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**COMPARATIVE SWOT ANALYSIS OF THE FOUR METROPOLITAN
REGIONS**

Transportation, Interaction, Relations and
Networks among Skopje, Sofia, Tirana, and
Thessaloniki

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Summary

This report presents the final findings based on a questionnaire survey and in related bibliography concerning the four metropolitan regions of Skopje, Sofia, Thessaloniki and Tirana. The findings presented cover topics related to a. forces and constraints of interaction among the four metropolitan regions, b. economic relations among Skopje, Sofia, Tirana and Thessaloniki, c. capacity and quality of transportation, energy, and telecommunication networks, d. importance of scientific networks, e. tourism and population movements, and f. the role of ethnic groups of residents as agents of cooperation. In forces and constraints of interaction a number of factors are examined, such as geographic location, economy, tourism, scientific activities, international image, means of communication, constraints of political nature, structure and function of the administration, rate of crime, quality of urban conditions, and social issues like xenophobia. In capacity and quality of transportation systems, examination covers road transport, rail, airports, ports, public transportation (buses, trolleys, tramways, and underground metro). In scientific networks there are references of universities, R & D institutions etc. based in each one of the four cities and participating in such networks. Finally, in the examination of the role of ethnic groups of residents as agents of

cooperation, historical references are made which can influence attitudes of local population towards ethnic minorities. Then, they are related to contemporary political, social and economic conditions which shape up the interaction between local societies and ethnic groups.

Keywords: *Metropolitan areas, Skopje, Sofia, Thessaloniki, Tirana, forces and constraints of interaction, economic relations, transportation, energy, telecommunication, scientific networks, population movements, tourism, ethnic groups.*

1. Forces and Constraints of Interaction Among the four Metropolitan Regions.

1.1. SKOPJE

1.1.1. Forces of Interaction

a. Geographical Location

Skopje is the capital of the Republic of Macedonia and its main economic, cultural, educational and sport centre. Located in the middle of the Balkan Peninsula and spread on the shores of the river Vardar along its flow through the Skopje Valley, the city is one of the oldest continuous civilized nodes in the Balkan Peninsula. The strategic location enabled it in its long history to represent a natural crossroad of the Eastern and Western culture, a place where many roads and civilizations met, clashed and mixed.

It is located in the north-western part of the republic and it lies on both banks on the upper course of the Vardar River. A major north - south Balkan route between Belgrade (320 km away) and Athens (490 km away) goes through it, while its distance from Thessaloniki is 250 km, from Sofia 170 km and from Tirana 160 km.

From the above it can be seen that the geographical location of Skopje is of strategic importance for developing relations of various types with the rest of Europe, and in particular, with the neighbouring cities of Tirana, Sofia and Thessaloniki. The existing interaction of Skopje with the other three Balkan metropolitan areas in the sectors of transportation and economic relations can be upgraded and interaction in new fields can be developed.

b. Economy

The establishment of FYROM as an independent state after the dismantling of former Yugoslavia, and the transition of its socio-political system from socialism to free economy drastically affected the structure of labour. A significant number of employees working in

the public sector had to change work orientations towards the private sector. Private sector activities were considered as the remedy to cure the economy of FYROM from recession and grant a new dynamism to it. This became even more obvious in the city of Skopje, which has been the centre of economic activities.

The development of new economic activities in Skopje was boosted in a high degree by foreign capital, investment and activities (RIMED PR9, 2003). Sofia and Thessaloniki were the main origins of these initiatives. Greek businesses were flourishing in Skopje, and did not even cease during the period of the Greek embargo to FYROM. It is worth mentioning that during this period, the Sofia route to Skopje was used by Greeks, since the direct transportation connection was stopped. The main sectors of economy that absorbed capital and initiatives primarily from Thessaloniki and secondarily from Sofia were food industry, commerce, financial services, and tourism.

c. Tourism

Many people from Skopje usually spend their summer holidays in Greek summer resorts, and mainly in the beaches of Pieria, Asprovalta, and Chalkidiki. They also travel to Sofia for short holidays and long weekends during the year. So, tourism can be considered for Skopje as a force of interaction with Thessaloniki and Sofia.

1.1.2. Constraints of Interaction

a. Transport

As was mentioned above, the geographical area of Skopje offers many advantages for developing relations with the other metropolitan regions in the Balkans. Part of this dynamism, though, is spared because of the poor quality of transportation networks mainly between Skopje and Tirana. The other links between Skopje and Sofia or Thessaloniki are in better condition and have been improved recently.

b. Political Constraints

The issue of the name of "Macedonia", which is the constitutional name of FYROM but has been disputed by Greek governments since early / 90s, and the embargo which was forced from Greece upon FYROM at the same period, still casts few shadows on the interaction between Greece and FYROM, and consequently, between Skopje and Thessaloniki. In a similar way, interaction between Skopje and Tirana is usually reduced during periods of nationalistic tensions between the population majority of Slavish origin and the Albanian minority.

1.1.3. Visits between Skopje and the other Metropolitan Centers of Tirana, Sofia and Thessaloniki

According to the responses from the survey conducted at a previous phase of the project (Table 1), respondents from Skopje seem to visit Sofia and Thessaloniki quite often (77,8% and 76,7% for many visits, respectively), but not so often Tirana (16,4%). The percentage of respondents from Skopje who have never visited Sofia is 0%, for Thessaloniki it is 6,7% and for Tirana it is 61,8%.

Table 1. Respondents living in (row) have ever visited (column) (RIMED Questionnaire Data. (2004:5)).

		Skopje	Sofia	Thessaloniki	Tirana	Average
Skopje	Never		0,0%	6,7%	61,8%	22,8%
	1-2 times		22,2%	16,7%	21,8%	20,2%
	Many times		77,8%	76,7%	16,4%	56,9%
Sofia	Never	33,8%		29,7%	82,4%	48,6%
	1-2 times	46,2%		43,8%	17,6%	35,9%
	Many times	20,0%		26,6%	0,0%	15,5%
Thessaloniki	Never	26,2%	32,7%		86,0%	48,3%
	1-2 times	52,5%	34,5%		8,0%	31,7%
	Many times	21,3%	32,7%		6,0%	20,0%
Tirana	Never	37,5%	70,6%	38,3%		48,8%
	1-2 times	47,9%	26,5%	42,6%		39,0%
	Many times	14,6%	2,9%	19,1%		12,2%
Total Sample	Never	32,2%	29,4%	24,0%	76,3%	40,5%
	1-2 times	48,9%	28,0%	33,9%	16,0%	31,7%
	Many times	19,0%	42,7%	42,1%	7,7%	27,9%

On the other hand, Skopje seems to be a “balanced” but not particularly favourable destination for the other cities, since it has not been visited by 33,8% of respondents from Sofia, 26,2% of respondents from Thessaloniki, and 37,5% of respondents from Tirana. At the same time it has been visited many times by 20% of respondents from Sofia, 21,3% of respondents from Thessaloniki and 14,6% from respondents from Tirana.

In general it is obvious that respondents from Skopje are the ones with many more visits to the other cities than the ones from Sofia, Tirana, and Thessaloniki.

1.2. SOFIA

1.2.1. Forces of Interaction

a. Geographical Location

Sofia occupies the central part of the Balkan Peninsula, it is the capital of Bulgaria and one of the oldest cities in the Balkans. It has been the capital of Bulgaria since 1878. It is an administrative centre and the major economic, scientific and cultural centre of the country.

The city is an important crossroad in the Balkans. It is a traffic junction of international railway, automobile and flying routes from Western Europe to the Middle East, and from Greece and FYROM to the Commonwealth of Independent States. It is an important centre for international railway and automobile routes as three main European transportation corridors, 4, 8 and 10 cross the city.

The geographical position of Sofia and the accruing advantages as a transportation node can be an important force of interaction with the three metropolitan areas of the Balkans (Skopje, Tirana, and Thessaloniki).

b. Economy

The socio-political changes in Eastern Europe during the 90/s affected Bulgaria, and hence Sofia, in the same way as in the case of Skopje, but in a rather more intense way. The economic crisis that occurred right after the collapse of socialism was severe and abrupt, and the creation of a system of free economy attracted foreign capital. The activities of foreign economic agents in Sofia were a main element of interaction with other areas, mainly from Western Europe. Northern Greece and Thessaloniki became part of it, particularly in the sector of textile industry.

Besides the above, more economic activities were orientated to the tertiary mode of production, as the percentage of the previously industrial working force had to abandon the secondary sector and turn to services (RIMED PR9, 2005). This encouraged Greek investors from Northern Greece, and particularly from Thessaloniki, to invest in Sofia.

But even for investors interested in modern technologies, Sofia offered comparative advantages, due to the highly skilled working force, a sound background for research and technology, and the still low wages and operating costs. Thessaloniki was again a strong link between Sofia and the rest of Europe for the establishment of industries of this type. What was seen as interaction between Sofia and Thessaloniki in the sector of economy does not happen with the other two metropolitan areas –of Tirana and Skopje- to this degree. This is understandable, since Sofia, Skopje and Tirana went through the same type of transformation, at the same time, and they are rather competing for attracting foreign capital, whereas Thessaloniki was providing this type of capital to the rest.

c. Tourism

Tourism can be considered as a force of interaction between Sofia and Skopje, not so much from the part of Sofia towards Skopje, but from Skopje to Sofia (Table 1). This is understandable, since Sofia is the closest “big city” to FYROM, and it is seen as a more “friendly” destination than Thessaloniki for a short visit.

