



## Skopje Bridges at the Intersection of Cultural Tourism and Cultural Heritage

### *Kültürel Turizm ve Kültürel Miras Kesişiminde Üsküp Köprüleri*

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#### Abstract

Cultural tourism consists of the consumption of culture by tourists and is closely linked to their specific demands, as exploration, testing, examining the artifacts of extinct cultures, and engaging with "other" cultures are significant motives. Cultural tourism involves tourists experiencing the lifestyles, traditions, and daily lives of people in different destinations. Skopje, the capital of North Macedonia, stands as one of the significant centers in the Balkan region. The Skopje Center and the Old Bazaar (Turkish Bazaar) areas are connected along the east-west axis by four bridges: Stone Bridge, The Bridge of Civilizations, Art Bridge, and Walking Bridge. These bridges were selected for this paper due to their cultural tourism value. The methodology of this paper is based on document analysis and on-site observation techniques in accordance with the principles outlined in the International Cultural Tourism Charter of 1999 by ICOMOS, an international conservation institution. The paper derives its research methodology from the International Cultural Tourism Charter (1999). The charter contains principles that explain the relationship between tourism and cultural heritage. The Skopje bridges, which form the material of the paper, have been evaluated and analyzed using the on-site observation technique within the context of Principle 1, Principle 2, Principle 3, and Principle 6 of the International Cultural Tourism Charter (1999). This paper aims to serve as a source for future literature on the subject.

**Keywords:** Tourism, Cultural Tourism, Cultural Heritage, Skopje, Skopje Bridges

#### Özet

Kültürel turizm, turistlerin kültür tüketiminden oluşmaktadır ve turistlerin özel talepleriyle yakından ilişkilidir; çünkü keşfetme, test etme, soyu tükenmiş kültürlerin eserlerini inceleme ve 'diğer' kültürlerle tanışmak önemli bir motiftir. Kültü turizmi; turistlerin farklı destinasyonlardaki insanların yaşam tarzını, geleneklerini ve günlük yaşamlarını deneyimlemesidir. Kuzey Makedonya'nın başkenti Üsküp, Balkan coğrafyasının önemli merkezlerinden birisidir. Üsküp Center ile Türk Çarşısı bölgeleri doğu-batı aksında dört köprü ile birbirine bağlanmaktadır: Taş Köprü, Medeniyet Köprüsü, Sanat Köprüsü ve Yürüyen Köprü. Bu çalışma kapsamında bu köprüler kültürel turizm değeri taşımalarından dolayı seçilmiştir. Bu çalışmanın yöntemi, uluslararası koruma kurumlarından biri olan ICOMOS'un 1999 yılında oluşturduğu Uluslararası Kültürel Turizm Tüzüğü'nde belirtilen ilkeler doğrultusunda doküman analizi ve yerinde gözlem tekniklerine dayanmaktadır. Çalışma, araştırma yöntemini Uluslararası Kültürel Turizm Tüzüğü (1999)'nden alır. Tüzük, turizm ve kültürel miras arasındaki

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**Citation:** Kirci, O. and Yazici, M. (2025). Skopje bridges at the intersection of cultural tourism and cultural heritage. *Journal of Humanities and Tourism Research*, 15 (1), 184-202.

**Submitted:** 10.03.2025.

**Accepted:** 21.03.2025

*ilişkiyi açıklayan ilkelere sahiptir. Çalışmanın materyalini oluşturan Üsküp Köprüleri, Uluslararası Kültürel Turizm Tüzüğü (1999)'nden seçilen İlke 1, İlke 2, İlke 3 ve İlke 6 ilkeleri bağlamında yerinde gözlem tekniğiyle değerlendirilmiştir ve analiz edilmiştir. Bu çalışma ile gelecek çalışmalar için bir literatür kaynağı oluşturması amaçlanmıştır.*

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Turizm, Kültürel Turizm, Kültürel Miras, Üsküp, Üsküp Köprüleri

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Culture encompasses the totality of tangible and intangible values accumulated by societies throughout history. These values are shaped within the framework of historical and social conditions as a result of individuals' interactions with their natural and social environments (Gülcan, 2010; Mazlum, 2024).

Tourism is an almost ubiquitous phenomenon that is both fascinating and challenging to study. The history of tourism can be traced back to the earliest historical records; however, most early forms of travel are not considered tourism in the sense we understand today. Contemporary tourism encompasses a wide variety of activities, including leisure, cultural exploration, scientific discovery, and religious visits (Robinson et al., 2020).

Domestic and international tourism continues to serve as a primary mechanism for cultural exchange, not only through its engagement with the remnants of other societies' pasts but also by offering unique experiences related to contemporary life. Tourism is widely regarded as a positive force for the preservation of natural and cultural heritage (ICOMOS, 1999).

Due to the richness inherent in the concept of culture, many tourists travel with the desire to explore the cultures of different societies (Mazlum, 2024). Cultural tourism encompasses the consumption of a wide variety of cultural assets such as heritage, art, folklore, and more. As a social practice, cultural tourism reconstructs or creates identities (e.g., nationalism, social identities, etc.) (Bauman, 1999).

