

Everyday Nationalism and Identity Narratives: The Case of the Built Environment in the Sandanski Municipality

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Abstract: *The article does not take a position against the care for monuments that are being ignored and are suffering neglect and decay in the past decades, but instead is exploring what is the narrative that is pushed to the surface in the absence of state care. Research on the built environment and the monumental landscape in Southern and Southwestern Bulgaria is significant for the general social, internal and external political spheres due to its border positionality¹ and historically loaded past. While we were evaluating the general condition of the immovable cultural properties of local importance (ICPLI) in the Municipality and the state of its management, I was enticed to search for the political agents that 'claim' authority over it (instead of the state) and to evaluate whose story do the local people 'see and hear' on an everyday basis. The article does not take a position against the care for monuments that are being ignored and are suffering neglect and decay in the past decades, but instead is exploring what is the narrative that is pushed to the surface in the absence of state care.*

Keywords: cultural properties of local importance, Sandanski, everyday nationalism, collective memory, political narrative, banal nationalism, built environment

Ключови думи: културни паметници от местно значение, Сандански, национализъм за ежедневна употреба, колективна памет, политически наратив, банален национализъм, стради



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Research on the built environment and the monumental landscape in Southern and Southwestern Bulgaria is significant for the general social, internal and external political spheres due to its border positionality² and historically loaded past. While we were evaluating the general condition of the immovable cultural properties of local

¹It shares a border with Greece to the south and as part of Blagoevgrad Province it borders the Republic of North Macedonia to the west.

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importance (ICPLI) in the Municipality and the state of its management, I was enticed to search for the political agents that 'claim' authority over it (instead of the state) and to evaluate whose story do the local people 'see and hear' on an everyday basis. The article does not take a position against the care for monuments that are being ignored and are suffering neglect and decay in the past decades, but instead is exploring what is the narrative that is pushed to the surface in the absence of state care.

INTRODUCTION

During the fieldwork, it was hard to miss the fact that a big part of the ICPLI lack (well) built infrastructure (both in terms of roads but also outdoor directories, signs with general information on the objects, etc.), security regimes, and owing to the latter, a handful of the archaeological sites³ and monuments are currently nonexistent due to looting and, possibly, trafficking. There was a salient difference, nevertheless, concerning those of the ICPLI and the immovable cultural properties with national importance (ICPNI) listed as historical sites, especially the ones related to the local record of the historical – Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization (in Bulgarian – BMPO, in the text VMRO). Many of the latter were well *preserved, restored* in the past 10 – 15 years and *maintained* with the initiative, coordination, and financial support of the VMRO-BND⁴. According to the Cultural Heritage Act (CHA; Закон за културното

наследство), these are the prerogatives of the central and local administration, i.e., Ministry of Culture and local municipalities⁵. Thus, if the state however transliterates them to other actors, then it is essential to know *who* gains the right of control over the *public memory* and the *national narrative* implemented in these monuments.

In my analysis, I am stepping on Michael Billig's seminal 'Banal Nationalism' (1995), which changed the general understanding of how nationalism 'functions' in societies. He turns his attention to the everyday use of nationalism and the 'banal' ways it affects societies to ensure their belonging to the 'imagined community'. One of these ways is through architecture and urban space construction. In this sense, my work has a meta-analytic aim – to discuss who claims the everyday distribution of the narrative and what are the banal, almost invisible changes of its influence on the public discourse. During the fieldwork, respondents shared that not as many tourists were interested in VMRO-related monuments in comparison to those, part of the ICPLI / ICPNI, having religious (i.e., Rozhen Monastery and its complex) or para-religious significance lacking state recognition (i.e., the birthplace of Reverend Stoyana, Bulgarian hermitess, considered clairvoyant and healer). But if we have to look at the everyday banal influence of the national narrative implicated in the built surrounding, it will be unavoidable to look at the region's geography and miss the symbolic presence of the historical and modern VMRO-BND.