1.2.2. Constraints of Interaction

a. Administrative and Legal Structure

The most obvious constraint of interaction between Sofia and the other three metropolitan centres is the phenomena of parallel levels of administration and power centres, in which the illegal ones are almost institutionalized and more effective than the legal. Corruption and criminality are also of concern to both, natives and foreigners, as surveys reveal. (RIMED Questionnaire Data, 2004:49).

Bureaucracy and relative inefficiency of public services should be also mentioned and they are partly related to the above.

1.2.3. Visits between Sofia and the other Metropolitan Centers of Tirana, Skopje and Thessaloniki

Respondents from Sofia (Table 1) seem to visit Thessaloniki more often than the other cities (26,6%) with Skopje as a close second (20%). Tirana is almost excluded, since 0% of respondents from Sofia have visited it many times and only 17,6% for 1-2 times. The percentage of respondents from Sofia who have never visited Skopje is 33,8%, for Thessaloniki it is 29,7% and for Tirana it is 82,4%.

On the other hand, Sofia is a favourite destination for respondents from Skopje (77,8% have visited it many times), it is more preferable as a destination than Skopje and Tirana (but still not so highly favoured) for respondents from Thessaloniki (32,7%) and an almost no-go area for respondents from Tirana, since 70,6% have never visited it and only 2,9% have visited it many times.

1.3. TIRANA

1.3.1. Forces of interaction

a. Geographical Location

Tirana is the capital of Albania and it is located in the western part of the Balkan Peninsula. Its geographical location favours its economic development, since it controls the closest sea transport connection in the Adriatic Sea between the Balkans and the Middle East and South Europe.

Tirana is in the heart of Albania, well connected and not far from Durrës, which is the biggest port of the country and a gate to Italy. It has an international airport, and it is also connected to the inner parts of the Balkan Peninsula through the Shkumbin river

valley. In this context, it can be of particular importance for Sofia and Skopje for providing an alternative route to Italy and South Europe (IOER & GTZ, 2002).

b. Economy

Tirana is the administrative, cultural, economic, and industrial centre of the Republic of Albania. As in the cases of Skopje and Sofia, the political and economic system changed at the beginning of the /90s. The change was even more dramatic there, since Albania was totally isolated from the rest of the world and the structure of economy, political system and society in general, was completely outdated.

Right after the collapse of socialism, a big wave of economic refugees emigrated, mostly for the neighbouring countries of Italy and Greece. At the same time, there was an invasion in Albania of foreign capital, which, in the biggest part was destined to Tirana (King et al, 2003). After an initial period of few years, the pace of foreign investments slowed down, due to the social upheaval that erupted and covered all Albania. The situation seemed to calm down some months later, but the feeling of insecurity and the instability of the political situation are still there. Nevertheless, foreign capital and foreign companies have a strong presence in Albania and mainly in Tirana. Greek companies operating in Tirana and originating from Thessaloniki are a significant force of interaction between the two cities.

c. Migration

Another force of interaction are the numerous Albanian immigrants, living and working in Thessaloniki, and investing in Tirana, establishing thus, economic and cultural ties between the two cities (Carletto et al, 2004).

1.3.2. Constraints of interaction

a. Urban Conditions

The big and abrupt population increase in Tirana during the last decade created serious problems in the infrastructure of the city (RIMED Questionnaire Data, 2004:49). This makes Tirana less attractive to interaction with the three other metropolitan areas of Skopje, Sofia, and Thessaloniki.

b. Political Instability and Social Unrest

The political instability and the comparatively high degree of corruption and criminality are other serious constraints of interaction. The ineffectiveness of the public sector and the general disobedience of people to the existing laws add to the above constraints.

Finally, the fact that Albania was in a strict isolation until the 90/s and was unapproachable to foreigners, still gives the impression to many people of an unknown and insecure environment and adds up to the list of constraints of interaction between Tirana and the cities of Thessaloniki, Sofia, and Skopje.

1.3.3. Visits between Tirana and the other Metropolitan Centers of Sofia, Skopje and Thessaloniki

Respondents from Tirana seem to prefer visiting Skopje and Thessaloniki but not very often (Table 1). The percentages of respondents who visited them 1-2 times were 47,9% and 42,6% respectively, while the equivalent percentages for respondents who visited them many times are 14,6% and 19,1%. The communication between Tirana and Sofia, according to the respondents is minimal (only 2,9% visited Sofia many times and 70,6% never visited).

On the other hand, Tirana as a destination was preferred by respondents from Skopje (21,8% for 1-2 visits and 16,4% for many visits) and rather ignored by respondents from

Sofia and Thessaloniki (82,4% of respondents from Sofia and 86% from Thessaloniki never visited Tirana).

In general, Tirana seems to be the most isolated city of the four examined, in both: respondents from there do not visit often the other three cities and Tirana is not visited often by respondents from the other cities.

1.4. THESSALONIKI

1.4.1. Forces of Interaction

a. Geographical Location

Thessaloniki is considered to be the second largest city in Greece. The unique geographical location of the city, situated between the East and the West, makes for a unique society which stands in the geopolitical crossroads of Southern and Eastern Europe, the Balkans and the Mediterranean. It is on route to the Black Sea and it is located in a particularly privileged geographical position in relation to the developing markets of the Balkans, South-eastern Europe and the Eastern Mediterranean. Being very close to the Balkan hinterland –as opposed to Athens which is further away- and having a pre-war tradition of being one of the very active urban centres in the Balkan peninsula with close ties to most of the other metropolitan areas, it has all the potential to play again this role now, that the political barriers do not exist any more.

b. Economy

Today, Thessaloniki is a modern, metropolitan area with a population of over one million inhabitants. It is the second biggest urban centre of Greece, holding a strategic location in respect to the other Balkan countries. This allows Thessaloniki to be the centre of co-operations and initiatives for trans-Balkan business and initiatives. The town is a meeting place for entrepreneurs, particularly from the region of the Balkans and the Black Sea. It's also an active centre of commerce and international culture. The local industry has

been continuously developing, while trade, traditionally the strong point of the city, is prospering.

The city of Thessaloniki is also considered as one of the most important communication centres in the Mediterranean. This is evident from the financial institutions located there, from the port with its special Free Trade Zone which provides facilities to the other Balkan countries, from the increasing demand of the international airport of Thessaloniki, from international fairs and expositions which take place there, etc. Recently Thessaloniki has become the seat of CEDEFOP (European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training) and the Black Sea Trade and Development Bank headquarters. It is also the nearest European Union port to the Balkan countries and the Black Sea Zone.

c. Science and Research

Thessaloniki is considered as one of the most important scientific and educational centres in the Balkans. The local scientific community is very active in the Balkan area and with many international activities and connections. In the city there are three universities, and an Institute of Technology. Science and research are important forces of interaction between Thessaloniki and the other three cities examined.

d. International Culture

Thessaloniki has always been a cosmopolitan city, not only because of the international activities happening there, but also because of the ethnic mixture of its population. Greeks, Romans, Slavs, Bulgarians, Turks, Armenians, Jews, Romanians, Roma formed the colourful canvas of the population in successive historic periods. In nowadays this tradition is kept active, as Thessaloniki hosts one of the highest percentages of immigrant population coming from the neighbouring Balkan countries but also from the Black Sea and the countries of the former Soviet Union (Kotzamanis, 2003). This tradition is another force of interaction with the other Balkan metropolitan centres.

1.4.2. Constraints of interaction

Typically, Thessaloniki presents less constraints of interaction compared to the other three cities but it seems that dynamism for positive changes is not equally strong. In constrains of interaction one should include the deteriorating urban conditions in terms of population densities, pollution, traffic jams, lack of free space, and outdated transportation infrastructure (and in particular, in rail transportation). Another constrain is the lately developed xenophobia, which is more obvious and loud than the national average, and the lack of tolerance to sensitive social groups, which unfortunately is encouraged by some of the local authorities in Thessaloniki.

1.4.3. Visits between Thessaloniki and the other Metropolitan Centers of Sofia, Skopje and Tirana

Respondents from Thessaloniki seem to prefer visiting Skopje for 1-2 times (52,5% as compared to 34,5% and 8% for Sofia and Tirana respectively), Sofia for many times (32,7% as compared to 21,3% for Skopje and 6% for Tirana), and they seldom visit Tirana (86% never visited it) (Table 1).

On the other hand, Thessaloniki is a destination favoured by the majority of respondents, since it presents the lowest percentage of never visited it (24% as compared to 32,2% of Skopje, 29,4% of Sofia, and 76,3% of Tirana) and one of the highest –together with Sofia- of many visits (42,1% as compared to 42,7% for Sofia, 19% for Skopje, and 7,7% for Tirana).

2. Economic Relations among Skopje, Sofia, Tirana and Thessaloniki

Economic relations among the four urban centres go far back in history and continued until W.W.2. Then, the creation of the "iron curtain" and the aftermath of the civil war in Greece interrupted these relations, firstly between Thessaloniki and the other three cities which "passed" to the other side, to the communist block. This, though, did not secure relations and cooperation among Sofia, Skopje, and Tirana, since more barriers were created among them, due to different interpretations of communism in the equivalent countries and to the enmity which was created among them. Bulgaria was tied to the Soviet block, Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia became part of Yugoslavia and adopted General Tito/s brand of communism, and Albania followed its own, lonely path, being allied to the People's Republic of China for a while, and then developing a peculiar isolationist socialism.