Cultural tourism is fundamentally based on the consumption of culture by tourists and is closely tied to their specific demands. The motivations of exploration, 'testing' other authentic cultures, examining the artifacts of extinct cultures, and encountering 'other' cultures are particularly significant (du Cros, 2002). This perspective encourages heritage tourism and heritage developers to adopt a nuanced approach to cultural artifacts: an object cannot function independently without its contextual surroundings, as they collectively form the cultural landscape (Virginija, 2016).

Cultural tourism encompasses all aspects of travel that enable travelers to engage with others' heritage and history or contemporary lifestyles and ways of thinking (McIntosh & Goeldner, 1986). In other words, cultural tourism offers cultural tourists access to the processes and products of other cultures. Culture, in this context, involves tourists experiencing the lifestyles, traditions, and daily practices of people in various destinations (OECD, 2009).

Natural and cultural heritage, cultural diversity, and living cultures hold significant appeal in the context of tourism. Cultural tourism has the potential to harness the economic aspects of cultural heritage, generating resources, educating the public, influencing policy, and directing these resources toward preservation efforts. Tourism, a fundamental component of many national and regional economies, can serve as a crucial driver of development when effectively managed (ICOMOS, 1999).

In the context of cultural tourism, the role of cultural heritage values in regional development becomes particularly prominent when considering historical cities. In recent years, historic bridges located in urban centers have gained attention both as reflections of urban identity

and as key elements of tourist attraction. Historic bridges are significant structures that reflect the cultural identity and historical continuity of nations. In this respect, they serve as focal points of attraction for tourists. Examples include Pons Fabricius (62 BCE) in Italy, Puente de Alcántara (104-106 CE) in Spain, Charles Bridge (1357) in the Czech Republic, Stone Bridge (1451-1469) in North Macedonia, Stari Most (1566) in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Old Bridge (1788) in Germany. These bridges are not only engineering marvels but also cultural heritage icons. International organizations such as UNESCO, the Council of Europe (COE), and the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) have developed various legal and strategic frameworks for the preservation of these structures and their integration into sustainable tourism activities. Within this context, the bridges in Skopje, located in the Balkans, stand out as significant elements of this heritage. Skopje is notable for its bridges that bear the marks of different civilizations throughout history, positioning the city as a vital representative of the region's cultural heritage. Accordingly, the primary research question of this paper is as follows:

- Under which principles established by international conservation organizations are Skopje's bridges preserved, and what are the cultural heritage and cultural tourism values of these bridges?

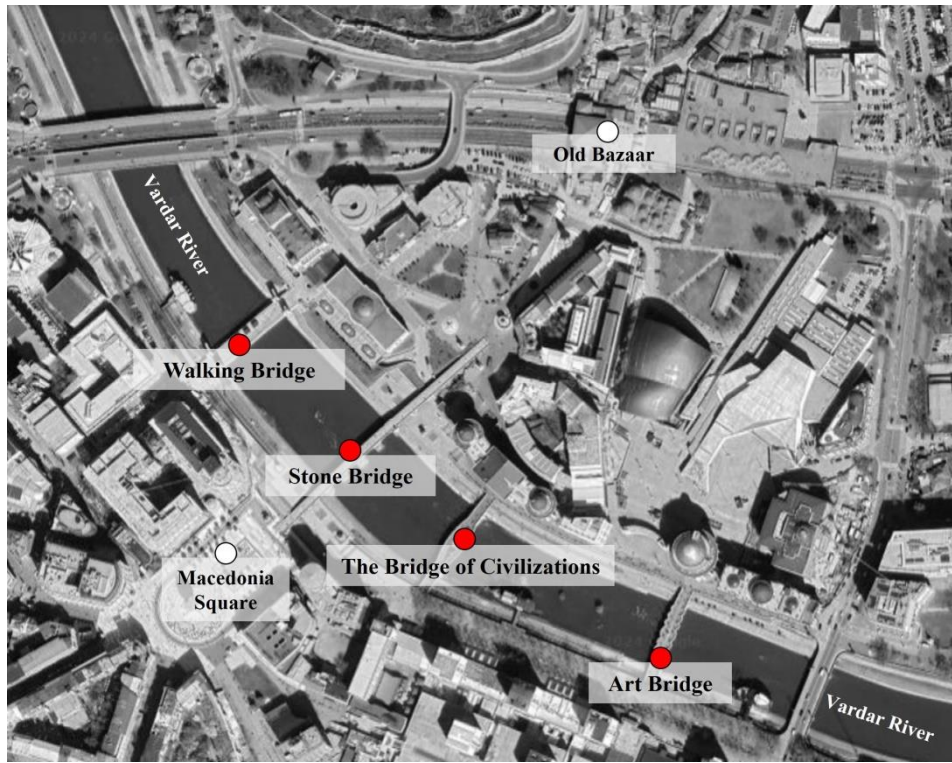
This paper's methodology draws from the International Cultural Tourism Charter of 1999 by the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS). ICOMOS serves as an international council that identifies the values constituting world heritage and oversees their preservation (ICOMOS, 2024). This Charter outlines principles that explain the relationship between tourism and cultural heritage. A document analysis was conducted by examining these principles in the International Cultural Tourism Charter (1999). The four Skopje bridges— Stone Bridge, The Bridge of Civilizations, Art Bridge, and the Walking Bridge—which constitute the material of the paper, were evaluated and analyzed using on-site observation techniques in accordance with the principles of the International Cultural Tourism Charter (1999). This analysis addresses a gap in the literature by evaluating the relationship between Skopje's bridges and tourism within the framework of the International Cultural Tourism Charter (1999). Additionally, it provides an important reference for future research.

