

## North Macedonian Culture as Part of Southeast Culture: A Focus on Contemporary Practices and Cultural Policy

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**Abstract:** This paper investigates North Macedonian culture as a component of Southeast Europe cultural heritage, focusing on contemporary cultural practices and the policies that shape them. North Macedonia, situated at the crossroads of the Balkans, embodies a rich synthesis of influences from Slavic, Byzantine, and Ottoman legacies. This research examines key cultural elements such as cultural events, as well as the impact of globalization on these traditions. Furthermore, it analyzes the role of cultural policy in promoting and preserving cultural heritage, addressing the challenges related to cultural identity and globalization. The findings highlight the dynamic interaction between local heritage and contemporary cultural expression, emphasizing North Macedonians contribution to the broader Southeast European cultural landscape.

**Keywords:** cultural heritage, cultural policy, contemporary cultural practices, North Macedonia, Southeast Europe

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### Introduction

Situated at the heart of the Balkans, North Macedonia occupies a strategic geographical position, sharing borders with Kosovo, Albania, Greece, Bulgaria, and Serbia. This central location has rendered the country a crucial crossroads for various civilizations, each leaving indelible marks on its cultural heritage (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983). Historically, the region fell under the dominion of major empires such as the Roman, Byzantine, and Ottoman, whose influences have profoundly shaped its multiethnic and multicultural identity (Erll & Rigney, 2019). The modern history of North Macedonia commenced with the dissolution of Yugoslavia, leading to its independence in 1991. A significant milestone in its political and cultural evolution was the resolution of the long-standing name dispute with Greece through the Prespa Agreement in 2018, officially changing the country's name to North Macedonia (European Commission, 2020). This agreement not only settled a diplomatic contention but also opened avenues for the nation's integration into international organizations. Preserving cultural heritage is of paramount importance for North Macedonia, aiming to enhance its international reputation and contribute to regional stability (Kolar, 2020). The nation's cultural heritage represents a fusion of Eastern and Western influences that have historically molded the Balkans. Contemporary cultural policies focus on safeguarding this rich heritage while addressing the challenges posed by globalization (Božić & Savić, 2019). The historical legacy of North Macedonia, coupled with its current cultural practices and policies, underscores its vital role in shaping the cultural identity of Southeast Europe (Savić, 2018). Among the most significant cultural landmarks are the cities of Ohrid and Skopje. Ohrid, designated as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, is renowned for its Byzantine churches, monasteries, and its historical role as a spiritual center serving as a living monument to the

country's cultural heritage (UNESCO, 1979). The Ohrid Summer Festival is a prominent cultural event that attracts international performers and audiences, showcasing Macedonian culture to the world (Vasilev, 2021). Skopje, the capital city, has undergone significant urban transformation, particularly through the "Skopje 2014" project. Dimova (2013) explores this 'ethno-baroque' phenomenon, analyzing how materiality and aesthetics in modern-day Macedonia reflect deeper conflicts and dialogues surrounding national identity and heritage. This initiative aimed to emphasize the city's classical aesthetic by introducing neoclassical buildings, statues, and monuments celebrating North Macedonia's ancient past, including figures like Alexander the Great (Kolar & Vasilev, 2022). While the project is controversial—critics argue it overshadows Ottoman and socialist architectural styles—it nonetheless plays an important role in reaffirming the city's cultural heritage (Božić, 2019).

**Research Methodology:** This research employs a qualitative approach to explore the intersection of cultural heritage preservation and contemporary cultural policies in North Macedonia, focusing on the examples of Ohrid and the Struga Poetry Evenings.

#### Historical Analysis

Brunnbauer(2005) discusses how historiographic myths and the construction of ancient nationhood have played a crucial role in the Republic of Macedonia's struggle for statehood, impacting its cultural policies and identity formation. This exploration of historical narratives provides insight into the complexities of nation-building and heritage preservation in the region."A comprehensive historical analysis was conducted by reviewing historical documents, scholarly books, and academic articles detailing the evolution of North Macedonia's cultural heritage from ancient times to the present. Special emphasis was placed on the influence of various empires—Roman, Byzantine, Ottoman—on the region's cultural landscape and identity (Erll, 2011). The analysis delved into the cultural, historical, and political significance of Ohrid and the Struga Poetry Evenings, highlighting their roles in shaping regional identity and cultural diplomacy (Savić, 2018).

#### Documentary and Archival Research

An examination of policy documents, archival materials, and reports from institutions such as UNESCO, the Ministry of Culture of North Macedonia, and other cultural organizations provided insights into governmental and international frameworks influencing the cultural-political environment of the region (UNESCO, 2003; Ministry of Culture of North Macedonia, 2020). This approach aided in identifying trends in cultural heritage management and the challenges posed by globalization and modernization (Božić & Savić, 2019).