The political changes of the /90s found the four cities without any recent structure of sound economic cooperation among them. The new situation, though, in the Balkan Peninsula, and the development prospects of the area as a whole, encouraged initiatives which seem to steadily grow. In the cases of Sofia, Skopje and Tirana, the attitudes in these urban centres also reflect the national attitudes, since they are the capitals and driving forces of the equivalent countries. In the case of Thessaloniki, things are more complicated, since it has been overshadowed by Athens for most of its recent history, but it is struggling to develop a character of its own, as a metropolis of the Balkans, and hence, it aspires to develop (Kokkali, 2002:19).

3. Capacity and Quality of Transportation, Energy, and Telecommunication Networks

3.1. SKOPJE

3.1.1. Transport

The transport policy and implementation in Skopje and general in FYROM has not been modernized since the time of Yugoslavia and a new, effective policy was not been formulated yet. The public transport in Skopje is operated mainly by buses, run by Public City Transport Company and some other private companies. Public City Transport Company, as reveals its name, is public, but it is not financed either by the municipality, or by the state, contributing, thus, to the inability of significant improvements to the quality of the offered services.

Bus and car transportation cover the whole city. The total number of buses in Skopje is 708. The Public City Transport Company runs 450 of them, and private transport companies run the other 258. There are also 34 taxi companies and 71 taxi stations. The registered motor vehicles and trailers in 2003 are: 933 motorcycles, 108.596 cars, 3.443 vans and buses and 152 trailers. There were efforts made by the local authorities to expand public transport in Skopje by constructing and operating a metro system, but these efforts have been unsuccessful due to the large number of underground water channels in the city, RIMED PR12, 2005).

In general, buses are old and pollute the environment. Research has shown that 60% of air pollution in Skopje is generated by public buses. The situation further deteriorated when a private consortium started operating the same bus lines with private, even older buses. The low level of service in the urban transport in general, is driving public transit riders away from public transport and to the private cars. Consequently, the steady increase of private vehicles creates excessive road congestion, pollution, and more road accidents.

In the last few years the main effort of the local authorities is to improve access to parking spaces, decrease traffic congestion, improve efficiency and quality of all means of public transit, and strengthen the financial situation of the urban transport company.

Airport

The Skopje International Airport is FYROM's state-owned asset run by public enterprises. It was operated by the military under the Yugoslavian jurisdiction before becoming regional airport in 1992.

Passenger numbers are currently at low levels, but potential for expansion exists as the regional economies regain momentum. Although the airfield infrastructure is assessed as adequate for the intermediate future, the terminal facilities, originally constructed for the Yugoslav military, are limited. Passenger congestion occurs in the mornings and evenings when flights are at their peak densities. The airport has little control on airlines scheduling flights, as carriers prefer early and late slots, which mesh better with their regional hub operations.

The increase of the passenger demand forced the Central Government to start a reconstruction and expansion project. The main object of it is to modernize Skopje airport, and in particular the terminal facilities. A new terminal building is studied as well as further improvements in the operation of airport services. In all these, the possibility of involvement of the private sector is examined.

3.1.2. Energy

The sources of energy used for heating in the city of Skopje are:

- Electric heating, 25%.
- Wood, 63,83%.
- Petroleum, 1,4%.

- District heating, 8,66%.
- Burning garbage 0,7%.
- Other, 0,28%.
- Unknown, 0,13%.

As we can see from the above, electricity is widely used for residential heating. The largest heat producer in the Skopje and in FYROM is Toplifikacija, a private company, which provides heat to 30% of the city of Skopje, or to 10% of people in FYROM.

Lately there is discussion for a project for a gas network providing energy. This is facilitated by the fact that gas pipelines already exist.

The electric network in Skopje has a total length of 4075 km. The steam heating network is 150 km and covers only the central city area with low quality of service.

3.1.3. Telecommunications

The telephone lines in Skopje telecommunication network are 225.823 and the subscribers are 183.277. The network is of good quality and it is expanded in almost all city areas. There are two mobile phone companies in Skopje and one telephone company (RIMED PR12, 2005).

3.2. SOFIA

3.2.1. Transport

Sofia is the centre of important international railway and automobile routes from Western Europe to Istanbul via Belgrade, and from Greece and FYROM to the CIS. Three Trans-European Transport Corridors cross the city: 4, 8 and 10.

The transportation system of Sofia constitutes a major part of the national transport system. The city is the most important railway junction in Bulgaria, ensuring connections

with the rest of the country, along five key directions. Public transit is well developed, reliable and important to the city's economy; it is provided by means of underground trains, buses, trams and electric buses. The city transport services consist of 21 tramlines, 11 trolley lines, about 200 bus lines and there are also over 15.000 licensed taxicabs. Double-cabin and double-seat lifts connect Sofia with Vitosha National Park.

A ring road runs around Sofia. Inside the ring road, the area of Sofia is 19.815 hectares, 2.087 of which are served by the City Transport and 510 by Bulgarian State Railways. The population outside the ring road is also served by Bulgarian State Railways and the City Transport.

The large residential satellite-quarters are connected with the central part of the city and the industrial zones through several main diagonal connections. 75-80% of passenger traffic cross the central part of the city and that has been one of the most difficult problems to tackle.

Private transport constitutes a rather small percentage – 5-6% of all work related journeys. About 85% of travellers use the public transport. Their distribution according to means of public transit used, are: 24% by trams, 10% by trolleybuses, 3% by the metropolitan railway, and 63% by buses. The ratio of passengers of tram, trolley and bus transport is 31:14:55.

Sofia Public Transport Company (SPTC) manages ground transport and it is owned by the municipality. The company has 14 sub-divisions with about 8.600 personnel. Approximately 1.3 million passengers are transported daily. Over 120 routes are served, the total length of the transport net being over 1.660 km.

The capital value of SPTC is 114 million US dollars. This includes:

- Vehicles – 39.8 million USD;
- Buildings – 18.9 million USD;
- Equipment – 40 million USD;
- Others (spare parts, different materials)

The total number of transportation vehicles is 1.960 and includes:

- 445 trams
- 215 trolleys
- 1300 buses

The Municipality of Sofia and the SPTC have jointly established a technological institute specialized in related research.

Major directives for capital investment are:

- Completion of the construction of some major tram lines, connecting main parts of the capital and industrial zones;
- Completion of the transport tunnel under Dragan Tsankov Blvd.;
- Reconstruction of the bus and trolley enterprise facilities;
- Extension of the tram lines to achieve standard distance between the rails.

Major Priorities for the Development of the Transport System are:

- Development of a new general transport-communication plan of Sofia;
- Approval of a new programme for the gradual improvement of the transport fleet, aimed at reaching the ratio 35:25:40 for passengers between three types of transport – tram, trolley and bus;
- Renovation of transport infrastructure, socket and cable nets, rectifying stations, maintenance and repair facilities, and industrial equipment;
- Modernization of vehicle fleet by importing new vehicles and manufacturing others according to the system of joint ventures of transfer of know-how.

Little has been done, however, up to now, due to insufficient funding.

Underground City Transport

A priority task of the new managing board of the municipality is the completion of the first line of Sofia underground, whose scheme was approved of in 1975. During the past 20 years a lot of funds have been spent, unfortunately without any result. Work progressed slowly due to small amounts of money being invested occasionally.

The general technical characteristics of the underground are:

- Overall length of Sofia Underground: 48 km with 52 stations.
- Average report speed: 40 km/h.
- Expected transportation of passengers towards the year 2020: 84 million.
- Minimum interval in one direction: 90 sec.

The start of the first part of the project, which aims to serve 250.000 passengers, is about to take place. This will enable the transformation of the architectural surroundings in the western part of the capital.

Tram Transport

The total length of the existing tram network in Sofia is 209 km. The double tramlines in Sofia are 84,4 km long. Each year 12 km of rail road has to be repaired at the cost of 2.2 million US dollars.

The "Tram transport" department operates the tram circulation. It is affiliated with 4 other tram depots in the city. The service equipment is rather poor. About 45% of trams have passed their depreciation deadline.

The vehicles are mainly manufactured in the Bulgarian plant "Tramcar". The most acceptable solution for the municipality is the establishment of joint ventures with leading firms in the field.

Trolley transport

Trolley transport started operating twenty years ago. It transfers passengers along 11 routes, 57.4 km long. The enterprise owns 215 trolleys and 120 of them are in daily operation. The service facilities include 2 depots, and a third one with a capacity of 150 trolleys is now under construction.

Bus Transport

Buses rank first among the types of transport in regard to the number of passengers. The main disadvantage, however, is the air pollution which they cause with their exhaust fumes. The municipality has signed contracts with Mercedes Benz and MAN for the delivery of new buses and engines more friendly to the environment.

There are 1300 buses operating and about 80% of them have more than 400.000 km on their engines, which means that at present they are completely depreciated.

Lifts

"Lift engineering" maintains and exploits the lifts and ski-pulls in the Vitosha National Park.

The property of the enterprise is valued at 3 million US dollars. They are double cabin and double seated lifts, with a total length of about 8 km, as well as 8 ski-pulls, 3 of which are stable and 5 are transferable.