## 2. MATERIAL

North Macedonia is in the southwestern part of the Balkan Peninsula and is strategically positioned as a cultural and historical crossroads between the East and the West. This geographical significance has earned it the title of the 'Heart of the Balkans'. The country's rich history has left behind a diverse cultural heritage, including tangible elements such as cultural-historical monuments, ethnographic artifacts, and museums, as well as intangible traditions like folklore, music, and culinary arts. In addition to its cultural wealth, the country's natural beauty—featuring lakes, towering mountains, and diverse landscapes—enhances its appeal as a distinctive tourist destination. These factors collectively position North Macedonia as a key region for sustainable tourism, particularly in terms of heritage conservation, ecotourism initiatives, and community-based tourism development (Milenkovski & Gramatnikovski, 2016).

The country's capital and largest city, Skopje, is one of the major hubs in the Balkans, owing to its strategic location along the Vardar-Morava corridor, as well as the Thessaloniki-Belgrade highway and railway route. Skopje and its surroundings, with their natural, historical, and cultural attractions, represent a region with high tourism potential (Kızılçaoğlu & Önal, 2020). The city of Skopje is bordered by the Vodno Mountains and the Skopska Crna Gora Mountains, while the Vardar River divides it into two parts. These geographical features have played a significant role in shaping the city's development. Skopje, which hosted extensive construction activities during the early Ottoman period, today attracts many tourists seeking cultural tourism experiences.

Bridges connecting the two banks of the Vardar River, which runs through the center of Skopje, play a crucial role in the city's urban fabric. To maintain the continuity of the east-west axis and establish links between the Old Bazaar, Macedonia Square, and various administrative and cultural buildings, pedestrian bridges such as Stone Bridge, The Bridge of Civilizations, Art Bridge, and Walking Bridge have been constructed over the Vardar River (Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** Pedestrian Bridges Over The Vardar River

Source: (Authors, 2024)

### 2.1. Stone Bridge

Stone Bridge, located on the Vardar River, which divides the city of Skopje into two regions, extends in an east-west direction, connecting the Old Bazaar (Turkish Bazaar) and Macedonia Square. The bridge is 210 meters long and 5.80 meters wide. In the literature, differing opinions exist regarding the number of arches of the bridge. Since Stone Bridge does not have an inscription, it is believed to date back to the Roman period or the 14th-century Serbian rule. However, due to its Ottoman architectural style and historical evidence, experts suggest that the bridge was constructed during the Ottoman period. Construction of the bridge began in 1446 during the reign of Sultan Murad II and was completed during the reign of Sultan Mehmed the Conqueror (Acun, 2012; Şerbetçi, 2017).

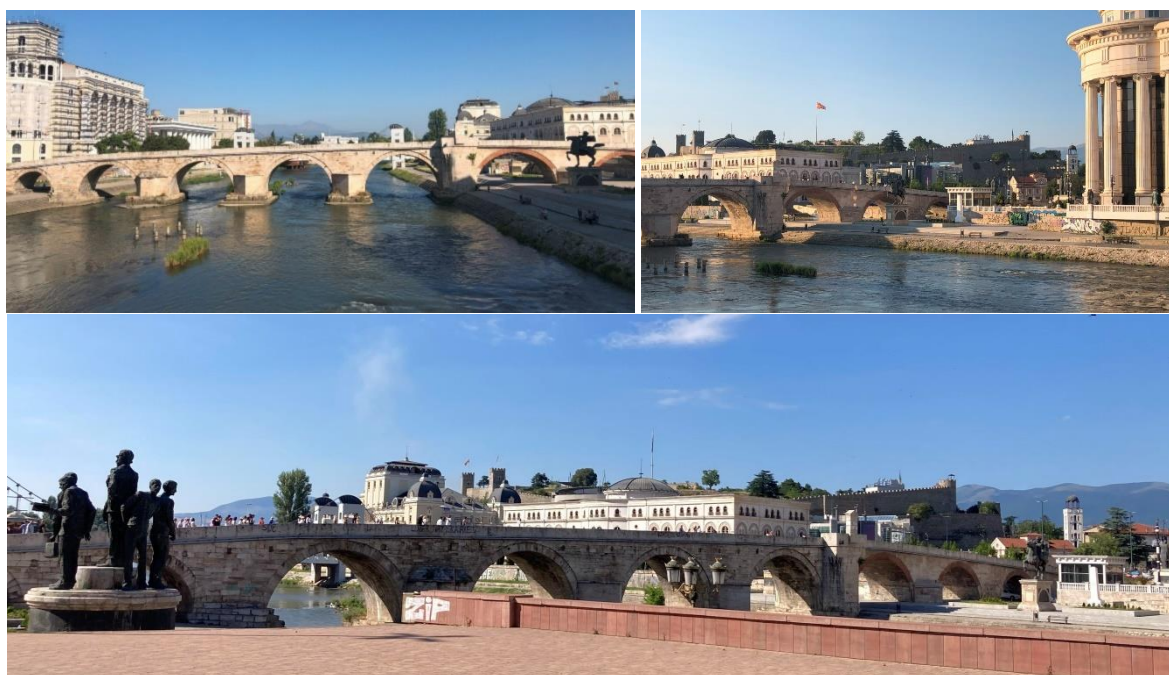
The bridge, with its cut-stone parapets, features a prayer platform referred to as a 'namazgah' located on the downstream side above the seventh pier from the west and the fourth pier from the east (Acun, 2012). Stone Bridge has suffered damage from earthquakes and other disasters and has undergone various repairs. During restoration efforts in 2006, a muqarnas-decorated mihrab niche (prayer space) was removed by the government of North Macedonia. However, in 2008, the mihrab was reconstructed on Stone Bridge (Figure 2) (Acun, 2012; Şerbetçi, 2017).



