

HEALTH BEFORE PROFIT: CIVIC ACTION AND THE CONSTRUCTION REFORM IN SKOPJE

Ivana Angelova

Lecturer from the practice,
Faculty of Architecture,
Ss. Cyril and Methodius in Skopje,
8ivanangelova@gmail.com

Divna Penchikj

Professor,
Faculty of Architecture,
Ss. Cyril and Methodius in Skopje,
pencic.divna@arh.ukim.edu.mk

Tea Damjanovska

Assistant,
Faculty of Architecture,
Ss. Cyril and Methodius in Skopje,
tea.damjanovska@arh.ukim.edu.mk

ABSTRACT

In Skopje, the civic initiative Health Before Profit demonstrates the transformative role civic engagement can play in urban policy, particularly in counteracting excessive and unwanted urban growth. Comprised of local residents, activists, and experts in urban planning and environmental protection, this civic movement emerged to address widespread concerns about rapid and uncoordinated construction and public space degradation in Debar Maalo neighbourhood. Through their advocacy, Health Before Profit successfully influenced the local government to implement a construction moratorium in 2017, a temporary halt on new construction. This pause provided space for community priorities to be better represented in the process of urban planning and in collaboration with experts, the local government was also able to strengthen institutional capacity aiming for long-term urban resilience.

This paper adopts a qualitative methodology, analysing the data through analytical approaches including stakeholder and discourse analysis at the time. The study focuses on relevant research on civic engagement and urban resilience, the case study in Skopje and the moratorium as an outcome and a tool for sustainable city planning.

In conclusion, this paper argues that civic engagement initiatives like Health Before Profit can empower communities and local governments to advance resilient, sustainable urban growth. The case provides valuable insights into how grassroots efforts, combined with expert collaboration, can foster institutional capacity and community driven urban planning, offering a model for addressing urban challenges in other contexts. Moreover, the construction moratorium initiated through civic advocacy, served as a platform for broader stakeholder engagement, enabling residents, community leaders, and policymakers to contribute to defining urban growth priorities and reinforcing resilience.

Skopje's experience suggests that when residents, community leaders, and policymakers collaborate, they can create an urban future that reflects shared values. However, challenges such as politicization and economic impacts highlight the need for transparent, inclusive processes that genuinely reflect community interests.

Keywords: civic engagement, building moratoria, urban resilience, institutional capacity building, Skopje

INTRODUCTION

Unregulated urban expansion is a persistent challenge in cities worldwide, particularly in contexts where governance structures are weak, and planning mechanisms fail to balance growth with sustainability. When construction is driven primarily by market forces and speculative investment, rather than by carefully structured urban policies, cities experience a range of negative consequences. Over construction often leads to the degradation of public spaces, overcrowding, and the overburdening of infrastructure that was never designed to accommodate such rapid densification. The lack of strategic, long-term planning results in uneven development, where some areas become overbuilt while others remain neglected, creating spatial inequalities and diminishing the overall quality of life. Without clear regulatory frameworks, unchecked construction transforms the urban landscape into a fragmented and chaotic environment, where profit-driven decision-making outweighs considerations of liveability, environmental sustainability, and community well-being.

Skopje, like many post-socialist cities undergoing transition, experienced these challenges severely in the years leading up to the building moratorium in 2018. The city's urban growth was shaped by weak planning structures, ineffective governance, and the absence of civic participation in decision-making. Weak and corrupted governance and regulatory loopholes further exacerbated the problem. The processes for developing and enforcing urban plans were neither transparent nor effective. Municipal authorities lacked both the institutional capacity and the political will to regulate construction activities, allowing deviations from approved urban plans to go unchecked. Developers were often able to bypass restrictions or proceed without proper oversight, leading to the construction of buildings that violated zoning regulations or exceeded allowable densities. Additionally, urban planners were to some extent absent from on-site assessments, meaning that decisions made in planning documents rarely translated effectively into the built environment. The lack of enforcement mechanisms allowed construction to proceed with minimal accountability, contributing to a landscape where investor interests dictated the form and function of urban growth.