Airport

Sofia airport is located close to residential areas of Sofia, thus posing serious problems to the environment and health of local people. However, the airport has attracted the attention of international financial organizations as well as of the Stability Pact. A project for "Reconstruction, Development and Extension of the Sofia Airport" started in 1997. It provides for new terminal buildings and related facilities, a new runway system, taxiways

etc. The project is part of the Trans-European Transport Corridor IV and VIII. The total cost is estimated to be around 210 million EURO, from which:

- 60 million EURO loan from the EIB;
- Another 40 million EURO loan from the Kuwait Fund for Arab Economic Development;
- 50 million EURO financial assistance through the ISPA Programme;
- And 7,6 million EURO for technical assistance from PHARE17.

The project for the extension of the Sofia airport started seven years ago, based on assumptions which were far from realistic. The forecasts of travel demand were never reached. On the contrary, air transport witnessed 11% decrease in demand, after the Bulgarian airlines "Balkan" went bankrupt. Now, it is doubtful that the demand will ever reach the initially predicted 2,5 million passengers. Moreover, the project never examined alternative locations, it keeps the airport dangerously close to residential areas, it did not organize public involvement, and its cost is constantly rising.

3.2.2. Energy

The electric network in Sofia has a total length of 8.000 km and includes over 5000 kiosk switchgears. Over 85.000 illuminants are installed all over Sofia.

The heat-transfer network of the city is approximately 850 km in length and it serves 340.000 dwelling units. The Central Heating System of Sofia is one of the biggest in Eastern Europe. In spite of the limited operational safety, the system supplies 900.000 citizens and about 5.900 companies, including almost all the industrial enterprises using steam.

The Central Heating Company "Toplofikatsiya" practically provides central heating for two-thirds of Sofia. However, its network is constructed according to the old model of

central heating, developed in the former Soviet Union, and has meanwhile become outdated in most countries which were using it.

In 2002 a new legislation was approved according to which, new apartment buildings should have central heating and parking space. It also provided for a rise in the price of electricity and made the price of liquid gas more attractive to consumers.

3.3. TIRANA

3.3.1. Transportation Networks

Three operators run the city transportation in Tirana: Travellers' Urban Transport Park - which is a municipal company-, Tirana Urban Trans sh.p.k., and Tirana Lines sh.p.k. - which are private companies, contracted by the municipality. The total length of bus lines in Tirana is 58.2 km and there are 157 buses in total. 47,4% of the total length of the bus lines is served by Travellers' Urban Transport Park with 79 buses. Respectively, Tirana Urban Trans sh.p.k serves 31,6% of the total length with 41 buses, and Tirana Lines sh.p.k. serves 21% of the total length of the bus lines with 37 buses. Since 2003, Municipality of Tirana has achieved the following objectives related to public transport:

- Increase of the number of urban service lines, adding the City centre-Tufine line
- Increase of the number of busses in the urban service, with 70 new busses
- Construct kiosks for the bus stops for the ring line.

Airport

Tirana International Airport is the country's only international airport. In 2003, it was used by more than 560.000 passengers and this number has been increasing since.

The consortium of Tirana Airport Partners, under the management of Hochtief AirPort signed a privatization agreement with the Albanian Government on October 15th, 2004.

Under the terms of a 20-year BOOT contract (Build Own Operate Transfer), the airport is scheduled to pass under private management in the spring of 2005.

The projects planned are:

- A new passenger terminal
- Renovation and expansion of the airport infrastructure
- A new road leading to the airport 6 km long, or alternatively, a bridge over an existing road
- New parking areas
- New freight facilities.

3.3.2. Energy

Electricity in Tirana is problematic, with often blackouts and unreliable service. The capacity of the network does not permit provision of electricity for 24 hours without interruption, and the situation is even worse in the rest of Albania.

KESH - Albanian Energy Corporation- is responsible for the production, allocation and administration of electric energy in Tirana. It is a public company, subsidiary to the Ministry of Industry and Energy. It collaborates with the Municipality of Tirana in the construction of necessary infrastructure.

According to KESH, the situation is gradually improving and in 2005 they will be able to provide electricity in all parts of the city, at the same time, without interruptions. (RIMED PR12 (2005)).

3.3.3. Telecommunications

The main telecommunication company in Tirana is Alb Telekom, a public –up to now- Company, subsidiary to the Ministry of Transport and Telecommunications, which now is

in the process of privatization. It was thought that privatization might solve the serious problems of telephone service in Tirana which never seized existing, despite the money invested for improvements. Furthermore, privatization was favoured because it was considered as a "best practice" and a policy prerequisite which would enable E.U. financial help.

Modern communication technologies –as Internet- also exist in Tirana in the shape of 30 Internet Centres. The current Internet network of Alb Telecom is part of an Italian network, but soon an Albanian provider will be able to operate an Albanian network.

Contrary to the above, mobile telephony is progressing fast. Two mobile phone operators, Albanian Mobile Communications (AMC) and Vodafone started operating in 1998 with investments from two Greek companies which exceeded 200 million USD. After these investments, the service was drastically improved. It is estimated that in these last five years the number of users of mobile phones has increased from 30.000 to almost one million. Right now, in average, each family in Tirana has one fixed telephone and two mobile phones. (RIMED PR12, 2005; Municipality of Tirana & UNISEF, 2002).

3.4. THESSALONIKI

3.4.1. Transportation Networks

The Organization of Urban Transportation of Thessaloniki (OASTh) is responsible for the operation of a bus network, the only mass transit system in the city. The capital of the company is distributed in about 2.000 shareholders and occupies more than 2.400 employees. The organization owns 536 buses, 505 of which are required for the daily operation and they serve approximately 410.000 passengers through 68 transportation lines.

Transportation facilities in the city of Thessaloniki are, in general, in a bad condition. The major problems are the inadequacy of the road network, the traffic jams and congestion, the absence of an organized parking scheme in the city and mainly in the overcrowded centre, traffic accidents, pollution, and the low level of service in the urban transport.

The situation is further deteriorating by the daily increase of the number of private cars in the streets of Thessaloniki. It is indicative that in the last 6 years there was a 35% increase in the use of private automobiles. Consequently, traffic jams are a daily phenomenon in the main streets, which cross the downtown area and at the same time they serve the through traffic to the exits of the city.

In order to tackle these problems, a campaign was recently initiated, aiming to improve the services of the Public Urban Transport in an integrated and effective way. The means and measures for the implementation of the accruing policy were of two categories:

Measures of immediate implementation

- Modernization of the bus fleet by replacing the buses with more than 12 years of use by new ones of modern technology and friendly to the environment. An immediate target is to have buses no more than 5 years old in the 80% of the fleet and until 2007.
- Rearrangement of the bus routes and operation of new ones, based on an origin – destination survey and with immediate targets to create bus lines of 24 hour operation, to improve and increase the existing connections of areas at the periphery of Thessaloniki with the centre, to expand the existing service where needed, and to diminish delays.
- Revision of the pricing policy in order to encourage the use of public transit.
- Free service for passengers with special needs (handicapped etc.).
- Expansion of bus lanes and securing their proper function.

- Further measures to facilitate the bus service (clearing of the bus lanes, policing and persecution of violations of their exclusive use etc.).
 - Use of telematics and modern technology for improving the management of the operation of the bus fleet and the flow of information to passengers.
- Measures of middle and long term implementation
- Planning of municipal/neighbourhood bus lines which will collect passengers from their neighbourhoods and transfer them to central bus lines.
 - Reorganization of hours of operation of retail stores, public services etc., in such a way as to avoid peaks of transportation demand and peaks of traffic.
 - Establishment of a system of controlled parking at the centre of the city, with free parking permits to residents of the centre, and creation of parking lots in the perimeter of the centre.
 - Construction and operation of a Metro system in Thessaloniki. The estimated budget is 1.050.000.000 Euros, its total length will reach 9.600 m with 13 stations in its lines. The construction period is estimated in 6 to 6,5 years, and the expected daily trips that it will carry are 220.000 (10% of all the daily trips in the area).
 - Construction and operation of a suburban rail system which will facilitate access in the suburban areas of Thessaloniki.
 - Construction of an underwater transportation corridor which will divert through traffic from the centre of Thessaloniki and will allow pedestrianization of the waterfront area. The estimated budget is 450.000.000 Euros and the construction period is expected to be 48 months.
 - Revision and replanning of the intercity lines in a way that cooperation with the public transport of the city will be achieved.

Airport

The airport "Macedonia" is located 13 km east of the city of Thessaloniki. The airport facilities cover an area of 21.000 m² and it is accessible by bus or by taxi.

The project for the expansion of "Macedonia" airport began 4 years ago, in 2001, but it was stopped because of bureaucratic complications in the procedure of contracting the developers. In the meanwhile, the cost for the extension of the landing corridor reached € 250.000.000. The need for the modernization of the terminal building has also been recognized, and alternative ways of financing the project are looked for. With all these obstacles, the construction works are expected to begin in the 2007, but there is uncertainty about it.

Port

The port of Thessaloniki is the second biggest in Greece, second only to the one in Piraeus. The port is connected with the Balkan hinterland by road and by train. It is also connected to the international airport Macedonia of Thessaloniki.

In general, the port of Thessaloniki handles cargo worth 6% of GDP annually, which is approximately 40% of GDP of the Central Macedonia region. Fifteen million tones of cargo are handled annually, 7 million tones of which are general cargo and 8 million are liquid fuel. 3500 ships sail into the harbour annually, more than 200.000 passengers are served (from just 50,000 in 1987) and more than 250.000 TEUs (containers) are long shored.