**Figure 2.** Mihrab on Stone Bridge

**Source:** (Authors, 2024)

During the period when Stone Bridge was first constructed, its surroundings featured structures reflecting the influence of the Ottoman era. However, many of these historical buildings have been lost over time. Today, the area around the bridge includes newly constructed structures, pedestrian bridges designed for Skopje 2014 project, and numerous statues (Figure 3). These pedestrian bridges have a historical appearance but were built using modern construction techniques (Şerbetçi, 2017; Skopje 2014, 2024a).



**Figure 3.** Stone Bridge

**Source:** (Authors, 2024)

As part of the Skopje 2014 project, a statue known as 'City Beach' or 'Kapachka' situated beneath Stone Bridge in the section of the river historically used as a beach by the residents of Skopje, symbolizes a woman diving into the waters of the Vardar River (Figure 4). This statue, belonging to the initial phase of the Skopje 2014 project, has retained its original placement and continues to stand in the waters of the Vardar River (Skopje 2014, 2024a).



**Figure 4.** The 'City Beach' or 'Kapachka' Statue Located At The Base of Stone Bridge

Source: (Skopje 2014, 2024a)

## 2.2. The Bridge of Civilizations (Oko Bridge)

The Bridge of Civilizations, a part of the Skopje 2014 project, was constructed adjacent to Stone Bridge. The initial name considered for this bridge within the Skopje 2014 project was Oko Bridge. The Bridge of Civilizations (Oko Bridge) is a pedestrian bridge that connects the Vardar embankment to the State Archives, Archaeological Museum, and the Constitutional Court (Skopje 2014, 2024b; Skopje 2014, 2024c; Gradska Redakcija, 2024) (Figure 5).



**Figure 5.** The Bridge of Civilizations (Oko Bridge)

Source: (Authors, 2024)

The construction of The Bridge of Civilizations began in September 2009 and was completed in June 2013. Upon its inauguration in June 2013, the bridge featured a total of 27 statues: 13 on each side and 1 in the center (Figures 6-7). The bridge is 83 meters long and 9.2 meters wide, with its pedestrian walkway expanding up to 12 meters in width (Skopje 2014, 2024b; Gradska Redakcija, 2024). The statues on the bridge represent figures from North Macedonia's history, specifically individuals associated with archaeological findings from their respective eras, as well as those whose actions left a mark on these regions. Consequently, The Bridge of Civilizations houses statues of King Perdikkas I, Alexander the Great, Amyntas III, and emperors Gavril Radomir, Ivan Vladislav, and Stefan Dušan (Skopje 2014, 2024c).



**Figure 6.** Statues on The Bridge of Civilizations (Oko Bridge)

Source: (Authors, 2024)



**Figure 7.** Fountain on The Bridge of Civilizations (Oko Bridge)

Source: (Authors, 2024)

Two years after the opening of The Bridge of Civilizations, it visibly sustained damage. Its facades were stripped, and many of the plaques on the statues placed on the bridge either disappeared or became illegible. In addition to these damages, a storm in Skopje caused the glass floor in the center of the bridge to break. The Bridge of Civilizations, with its damaged surface, became a topic of discussion in the media. Subsequently, the glass floor was replaced (Skopje 2014, 2024b; Gradska Redakcija, 2024) (Figure 8).



**Figure 8.** The Plaque on the Statue on the Bridge of Civilizations and the Glass Floor of the Bridge; (from Left to Right)

Source: (Authors, 2024)

### 2.3. Art Bridge

Art Bridge, located between Stone Bridge and The Bridge of Civilizations, was constructed as part of the Skopje 2014 project. This pedestrian bridge spans the Vardar River and connects the GTC shopping center with the organic building of the Public Prosecutor's Office (Gradska Redakcija, 2024; Skopje 2014, 2024d).