³ As per the Cultural Heritage Act /CHA/, monuments and sites listed in the List of Immovable Cultural Properties (ICPs) with the categories 'of local importance' and 'of national importance' are listed in several categories, such as archaeological, architectural and construction, historical, etc., sites.

⁴ Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization - Bulgarian National Movement is a modern Bulgarian political party with a national-conservative orientation (see: <https://europeelects.eu/bulgaria/>)

⁵ The modern normative structure concerning the immovable heritage of both categories combines simultaneously: centralised and decentralised approaches to the preservation and promotion of cultural heritage. That creates an unclear distribution of responsibility for the protection of cultural heritage, especially when larger financial resources are required. CHA declares that: 'The State shall ensure the protection of cultural heritage regardless of its location' (Art. 1, para 2), while it also obliges the owners, concessionaires and users of immovable cultural property to take the necessary care for their preservation, conservation and maintenance, in compliance with its provisions and its implementing acts (Art. 71, para 1). As it comes to an 'outside' initiative for restorative work, it says that in cases of investment projects and requests for interventions in protected areas for the conservation of single or group immovable properties with the category of 'local significance', coordination shall be carried out by the Minister of Culture or officials, authorized by him, after a written opinion has been provided by one of the 6 municipal expert units in the planning regions (Art 197, para 1). Nevertheless, the latter has limited powers and remains rather unpopular among municipal administrations in their respective regions.

The 'architects' of the 'official discourse': the state and its representatives, political figures and parties, academia, church, etc., have long exercised political power in the wider region including Sandanski Municipality, especially in the period before the democratic changes in 1989. Over the course of decades, history and its symbols became a powerful tool for achieving clear separation from the other neighbouring Balkan countries (especially towards Macedonia), specifically with Todor Zhivkov's rule⁶ when he imposed 'ideological nominalism'⁷ Nowadays, in the context of rising nationalism and the renewed importance of the so-called 'Macedonian question', the nationalistic politics led by certain parties can lead to a political and social conflict in the Balkans and a consecutive EU reaction.

THEORETICAL STANDPOINT

An analysis of 'elite – society' relationship calls for a specific attention to be drawn on the social understanding and construction of space. The topic has been of an interest to a number of fields such as: political geography, historical sociology, philosophy, sociology, sociology of architecture, sociology of space. The relationship between space and power in a more cultural approach became a primal concern of the post-structuralist philosophers such as M. Foucault and J. Derrida, to whom the architecture becomes both symbolic and physical epitome of human relations and the 'anthropic space' – an 'affirmation of a collective identity (of a city, a people or a Nation)'⁸.

Architecture, built environment, and urban spaces have arguably been an important part of nation-building processes throughout the

world. Seen as part of the cultural heritage of the communities it is another tool used by nation-states to carry the 'nation's code' throughout the ages and create the distinctive image of the named nation⁹. Georg Simmel in his 'Sociology of space'¹⁰ notes that the 'significance of space for social formations lies in its capacity of fixing their contents', i.e., the urban space as a social space embodies the central ideas, ideologies, politics, sentiments of a certain historical period.

The present research takes Henry Lefebvre's approach to space as an essentially social construct and a political tool:

[Urbanism] is a mask and a tool: a mask for the state and political action, a tool of interests that are dissimulated within a strategy and a socio-logic. Urbanism does not try to model space as a work of art. It does not even try to do so in keeping with its technological imperatives, as it claims. The space it creates is political¹¹.