Another critical issue was the absence of civic engagement in the planning process. Decisions about urban development were often made behind closed doors, without input from the very communities most affected by these changes. As a result, the needs and priorities of residents were consistently overlooked. Neighborhoods became denser without corresponding investments in infrastructure, leading to worsening conditions for those already living there. Sidewalks disappeared under the pressure of increasing vehicle numbers (illegally parked), green spaces (governmental land sold to private developers) were replaced by high-rise apartments, and public services failed to expand to meet the growing demand. In areas like Debar Maalo, a neighbourhood in Centar Municipality in Skopje, which became a focal point for investor-driven urbanization, the unchecked pace of construction led to severe overcrowding and a deterioration in living conditions. Despite high real estate demand, the lack of comprehensive urban planning meant that new residents were moving into environments that were already under strain, perpetuating a cycle of declining livability.

The influence of private investors in shaping Skopje's urban landscape was perhaps the most defining characteristic of this period. Real estate developers held significant control over urban decision-making, often acting as the primary mediators between residents and local authorities. With inadequate municipal oversight, the logic of profit maximization dictated the pace and nature of development. The consequences of this approach were visible across the city where buildings were constructed with little regard for their impact on surrounding areas, infrastructure remained underdeveloped, and the balance between private and public interests tilted heavily in favor of investors. In some cases, even when community members raised concerns, they had little recourse, as institutional mechanisms for citizen participation were either weak or entirely absent.

Skopje's urban growth model, especially its central part, had become unsustainable, threatening residents' quality of life. This has led to halting the construction for the central area in the city. This implementation was not spontaneous but the result of persistent civic advocacy, specifically by the platform Health Before Profit (HBP). Their efforts created the momentum needed for institutional change, demonstrating that civic engagement was not only a reaction to urban crises but a proactive force shaping policy decisions. The moratorium was not just a halt on construction but an opportunity to rethink the future of the city and to restore a balance between development and liveability. The following chapters explore how civic engagement, led by HBP, played a crucial role in bringing about this shift and how the moratorium served as a turning point in Skopje's urban trajectory.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The recognition of civic engagement as a key part of shaping shared spaces is not new. In early urban settlements, decision-making was often rooted in collective negotiation. People gathered in village squares, assembly halls, and marketplaces to talk through shared concerns and make agreements about land, resources, or public infrastructure. These early practices of self-governance took different forms depending on context, but they offered a foundation for participatory urban decision-making long before planning became a formal

discipline. The idea of the settlement as both a spatial and social unit has been a recurring topic in urban studies, especially since the Industrial Revolution. In this context and across different periods, numerous planning approaches have attempted to 'build community' through design interventions. However, while the built environment undoubtedly shapes patterns of social interaction, community relations are also deeply influenced by broader cultural, economic, and political dynamics that extend beyond physical form.

As industrialization advanced and urban governance became more centralized, these grassroots forms of participation were often pushed aside in favour of top-down, technocratic models. In the twentieth century, modernist planning tended to prioritize large-scale interventions driven by professional expertise, often without the involvement of those most affected. This shift contributed to widespread critiques of urban governance models that prioritize efficiency, growth, and profit at the expense of social equity and collective well-being. In response, scholars such as David Harvey have advanced the concept of the right to the city, emphasizing the imperative for urban inhabitants to reclaim agency in shaping the environments they inhabit.

In the contemporary era, cities are confronted by a multiplicity of complex and interconnected challenges like climate adaptation, extreme weather events, social inequality, gentrification, and the implications of artificial intelligence and smart city governance. In this context, participatory approaches have gained new relevance. More and more they are seen not only as a democratic requirement, but also to work towards more inclusive, resilient, and sustainable urban futures.

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT AND THE RESILIENT COMMUNITY IN URBAN GOVERNANCE

The role of civic engagement in shaping urban governance has long been a subject of research, gaining renewed urgency in the face of contemporary urban challenges. From climate crises to unchecked speculative development, cities today require governance models that are not only participatory but also resilient. Civic engagement, whether through institutionalized public consultations or grassroots activism, has proven to be a crucial mechanism for ensuring that urban policies reflect the needs and aspirations of those who inhabit the city.

Scholars such as Patsy Healey argue that planning should not be a rigid, top-down process dictated by governments or market forces but rather a continuous negotiation among diverse stakeholders. She argues that governance structures must evolve through active public participation, ensuring that urban development is shaped collectively rather than imposed. This view builds upon earlier critiques by Jane Jacobs, who famously opposed large-scale redevelopment projects that disregarded the organic networks of urban life. For Jacobs, cities function best when they grow incrementally, in response to the lived experiences of their communities. Similarly, John Friedmann introduces the idea of "empowered participatory governance," emphasizing that urban planning should not simply inform communities but be co-created by them.