Measuring 80 meters in length, Art Bridge features sculptures of writers, composers, and artists. The project, which began in April 2013, includes a total of 29 statues: 14 on each side of the bridge and one at the center (Figure 9). The central statue represents the Miladinovci brothers and stands three meters tall. On both sides of the bridge, there are 14 bronze statues, each two meters in height, of famous artists and cultural figures from the region: Toshe Proeski, Lazar Lichenoski, Nikola Martinovski, Dimitar Kondovski, Petar Mazev, Grigor Prlichev, Stale Popov, Krste Petkov Misirkov, Kocho Racin, Jordan Hadži Konstantinov-Jinot, Blaze Koneski, Aco Shopov, Slavko Janevski, Vasil Iljoski, Vancho Nikoleski, Zivko Chingo, Vojdan Chernodrinski, Dimitar Pandilov, Nikola Vaptsarov, Nejati Zekeria, Murteza Peza, Adem Gaitani, Risto Shishkov, Petre Prlichko, Vlastimir Nikolovski, Trajko Prokopiev, Todor Skalovski, and Stefan Gajdov (Table 1) (Skopje 2014, 2024e; Wikipedia, 2024).



Figure 9. Art Bridge

Source: (Authors, 2024)

Table 1. Sculptures on Art Bridge

SCULPTURES ON ART BRIDGE			
			
Vojdan Černodrinski	Živko Čingo	Jordan Hadži Konstantinov-Džinot	Stefan Gajdov

Source: (Wikipedia, 2024)

**Table 1.** Sculptures on Art Bridge (Continued)



Adem Gajtani



Vasil Iljoski



Slavko Janevski



Blaže Koneski



Dimitar Kondovski



Lazar Ličenoski



Nikola Martinovski



Petar Mazev



Vančo Nikoleski



Vlastimir Nikolovski



Dimitar Pandilov



Murteza Peza



Stale Popov



Toše Proeski



Trajko Prokopiev



Grigor Prličev

Source: (Wikipedia, 2024)

**Table 1.** Sculptures on Art Bridge (Continued)

			
Petre Prličko	Kočo Racin	Todor Skalovski	Aco Šopov
			
Nikola Vapcarov	Nedžati Zekirija	Miladinov Brothers	

Source: (Wikipedia, 2024)

## 2.4. Walking Bridge

Walking Bridge is a pedestrian bridge connecting the Vardar embankment to the National Theatre of Macedonia and Mepso (Figure 10). Initially conceived as a bridge with a Ferris wheel as part of the Skopje 2014 project, the conceptual competition for the Ferris wheel was cancelled multiple times before finally being won by the Austrian firm 'Massabni Architects GmbH.' The Ferris wheel, designed to reach a height of about 60 meters, was planned to be located on Walking Bridge over the Vardar River, between the VMRO Museum and the Old Theatre section (Figure 11). According to the design company's statements, the appearance of the Ferris wheel was inspired by the historical symbols of Macedonia. In addition to the Ferris wheel, the design included bright-colored historical wagons and a coffee bar, and the surroundings were to be fully landscaped. However, following some discussions, the mayor decided to remove the Ferris wheel from the bridge, and revisions were made to the bridge's design. The design maintained the mass structures along the pedestrian axis, which could be used as sales units (Koneski, 2014; Faktor, 2024).



**Figure 10.** Walking Bridge and Its Surroundings

Source: (Authors, 2024; Koneski, 2014)



**Figure 11.** Design of a Bridge with a Ferris Wheel

Source: (Koneski, 2014)

### 3. METHODOLOGY

The methodology of this paper is based on document analysis and on-site observation techniques in accordance with the principles outlined in the International Cultural Tourism Charter of 1999 by the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS). One of the international conservation institutions is ICOMOS. Document analysis is the process of systematically examining written or visual materials in relation to a specific research problem. This analytical method is used to provide historical data, evaluate current practices, and support research (Bowen, 2009). On-site observation is a significant data collection method in scientific research that allows the examination of events, phenomena, or places in their natural context. This technique, particularly used in fields such as social sciences, architecture, archaeology, and environmental studies, enables researchers to conduct direct examinations, understand contextual relationships, and obtain qualitative data (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2018). In architectural and restoration research, on-site observation is used to analyze the preservation status of structures,

assess user behavior, and examine the relationship between historical sites and their contemporary functions (Creswell, 2014). It is especially significant in studies related to the conservation of cultural heritage, restoration processes, and user experiences.

The paper derives its research methodology from the International Cultural Tourism Charter (1999). This charter is a framework that establishes a unified set of principles explaining the relationship between tourism and cultural heritage. These principles highlight key considerations regarding tourism, cultural heritage, and the interaction between local communities and tourists (ICOMOS, 1999). In this context, the research methodology consists of two stages, which also represent the procedural steps of the paper. In the first stage, all the principles outlined in the International Cultural Tourism Charter (1999) were examined through document analysis (Table 2). Among the principles analyzed, those deemed most appropriate for evaluating the Skopje bridges were selected: Principle 1, Principle 2, Principle 3, and Principle 6. These principles were chosen due to their relevance to historical and cultural value, aesthetics, usage and accessibility, and harmony. In the second stage, the pedestrian bridges located in Skopje City Center over the Vardar River were evaluated and analyzed using the on-site observation technique in accordance with the selected principles.