#### Comparative Analysis

The research included a comparative analysis of cultural heritage preservation strategies in North Macedonia and neighboring Southeast European countries. By employing case studies from adjacent states, this analysis highlighted shared challenges and opportunities, contributing to a broader understanding of cultural dynamics in the region and the role of cultural diplomacy (Kolar, 2020; European Commission, 2020).

### **Contemporary Cultural Practices: Festivals as a Bridge Between Tradition and Modernity**

Cultural festivals in North Macedonia represent significant contemporary practices deeply rooted in the country's historical heritage. The Struga Poetry Evenings, for instance, provide a fertile platform for literary exchange between Macedonian poets and their international counterparts (Struga Poetry Evenings Archive, n.d.). Similarly, the Ohrid Summer Festival showcases Macedonian culture to a global audience through a combination of music, theater, and art (Vasilev, 2021). According to Božić and Savić (2019), globalization presents both opportunities and challenges for cultural practices. While it enables intercultural exchanges, it also necessitates the preservation of local traditions. Savić (2018) elaborates that such events act as cultural ambassadors, promoting regional cohesion and elevating North Macedonia's reputation on the international stage. An illustrative example is how younger generations reinterpret folk music by blending traditional motifs with contemporary artistic styles, maintaining cultural relevance in a modern context (Kolar, 2020). Aligned with global frameworks such as UNESCO's Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (UNESCO, 2003), the Ministry of Culture of North Macedonia implements initiatives focused on preserving cultural heritage and promoting cultural tourism (Ministry of Culture of North Macedonia, 2020). Kolar (2020) emphasizes the importance of involving local communities in heritage preservation policies to ensure sustainability and relevance. However, Kolar and Vasilev (2022) caution that balancing economic development with the preservation of cultural heritage remains a challenge, particularly given limited resources and the need for fair representation of ethnic and regional identities.

### **Regional Cooperation and Cultural Diplomacy**

The cultural heritage of North Macedonia plays a pivotal role in strengthening the regional identity of Southeast Europe, balancing tradition and modernity. Erll and Rigney (2019) assert that cultural memory is central to reinforcing regional identities, especially in the face of global influences. Initiatives such as the Council of Ministers of Culture of Southeast Europe promote shared heritage and regional cohesion (European Commission, 2020). An example is the Struga Poetry Evenings, established in 1962, which highlight North Macedonia's literary and intercultural dedication. According to the Struga Poetry Evenings Archive (n.d.), this event has hosted poets from over 100 countries, serving as a platform for cultural diplomacy and dialogue. Similarly, the Ohrid Summer Festival connects local traditions with global cultural currents through artistic performances in Ohrid's historical landmarks (Kolar, 2020). Despite these successes, North Macedonia faces challenges such as globalization pressures and limited resources. Through strategic cultural policies and initiatives, the country solidifies its role as a model for cultural heritage preservation, contributing to regional stability while addressing both local and global challenges (Božić, 2019).

### **Preservation of Heritage in Ohrid**

The preservation of cultural heritage in Ohrid, recognized as a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 1979, exemplifies the successful integration of conservation efforts with sustainable development (UNESCO, 1979). Known as the "Jerusalem of the Balkans," the city boasts historic churches, monasteries, and the unique Lake Ohrid, all attesting to its significance as a center for the spread of Slavic literacy and Orthodox Christianity (Vasilev, 2021). Landmarks such as the Church of St. John

at Kaneo and the Early Christian Basilica reflect a fusion of Byzantine and local architectural styles, symbolizing the rich heritage of the Balkan region (Kolar, 2020). Preservation efforts include fresco and architectural restorations funded by the Ministry of Culture and international partners, aiming to minimize damage and ensure the longevity of these treasures (Ministry of Culture of North Macedonia, 2020). Political interventions, supported by the government, focus on safeguarding cultural and natural heritage through strict building regulations and adherence to UNESCO recommendations, highlighting the role of cultural policy in long-term preservation (UNESCO, 2003). Local communities contribute through awareness campaigns and sustainable tourism strategies. Educational programs and eco-oriented tours mitigate the negative impacts of mass tourism, allowing visits that respect the cultural and natural significance of Ohrid (European Commission, 2020). According to Petrovska and Cingoski (2016), the development of cultural heritage tourism in Ohrid has been instrumental in promoting sustainable economic growth while preserving the city's unique historical sites. By integrating tourism with heritage preservation, Ohrid serves as a model for balancing economic interests with cultural sustainability." Educational programs and eco-oriented tours help mitigate the negative impacts of mass tourism, promoting visits that respect the cultural and natural significance of Ohrid (European Commission, 2020). By integrating local, national, and international initiatives, Ohrid has become a model for sustainable development in the region, underscoring the importance of preserving shared cultural heritage (Erll, 2011).