While participatory planning has been widely embraced in theory, its implementation is often full of contradictions. Mark Purcell critiques how such frameworks are frequently co-opted, giving the illusion of inclusivity while maintaining decision-making power in the hands of a few. Farzaneh Miraftab offers a useful distinction between "invited" and "invented" spaces of participation, the former referring to state-sanctioned mechanisms that limit public action, and the latter to grassroots-driven movements that emerge as a response to top-down governance. The idea of the resilient community has gained prominence in urban discourse, evolving from an ecological concept into a broader social and institutional framework. A resilient community is not simply one that withstands crises but one that actively adapts, recovers, and transforms in response to socio-economic and environmental disruptions. This perspective ties directly to urban governance, where resilience is increasingly understood as a function of civic engagement and participatory decision-making. David Harvey argues that resilience, when divorced from justice and equity, risks becoming a tool for maintaining the status quo rather than fostering meaningful change. For cities to be truly resilient, they must empower communities to shape their environments rather than merely endure structural challenges.

Elinor Ostrom further expands on this by demonstrating that collective action and local governance are essential for sustainable urban management. Her work highlights how community-driven initiatives, rather than centralized institutions, often provide the most effective responses to urban challenges. Healey reinforces this argument, linking resilience to collaborative planning, where diverse stakeholders engage in decision-making that strengthens a city's ability to navigate crises. In this sense, resilience is not just about enduring shocks, it is about continuously shaping urban development through democratic and participatory means.

These insights are particularly relevant in the case of Skopje, where civic initiatives arose in direct response to an exclusionary, investor-driven urban model. Faced with aggressive over-construction and a lack of meaningful public consultation, those initiatives stimulated local stakeholders to demand transparency, accountability, and a more democratic approach to urban governance. Rather than waiting for institutional spaces of participation to open, they created their own, proving that civic engagement is most transformative when it challenges, not just adapts to, the prevailing system.

CASE STUDY: THE HEALTH BEFORE PROFIT INITIATIVE IN SKOPJE

Skopje's urban development has long been shaped by structural inefficiencies, weak regulatory oversight, and a lack of systematic planning. Decision-making processes often rely on outdated, inaccurate, or low-quality and quantity data, making urban policies reactive rather than strategic. There is no established system for monitoring spatial changes or assessing the effectiveness of urban measures, which leads to unchecked development and an increasingly fragmented cityscape.

Governance mechanisms meant to regulate urban growth are largely ineffective. Internal procedures for drafting and implementing urban plans are poorly structured, and municipal authorities often lack either the capacity or the political will to enforce legal measures. Urban planners are rarely present on-site to assess how their designs materialize, creating a disconnect between planning and the lived experience of residents and construction inspections are nearly non-existent, allowing developers to bypass regulations with little consequence.

One of the greater issues is the absence of meaningful civic engagement in urban decision-making, a shortfall that has been present from the outset. Communication between local authorities and residents is minimal, often limited to bureaucratic formalities rather than genuine consultation. As a result, the city's development has failed to address fundamental public needs. This has led to severe urban deficiencies related to the increasing density like the lack of green spaces, kindergartens, and schools; overcrowded neighbourhoods with overloaded infrastructure; persistent traffic congestion caused by fragmented and uncoordinated transportation planning; and a critical shortage of parking spaces, forcing cars onto sidewalks, further reducing pedestrian accessibility. At the core of Skopje's urban crisis is the unchecked influence of investors. Developers have largely dictated the pace and nature of urban expansion, often with minimal intervention from municipal authorities. In many cases, they are the only ones engaging with residents, on their own terms, leading to urbanization patterns driven by profit rather than public interest. This investor-led growth model has eroded any aspect of balanced urban development, prioritizing short-term financial gain over long-term quality and liveability.

EMERGENCE OF HEALTH BEFORE PROFIT PLATFORM

The rising discontent with the way the neighborhood was growing has led to increased civic engagement in response to urban development policies, particularly concerning the Detailed Urban Plans (DUP).

