

Search [advanced search](#)

USERNAME:

PASSWORD:

Login

[ALBANIA](#) [BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA](#) [BULGARIA](#) [CROATIA](#) [KOSOVO](#) [MACEDONIA](#) [MONTENEGRO](#) [ROMANIA](#) [SERBIA](#) [ALL BALKAN COUNTRIES](#)

[All the News](#) [Premium](#) [Blogs](#) [Video](#) [Press Reviews](#) [SALESPERSON WANTED](#) [Premium Subscription](#) [RSS](#) [Contact](#) [Newsletters](#)

[Culture Watch](#) [EU Focus](#) [Spotlight on South Serbia](#) [Future of Bosnia](#) [Montenegro Energy Focus](#) [Balkan Transitional Justice](#) [Serbia Elections 2012](#)

14 JUN 12 / 18:03:47

Art and Religious Intolerance

Harald Schenker

The organisers of a festival in Skopje destroyed a work of art already on display, claiming that it hurt religious feelings.

A festival of creative industries opening today in Skopje has started with a bang. The organisers of the festival decided to remove a billboard i.e. tear into bits a work of art that already was on display as part of an exhibition, without informing the artist group involved, because it hurt religious feelings.

Of course the public is left in the dark about the owner of those hurt feelings, as it is about the author of this catastrophic decision. What was the incriminated piece of art?



The billboard depicted a mock advert for a cleaning product, which was supposed to clean “even the most inaccessible surfaces”.

The background shows a fresco from a Skopje church that featured a “miraculous” self-cleaning icon not long ago.

It seems that the Balkans are inhabited by extremely sensitive people, whose feelings get hurt at almost every moment.

If one criticises Greece for having a lax attitude towards tax collection, one hurts all Greeks’ feelings. If one decides not to participate at the inauguration of someone like Tomislav Nikolic as President of Serbia, the entire Serbian nation’s feelings are hurt.

There is no end to stories of nations’ feelings being trampled upon. Except it is always people who claim to represent the entire nation who invoke this pseudo-moral instrument.

And it is always their own personal interest they have in mind. But it seems people don’t mind being abused, otherwise they would react.

A specific category of collective feelings getting hurt, whenever political players need them to be, are religious feelings. Because they felt offended, the Taleban blew up a piece of world heritage in the shape of the Bamiyan Buddha statues and drove an entire country back into

MEET THE BLOGGER

Harald Schenker

PREMIUM SELECTION



19 JUL 12 / 16:32:17

[EU Pressure Cools Romania’s Feuds – For Now](#)

Harsh words from Brussels have forced Victor Ponta to pull in his horns in his bruising battle with President Basescu –

but the drama is far from over.

19 JUL 12 / 15:01:06

[Serb Murders Strike Fear Into Kosovo Village](#)

18 JUL 12 / 14:44:02

[Bosnian Transitional Strategy Hangs on Political Support](#)

18 JUL 12 / 12:28:12

[Literary Prize Holdup Feeds Albanian Writers’ Suspicions](#)

18 JUL 12 / 12:25:26

[Kosovo’s ‘Independence’ Stirs Debate on PM’s Power](#)

17 JUL 12 / 12:04:34

[Hunt for Lost Treasures Has Macedonia Divided](#)

13 JUL 12 / 18:03:49

[Ticket Deal May Leave Belgrade Short-Changed](#)

13 JUL 12 / 09:19:43

[Srebrenica - 10th Sabotage Unit: ‘Taking Breaks Amid Cold-blooded Murder’](#)

12 JUL 12 / 13:53:09

[Bosnia’s ARS AEVI Open – But Awaiting Own Home](#)

12 JUL 12 / 12:30:40

[Post-Election Serbia Seeks More Trade with Russia](#)

12 JUL 12 / 09:23:54

[Serbia’s Victorious Progressives Struggle to Fill Ministries](#)

11 JUL 12 / 11:40:11

[‘Making a Better Future by Resolving the Past’](#)

11 JUL 12 / 11:20:11

[Marchers Form ‘Living Monument’ to Horror of Srebrenica](#)

11 JUL 12 / 10:41:32

[Zvornik Brigade, Guilty For 2,500-Plus Deaths](#)

LATEST NEWS FROM THE BALKANS

19 JUL 12 / 14:40:15

[Montenegro ‘Corrects Injustice’ To Ex-Royals](#)

19 JUL 12 / 13:41:41

[Macedonian Politics Blamed for Failed Election of Judges](#)

19 JUL 12 / 13:30:42

[Serbian Paper’s New Russian Owner Denies](#)

the Stone Age.

Because of the hurt feelings of Islamists, an ever increasing number of people are restricted in their freedom of movement, including artists and journalists. If they survive, that is. Theo van Gogh was executed in 2004 because of hurt religious feelings.

Let us turn things around and imagine a world without religious feelings being hurt. Martin Luther decides not to nail his theses at the entrance of the church in Wittenberg and start the end of the Middle Ages. Martin Luther King decides not to lead the protests of black Americans out of consideration for the religious feelings of the Ku Klux Klan. Women decide not to fight abuse and enslavement in order not to hurt their fathers', husbands' and brothers' religiously motivated feelings of supremacy. Archbishop Tutu and Nelson Mandela stick to their jobs in order not to hurt the religious feelings of White South Africans.