Currently, the Strategic Plan of the port is under preparation with main objectives to maximize and exploit its comparative advantages, to modernize and expand it, and to strengthen its international character.

4. Importance of scientific networks

Today, the area of South-eastern Europe is an arena for complex and interwoven economic, social and environmental issues, policies, and actions. No national government or international organization could cope with them without the appropriate scientific expertise. The goal of promoting sustainable and balanced urban development and regional integration in the four Metropolitan Regions of Skopje, Sofia, Thessaloniki and Tirana should be based on building scientific networks of cooperation among these cities. This could be further facilitated by their relative proximity, and by their common historical references.

Policies promoting a common framework for action usually come as consequences of cooperation of the academic community and the related scientific and technological organizations in the areas involved. And if the role of the applied science in developing specific policy areas in the relevant regions of Balkans has not yet been elucidated in clear and concrete terms, the building of expertise on a regional scale is obviously mandatory, e.g. in the environment problems, in weather forecasting and the prevention of local natural catastrophes, in clean and sustainable energy production, in efficient transportation systems, etc. Scientific co-operation among regional academic institutions, working on collaborative projects in some fields of regional interest, can and should contribute to acquiring the problem-solving experience that is needed to provide regionally relevant expertise. Of course, it should go in parallel with and via the traditional fruitful collaboration schemes with big scientific countries of EU and the world at large.

A framework for co-operation among and with the SEE countries, complementing the one described in detail above, has been elaborated under the Greek Presidency of the European Union in the first half of 2003. The Action Plan adopted in Thessaloniki in June

2003 "specifies the objectives and the thematic priorities for the main goals, identifies the potential instruments for implementation of the policy and provides for the preparation of annual Work programmes of the actions to be undertaken". It refers to various actors, including UNESCO, and initiatives, which should collaborate in its implementation.

It is a challenge to make better use of the various co-operation programmes and initiatives available. The scientists are asked to break the walls separating the traditional disciplines and to collaborate with their colleagues from other disciplines for solving some regional problems. The supranational and international governmental and non-governmental organizations might be asked in their turn to be more flexible in the collaborations with their sister organizations.

Natural sciences based research for better health, healthier food production, better environment, and sustainable development is rather regional-relevant. However, the co-operation in some transdisciplinary fields could be beneficial not only for the concrete problem-solving, but also for stabilizing the basic-science supporting infrastructures, including the human resources.

Putting the selective stabilization and up-grading of the local research infrastructures and equipment facilities in the heart of the problem of reconstructing the scientific cooperation within the four cities of Balkans and between them and the rest of Europe outlines well the logic of the initiative: good and meaningful projects should help the revitalization of the research capacities and stabilize the human sources and visa versa.

Academic institutions were the first ones to establish networks of scientific cooperation between the four cities, and they participated in various projects, funded by a variety of organizations (ministries, the E.U., U.N., UNESCO, World Bank, the European Development Bank, local authorities etc.). Indicative are the following six proposals which

have been approved related to the creation of such sub-regional networks. They contain reviews on the state-of-the-art in the respective fields, and estimations of the finances needed for both : the upgrading of the research equipment and for exchanges and training of personnel. These are:

- Functional Materials Network (FUMANET).
- Molecular Biology and Genetics Network.
- Plant Biology and Plant Biotechnology Network.
- Network for Earthquake Hazard Mitigation.
- Network for astronomic observations and training.
- Network for S&T Indicators and Statistics for Science Policy making.

Scientific networks are also developed between Chambers and organizations in the four cities. The Technical Chamber of Greece has established the Institute of Trans-Balkan Cooperation on Research, Technology, and Development (www.tee.gr). There was cooperation with equivalent organizations from the three other cities which can be seen below:

From Skopje

- ? The Republic Institute for the Protection of Cultural monuments
- ? ICOMOS (National Committee of FYROM)
- ? Institute of Earthquake Engineering and Engineering Seismology
- ? Institution of Engineering – Scientific Societies and Unions
- ? Union of Architects

From Tirana

- ? Institute of Studies and Mechanical Designs
- ? National Planning Institute

From Sofia

- ? Federation of Scientific and Technical Unions
- ? Union of Architects

? Academy of Sciences

Academy of Sciences from Sofia had also established cooperation with local authorities from Greece and FYROM.

In general, more active in participating in scientific networks (either with any of the other three cities or not) are Sofia and Thessaloniki. Tirana was up to now with the least participation in such networks, but seems that it is catching up fast.

In the following tables scientific cooperation of various types between the four cities can be seen and compared to other policies of cooperation that will help to exploit advantages/opportunities and face weaknesses/challenges in the four cities.

Table 2a. Policies of cooperation of city in row with city in column that will help to exploit advantages/opportunities and face weaknesses/challenges in the four cities. (RIMED Questionnaire Data. (2004:88)).

		Sofia	Thessaloniki	Tirana	Average Sample
Skopje	Trade relations (mainly exports)	40,00%	46,67%	50,00%	45,56%
	Trade relations (mainly imports)	23,33%	30,00%	23,33%	25,56%
	Organize joint international events	31,67%	35,00%	28,33%	31,67%
	Receive FDI	8,33%	36,67%	8,33%	17,78%
	Send FDI	3,33%	6,67%	6,67%	5,56%
	Joint ventures by private firms	55,00%	70,00%	45,00%	56,67%
	Administrative cooperation	21,67%	18,33%	18,33%	19,44%
	Cooperation in vocational training	20,00%	23,33%	23,33%	22,22%
	Cooperation in EU programs	50,00%	58,33%	45,00%	51,11%
	Administrative staff exchange and training	13,33%	10,00%	3,33%	8,89%
	Scientific cooperation among Universities	46,67%	46,67%	40,00%	44,44%
	Joint promotion of cities to attract FDI	33,33%	23,33%	38,33%	31,67%

Table 2b. Policies of cooperation of city in row with city in column that will help to exploit advantages/opportunities and face weaknesses/challenges in the four cities. (RIMED Questionnaire Data. (2004:89)).

		Skopje	Thessaloniki	Tirana	Average Sample
Sofia	Trade relations (mainly exports)	41,79%	32,84%	47,76%	40,30%
	Trade relations (mainly imports)	16,42%	29,85%	19,40%	24,63%
	Organize joint international events	52,24%	62,69%	38,81%	50,75%
	Receive FDI	2,99%	16,42%	2,99%	9,70%
	Send FDI	14,93%	5,97%	16,42%	11,19%
	Joint ventures by private firms	49,25%	46,27%	28,36%	37,31%
	Administrative cooperation	44,78%	43,28%	43,28%	43,28%
	Cooperation in vocational training	22,39%	10,45%	16,42%	13,43%
	Cooperation in EU programs	61,19%	73,13%	41,79%	57,46%
	Administrative staff exchange and training	7,46%	5,97%	7,46%	6,72%
	Scientific cooperation among Universities	46,27%	47,76%	37,31%	42,54%
	Joint promotion of cities to attract FDI	43,28%	32,84%	35,82%	34,33%

Table 2c. Policies of cooperation of city in row with city in column that will help to exploit advantages/opportunities and face weaknesses/challenges in the four cities. (RIMED Questionnaire Data. (2004:89)).

		Skopje	Sofia	Tirana	Average Sample
Thessaloniki	Trade relations (mainly exports)	65,22%	62,32%	53,62%	57,97%
	Trade relations (mainly imports)	18,84%	30,43%	10,14%	20,29%
	Organize joint international events	28,99%	28,99%	17,39%	23,19%
	Receive FDI	13,04%	13,04%	5,80%	9,42%
	Send FDI	28,99%	27,54%	21,74%	24,64%
	Joint ventures by private firms	40,58%	43,48%	20,29%	31,88%
	Administrative cooperation	27,54%	23,19%	23,19%	23,19%
	Cooperation in vocational training	7,25%	7,25%	10,14%	8,70%
	Cooperation in EU programs	44,93%	43,48%	36,23%	39,86%
	Administrative staff exchange and training	5,80%	17,39%	8,70%	13,04%
	Scientific cooperation among Universities	26,09%	44,93%	18,84%	31,88%
	Joint promotion of cities to attract FDI	7,25%	15,94%	5,80%	10,87%

Table 2d. Policies of cooperation of city in row with city in column that will help to exploit advantages/opportunities and face weaknesses/challenges in the four cities. (RIMED Questionnaire Data. (2004:90)).

		Skopje	Sofia	Thessaloniki	Average Sample
Tirana	Trade relations (mainly exports)	55,38%	38,46%	32,31%	35,38%
	Trade relations (mainly imports)	30,77%	35,38%	0,00%	17,69%
	Organize joint international events	35,38%	26,15%	33,85%	30,00%
	Receive FDI	12,31%	15,38%	13,85%	14,62%
	Send FDI	6,15%	12,31%	4,62%	8,46%
	Joint ventures by private firms	36,92%	36,92%	26,15%	31,54%
	Administrative cooperation	30,77%	18,46%	27,69%	23,08%
	Cooperation in vocational training	23,08%	30,77%	29,23%	30,00%
	Cooperation in EU programs	33,85%	29,23%	40,00%	34,62%
	Administrative staff exchange and training	13,85%	12,31%	12,31%	12,31%
	Scientific cooperation among Universities	38,46%	33,85%	33,85%	33,85%
	Joint promotion of cities to attract FDI	23,08%	21,54%	18,46%	20,00%

5. Tourism and population movements

5.1. SKOPJE

Being the largest and the most well known city in FYROM, Skopje is the main economic, cultural, educational, and sport centre in the country. Almost all activities of international character in the above fields take place in Skopje.