One of the earliest organized civic responses to the urban chaos in Center Municipality was In Defence of Debar Maalo (IDDM) formed in 2015, asking for more participatory oriented approaches and inclusion. This initiative comprised approximately 20-30 local residents from diverse professional backgrounds. The mayor at the time demonstrated a willingness to engage with the public, organizing meetings with urban planners, the urban planning commission, municipal officials, and residents. Public presentations and hearings were conducted, accompanied by surveys that addressed key concerns such as the legal compliance of the proposed plan and the extent of opportunities for citizen input. These surveys also contained specific remarks and comments on the plan itself, including questions regarding the legal basis for its development and identification of the relevant articles of the Law on Planning under which it was prepared.

In Skopje, a stark example of this trend was and still is the urban neighbourhood Debar Maalo, one of the most sought-after central areas, where rapid and investor-driven development led to an imbalance between growth and liveability. Despite its high housing demand and escalating real estate prices, the quality of life in the neighbourhood suffered largely. Many residents were unaware of these urban challenges when purchasing property, leading to continued demand despite worsening living conditions.



Figure 1: Health Before Profit public gathering under the motto "Choose a better quality of life in Centar!"

Building on the momentum generated by the In Defense of Debar Maalo initiative, a new civic platform HBP was formed in September 2017, prompted by a tragic traffic accident near Kole Nedelkovski Elementary School. Initially created as an advocacy platform just before the local elections, its primary objective was to introduce urgent urban and environmental concerns into political discourse. The platform aimed to engage political candidates in discussions about pressing urban issues and potential solutions.

POLITICAL INFLUENCE AND THE CONSTRUCTION MORATORIUM

As stated on the group's official Facebook page, the initiative was "created in September 2017, just before the local elections," with the aim of serving as "a pre-election political discourse for potential candidates, to draw attention and spark debate about the pressing issues and potential solutions outlined in it."

One of the platform's main goals was to stop excessive and unregulated construction in Centar Municipality by introducing a construction moratorium. The local elections of 2017 had already marked a turning point, with HBP drafting a list of 43 demands and urging political parties to adopt them. This idea gained public support, and the opposition party Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM) integrated these demands in their program and subsequently won the elections. Jana Belcheva, a member of IDD and the creator of the platform HBP was offered a leading candidate position on the list of the coalition led by SDSM and became the president of the municipal council in 2017. With the implementation of the moratorium, several members of HBP were subsequently contracted by the municipality to help oversee urban planning policies. Among these positions, two roles were established within the Urban Planning Department to prepare special reports on controversial DUPs to ensuring greater transparency and oversight.

In March 2019, the initiative In Defence for Debar Maalo has launched a forum named 'A Chance for Skopje', supported by the Institute for Communication Studies in Macedonia (ICS). The forum gathered residents from across the city to discuss urban challenges. In this way other neighbourhoods throughout the city were engaged and informed on the work of the initiative. In the same year, Prince Edward, Earl of Wessex, visited Skopje and attended meetings and exhibitions, called 'Visions for Debar Maalo' and 'Don't ignore, react!', both related to urban activism.

In 2020, Belcheva resigned due to municipality's failure to fulfil its core promises.

ELECTORAL PARTICIPATION AND INSTITUTIONAL ACHIEVEMENTS

As civic engagement deepened, the platform evolved into a more structured political actor. In the lead-up to the 2021 local elections, the initiative formalized into the independent civic list 'A Chance for Centar'. Within just a month of mobilization, the group secured approximately 2,506 votes (6% of all residents, or 12.18% of those who voted in Centar Municipality) winning three seats in the local council and two positions in the municipal public enterprise POC (Parking lots of the Municipality of Centar).

The platform organized itself into thematic working groups covering areas such as urban planning, environmental and communal issues, energy efficiency, education, and municipal transparency. Their representatives, unlike traditional political actors, operated on a voluntary basis, focusing on monitoring municipal programs, proposing amendments, and intervening in matters affecting public interest.

Activities included organizing thematic citizen meetings, mapping pollution sources and cultural assets, and assessing construction projects—all supported by active use of social media.

In the 2021 local elections, 'A Chance for Centar' was one of more than 30 independent citizen initiatives across the country. Together, they received over 56,000 votes, positioning these lists as the third political force nationwide. This marked a significant shift from civic activism toward broader political participation.