### **Challenges in Preserving Cultural Heritage**

Despite its successes, Ohrid faces significant challenges in balancing heritage preservation with economic growth. Uncontrolled urban development and increasing tourist activity threaten the integrity of the city's cultural and natural heritage (Vasilev, 2021). Additionally, pollution and overfishing pose serious risks to the ecosystem of Lake Ohrid, including its rich biodiversity (Kolar & Vasilev, 2022). Addressing these issues requires coordinated efforts among local authorities, national policymakers, and international organizations. On a regional and global scale, Ohrid's preservation efforts have broader implications. The city's initiatives serve as inspiration for other regions with rich heritage, demonstrating how cultural policy can be integrated with sustainable practices (Hobsbawm, 1992). Cultural events like the Ohrid Summer Festival further highlight the importance of heritage preservation in contemporary cultural expression, enhancing the city's international visibility (Savić, 2018). Ohrid exemplifies the significance of effective cultural policies in heritage preservation in the modern world. By combining restoration efforts, regulatory measures, and community involvement, the city continues to serve as a cultural landmark for Southeast Europe. This example illustrates that preserving cultural heritage not only supports identity but also acts as a driver for sustainable development and global cultural connectivity (Božić & Savić, 2019).

### **Case Study: Struga Poetry Evenings**

The Struga Poetry Evenings (SPE) represent a cornerstone of cultural diplomacy and the literary landscape in North Macedonia. Established in 1962, this annual international poetry festival held in Struga is recognized as one of the leading literary events in Southeast Europe (Struga Poetry Evenings Archive, n.d.). SPE plays a central role in promoting Macedonian culture on the global stage while providing a platform for international cultural exchange and dialogue among nations (Božić & Savić, 2019). Originally conceived to celebrate Macedonian poetry, SPE is deeply rooted in the literary

traditions of the Balkans. Over time, it has evolved into a global manifestation, attracting participants from around the world, including Nobel laureates and prominent poets, thereby cementing its status as a center of literary excellence and intercultural dialogue (Erlil & Rigney, 2019). The festival transcends mere artistic celebration; it serves as a vital instrument of cultural diplomacy. By uniting diverse voices, it fosters mutual understanding and peace, reflecting North Macedonia's commitment to fostering cooperation through cultural initiatives (Earl, 2011; Savić, 2018). This mission aligns with broader regional efforts to strengthen collective identity in Southeast Europe and bridge differences through culture (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983).

### **Key Features and Activities of the Struga Poetry Evenings**

#### **1. The Golden Wreath Award**

The Golden Wreath Award is the festival's highest honor, bestowed upon distinguished poets for their lifetime achievements. This accolade celebrates the global impact of poetry as a medium for cultural exchange. Renowned recipients such as Pablo Neruda and Seamus Heaney underscore the international significance of SPE (Struga Poetry Evenings Archive, n.d.).

#### **2. Local and Global Participation**

The festival actively involves local communities, schools, and universities, ensuring it remains firmly rooted in Macedonian cultural traditions. Concurrently, through workshops, public readings, and discussions, emerging poets are offered opportunities to engage with global literature (Kolar, 2020).

#### **3. Promotion of the Macedonian Language**

SPE actively endeavors to preserve and popularize the Macedonian language. By featuring Macedonian poetry in its programs, the festival emphasizes local cultural depth and contributes to its broader recognition on the global stage (Vasilev, 2021).

#### **4. Responsiveness to Modern Challenges**

Despite its successes, SPE faces challenges such as maintaining financial stability and adapting to digital formats. The introduction of virtual activities during the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated the festival's resilience and capacity for innovation (Ministry of Culture of North Macedonia, 2020). The impact of SPE extends beyond national borders, serving as an exemplar for similar events in the region. It illustrates how cultural festivals can foster regional cooperation and global connectivity, emphasizing the role of cultural heritage in strengthening identity and mutual understanding (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983). The festival functions as more than an artistic event; it is a tool for cultural diplomacy, education, and heritage preservation. Through its ability to unite diverse cultures, SPE contributes to positioning North Macedonia as a key player on the cultural stage of Southeast Europe (Božić, 2019).

### **Conclusion:**

North Macedonia's strategic efforts in preserving its cultural heritage and promoting contemporary cultural practices, particularly through the cases of Ohrid and the Struga Poetry Evenings, highlight the nation's significant role in shaping Southeast Europe's cultural identity. By balancing tradition with modernity, and local initiatives with global frameworks, North Macedonia exemplifies how cultural

heritage preservation can serve as a catalyst for regional stability, sustainable development, and international cultural diplomacy (Erll & Rigney, 2019; Savić, 2018).

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