It lies on the upper course of the Vardar River and is located on a major north-south Balkan route between Belgrade and Athens. Although Skopje was settled as early as the pre-historic times, the first urban settlements in the Skopje area are from around the 4th century BC. Today's Skopje is a very new town and was basically built after the earthquake in 1963, when two thirds of the town was destroyed, and more than one thousand inhabitants died. After that, Skopje was reconstructed and became a modern town, which has gone through a remarkable process of development until the / 80s. Right after that, Yugoslavia entered in an economical crisis and the development of Skopje was disrupted.

Skopje is a city that has nicely amalgamated the past with the present. The stone mosaics, the amphitheatre and the aqueduct from the Roman times, the early Christian basilicas, the Middle Age churches with their master pieces of icon painting and wood carving, the Skopje fortress, the animated arabesques of the buildings from the time of the Ottoman Empire, the Stone Bridge and the Old Skopje Bazaar, together with the modern architectural buildings, give Skopje the image of a European city where there is respect for the different cultural traditions, carved into time and space. Among the many international architects that participated in its reconstruction was the Japanese urban planner Kenzo Tanga, who gave the centre a "city wall" of high-rise buildings, while the banks of the Vardar were laid out as pleasant tree-lined promenades. Skopje is also the birthplace one of the greatest humanist, Mother Theresa.

Classical and modern, Orient and Occident meet in Skopje and have resulted in the creation of a fascinating mosaic in the cityscape. The city and its vicinity have plenty of valuable cultural and historical monuments which attract the attention of every visitor. In the last years the number of tourists visiting the city of Skopje from all over Europe is increasing by stable rates.

More than 50% of the people living in capital of FYROM, Skopje don't keep contacts and communication with anyone from the other three cities (Sofia, Tirana, and Thessaloniki). But almost the 2/3 of the people seems to know at least one person in the other cities. It can be said that people from Skopje seem to have more relations with Sofia (Table 3a).

Table 3a. Contacts among people in the three cities: Respondents in (row) know in person people in (column) (RIMED Questionnaire Data, 2004:79)

		Skopje	Sofia	Thessaloniki	Tirana	Average Sample
Skopje	None		15,3%	37,3%	51,8%	34,5%
	1-2 persons		20,3%	15,3%	30,4%	21,8%
	3-5 persons		28,8%	18,6%	10,7%	19,5%
	6-10 persons		11,9%	11,9%	1,8%	8,6%
	More than 10		23,7%	16,9%	5,4%	15,5%

5.2. SOFIA

Sofia is one of the oldest cities in Europe. As a settlement, it was founded seven thousand years ago, and it has been the capital city of Bulgaria for more than 127 years, since 1878. It is located on an elevated plain in the western part of Bulgaria, about 550 m above the sea level. The city is surrounded by mountains in three directions: Vitosha Mountain from the south (Vitosha-Nature Park), Lulin, Plana from the west and Stara Planina from the north. (www.sofia.gr).

The development of Sofia was strongly influenced by the hot springs and the fertile soils. The five thousand years of history can be traced in the different excavated layers, where monuments of Thracians, Romans, Slavs and Bulgarians follow a succession of historical eras. A great number of architectural monuments have been preserved, such as the Alexander Nevsky Cathedral, the Public Theatre Ivan Vazov, the Palace of Justice, the churches St. George and St. Sofia, etc. Sofia University, the Academy of Fine Arts, the Musical Academy, the National Theatre and the National Opera Theatre, the Saints Cyril and Methodius National Library, the Archaeological Museum and Ethnographic Museums contribute in the cultural riches of the city and the architectural style is preserved from the turn of the century.

During the last decades the city's image changed from oriental to European. Today, the population of Sofia is about 1.250.000, which is the 14% of the total population in Bulgaria. The region of Sofia is between the few ones in Bulgaria where stable positive internal migration was taking place during the last decades, and this migration started increasing rapidly in the last 10 years. Sofia attracts the major economic and scientific activities of the country and it is an administrative and cultural centre. It's also famous for its mineral springs and beautiful nature surrounding the city.

The political changes at the beginning of the /90s ended up in the opening of the borders to tourism, which soon became one of the main sectors attracting foreign investments. New infrastructure for tourism has been created and the existing one has been renovated. Furthermore, a significant part of the working force is absorbed by this sector. The fact that the cost of life in Sofia is cheaper than in most E.U. cities is an additional advantage for making tourism in Sofia attractive.

From the three other metropolitan areas examined, people from Sofia seem to prefer visiting Skopje and Thessaloniki, but not Tirana (Table 3b).

Table 3b. Contacts among people in the three cities: Respondents in (row) know in person people in (column) (RIMED Questionnaire Data, 2004:80)

		Skopje	Sofia	Thessaloniki	Tirana	Average Sample
Sofia	None	28,1%		43,8%	65,6%	45,5%
	1-2 persons	20,3%		21,9%	24,6%	22,2%
	3-5 persons	31,3%		18,8%	4,9%	18,5%
	6-10 persons	10,9%		4,7%	3,3%	6,3%
	More than 10	9,4%		10,9%	1,6%	7,4%

5.3. TIRANA

Tirana is located in the western part of the Balkan Peninsula, it is the capital city of Albania and the biggest one in the country. Being located in the centre of Albania, Tirana is the crossroads that links the Adriatic Sea with western Balkans, and through the Shkumbin River Valley with the inner parts of the Balkan Peninsula. It is the administrative, cultural, economic, and industrial centre of Albania.

The area around Tirana has been inhabited since the Neolithic age. On the mountainside of Dajti are the remains of an ancient castle dating back to the first century B.C., which happens to be the castle that the Byzantine historian Prokop (sixth century) mentions as the castle of Tirkan. The name of the city contains an ancient root that is present in other places that have been inhabited by Illyrians. There was a system of castles on the surrounding hills (Petrel', Prez', Ndroq, Fark', etc.) that served as protection for Durr's and Kruja. The oldest discovery in the area of Tirana has been a mosaic with several other remains of buildings of the later antiquity, found at the Kroj i Sh'ngjinit (Fountain of Sh'ngjin), near a Medieval temple.

The political changes of the /90s changed drastically the economic and social structure of the city and of Albania in general. A major effect on Tirana was the high increase of the population of the city, due to internal migration. (Felstehausen, 1999). From 1989 till now the population of the city is increased by approximately 105.000 inhabitants. Today the number of the inhabitants in Tirana is estimated over 700.000 and the urban infrastructure is inadequate to accommodate them. Furthermore, because of this increase, unemployment has boomed at 22,7%. This also created migration out of Albania (external migration from Tirana was lower than the rest of the country but it is still estimated that 10% of the Albanian immigrants abroad have a direct or indirect connection with Tirana) mainly to Greece and Italy.

Under these circumstances the tourism sector is barely developed in the city of Tirana. Currently, the two best hotels are of foreign ownership, from Kuwait and from Austria, and almost all the visitors are businessmen and not tourists. Given though the cheap and available labour, the capital coming from the Albanian immigrants abroad, and the relative work experience in the tourist industry of repatriating immigrants, tourism is expected to have a fast growth in the near future (Driscoll et al, 1994). There are many attractions in the surroundings of Tirana, such as the mountain of Dajti nearly 20 km far from the city, or the castle of Petrela and Preza, which are well known for their historical value. Furthermore, a cable car is planned, which will connect mountain of Dajti to Tirana. There are also cultural attractions in the city such as the National Ballet Theatre, Opera, Library and Historical Museums.

As it concerns interaction of the population of Tirana with the other three cities of Skopje, Sofia and Thessaloniki, 51,4% of people living in Tirana have contacts with at least one or more people in these cities. In general people in Tirana have more contacts in Thessaloniki, and less in Sofia (Table 3c).

Table 3c. Contacts among people in the three cities: Respondents in (row) know in person people in (column) (RIMED Questionnaire Data, 2004:80)

		Skopje	Sofia	Thessaloniki	Tirana	Average Sample
Thessaloniki	None	59,4%	49,2%		78,0%	61,8%
	1-2 persons	26,6%	28,6%		13,6%	23,1%
	3-5 persons	6,3%	11,1%		3,4%	7,0%
	6-10 persons	3,1%	6,3%		1,7%	3,8%
	More than 10	4,7%	4,8%		3,4%	4,3%

5.4. THESSALONIKI

Thessaloniki is the second largest city of Greece and it is considered as the capital of Northern Greece. Located on the picturesque bay of Thermaikos, it has a history of 2.300 years. It has always been a mercantile city, with Jewish, Turkish, Armenian and Christian districts. Its attribute as "commercial centre of the Balkans" is not, therefore, fresh. It is a classical city a Hellenistic, a Byzantine, a Balkan, a Mediterranean city, a city of the East but also of Europe.

Today, Thessaloniki is a thriving city and one of the most important trade and communication centres in the Mediterranean. It is also a business centre and a meeting place for entrepreneurs, particularly from the Balkans and the Black Sea. It is a metropolitan city with a population of over one million.