KEY OUTCOME: THE CONSTRUCTION MORATORIUM IN CENTAR MUNICIPALITY

On December 27, 2017, the Council of Centar Municipality in Skopje voted in favour of the decision to halt construction within its legal borders and declared that the urban plans are invalid until their legitimacy is being confirmed. Meaning, they will not be implemented until the actual situation on the ground is assessed, the spatial capacity is examined, and compliance with higher-level planning documents, such as the General Urban Plan (GUP), is verified.

The moratorium on DUPs in Centar Municipality was introduced as a response to widespread irregularities and systemic failures in urban planning. Covering an area of 4.5 km² (of a total of 7.52 km² of the entire municipality), this measure aimed to halt inappropriate urbanization, ensuring a balanced approach to development that prioritizes the public interest. The moratorium serves not only to analyse but also to develop new and improved DUPs. It was expected to improve urban infrastructure planning, resolve governance inefficiencies, and reintroduce transparency into municipal decision-making.

Initial reactions to the moratorium were mixed. While civic initiatives and urban experts welcomed it as a necessary intervention, investors and construction companies expressed concerns over financial losses and project delays. The municipality faced pressure from various stakeholders, necessitating careful navigation of economic, legal, and political challenges.

IMPLEMENTATION OF THE MORATORIUM AND CHALLENGES DURING THE PROCESS

The introduction of the construction moratorium in Centar Municipality was a turning point in local urban governance, yet its implementation was met with considerable resistance and structural challenges. While the initiative aimed to correct longstanding issues, it quickly became clear that both institutional and economic pressures would shape its trajectory.

No municipal decision was made without prior examination of development plans and discussion among the municipal administration, planning professionals, and the mayor, grounded in reasoned argument and evidence-based discussion. Working commissions were tasked with reviewing the proposed new DUPs before they were submitted for voting in the municipal council. It was crucial in that process that all problems of the urban plan are publicly addressed, with explanations of why a proposal is beneficial or problematic, as well as its financial implications.

One of the key obstacles was the very system responsible for producing the problematic urban plans in the first place. The same planning firms that had previously approved irregularities were now tasked with revising them, raising serious concerns about accountability and the potential for superficial corrections rather than genuine reform.

Budget constraints further complicated the process, as the necessary revisions had to be carried out using already allocated municipal funds, leaving little room for a more comprehensive restructuring. While some urban planners engaged with the process in good faith, others deliberately obstructed the reforms, resisting stricter oversight. In response, the municipality committed to rigorous monitoring, ensuring that the revisions adhered to the principles outlined in the moratorium.

The economic impact of the moratorium quickly became a controversial issue. The halt in new construction directly affected municipal revenue, which had been heavily reliant on construction fees. Local government funding was reduced, placing additional pressure on other municipal services. At the same time, construction companies voiced strong opposition, as stalled projects led to financial losses and uncertainty within the industry.

Despite the moratorium, the enforcement of construction laws remained a serious limitation. There were no systematic inspections to ensure that built structures matched approved plans, allowing developers to bypass regulations with little consequence. Legal gaps continued to enable unauthorized modifications, further contributing to the lack of order in urban development.

Parking and mobility issues also remained unresolved, despite efforts to introduce stricter regulations. Many newly constructed buildings, originally planned with multi-level parking, failed to implement these solutions, exacerbating congestion and reducing public space. The municipality proposed a series of measures, including the enforcement of mandatory garage use, higher parking fees, and a structured timeline for eliminating illegal sidewalk parking within 18 months. However, without a robust enforcement mechanism, the success of these initiatives remained uncertain.



Figure 2: Example of one Detailed Urban Plan (DUP) evaluation and revision

POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS

Contrary to criticism from the construction sector, the moratorium was never intended as an absolute opposition to development but rather as a necessary intervention to shift towards sustainable urbanism. It brought urban planning reform to the forefront of national discussions, particularly concerning how municipalities finance themselves and the long-term implications of unchecked construction. Additionally, the debate over the legalization of illegal buildings gained momentum, exposing the deep-rooted consequences of years of unregulated development. The moratorium served as a precedent for transparency, civic engagement, and responsible governance, reinforcing the idea that urban planning must serve the public interest rather than private profit. However, the legal and institutional resistance to the reform became evident when the Constitutional Court overturned the moratorium twice, once in March 2019 and then again in December 2020. The court ruled in favour of the Chamber of Construction that filed charges on the Municipality of Centar based on the argument that the category of moratorium is not recognized in the constitutional system. Despite efforts to align urban plans with the General Urban Plan (GUP), new DUPs faced obstacles from key institutional actors, including the City of Skopje, the Ministry of Transport and Communications, and segments of the urban planning profession. Nevertheless, during this period, four new DUPs were successfully adopted, based on extensive technical assessments.

