

Scaling National Memory: Museums of the Macedonian Struggle between Nation-Building, Contested Heritage and Borderland Identities

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Abstract

The paper adopts a comparative approach to four museums dedicated to the Macedonian Struggle: the Museum of the Macedonian Struggle in Thessaloniki, the Museum of the Macedonian Struggle for Independence in Skopje, and the museums of the Macedonian Struggle in Kastoria and Chromio (Kozani). Rather than analysing these institutions as isolated repositories of historical artefacts, the paper interprets them as interconnected actors within a broader landscape of memory production, where national identities are continuously constructed, negotiated, and legitimised across different territorial scales.

The comparison is structured around three interconnected levels of memory-making. At the national level, the museums of Thessaloniki and Skopje function as institutional centres of official memory, producing comprehensive narratives that legitimise the historical continuity of the Greek and Macedonian nation-states. At the regional level, Kastoria demonstrates how national narratives are adapted to the specific historical experience of Western Macedonia through educational programmes, commemorative practices, and regional heritage initiatives. At the local borderland level, Chromio reveals how national memory is embedded within everyday civic life, illustrating the crucial role of small museums in transmitting historical narratives in frontier communities where political, linguistic, and cultural boundaries have historically overlapped.

The analysis combines perspectives from political history, museum studies, and memory studies, employing the historiographical categories of nation-building, state-building, symbolic politics, Authorized Heritage Discourse, Dissonant Heritage, Borderland Memory, and Heritage Diplomacy. Particular attention is devoted to the political use of museums as instruments for constructing historical continuity through the selective representation of heroes, revolutionary movements, maps, monuments, flags, religious symbols, visual iconography, and spatial narratives. Equally significant is the analysis of processes of othering and boundary-making, through which museums define the national community not only by celebrating its own past but also by representing—or silencing—the historical roles of Bulgarians, Albanians, (Neo-)Ottomans, and, to a lesser extent, Serbs. These dynamics reveal how museums establish symbolic boundaries between legitimate members of the national community and those portrayed as rivals, outsiders, or marginal actors in the historical narrative.

Special attention is devoted to the transformations that occurred between 2020 and 2026, when the implementation of the Prespa Agreement, Bulgaria's challenges to Macedonian historical narratives during the European accession process, and renewed controversies over national symbols reshaped the political context in which these museums operate. Rather than producing more inclusive historical narratives, these developments have reinforced the role of museums as spaces where memory, identity, and political legitimacy continue to be negotiated.

The paper argues that the four museums should not simply be understood as institutions preserving collective memory. Instead, they constitute a multi-scalar infrastructure of memory in which national, regional, and local institutions interact to produce political cultures of remembrance. By examining how competing identities are constructed through inclusion, exclusion, and the symbolic representation of both the national Self and its historical Others, the paper contributes to current debates on museums as political actors and on the role of contested heritage in shaping identities and public memory in contemporary border regions.