**Table 2.** Summary of the Principles in The International Cultural Tourism Charter (1999)

PRINCIPLES OF THE INTERNATIONAL CULTURAL TOURISM CHARTER (1999)	
Principles	Summary of the principles
<b>Principle 1</b>	<p><b>Protection and Presentation of Cultural Heritage through Tourism</b></p> <p>Both domestic and international tourism should create opportunities to present local cultural heritage to both host communities and visitors as an important medium for cultural exchange. Natural and cultural heritage is a tangible and intangible resource that communicates historical and cultural values. It must be made accessible to a broad audience, and efforts should be made to facilitate the understanding of this heritage by both local communities and visitors. The value of heritage varies at universal, national, and local levels, and these values should be presented to visitors through appropriate and engaging programs, using tools such as education, media, and technology. Interpretation and presentation programs should raise awareness of heritage preservation and increase community support. Furthermore, through programs that address cultural heritage from different groups and languages, visitors should be informed about various cultural values.</p>
<b>Principle 2</b>	<p><b>The Relationship between Cultural Heritage and Tourism</b></p> <p>The relationship between cultural heritage sites and tourism is dynamic and must be managed sustainably. Cultural heritage should be preserved and developed in the long term as a fundamental component of social, economic, and tourism policies. Tourism projects should minimize the negative impacts on cultural heritage and local communities while preserving the authenticity of cultural values. The use of local materials should be prioritized, and local architectural styles or civil architectural traditions should be respected. Moreover, the impacts of tourism in these areas should be continuously monitored, and management plans should be developed to establish the limits of acceptable change.</p>

Source: (Authors, 2024)

**Table 2.** Summary of the Principles in The International Cultural Tourism Charter (1999) (Continued)

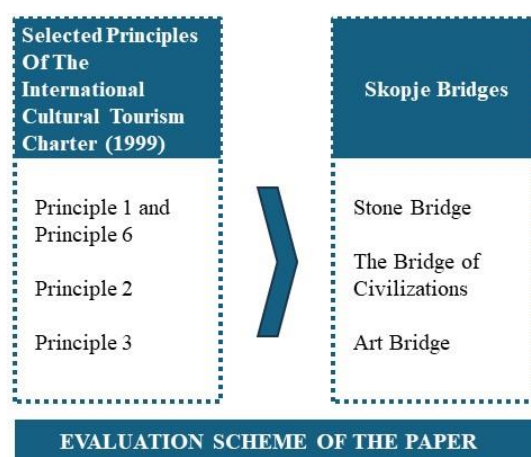
<b>Principle 3</b>	<p><b>Visitor Experience in Conservation and Tourism Planning</b></p> <p>Conservation and tourism planning should provide visitors with information that helps them understand the value of cultural heritage while offering an enjoyable experience. Visitors should be able to explore the area at their own pace, with routes designed in a way that minimizes negative impacts while preserving the integrity of the site.</p> <p>Respect should be shown for religious sites and traditions, and visitors should be encouraged to behave responsibly. Additionally, comfort, safety, and health conditions should be ensured in the planning processes; however, these elements must not interfere with the site's natural and cultural values.</p>
<b>Principle 4</b>	<p><b>Participation of Host Communities</b></p> <p>Host communities and indigenous peoples should actively participate in conservation and tourism planning. At the regional and local levels, the rights of communities and indigenous peoples to their lands and significant sites must be respected, and they should be involved in the management and presentation of their cultural resources.</p> <p>Although cultural heritage holds universal value, respect must be given to the specific needs and cultural practices of certain communities, ensuring their right to manage their own heritage is preserved.</p>
<b>Principle 5</b>	<p><b>Tourism and Conservation Activities Benefiting Local Communities</b></p> <p>Tourism and conservation activities should provide socio-economic benefits to the host community. Decision-makers should support the economic and social development of local populations by fairly distributing the benefits of tourism and contributing to the fight against poverty.</p> <p>Conservation management and tourism programs should ensure that local communities equally benefit from education, employment opportunities, and cultural advantages. Additionally, revenues generated from historical sites should be directed toward conservation and presentation efforts. Educational programs should be organized to enhance the ability of local people to present and interpret cultural heritage, and the participation of local interpreters should be encouraged.</p>
<b>Principle 6</b>	<p><b>Tourism Promotion Programs Should Protect and Enhance Cultural and Natural Heritage</b></p> <p>Tourism promotion programs should develop and protect cultural and natural heritage while providing accurate information to visitors. Promotional activities should be designed to encourage visitors to act in a manner consistent with cultural heritage and should be organized in a way that prevents overcrowding.</p> <p>Furthermore, tourism should promote the region's broad natural and cultural features, reducing pressure on popular sites, while the promotion of local crafts and products should benefit the local community economically without compromising cultural integrity.</p>

Source: (Authors, 2024)

When examining Table 2, it becomes evident that each principle is interrelated. For example, Principle 1 and Principle 2 emphasize the relationship between cultural heritage and tourism, highlighting the sustainability and comprehensibility of the relationship between cultural heritage sites and tourism. This indicates that certain aspects of the principles may overlap with each other.

