

CITIES AS PLACES OF HOPE: Skopje

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Intro: “Cities as Places of Hope”

As part of the Green European Foundation’s transnational project “Cities as Places of Hope”, we are spotlighting transformative green practices in Southeast Europe. This article focuses on Skopje, the capital of North Macedonia, which is undergoing a gradual transformation into a bike-friendly city.

Cities are gaining increasing importance globally, with urban actors all over the world facing similar development issues. The pressing challenges posed by worldwide urbanisation call for efficient and innovative approaches. While many innovative solutions for sustainable urban development exist at a local level, for example in the fields of energy efficiency, mobility, and municipal services, the broader uptake of these practical solutions is often hindered by a lack of awareness and access.

In the heart of the Balkans, a city is taking cycling to the next level: Skopje Velo City project

Skopje is the capital of and the largest city in North Macedonia, accounting for a quarter of the country’s population, and its administrative, political, cultural, and academic centre. The city is located in the north of the country and was built in the Skopje valley on an east-west axis along the course of the Vardar river. Skopje is 245 metres above sea level, approximately 20 kilometres long and 10 kilometres wide, and its urban area covers 337 square kilometres. Over 500 000 inhabitants live within its administrative boundaries.

In the 1960s, Skopje had a population of 190 000, with more than 100 000 bicycles (Fig. 1). Following the devastating earthquake in 1963, however, the city was rebuilt using a highly car-centric urban planning approach, resulting in a dramatic change in transport use. By the 1980s there had been a huge drop in bicycle use. This reached a record low in 2010, with the modal split shared almost equally between walking (35 per cent), private cars (33 per cent), and public transport (30 per cent). Cycling represented a share of only 1.4 per cent (Fig. 2).

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Figure 1. This photograph was taken in 1960, several years before the 1963 earthquake. At the time, Skopje was a city with a strong bicycle culture.

It was at this point that the city took on the challenge to rekindle its love affair with the bicycle, launching an ambitious transformative project entitled “Skopje Velo City” (Skopje Velograd).

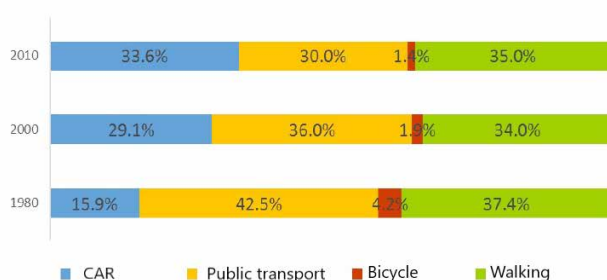


Figure 2. Modal split (%) in Skopje in 1980, 2000 and 2010.

The objective of the project was to raise the share of cycling to 5 per cent by 2020. The city has been working hard to reach that target within the framework of the Skopje Sustainable Urban Mobility Plan (SUMP), launched in 2011 and upgraded in 2019.

The improvement of the city’s cycling infrastructure was a major priority of the 2014-2017 three-year plan. More than 50 kilometres of cycle paths were (re-)constructed by the end of 2017, improvements were made to the public bike share scheme, and campaigns were carried out to promote cycling. Skopje wanted to move away from its pro-car policies and become a more liveable city. This was an “icebreaker” period for the city’s citizens in order to introduce the idea of more bicycles on the streets and to develop an alternative to the city’s mobility plan at that time. The cityscape of Skopje was then still characterised by a high volume of motorised traffic and frequent traffic jams. Few Skopje residents regarded

bicycles as a safe and reliable mode of transport, and motorists often failed to pay sufficient attention to cyclists. Even though a cycling concept for the city of Skopje (2010-2017) had been developed and a cycle network was being partly implemented, the share of bicycle traffic remained at a low level (approximately 2 per cent).

It was thanks to the efforts of Skopje’s green-minded community, who worked to raise awareness of alternative mobility solutions, that the transformation started to become practically feasible. As a result, in 2019 an even more detailed and ambitious three-year plan was adopted by the city’s new administration to increase the length of the city’s cycle path network by 50 per cent, as well as increasing the percentage of cyclists in the city and supporting the networking of all relevant stakeholders.

With the help of these action plans, Skopje Velo City is making good progress towards its main goal of improving cycling in Skopje. The project has identified four main routes and seven connecting routes needing improvement (Fig. 3). Improvement works include providing appropriate road surfaces, road surface repair, constructing ramps for smooth cycling, and removing obstacles.

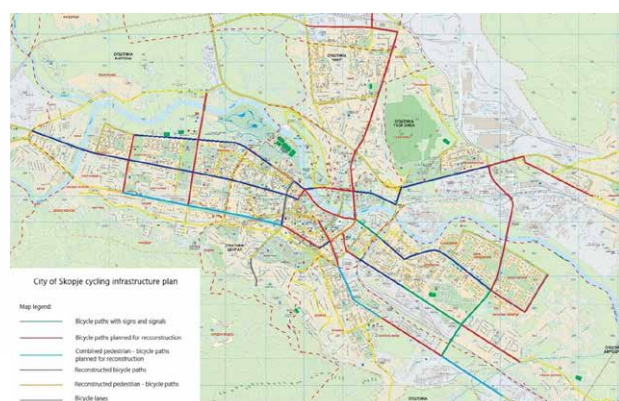


Figure 3. Map of four main bicycle routes requiring improvement (three east-west and one north-south) and seven connecting bicycle routes (all north-south).

In the last two years alone, the city has built or reconstructed more than 25 kilometres of cycle paths, combined pedestrian-cycle paths and cycle lanes, increasing the total cycling infrastructure to 75 kilometres. This is joined by an existing cycle route along the Vardar riverbank that connects most of the city, consisting of 11 kilometres downstream and 9.5 kilometres upstream (Fig. 4). With minor improvements and connections with the rest of the city’s cycle routes, this could become the backbone of Skopje’s cycle path network.

In addition to these improvements under the 2019-21 cycle plan, the city intends to implement 30 km/h zones in several municipalities.





Figure 4. The existing cycle route along the Vardar riverbank connects most of the city. It is consisted of 11 kilometres downstream and 9.5 kilometres upstream cycle road accompanied with a walking path in the upper level of the river bank.

Covid-19

Despite real progress as outlined above, these measures alone were not sufficient to achieve the 5 per cent target. Nevertheless, 2020 saw this dream become reality. With the current pandemic, as in the rest of the world, Skopje has witnessed a bicycle boom. There are more people on bicycles than ever before in recent memory, bike shops are running

out of bicycles to sell, and the city's cycle paths are turning out to be too narrow for the number of users. A similar boom occurred around the world during the oil crisis in the 1970s. What we can learn from that boom is that people can easily go back to their old habits, and cities can become even more car-oriented than before. Skopje should seize this opportunity to improve and upgrade the Velo City project and continue with its ambitious plans beyond 2021.



Figure 5. Reconstructed cycle and walk path with signs and signals along the busiest traffic routes in the city of Skopje