METHOD: QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE URBAN PLANS

Throughout the first three months of the implementation of moratorium the municipality established a working group comprised of two HBP members with urban development backgrounds to evaluate the DUPs. The group intended to establish a methodology for optimal qualitative analysis of the plans based on the building standard law and the masterplan regulations. The group's crucial role was to show its results to the planners and the municipal administration. The group came as a mediator between those two actors and was also involved in the decision-making process by giving recommendations for future legislation on planning regulation.

The methodology adopted for analysing the DUPs that the working group provided was:

1. Analysis of the Existing Situation: Through Spatial Mapping
 - o Inventory Mapping: Conducted a comprehensive survey of the existing building stock and street network, addressing the lack of an updated or reliable GIS database.
 - o Assessment of Plan Implementation: Evaluated the extent to which the provisions of the previous urban plan had been realized, both in terms of constructed buildings and implemented infrastructure.
 - o Ownership Analysis of Vacant Plots: Mapped and categorized empty or undeveloped parcels of land to identify ownership patterns, uncover potential conflicts, and assess development pressures, especially in areas vulnerable to speculative investment.
2. Comparative Evaluation through Visualization and Quantitative Methods
 - o 3D Visualization of Existing vs. Planned Structures: Utilized digital modeling to juxtapose the current built environment with the proposed urban form, enabling stakeholders to visualize spatial transformations and potential impacts on the surrounding context.
 - o Shadow Analysis:
 - I. Duration of Shadow Exposure: Measured the number of hours individual residential units would remain in shadow under the proposed development.
 - II. Shadow Coverage: Assessed the spatial extent of shadows cast by planned structures on adjacent public and private spaces.
 - o Comparison of Quantifiable Urban Indicators: Conducted a side-by-side comparison of key numerical indicators between existing conditions and planned proposals to assess proportionality, density, and compliance with planning standards.
3. Analysis of Planned Urban Conditions in DUPs
 - o Discrepancy Analysis between GUP and DUP: Compared numerical indicators between the GUP and the DUP under review to identify deviations in density, land use, and spatial allocation.
 - o Construction Scope and Intensity: Analyzed the total area designated for construction and the proposed building intensity (e.g., floor-area ratio, building height), evaluating alignment with urban capacity and infrastructural support.
 - o Public Facility Requirements: Assessed the projected demand for educational, health, and social protection facilities, such as kindergartens, schools, and health centers, based on increased population and density.
 - o Green and Open Space Provisioning: Evaluated the distribution and sufficiency of:
 - I. Public green areas: Parks, playgrounds, and accessible open spaces.

through four distinct analytical approaches, examining geological, spatial, ownership, and infrastructural constraints.

- o Public Parking Inventory and Street Profile Analysis: Quantified the number of existing and planned public parking spaces & Reviewed Street cross-sections to determine the feasibility of accommodating new traffic and parking demands.
- o Compliance of Built Form with Spatial Parameters: Mapped and documented buildings that fail to comply with minimum spatial requirements related to height, depth, and distance between structures, compromising urban form and livability.
- o Population Estimation, Density, and Demographic Challenges: Projected population growth and residential density despite the absence of a recent national census (last conducted in 2000), relying on proxy data and local observations to approximate demographic trends.

II. Private green areas: Yards, gardens, and other non-public vegetation.

- o Assessment of Parcels Incompatible with Underground Parking (-2 Levels): Identified and mapped plots unable to accommodate two levels of underground parking

CONCLUSION

The construction moratorium led by Health Before Profit in Skopje's Centar Municipality offers critical reflections on the interplay between civic engagement and urban governance in post-socialist contexts. It reveals how grassroots initiatives can interrupt unsustainable development practices and create opportunities to rethink planning priorities amid institutional weaknesses.

This case highlights the fragmented nature of Skopje's planning system and the dominance of investor-driven agendas, showing the moratorium's role as a crucial pause to reconsider urban futures. The initiative also illustrates how organized civic action can challenge entrenched governance, fostering accountability despite political resistance and systemic opacity.