Social construction of space (buildings, streets, monuments) is preconditioned and produced by and within historical, social, physical, mental processes, and political values integrated in them¹². Being, nevertheless, constructed by architects on the political elite's order, space appears to be entitled the medium position between the aforementioned, the symbolic interpretations and the societal practices of everyday life. His approach also lies on the idea of 'everyday life' and the dialectical nature of space: it can change individuals but it can be changed in turn as well. The matter of agency is important in the works of Giddens, as he also introduces the notion of 'locale'

⁶ Before his rule in the early 60s, the country was following an internationalism course that was visible in the state politics aimed at building a narrative of a shared VMRO past with Macedonia. In line with that, the regime was following the 'teleological continuity' between the 'progressive' revolutionary struggles of the past and the communist ones. The state narrative was ideologically imposed through a campaign in 1949 – 1951 when many public facilities, schools, factories, and urbanities were named after the new pantheon of Macedonian revolutionaries. Hence, the town of St Vrach became Sandanski after the revolutionary Yane Sandanski (Gruev 2011: 53).

⁷ Todorova 1997:146.

⁸ Vitale 2012.

⁹ Jones 2011.

¹⁰ Simmel 1997.

¹¹ Lefebvre 2003: 180.

¹² Verdery 1999: 39-40.

the space and all its features, which help individuals to sustain their communication of meaning¹³. All locales are ascribed different functions in different social circumstances and depending on the group of individuals in focus. In his words: 'space is not an empty dimension along which social groupings become structured, but has to be considered in terms of its involvement in the constitution of systems of interaction'¹⁴.

MAPPING OF THE LIVED SPACE IN THE SANDANSKI MUNICIPALITY

If we look at the political field in Bulgaria, we will inevitably notice that VMRO-BND is one of the parties, if not the only one, that takes an active stance on the monuments and built environment¹⁵. In the past less than ten years, the party has organised many events to engage the public in the country with the monuments and the built surroundings on its territory. An example is its appeal to every citizen to #RememberTheHeroes and to offer a flower to an 'unpopular' monument in his/hers village, district or town every June 2nd – the commemoration day for the revolutionary Hristo Botev and those who gave their lives for the Independence of the country - for the past several years¹⁶. This year the VMRO-BND representatives from the Sofia City Council suggested that the controversial Soviet Army Monument should be substituted with a monumental complex of the Founders of the Bulgarian state¹⁷. Additionally, at least since 2016 – 2017, it leads a campaign for the search, restoration, and reconstruction of soldier memorials in Western, North- and South-Western Bulgaria. In 2010 they announced their

youth organisation's 'Pure Memory' campaign, which aims at maintaining memorial sites in Bulgaria: 'For years, along with its current political activity, VMRO has been taking care of the symbols of our national pride in all parts of Bulgaria'¹⁸.

Thus, as we can see, the everyday cultural production of a nationalist party's reclaimed memorials can divert however slightly the 'collective' memory pushing a revanchist narrative into everyday life¹⁹. In the case of Sandanski Municipality, we can argue that this is the case with the shared past of Bulgaria and North Macedonia.

With all that in mind, I will look at five cases: two ICPLI and two ICPNI, the restoration practices of the state and VMRO-BND and the symbolic geography they create in small villages and desolated areas in the Municipality in question.

THE STS CYRIL AND METHODIUS CHURCH AND THE GRAVES OF YANE SANDANSKI²⁰ AND TODOR ALEXANDROV

The temple (III. 1) was built in 1912 – 1914 across the Rozhen monastery by the then VMORO²¹ leader – Yane Sandanski, who wanted to counter the Ecumenical Patriarchate forbidding the Bulgarian exarchists from the sanctuary. While it is now missing, it is said that above the main entrance of the church, there was a sign saying: 'This church was built in memory of St. Cyril and St. Methodius on the initiative and assistance of the citizen Yane Sandanski. It was started on May 1912 and finished on October 1914'. Although there are seven sites with local importance surrounding

¹³ Giddens 1979: 201-210.

¹⁴ Giddens 1984: 368.

¹⁵ I thank the journalist Georgi Donkov who performed a professional engine search on the online media coverage of the relationship between VMRO and the built environment to test my hypothesis that the party is one of the leading ones in that respect.