#### 4. EVALUATION: SKOPJE BRIDGES IN CONTEXT SELECTED PRINCIPLES OF THE INTERNATIONAL CULTURAL TOURISM CHARTER

This section of the paper presents an evaluation of the Skopje bridges (Stone Bridge, The Bridge of Civilizations, and Art Bridge) in the context of the International Cultural Tourism Charter (1999), based on the principles outlined in the Charter. Walking Bridge has been excluded from the evaluation due to insufficient literature information. A document analysis was conducted by examining the principles outlined in the International Cultural Tourism Charter (1999). As a result of the document analysis, it was determined that four principles from the charter were suitable for evaluating the Skopje bridges. Principle 1, which states ‘...natural and cultural heritage is a source that tells the story of historical development’ and Principle 6, which includes ‘...visitors should be provided with information about the cultural heritage values of the place and the host community’ are considered related to each other. Therefore, in this paper, Principles 1 and 6 were combined for the evaluation of the bridges. Thus, Stone Bridge, The Bridge of Civilizations, and Art Bridge were evaluated and analyzed using the on-site observation technique within the context of Principle 1, Principle 6, Principle 2, and Principle 3 of the International Cultural Tourism Charter (1999) (Figure 12).



**Figure 12.** Skopje Bridges In Context Selected Principles Of The International Cultural Tourism Charter (1999)

**Source:** (Authors, 2024)

When evaluating the bridges in the context of Principles 1 and 6, the following conclusions can be made:

- Stone Bridge is a significant cultural heritage element for both the host community and visitors, as it is one of the Ottoman monuments in Skopje and a historical bridge. Visitors frequently cross Stone Bridge between Macedonia Square and the Old Bazaar (Turkish Bazaar). The bridge's status as a symbol of Skopje signifies its importance in both the past and present life of the local community. The presence of a mihrab, a religious marker on the bridge, facilitates direct contact for visitors with Ottoman culture. Mukarnas, a geometric decorative element seen in Islamic architecture, can be found on the mihrab of Stone Bridge, providing visitors with the opportunity to explore architectural elements from different cultures. Additionally, Stone Bridge is a pedestrian bridge, accessible to users. The 'City Beach' or 'Kapacka' statue placed at the foot of the bridge as part of the Skopje 2014 project serves as a symbol of ancient culture and social life.
- The statues on The Bridge of Civilizations represent important figures for North Macedonia. Their presence on the bridge provides an opportunity for both the local community and visitors to establish direct contact and learn about these individuals.

However, due to exposure to external environmental conditions, the statues have become deformed. As a result, both locals and visitors are unable to read the nameplates on the statues, meaning the figures cannot be properly recognized by the public.

- Art Bridge, featuring sculptures of writers, composers, and artists, allows the host community and visitors to have direct contact with local cultural heritage. The exhibition of these sculptures has facilitated cultural exchange between visitors and the local community.

When evaluating the bridges in the context of Principle 2, the following conclusions can be drawn:

- Stone Bridge, having undergone numerous restorations, provides visitors with the opportunity to experience history up to the present day. For visitors to Skopje, it is not merely a pedestrian bridge. Due to its context, Stone Bridge offers various perspectives to visitors. To the southwest, there is Macedonia Square; to the west, the Walking Bridge, the National Theatre of Macedonia, and the Museum of the Struggle for Macedonian Independence; to the northeast, the entrance to the Old Bazaar (Turkish Bazaar); and to the east, the Archaeological Museum of North Macedonia and The Bridge of Civilizations. As a historic symbol of Skopje, the bridge is a point of attraction for visitors, offering scenic views. The presence of various sales units at the entrance and exit of the bridge indicates that Stone Bridge contributes to the country's tourism revenue, making it an essential part of the tourism project.
- The Bridge of Civilizations is a pedestrian bridge located between the Archaeological Museum of North Macedonia and City Trade Center Skopje, crossing the Vardar River. Considering its proximity to the Archaeological Museum of North Macedonia, the statues on the bridge hold particular significance. The statues represent important historical figures from North Macedonia's past, derived from archaeological excavations. This symbolism reflects the value placed on cultural spaces and collections. Like other bridges in Skopje, The Bridge of Civilizations establishes a dynamic relationship between cultural heritage and tourism.
- Art Bridge is a pedestrian bridge located between the Macedonian Opera and Ballet and City Trade Center Skopje, crossing the Vardar River. The presence of statues of artists on the bridge signifies the importance given to art and artists. Additionally, this bridge serves as a connection to Mother Teresa Square, where cultural venues such as opera, ballet, and concert halls are located, thus acting as a bridge to cultural spaces.

When evaluating the bridges in the context of Principle 3, the following observations can be made:

- Stone Bridge, The Bridge of Civilizations, and Art Bridge, all located over the Vardar River, provide a noteworthy visitor experience. Among these, the most frequently used bridge is Stone Bridge, as it connects the historic area to the city center. All three bridges offer visitors the opportunity to explore the area at their own pace. However, the presence of the fountain and statues at the center of The Bridge of Civilizations adds variety to the visitors' circulation time. A similar situation is observed on Art Bridge. The adequate lighting on The Bridge of Civilizations and Art Bridge contribute positively to the security conditions, ensuring a safer experience for visitors. However, the lack of sufficient lighting elements on Stone Bridge raises concerns about safety conditions.

