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City profile

Thessaloniki: The changing geography of the city and the role of spatial planning

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ABSTRACT

Thessaloniki has existed for over twenty-three centuries. Today it is the second largest city in Greece after Athens. This City Profile aims to identify and present the milestones in the city's development trajectory and give an overview of the evolution and the planning of the city. After a summary of the historical development of Thessaloniki, emphasis is given to the period after 1990s. Lately, the fiscal and refugee crises hitting the country have changed the urban geography of the city, challenging its sustainability and questioning its future development. At the same time the planning and management system of the city face the overfragmentation and semi-implementation of the plans, the chronic lack of a clear vision for the city's development and the downgrading of the role of strategic spatial planning within the current context of recession. The adoption of a really radical resilience policy along with the reconsideration and redefinition of planning principles and content seems to be the only option for Thessaloniki to track its development trajectory.

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1. Introduction and historical background

Thessaloniki is a city with a long history. Located in the north of Greece on the northern fringe of the Gulf of Thermaikos, its geopolitical location has been of crucial importance for its economy and is an axis that has shaped and continues to shape its history.

Thessaloniki is the second largest city in Greece. Its greater metropolitan area population exceeds one million inhabitants and consists of two macro-zones. The first macro-zone is Thessaloniki's Urban Agglomeration (UATH). It includes seventeen Municipal Units¹ (according to L3852/2010), having over 800,000 people, whereas its central area, or in other words, the Municipality of Thessaloniki² - had 325,182 inhabitants in 2011 (Fig. 1). The second macro-zone is its greater influence (peri-urban) area, whose spatial definition is currently under revision.

Thessaloniki is the second major economic, industrial, commercial, tertiary educational and political center, after Athens. It is also usually mentioned as 'co-capital'. It belongs administratively to the Region of Central Macedonia, whose neighboring countries on the north are FYROM and Bulgaria.

The city of Thessaloniki was founded in 315 BCE by King Cassander of Macedonia. During the Roman period Thessaloniki was an important

metropolis and a major trade-hub, as it was located on the Via Egnatia, the road which connected Thessaloniki and great centers of commerce such as Rome and Byzantium. Later on, Thessaloniki was considered the second largest and wealthiest city of the Byzantine Empire after Constantinople.

Thessaloniki was conquered by the Ottomans in 1430 and remained under Ottoman rule until the Balkan Wars in 1912. In the 15th century Thessaloniki was a nearly desolated city, losing almost 75% of its population that at that time numbered ten thousand people (Karadimou-Yerolymou, 2008). However, a century later, the city started to flourish again economically and demographically, due mainly to the settlement of Jews that were attracted to the city. In the late 18th century Thessaloniki was the major economic center of the Balkans and along with Smyrna the two most important ports of the East. Its population was approximately eighty thousand people. The outbreak of the Greek Revolution (1821–1832) against the Ottoman Empire took its toll on the city. Contrary to southern Greece that formed an independent Greek state in 1830, Thessaloniki did not manage to gain its independence and experienced the penalties of Ottoman rule. In the 1840s Thessaloniki was a city in decay characterized by declining economic activity and a weakening Greek presence that counted the smallest number of Greeks that the city had seen since its conquest by the Ottomans (Dimitriadis, 1983; Karadimou-Yerolymou, 2008). Finally, in the first Balkan War (1912), four Balkan States - including Greece - defeated the Ottoman Empire achieving their independence. Therefore, after five centuries of Ottoman rule, Thessaloniki was finally incorporated into the Neohellenic State in 1912.

Since the beginning of the 20th century, Thessaloniki has experienced continuous transformations within which the urban landscape

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¹ According to L3852/2010 (Kallikratis Plan) the Municipal Units replaced the former Municipalities based on L2539/97 (Kapodistrias Plan). The new administrative readjustment (Kallikratis Plan) merged the 1034 former Municipalities -current Municipal Units- of Greece into 325 larger administrative units, the current Municipalities.

² The current Municipality of Thessaloniki includes the Municipal Units of Thessaloniki and Triandria.



Fig. 1. The Urban Agglomeration of Thessaloniki (UATH).
Source: edited by the author

has changed relentlessly, along with the social and economic geography of the city (Hastaoglou-Martinidis, 1997). In addition, the prolonged fiscal and economic crisis that began in 2009 and the current refugee crisis hitting the country question the city's identity and future development. At the same time, the chronic problem of the lack of a clear vision for the city's development, the fixed weaknesses of the planning and management system of the city, along with the downgrade of the role of spatial planning due to the economic rollback, challenge the city's sustainability and resilience.

This paper aims to present an overview of the evolution and planning of the city giving emphasis to the period after 1990. The mid 1980s is a turning point in the spatial planning and management of the city since it is the time the metropolitan planning system was established. The paper focuses on the identification and presentation of the milestones in the city's development trajectory that derive from a sequence of greater geopolitical and economic changes in order to discuss and compare their gravity and evaluate the city's future development and prospects.

The paper is structured into five main parts. First, a description of the city's historical development is briefly presented, covering the period from its incorporation into the Greek state up to the end of the 1940s. Second, the city's evolution after the Second World War is analyzed

up to the era of crisis, highlighting and explaining the historical peculiarities and new conditions that have shaped its contemporary identity. Third, emphasis is given to the current changing geography of the city in the aftermath of the fiscal and refugee crises challenging its sustainability and questioning its future development. Fourth, a critical analysis of the city planning and management is presented. The paper ends with a discussion and evaluation the city's future development, highlighting the opportunities and the mishaps of the city's trajectory.

2. The formative years: 1912–1949

At the dawn of the 20th century Thessaloniki was a multi-ethnic city with a population of 150,000 inhabitants. For a long period, urban life was characterized by the coexistence of three main ethnic-religious groups: Christians, Jews and Muslims. These communities lived in distinct quarters. Turks lived in the upper parts of the city; Jews in the lower district near the sea walls and the harbor; Christians were in the east and in small pockets around Byzantine churches. In the western part the commercial sector and the European quarter were located. The city had a medieval character with its dense and irregular street network, urban clusters and introverted neighborhoods surviving

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