¹⁶ Standart (31.06.2022).

¹⁷ News.bg (08.02.2023).

¹⁸ VMRO.bg (08.11.2010).

¹⁹ Following the idea of Renan 1992: 3.

²⁰ A prominent VMORO leader (1972 – 1915).

²¹ Internal Macedonian – Adrianople Revolutionary Organisation, in Bulgarian VMORO



Illustration 1. View of the 'St. Cyril and Methodius' Church, Rozhen village.
Илюстрация 1. Изглед към църквата „Св. Св. Кирил и Методий“, с. Рожен.



Illustration 2. The grave of the revolutionary Yane Sandanski
Илюстрация 2. Гробът на революционера Яне Сандански.

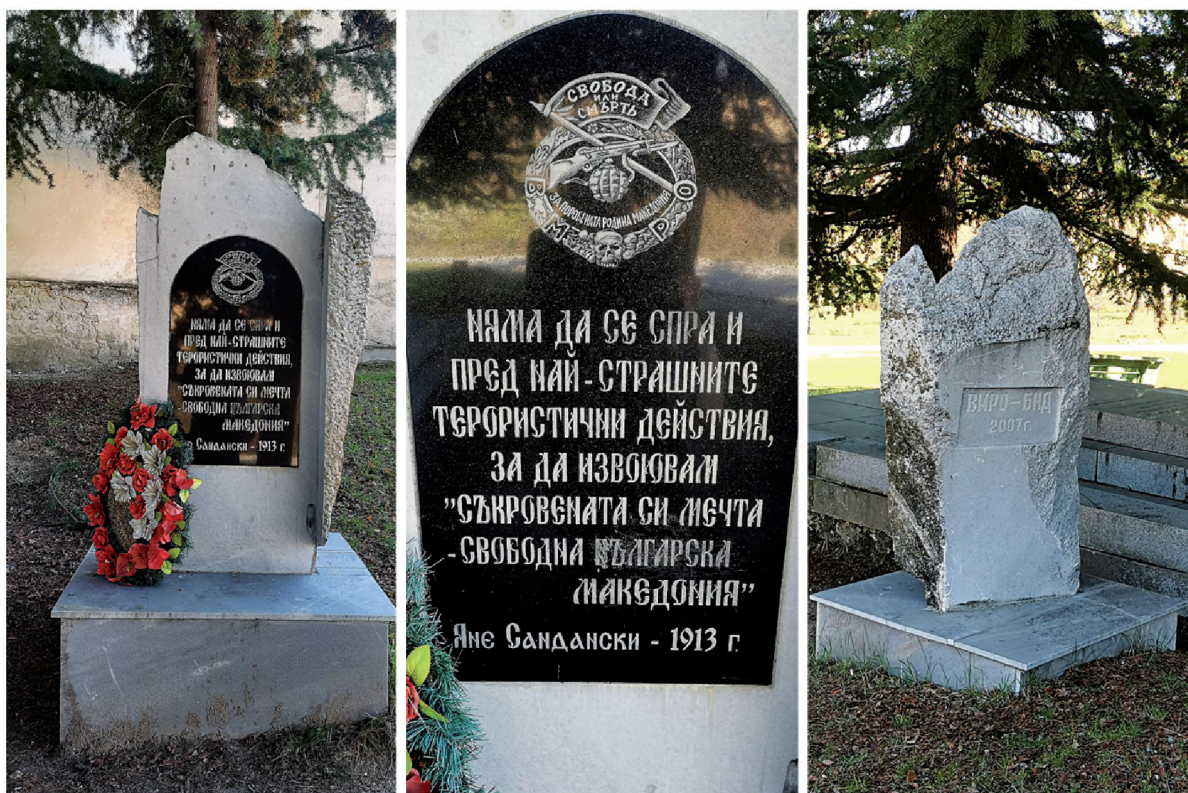


Illustration 3. The front (left and middle) and the back of the plaque – gravestone. On the front engraving, the word *Bulgarian* is visibly fainter and with scratch marks. The back visible from the road reads ‘VMRO-BND, 2007’.