The evaluations made in the context of Principles 1 - 6, Principle 2, and Principle 3 of the International Cultural Tourism Charter (1999) have been summarized in 8 distinct categories: historical and cultural value, aesthetics and design, usage and accessibility, compatibility and

integration, conservation and restoration, local communities and tourism, economic and social contribution, and visitor experience, as presented in Table 3.

**Table 3.** Summary of Evaluations of Skopje Bridges in the Context of The International Cultural Tourism Charter (1999) Principles

CATEGORY	PEDESTRIAN BRIDGES OVER THE VARDAR RIVER		
	Stone Bridge	The Bridge of Civilizations	Art Bridge
<b>Historical and Cultural Value</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It carries traces of the Ottoman period and has historical value with its religious and architectural elements (such as the mihrab).</li> <li>• The bridge, completed during the reign of Sultan Mehmed the Conqueror, is an important symbol of the city's identity.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Statues of important figures in the history of North Macedonia are displayed on the bridge.</li> <li>• It is related to archaeological and historical contexts.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It offers a cultural and artistic identity with sculptures of artists, writers, and composers.</li> <li>• It reflects the city's cultural memory.</li> </ul>
<b>Aesthetics and Design</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It carries the characteristics of Ottoman architecture.</li> <li>• It features cut stone railings, a mihrab with muqarnas, and geometric decorations.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It combines modern and historical textures.</li> <li>• It is a pedestrian bridge enriched with sculptures. However, the aesthetic integrity has been damaged over time.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Artistic details and sculptures offer an aesthetic experience.</li> </ul>
<b>Usage and Accessibility</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It has intense pedestrian traffic between the city center and the Historical Turkish Bazaar (Old Bazaar).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It provides direct connection to museums and monumental structures.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It is a connection point for cultural and artistic activities.</li> </ul>
<b>Compatibility and Integration</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There are debates about its incompatibility with surrounding modern structures and the Skopje 2014 project.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It has partially adapted to the design of surrounding modern buildings; however, there are shortcomings in aesthetic and historical continuity.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It demonstrates a more integrated design approach with the surrounding buildings and cultural fabric.</li> </ul>
<b>Conservation and Restoration</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It has undergone various restorations over time, and some original elements have been damaged; however, details such as the mihrab have been preserved.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It was damaged shortly after its opening, and some of the sculpture plaques have become unreadable.</li> <li>• The need for restoration continues.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Despite being a new structure, there are observed deficiencies in maintenance and preservation.</li> <li>• The sculptures require regular maintenance.</li> </ul>

Source: (Authors, 2024)

**Table 3.** Summary of Evaluations of Skopje Bridges in the Context of The International Cultural Tourism Charter (1999) Principles (Continued)

<b>Local Communities and Tourism</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It holds symbolic value for the local community and attracts significant interest from tourists.</li> <li>• It serves as a transition point for cultural events.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Historical figures are introduced through sculptures; however, the lack of information plaques disrupts the dialogue between the sculptures and visitors.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The representation of artists and cultural figures serves as a point of cultural interaction for both the local community and tourists.</li> </ul>
<b>Economic and Social Contribution</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It contributes economically through surrounding tourist and commercial activities.</li> <li>• It is a historical tourist attraction.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Its connection with museums and tourist areas generates economic benefit.</li> <li>• The presence of sculptures increases tourist attraction.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It generates tourist revenue through the transfer of cultural events and artistic values.</li> <li>• It has become the center for artistic events.</li> </ul>
<b>Visitor Experience</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It offers a historical and cultural experience. Different views and architectural details can be observed while crossing the bridge.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sculptures and detailed design provide visitors with a unique experience; however, some physical damages may negatively affect the experience.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It provides a trip focused on art and culture.</li> <li>• Visitors embark on a cultural journey with the views and sculptures the bridge offers.</li> </ul>

Source: (Authors, 2024)

## DISCUSSION

When the relationship between the pedestrian bridges over the Vardar River in Skopje City Center is evaluated using the on-site observation technique in accordance with the selected principles from the International Cultural Tourism Charter (1999), it can be said that The Bridge of Civilizations and Art Bridge share similar values in terms of aesthetics, size, and design, whereas Stone Bridge carries distinct values. On the other hand, Stone Bridge carries different values due to its historical and cultural significance. The more recent The Bridge of Civilizations and Art Bridge, which have undergone various restoration projects, present a contrast with the historically rich and restored Stone Bridge, raising questions about their compatibility.

However, cultural tourism is not only about the traces left by the past but also about providing information about the present, offering experiences, and facilitating intercultural exchange. Cultural tourism is a social practice that not only ensures the protection of natural and cultural heritage but also plays a significant role in architectural developments. The evaluations made in this paper indicate that the Skopje bridges (Stone Bridge, The Bridge of Civilizations, and Art Bridge) align well with the principles outlined in The International Cultural Tourism Charter (1999) in terms of preserving and sustaining both tangible and intangible cultural heritage. If the presence of these principles is further developed, and local communities are actively involved in the protection processes as stated in Principles 4 and 5 of the Charter, the preservation of the Skopje bridges and the enhancement of their tourism potential will become more sustainable. In this regard, organizing educational programs, awareness campaigns, and developing policies to support economic development are essential steps to increase local communities' sensitivity to cultural heritage values.

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