Copernicus, Galileo and Bruno don't even start to think about the universe out of respect for the religious feelings of the Catholic clergy. Isaac Newton eats his apple and goes back to sleep out of consideration for the religious feelings of his peers.

And last but not least, Charles Darwin burns his own theses about the origins of species out of consideration for religious feelings. When religious tolerance is confused with obedience, the result is stagnation and ultimately intolerance. The result is the opposite of self-reflection, the one and only engine of progress.

Now let us look at artists and respect for religious feelings. Had they been obedient, the Renaissance would have never happened. Had they been obedient, some of the world's greatest works of art would have never been created.

It is the role of an artist to question and to provoke. And it is the role of society to take those questions and deal with them. It ultimately is the achievement of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment that democratic values have been enshrined in the foundations of our societies.

Freedom of expression, including artistic expression, belongs to these values. It is a basic prerogative for the functioning of a democracy. Seen the other way – once a society goes down the path of endangering this freedom, democracy is at stake.

There is the other way, too. The Nazis burned books and banned artists, declaring them degenerate. Zhdanov introduced Socialist Realism as the one and only dogma for art, while the Soviet regime treated deviation from it as treason.

Of course, there is always that option. But does a society like Macedonia's want to go down that path? Do artists have to start to self-censure themselves because someone might take offense? What this ultimately produces is complacent, decorative and dull craftwork so much loved by the petit-bourgeois and by the palankians [inhabitants of provincial

Political Link

19 JUL 12 / 13:29:19

[US-Backed Project to Tackle Corruption Unveiled in Bosnia](#)

19 JUL 12 / 13:27:07

[Attacks Rock Serb-Run North of Kosovo](#)

19 JUL 12 / 12:16:07

[ICRC: More than 13,000 Missing in the Region](#)

19 JUL 12 / 10:57:31

[Belgrade Remembers Victims from Orahovac](#)

19 JUL 12 / 10:43:50

[World Leaders Condemn Bulgaria Bus Bombing](#)

narrow minded communities].

If artists cannot create and exhibit free from social and political pressure, they will turn against this pressure. There is no single example of a regime that managed to silence artists. Ai Wei Wei and Liu Xiaobo are recent prominent examples of that failure. But the list is endless. It is not possible and it is stupid, because it will ultimately turn against the censors.



I wonder if anyone in the organisation of the festival, which is held under the auspices of the City of Skopje, will have the guts to get up and say that the work of art that they destroyed was a manifestation of deviation, that it was degenerate. Of course they won't. It is so much easier to hide behind someone else's religious back.

Ultimately these kinds of actions need not be taken with the same degree of seriousness that the protagonists display. Pitiful is the right word for them. They demand to be made fun of, to be subjected to the purifying process of satire. They are unworthy of reaction on an intellectual level. Artists have their own means and will react. A small but active independent scene has arisen in Macedonia and I am confident that they have answers to this act of cultural vandalism.

Of course, the destruction of intellectual property is another issue. But that is up to lawyers to deal with.

In one of Tom Robbins' novels, a parrot is trained to say a single sentence that I would like to throw into the face of any kind of self-styled religious zealots or people acting on their behalf: "People of zee wurl, relax!"

[SHARE THIS ARTICLE](#)

2 comments

3 Stars



Discussion

Community



Martin • a month ago

This is how things work in the Balkans. Is there a thorn in your eye? - destroy it! It wasn't too long ago when a mindless marauder broke in the memorial home of Macedonian painter and artist Lazar Lichenovski in Skopje and caused a bedlam in the gallery, destroying paintings of exceptional sentimental and national value. The frescoes in a monastery overlooking the Matka canyon have their eyes chiseled out, all of them. Underneath the frescoes, names chiseled out and dated 1912, 1913, 1914, 1923. Balkan wars.

The billboard was destroyed by a very sensitive group people who do not tolerate any mockery of their faith. I am not taking sides. I am all for art and the freedom of speech and expression, but we are not talking about a Western country here. In Macedonia faith has very deep roots. Apart from the thick block of secular generations that envelopes students of socialism and post-Yugoslavia youth, Macedonian society is engulfed in the mystical. People have dreams in which they are told to build monasteries and shrines here and there. The next day they go on to carry out the mission only to discover graves, berried foundations of churches, water...

You can not project your western approach without considering all sides. Yes, I agree, it is such a nuance when people become easily offended so that you have to nitpick your terminology and how you carry over your thoughts. But in the same time, there are people to whom faith is the only salvage from the madness out there. On a similar note, I haven't seen any op-eds on the Vevchani Karneval where muslims took things wrong and the Greek ministry of foreign affairs sent a protest note to Skopje, even raising dust in the EU parliament.

1 ^ | 1 v • Reply • Share



Kerwin Williamson • 11 days ago • parent

Very good response Martin, its always great to learn more about the Balkans, through the responses of others. I understand the "sensitivity" of people there, although what it causes them to do is wrong at time. This will all change for the better in time.

1 ^ | v • Reply • Share

BalkanInsight

- All Balkans
- Albania
- Bosnia and Herzegovina
- Croatia
- Kosovo
- Macedonia
- Montenegro
- Romania
- Serbia

- News
- Business
- Culture and Lifestyle
- Video
- Blog

- Analysis
- Comment
- Features
- Interviews
- Investigations
- Profiles
- Premium

- About BIRN
- About Balkan Insight
- Services
- Partner Network
- Contact

Published by