Илюстрация 3. Лице (вляво и в средата) и гръб на паметната плоча – надгробен паметник. На лицевата страна на гравюрата думата „български“ е видимо изтрита и със следи от драскотини. На гръба, видим от пътя към Роженския манастир, е изписано „ВМРО-БНД, 2007“.

the Rozhen Monastery, one could not find any signs or informational posts that would point at them, thus, preventing their socialisation with tourists, as confirmed by the former mayor of the village of Rozhen.

The grave of Yane Sandanski (III. 2) is located in the church’s yard and is part of the Rozhen Monastery Complex, included in the Cultural-historical zone ‘Melnik – Rozhen Monastery’. The only plaque marking the object is located next to it and bears on its backside (visible from the road to the monastery) ‘VMRO-BND, 2007’ (see III. 3). The face of the stone quotes Sandanski’s words: ‘I shall not stop even before the most fearsome terroristic acts, so to conquer my most cherished dream – free *Bulgarian* Macedonia’ (emphasis mine) – Yane Sandanski, 1913. The word ‘Bulgarian’

appears fainter than the rest of the engraving and is reported by a local newspaper²² as the result of purposeful action by Macedonian tourists visiting the grave.

In the recent past, the site, together with the Sts Cyril and Methodius church, became a conflict point for some nationalistic formations such as VMRO-BND and OMO ‘Ilinden’, but also between them and their north-Macedonian counterparts coming for annual commemorations. Thus, the Sandanski mayor separated the groups: the former could honour the revolutionary at this place, while the rest were relocated to the nearby town of Melnik.

Part of the Cultural-historical zone ‘Melnik – Rozhen Monastery’ is also the single immovable cultural property ‘Grave of Todor Alexandrov’²³, located next to St Elias Chapel, above the village

²² Pzndes (18.03.2019).

²³ Another famous leader (1981 – 1924) of VMRO – killed and buried on the territory of the modern day Sandanski municipality, as well.



Illustration 4. Graffiti of Bulgarian National Unionon (БНС), perceived as an ideological successor of the fascist organisation – Union of the Bulgarian National Legions (1932 – 1943), collaborators of VMRO-BND on the road towards both the grave and the place of the killing of T. Alexandrov. Various information and guide tables with the picture of T. Alexandrov and the branding of VMRO's Youth Committee. The VMRO and the Bulgarian flag are at a height in proximity to the 'St. Elias' Chapel.

Илюстрация 4. Графити на Български национален съюз (БНС), възприеман като идеологически наследник на фашистката организация Съюз на българските национални легиони (1932 – 1943), сътрудничещи с ВМРО-БНД, на пътя както към гроба, така и към лобното място на Т. Александров. Различни информационни и указателни табла със снимката на Т. Александров и с клеймото на Младежкия комитет на ВМРО. На хълм, в близост до параклиса „Свети Илия“, са поставени българското и знамето на ВМРО.

of Sugarevo. The site is part of the IPNP list. No road infrastructure leads to both the place of the killing and the grave of the revolutionary. As in the case of Yane Sandanski, there are no official municipal signs and information tables, but some differences are worth mentioning. Its symbolic status was maintained specifically due to the efforts of VMRO-BND's youth organisation, and that is visible by the dominating party and historical organisation markers that guide the path of the determined tourist (graffiti on the road, Bulgarian and VMRO flags, and information and guide tables with the picture of T. Alexandrov; see III. 4).