Culturally Thessaloniki is quite rich. It has numerous museums among which a Cinema Museum, the very successful International Film Festival of Thessaloniki, an impressive Concert Hall, the National Theatre of Northern Greece, and a number of renovated theatres. It is also well known for its active scientific community with three Universities, the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, the University of Macedonia and the Alexandrian Technological Institute. The city is also well known for its variety in entertainment and has a reputation of a 24 hours city with areas of renovated old ware houses which host these activities ("Ladadika", "Milos", "Vilka" etc.) One of the city's advantages is its direct access to the beaches of Chalkidiki and Pieria, and to the ski resorts of "Seli", "Kaimaktsalan" etc.

Tourism has been important for Thessaloniki for most part of its recent history. This was facilitated by its character as a transport centre, served by all means of transportation (road, rail, air, sea). The last ten years there is also a dynamic entrance of foreign capital invested in tourist infrastructure there.

Between the four cities examined, Thessaloniki has the highest percentage of the population not having any contact in any of the other three cities. It also has the lowest percentage of people having one or two contacts in the other three cities. This can be explained by the fact that traditionally, contemporary Thessaloniki was orientated towards Western Europe, and this was more intense after W.W.2. With the participation of Greece in the E.U. these orientations became even stronger, and remained so after the new political situation in the Balkans. The "opening of the borders" did not have as much effect for Thessaloniki as for the other three cities, since people from Thessaloniki were already enjoying free access to European capitals, and most important, they could afford it. In general, people from Thessaloniki have more contacts with Sofia and less with Tirana (Table 3d).

Table 3d. Contacts among people in the three cities: Respondents in (row) know in person people in (column) (RIMED Questionnaire Data, 2004:81)

		Skopje	Sofia	Thessaloniki	Tirana	Average Sample
Tirana	None	47,7%	63,4%	37,3%		48,5%
	1-2 persons	20,5%	24,4%	23,5%		22,8%
	3-5 persons	11,4%	12,2%	19,6%		14,7%
	6-10 persons	9,1%	0,0%	15,7%		8,8%
	More than 10	11,4%	0,0%	3,9%		5,1%

6. The role of ethnic groups of residents as agents of cooperation

6.1. Skopje

There are many ethnic groups living in Skopje: Albanians, Bulgarians, Greek-Macedonians, Serbs, Bosnians etc. Albanians form the biggest minority group there, and there is tension in their relationships with the Macedonian majority. These tensions were at their peak since early /90s, when native Albanians were demanding more civic liberties, official use of Albanian language and acceptance of their ethnic identity. They

also grew strong again, when the war in Kosovo erupted. Nowadays there is a combined effort of the government of FYROM and the E.U. to maintain peace and stability by establishing a new legislation that changes drastically the local administration system and gives to Albanian minority considerable rights for self administration. ("Local Self Government Law", 1995/2002). The other minorities in Skopje coexist harmoniously with the local society and they are assimilated to it. While for most of them it can be stated that they can act as agents of cooperation, Greek-Macedonians were in a more complex position, especially during the recent crisis between Greece and FYROM. In this crisis, Greek-Macedonians were at the forefront of the opposition against the Greek claims about the rights of the name of Macedonia. Despite the crisis, though, relations between FYROM and Greece never seized, they have been improving since, and in a future of cooperation between the two countries Greek-Macedonians will be useful as a positive catalyst.

In the questionnaire of the study, respondents from Skopje seem to downplay "receiving immigrants" and "sending emigrants" from/to the other three cities, as positive forces for cooperation. They seem to favour Sofia equally for immigration and emigration (3,33%), Thessaloniki only for emigration (6,67%) and Tirana only for immigration (5%). (Table 4a).

Table 4a. Part of table "Policies of cooperation of city in row with city in column that will help to exploit advantages/opportunities and face weaknesses /challenges in the four cities". (RIMED Questionnaire Data. (2004:88)).

		Sofia	Thessaloniki	Tirana	Average Sample
Skopje	Receive immigrants	3,33%	0,00%	5,00%	2,78%
	Send emigrants	3,33%	6,67%	0,00%	3,33%

6.2. Sofia

No ethnic group of Albanians living in Sofia was recorded. Macedonians can be found in Sofia, but few of them are from Skopje, or FYROM in general. More Macedonians in Sofia are from Pirin, a region in the south of Bulgaria, and they have Bulgarian citizenship. Macedonians either from Skopje, or from the south of Bulgaria do not face any discrimination, mutual feelings with native Bulgarians –who consider them of Bulgarian origin- are very friendly, and they are considered as agents of cooperation. Greeks can also be found in Sofia and belong to different categories: Greeks who came from Greece after the political changes, mainly for business and not so much as permanent residents. Greeks who went to Bulgaria as political exiles after the end of the civil war in Greece (1948) and now few have remained, since most of them have been repatriated in Greece the last two decades. Finally Greeks who live there for centuries, with the last ones being Vlachs from the end of the 19th century. The last two categories have Bulgarian citizenship. In general, ethnic groups of Greek origin in Bulgaria and in particular in Sofia are in friendly relationship with native Bulgarians and are considered as agents of cooperation.

In the questionnaire of the study, neither immigration to Sofia from Skopje, Thessaloniki, and Tirana, nor emigration from Sofia to these cities was considered by the respondents as encouraging cooperation among cities. Respondents seemed to favour immigration only from Skopje, but still with the low percentage of 4,48% (the equivalent from Thessaloniki and Tirana being 0%), and emigration from Sofia, only to Skopje and Thessaloniki (both by 2,99%) (Table 4b).

Table 4b. Part of table “Policies of cooperation of city in row with city in column that will help to exploit advantages/opportunities and face weaknesses /challenges in the four cities”. (RIMED Questionnaire Data. (2004:89)).

		Skopje	Thessaloniki	Tirana	Average Sample
Sofia	Receive immigrants	4,48%	0,00%	0,00%	0,00%
	Send emigrants	2,99%	2,99%	0,00%	1,49%

6.3. Tirana

Ethnic groups living in Tirana include Greeks from Southern Albania (Northern Epirus). The biggest part of Greek minority used to live in cities and villages of the south of Albania and most of them (especially the younger generation) have emigrated to Greece. The treatment of the Greek minority by the Albanian authorities has been a cause of tension between the two countries for many years. The Albanian communist government was blamed for discrimination against them and for brutal violations of human rights. The new governments of Albania (after the collapse of communism), although in much better relations with their Greek counterparts, are still blamed for suppressing civil and political liberties of the Greek minority. A major source of dispute is the size of the ethnic-Greek population in Albania. The 1989 Albanian census enumerated 58,758 ethnic Greeks, but the Greek government claims the community numbers 300,000. An independent estimate would be about 120,000. (Carletto et al, 2004).

Minorities of Bulgarian or Macedonian origin do not live in Tirana in worth mentioning numbers. Another ethnic group which can be found in Tirana, emigrated to Albania recently. It is the group of Albanians from Kosovo, who fled Kosovo because of the war and they are well received by native Albanians.

In the questionnaire of the study, respondents from Tirana seem to favour Thessaloniki for both accepting immigrants and sending emigrants, by equivalent percentages of

30,77% and 47,69% and they consider it as fostering cooperation between the two cities. Sofia and Skopje seem not to be so favourable, since only 6,15% of the respondents believed that receiving immigrants from Skopje would improve cooperation (the equivalent for Sofia being even lower, 4,62%), and only 7,69% believed that sending emigrants to Skopje would foster cooperation (the equivalent for Sofia being again 4,62%) (Table 4c).

Table 4c. Part of table “Policies of cooperation of city in row with city in column that will help to exploit advantages/opportunities and face weaknesses /challenges in the four cities”. (RIMED Questionnaire Data. (2004:90)).

		Skopje	Sofia	Thessaloniki	Average Sample
Tirana	Receive immigrants	6,15%	4,62%	30,77%	17,69%
	Send emigrants	7,69%	4,62%	47,69%	26,15%

6.4. Thessaloniki

Thessaloniki is the only one of the four cities that has ethnic groups from the other cities as economic refugees. In terms of numbers, the big majority of them are Albanians, fewer are Bulgarians, and very few are from FYROM (in fact they cannot constitute ethnic group of residents due to their low number). There are also other ethnic groups in Thessaloniki, the biggest one being of Greek origin, from the former Soviet Union (see below). A notion of a ‘hierarchy of Greekness’ has been developed in relation to Albanian immigration and recent Greek immigration policy. Next to Greek resident nationals come the Pontian (or Pontic) Greeks who are ‘repatriates’ from the former Soviet Union, to which they migrated in the early twentieth century from their historic Greek homeland of Pontos in Asia Minor. As members of the Greek Diaspora Pontian Greeks are given full citizenship status and other benefits that facilitate their integration into Greek society. Ethnic-Greek Albanians come next in the hierarchy: their ‘Greek nationality’ is recognised but they are not given full citizenship rights and are not officially encouraged to settle permanently in Greece. Finally there are the ‘true’ Albanians who are seen both as

Moslems and allies of the historical enemy, the Ottoman Turks, and as manifestations of that other enemy, communism.

