Eastern Bloc were driven by an ideology characterised by collectivism rather by individualism. Although architects from the COMECON were not inferior to architects in the West, they did not enjoy the recognition of their colleagues on the other side of Europe despite some of them having since joined the European Union. One such is the Bulgarian

³⁴ Lino Bianco, email to H.E. Madame President [of Malta] (3 May 2017). The First Gentleman was copied in.

³⁵ The meeting was held at the Curia of the Bishop of Gozo some weeks after Stefanovski’s departure.

Gozo, known as the island of hills, was considered an ideal place; one of the hills could have been a fitting location for the erection of a Cross.

There is a Cross at the peak of GHamar hill overlooking Our Lady of Ta` Pinu Basilica. It marks the last station in the way of the Cross; the 14 stations are located along a path way up the hill. Being life-sized, its dimensions are negligible when compared to the Millennium Cross.

³⁶ See footnote 11.

³⁷ P. Stevens, “Zaha Hadid Architects plans ‘Mercury Tower’ as part of major redevelopment project in Malta”, in *Designboom*, 3 August 2018. Retrieved on 10 September 2021 from <https://www.designboom.com/architecture/zaha-hadid-mercury-tower-paceville-malta-08-03-2018/>

architect Georgi Stoilov.³⁸ Despite his standing and the professional and moral support which he offered to contemporaries in the West whom he helped rise to fame, his significant efforts are still not duly acknowledged. He struggled to assert his presence. Stefanovski, his junior in age, was brought up in the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY).³⁹ Despite his standing in North Macedonia, and the fact that he was once acknowledged by the International Academy of Architecture under the presidency of Stoilov,⁴⁰ he is hardly known beyond his native country.

Although Malta and SFRY had a history of foreign relations both at diplomatic level and as members of the Non-Aligned Movement, Malta and the Republic of North Macedonia had established diplomatic relations on 25 January 2017 with Malta's first ambassador presenting the letters of credence on 22 April 2021.⁴¹ Whilst Stefanovski's effort to erect a public monument or/and building in Malta was an opportunity to leave his imprint on the contemporary architecture of the island, he attempted to establish a cultural diplomatic bridge between the two countries through his proposal/s.

Author's Note: This paper is dedicated to Professor Dr Arch. Jovan Stefanovski, a colleague and a friend at the Faculty of Architecture, UACEG, Sofia.

³⁸ Following his completion of his architecture studies in 1954 at the Moscow Institute of Architecture, Stoilov moved to Paris in 1965 to major in urbanism. He was a pioneer in the Union of Architects of Bulgaria and its Chairman (1965–1968; 1977–1990), Mayor of Sofia (1967–1971), Member of Parliament (1967–1990), Bulgaria's Minister for Architecture and Town Planning (1971–1973); President of the International Union of Architects (1985–1987) and founder of the International Academy of Architecture (1987–2018) (International Academy of Architecture, Sofia, *Georgi Stoilov*. Retrieved on September 2021 from <https://iaa-ngo.com/portfolio-posts/georgi-stoilov/>). Most of the star architects were elected academicians of the International Academy of Architecture.

³⁹ The Republic of Macedonia, renamed Republic of North Macedonia as of February 2019, is one of the successor states of the former Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia.

⁴⁰ See footnote 17.

⁴¹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs [Republic of North Macedonia], "Osmani receives copies of letters of credence of newly-appointed Ambassador of Republic of Malta, Mary Scicluna", 22 April 2021. Retrieved on 16 September 2021 from <https://www.mfa.gov.mk/en/page/1699/post/2559/osmani-receives-copies-of-letters-of-credence-of-newlyappointed-ambassador-of-republic-of-malta-mary-sciicluna>

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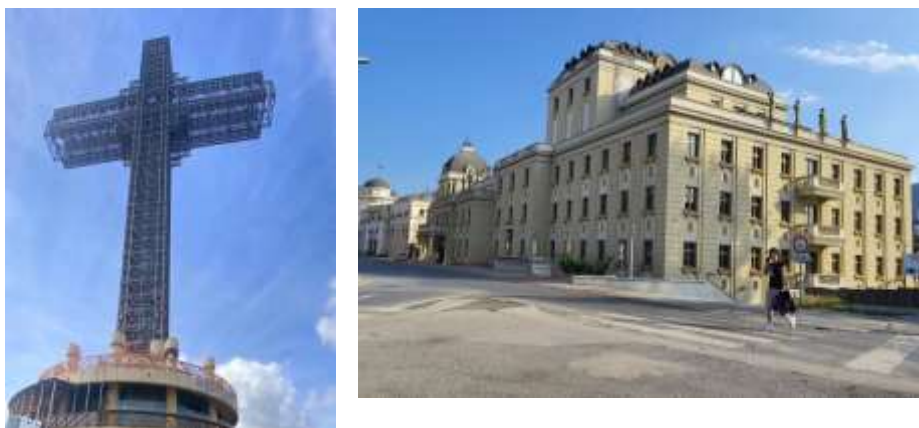


Fig. 1. Millennium Cross (left) and the National Theatre (right), both in Skopje (Source: Borche Veljanovski)





Fig. 2. Part of photographic survey of the Old Parish Church of Saint Mary, Birkirkara, undertaken by Jovan Stefanovski (© Jovan Stefanovski Archive)



Fig. 3. Meeting at San Anton Palace: The First Gentleman Edgar Preca (centre), Jovan Stefanovski (left) and Ivana Stefanovska Cvetkovska (right) (© Jovan Stefanovski Archive)