However, the experience also exposes the fragility of reforms tied to individual political actors and the difficulty of sustaining participatory governance over time. Yet, the expanding network of civic organizations advocating for spatial justice signals a resilient, collective form of urban activism rooted in solidarity and shared knowledge. Finally, the moratorium points to the need for systemic reforms in urban financing, as reliance on construction revenues drives pressures for overdevelopment. Overall, this case demonstrates that civic resilience encompasses both resistance and the capacity to propose and implement alternative urban practices, offering valuable insights for cities facing similar governance challenges and debates about democratic urbanism.

List of Abbreviations:

HBP - Health Before Profit
 IDDM - In Defence of Debar Maalo
 DUP - Detailed Urban Plan
 GUP- General Urban Plan
 SDSM - Social Democratic Union of Macedonia
 ICS - Institute for Communication Studies

REFERENCES

- Ostrom, E. (1990). *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action*. Cambridge University Press.
- Taylor, N. (2000). *Urban Planning Theory since 1945*. London: SAGE Publications.
- Jacobs, J. (1961). *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. Random House.
- Arnstein, S. R. (1969). A ladder of citizen participation. *Journal of the American Institute of Planners*, 35(4), 216–224. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01944366908977225>
- Healey, P. (1997). *Collaborative planning: Shaping places in fragmented societies*. Vancouver: UBC Press.
- Harvey, D. (2012). *Rebel cities: From the right to the city to the urban revolution*. London: Verso.
- Friedmann, J. (1987). *Planning in the Public Domain: From Knowledge to Action*. Princeton University Press.
- Purcell, M. (2002). Excavating Lefebvre: The right to the city and its urban politics of the inhabitant. *GeoJournal*, 58(2-3), 99–108.
- MirafTAB, F. (2009). Insurgent planning: Situating radical planning in the Global South. *Planning Theory*, 8(1), 32–50.

- Meerow, S., Newell, J. P., & Stults, M. (2016). Defining urban resilience: A review. *Landscape and Urban Planning*, 147, 38–49.
- Ostrom, E. (1990). *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action*. Cambridge University Press.
- In Defense of Debar Maalo newsletter. (2017, October 11). Choose a better quality of life in Centar! [Newsletter, p. 1]. Author unknown.
- Health Before Profit. (2017). About section. Facebook. https://www.facebook.com/zdravjepredprofit/about_details
- Tocka. (2017, October 7). Дебармаалци го вратија ударот: Ќе гласаат за тие што ќе им ги исполнат сите барања [Debarmaalo residents strike back: They will vote for those who fulfill their demands]. Tocka. <https://tocka.com.mk/vesti/243162/debarmaalci-go-vratija-udar-ot-ke-glasaat-za-tie-sto-ke-im-gi-ispolnat-site-baranja>
- Radio Slobodna Evropa. (2019, May 25). Студентски визији за скопско Дебар Маало [Student visions for Skopje's Debar Maalo]. Radio Slobodna Evropa. <https://www.slobodnaevropa.mk/a/29997029.html>
- Telma TV. (2025, April 30). Поповска: Независните листи беа четврта политичка сила на минатите избори. [Popovska: The independent lists were the fourth political force in the previous elections]. Popovska, A. <https://telma.com.mk/2025/04/30/popovska-fiktivnite-partii-ne-se-konkurencija-dodeka-nezavisnite-listi-bea-chetvrta-politichka-sila-na-minatite-izbori/>
- Porta3. (2018, October 29). Мораториум како инструмент за контрола на изградбата [Moratorium as an instrument for controlling construction]. Porta3 <https://www.porta3.mk/moratorium-kako-instrument-za-kontrola-na-izgradbata/>
- SDK.mk. (2019, March 20). Уставниот суд ја поништи одлуката за „мораториум на градби“ во Општина Центар [The Constitutional Court annulled the decision on the “construction moratorium” in the Municipality of Centar.]. SDK.mk. <https://sdk.mk/index.php/makedonija/ukinat-moratoriumot-vo-opshtina-tsentar-dodeka-ustaven/>
- SDK.mk. (2020, December 16). Уставен суд по вторпат го укина мораториумот за градба во Општина Центар [Constitutional Court overturns construction moratorium in the Municipality of Centar for the second time]. SDK.mk. <https://sdk.mk/index.php/dopisna-mrezha/ustaven-sud-po-vtorpat-go-ukina-moratoriumot-za-gradba-vo-opshtina-tsentar/>