The place of the revolutionary's killing does not bear exclusive signs of the political party,

but it is widely known that it is maintained by its activists. A newly renovated hut hosts the groups coming to commemorate the hero, while a plaque tells the story of the place. Using a somewhat beginning of the 20th c. script, it says: 'Stranger, wherever you come from, take a bow here, for this is the place where a person that sparks pride in every Bulgarian's heart, was killed. In this corner of the beautiful Pirin, Todor Alexandrov died at the hands of traitors of the liberation on 31st of August 1924'. In the middle of the meadow, there is a tombstone behind two rows of metal fences to mark the actual place (see III. 5).

Alexandrov's grave is located in the St Elias yard, and alongside it are the places of the rest of



Illustration 5. The meadow – place of the killing of the revolutionary T. Alexandrov.

The plaque in front of the hut and the cenotaph behind two rows of metal fences.

Илюстрация 5. Поляната, която е считана за място на убийството на революционера Т. Александров. Паметната плоча пред хижата и кенотафът, поставен зад два реда метални огради.

the four revolutionary activists for the liberation of the Macedonian lands from Ottoman rule. A big VMRO flag is placed on a tree in the middle of the grounds, while some graves have ribbons with the Bulgarian flag tied to them. On them, it is – ‘Heroes never die’, written, preceded and followed by the supposed symbol of either the proto-Bulgarian ruling dynasty Dulo or their supreme god Tangra (Tengri) (see III. 6). The latter is a specific symbol used by nationalist and ultra-nationalist circles in Bulgaria.

HADZHSIMEON'S BARN

This ICPLI is located in the southernmost point of the Sandanski Municipality, and the road infrastructure proves to be an obstacle in front of anyone determined to see it (see III. 7). It is situated in the village of Goleshovo – the birthplace of Stoyo Hadzhiev a participant in the Macedonian-Adrianopole liberation movement

and a close affiliate of Yane Sandanski. In the centre of the decaying village, populated by 29 people, surrounded by a low metal fence with an embedded VMRO sign, stands a renovated and maintained monument of him. It was restored alongside one of the eight Ottoman 150-year-old stone bridges in the village in 2010 (see III. 8) with the financial support of the central and local party leadership²⁴.

The same year the only ICPLI in the village – the Hadzhisimeon's Barn – was also completely renovated since it was devastated due to years of negligence. The site is related to another one of the prominent revolutionaries of VMORO – the poet Peyo Yavorov, who together with his paramilitary group, got in a battle with the Ottoman Asker. Except for the reconstruction of the building, VMRO-BND created an exhibition telling the story of the activists and VMRO in the wider region and the village of Goleshovo. A big flag marks the political belonging of the

²⁴ Struma.com (02.11.2010).



Illustration 6. View of the 'St. Elias' Chapel vicinity. On the left-hand side are visible – the VMRO flag put in the middle of the yard, and a Bulgarian flag ribbon tied above Alexandrov's grave with the 'Heroes do not die', and the Tangra symbols.

Илюстрация 6. Изглед към околностите на параклиса „Свети Илия“. От лявата страна се виждат знамето на ВМРО, поставено на дърво в средата на двора, и лента с цветовете на българското знаме, надпис „Героите не умират“ и символите на Дуло/Тангра, над гроба на Т. Александров.

barn's space (see III. 9). That example testifies to a private civil and specifically partisan initiative for the maintenance of the ICPLI at the expense of municipal and state structures. In front of the building, the rebuilders placed a bust of Yavorov (III. 10). Knowing that monuments (monuments, plaques, fountains) are not neutral 'decorations' of the urban environment but, on the contrary, an important source of cultural identity and memory, this is a significant statement²⁵. Often, they are built to give a specific dominant meaning to the space, to draw attention to a part of the past, and selectively chosen to articulate certain values personalized by a historical person or event. They are also places where

groups define themselves and speak on behalf of the collective²⁶.

CONCLUSIONS

After the accelerated process of declaring cultural properties with local significance in the 1960s and 1970s, the state and municipalities found themselves in a situation to be obligated to take care of many such officially listed immovable properties (Art. 17, par. 1, item 9), while having insufficient financial resources and will²⁷. This situation opens up a room for action of politically engaged actors, free to re-interpret the past and use it to mobilize the

²⁵ Bellentani, Panico 2016: 29.