There is an obvious relationship between the spatial distribution of Albanians and the types of employment available. Urban areas such as Thessaloniki offer the possibility of year-round employment (albeit often in casual, temporary jobs). Albanians are employed as unskilled or semi-skilled labour in the construction industry, in hotels and restaurants, in small manufacturing or service concerns involved in activities such as clothing, removals or painting and decorating, and in personal services such as domestic cleaners, gardeners, baby-sitters, carers of elderly people etc. A number of Albanian girls and young women (and also boys) are procured by prostitution rings to work in the sex industry. It can be seen that the vast majority of these jobs are low-skilled and insecure. Most are located in the informal economy where employers take advantage of Albanians' illegal status. The recent regularisations have improved this situation somewhat. On the other hand the Greek employment market has to some extent bifurcated into 'jobs done by immigrants' and better-status work done by Greeks. Discrimination, exploitation and racism continue to be widespread, but tolerated by Albanians because of the dire economic conditions in their home country. Initially welcomed, Albanians quickly became denigrated with a series of highly negative stereotypes. If anything the vilification has been more severe in Greece, reflecting the more massive presence of Albanian migrants, the lack of other prominent migrant nationalities, and the more antagonistic history of Greco-Albanian relations during and since the Ottoman Empire. (King et al, 2003). The Greek reaction is also made more complicated by the presence, amongst the immigrants, of large numbers of ethnic-Greek Albanians who are treated more favourably than 'other' or 'true' Albanians, both in terms of their rights in Greece (automatically given visas and work permits) and the attitudes of the Greek population. The topic of Albanian criminality has been obsessively pored over by the Greek media, with the result that public opinion has been fundamentally changed. Given that police and court behaviour tends to reflect

the bias of society at large, Albanians have been disproportionately targeted, leading to high numbers of reported arrests and prison inmates. And yet, Albanians have been able to negotiate their way round and through these exclusionary barriers. They are able to stress their shared Balkan identity. Most Albanians learn Greek quickly and, at a local and personal level, above all through work and neighbourhood relations, are able to relate in a dynamic way to Greek society.

Bulgarians are better accepted than Albanians, although still with a certain attitude of superiority from the part of the Greeks, granted by their better economic status. Bulgarians are also employed as unskilled or semi-skilled labour but in a lower proportion, while a number of them are also occupied in white collar employment (a typical example being their employment in medical professions). Many Bulgarian young women are procured by prostitution rings to work in the sex industry. A difference in the Greek attitude between Albanian and Bulgarian minorities seems to reflect their difference in numbers in Greece. Albanians are characterized by more negative stereotypes, although Bulgarians are also believed to be at least related to the Bulgarian Mafia.

In the questionnaire of the study (Table 4d), respondents from Thessaloniki seem also to downplay "receiving immigrants" and "sending emigrants" from/to the other three cities, as positive forces for cooperation. They seem to favour Tirana equally for immigration and emigration (4,35%), Skopje only for emigration (2,90%) and Sofia more for emigration than immigration (1,45% to 2,90%), although these percentages are too low for being used in forming conclusions.

Table 4d. Part of table “Policies of cooperation of city in row with city in column that will help to exploit advantages/opportunities and face weaknesses /challenges in the four cities”. (RIMED Questionnaire Data. (2004:89)).

		Skopje	Sofia	Tirana	Average Sample
Thessaloniki	Receive immigrants	0,00%	1,45%	4,35%	2,90%
	Send emigrants	2,90%	2,90%	4,35%	3,62%

Conclusions

As it was seen above, the structure of the text covered topics related to a. forces and constraints of interaction among the four metropolitan regions, b. economic relations among Skopje, Sofia, Tirana and Thessaloniki, c. capacity and quality of transportation, energy, and telecommunication networks, d. importance of scientific networks, e. tourism and population movements, and f. the role of ethnic groups of residents as agents of cooperation. From the above topics, forces of interaction, common for all cities were found to be their geographic location and the fast developing economy. Tourism is also a force of interaction for all of them except Tirana -where it is not as developed. In addition to the above, forces of interaction, specifically for Thessaloniki, can be also considered the scientific activities taking place there, and its international image. Constraints of interaction are not common for all cities. For Skopje constraints of interaction are the transport system, and constraints of political nature, mainly because of tension with Greece and Albania –for different reasons for each of them. For Sofia, the equivalent constraints are bureaucracy and corruption of the administration, and the comparatively high rate of crime. For Tirana constraints are considered the low quality of urban conditions, the inefficiency of the administrative system, the political instability, and the high rate of crime. Finally, for Thessaloniki constraints of interaction with the other three cities are the low quality of urban conditions, and the fast growing xenophobia. Economic relations between the four cities were found to be fast developing. In capacity and quality of transportation systems, examination covered road transport, rail, airports, ports, public transportation (buses, trolleys, tramways, and underground

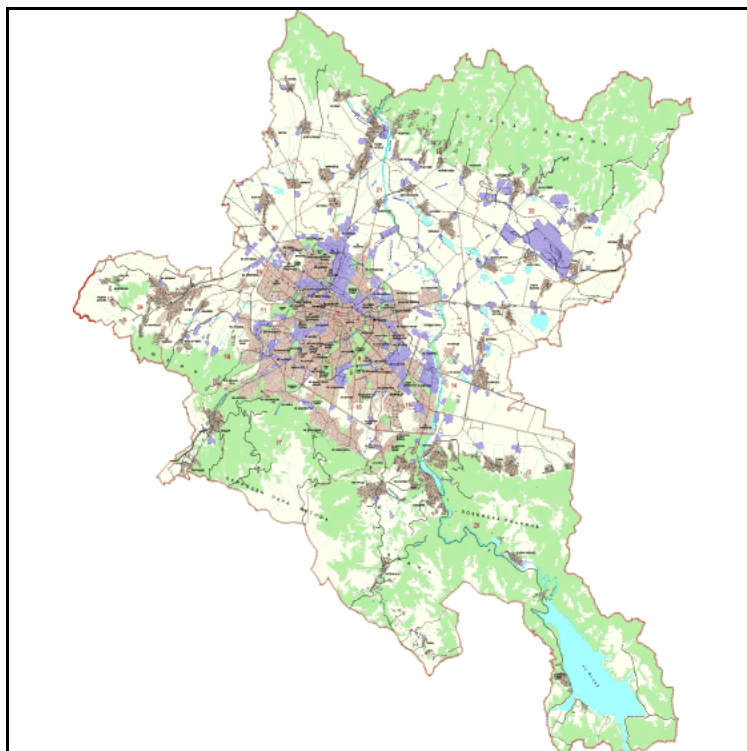
metro). Sofia presented a comparatively high variety of transportation means, although not all of them modernized. Tirana, from its part, had an impressive growth in telecommunications and particularly in mobile telephony. Scientific networks are developing fast between the four cities, with universities and R & D institutions playing a significant role in this. Sofia and Thessaloniki seem to be leading in this sector. All four cities present high levels in population movements and tourism. Sofia and Thessaloniki seem to be the most favourite destinations of them, and in Skopje there is the highest percentage of local people who visit the other three cities. Finally, as it concerns the role of ethnic groups of residents as agents of cooperation, all four cities have ethnic groups of residents – Sofia having the lowest in numbers- and lasting harmony in coexistence between the ethnic groups and the local population has not been achieved yet.

City maps of the four metropolitan regions

1. Skopje



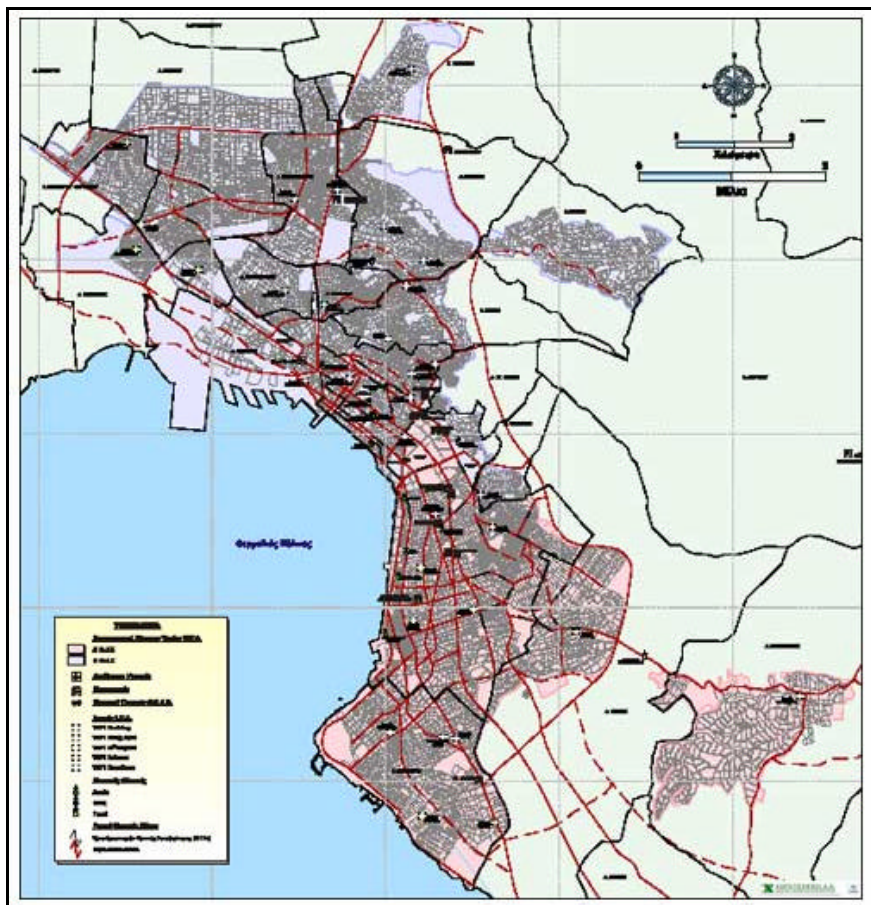
2. Sofia



3. Tirana



4. Thessaloniki



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