²⁶ Ibid. 2016: 29.

²⁷ Interim report 2022: 37.

population for their own goals. We can possibly simulate that this is among the reasons for the party's traditional establishment in the local government.

The post-facto politicization of memorial sites plays a significant role in the articulation of the memory, significant figures and values of the past today. As such, their meanings can be used in a multitude of political and territorial narrative struggles and may carry potential risks in the future. Given the boundary positioning of the municipality, marking spaces as

partisan may lead not only to intra-community conflicts but also to such with neighbouring states. The existence of the burial places of the revolutionaries Yane Sandanski and Todor Aleksandrov, in particular, can serve equally for political purposes and political power games, as well as effective expressions of the shared past with North Macedonia, especially in the context of the Treaty of Friendship, Good Neighbourliness and Friendship signed more than five years ago. The region's border position has the potential to bring many positives



Illustration 7. The infrastructure leading to the Goleshovo village, along with the village sign and views from its centre.

Илюстрация 7. Пътят, водещ към с. Голешово, заедно табелата на селото и изгледи от центъра му.



Illustration 8. The centre of Goleshovo, along with Stoyko Hadzhiev's 2010-renovated monument and the stone bridge, bearing a plaque with the 'Restored by VMRO, 2010' sign.

Илюстрация 8. Центърът на с. Голешово, заедно с обновения през 2010 г. паметник на Стойко Хаджиев и каменния мост, на който е поставена плоча с надпис „Възстановено от ВМРО, 2010 г.“.

and opportunities for the development of trans-border tourism in its natural, historical, architectural and wine-tasting versions. In mid-April 2022, many Greeks chose Sandanski for their Easter holiday. Building an appropriate information and transport infrastructure, bringing together existing and new, publicly agreed sites of local importance, can be of particular significance for creating a suitable touristic environment for guests from both

neighbouring countries. That will also improve the infrastructure for small businesses and attract potential investors and consumers, attracted by the affordable prices, scenery, quality food and consumer goods, and rich cultural, historical and architectural heritage. Among the opportunities that are opening up is that of EU cross-border funding, which aims specifically to improve links between border regions for the Union.



Illustration 9. The inside of Hadzhisimeon's Barn with some of the exhibition posters and the VMRO flag.

Илюстрация 9. Вътрешността на Хаджисимеоновата плевня с някои от плакатите на изложбата и знамето на ВМРО.



Illustration 10. View of Hadzhisimeon's Barn, along with the poet and revolutionary Peyo Yavorov's bust.

Илюстрация 10. Изглед към Хаджисимеоновата плевня и бюст-паметника на поета и революционера Пейо Яворов.

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Всекидневният национализъм и наративите за идентичността: казусът на архитектурната среда в община Сандански

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Изследванията на архитектурната среда и монументалния ландшафт в Южна и Югозападна България са значими за общата социална, вътрешно- и външнополитическа сфера поради граничното положение и исторически натовареното минало на региона. Докато оценявахме общото състояние на недвижимите културни ценности с местно значение (НКЦ с МЗ) в общината и състоянието на тяхното управление, на преден план излезе темата за политическите агенти, които „претендират“ за правомощие върху историческите наративи, които те символизират. Това, от своя страна, доведе и до въпроса *чия* история „виждат и чуват“ местните хора, а и туристите, посещаващи района, в ежедневието си. Следвайки идеята на М. Билиг за всекидневната употреба на национализма и „баналните“ начини, по които той въздейства върху обществата, за да гарантира тяхната принадлежност към „въображаемата общност“, е неизбежно да се вгледаме във физическия облик на региона, пропускайки символното присъствие на историческата ВМРО и претендента за неин наследник в съвременността – ВМРО-БНД.

