

Case study ID

MK_02

NA TOCHAK

CASE STUDY SHORT SUMMARY REPORT

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NA TOCHAK

Case Study at a Glance

NaTochak (literal translation: “on bicycle”) is a grassroots civic initiative that emerged in Skopje in 2012 to address the lack of safe and inclusive cycling infrastructure. Rooted in collective frustration over car-dominated urban planning and unsafe traffic conditions, the movement began by organizing Critical Mass rides—monthly public cycling actions that reclaim city streets and promote the bicycle as a practical and sustainable mode of transport. Over a decade, more than 90 actions have taken place, involving thousands of citizens.

The initiative is horizontally organized, open to all, and run by a rotating group of volunteers. Its tools range from joyful street rides and symbolic urban interventions to public campaigns, policy advocacy, and educational workshops. Beyond visibility, NaTochak has pushed for structural change by mapping problematic areas, submitting infrastructure proposals, and collaborating with schools, planners, and cultural institutions.

Although largely self-funded, the initiative has had a measurable impact: cycling lanes were introduced in parts of the city, and public discourse on mobility has shifted. By promoting cycling as both a cultural and political act, NaTochak has contributed to a broader vision of urban resilience, one that centers sustainability, safety, and citizen agency in shaping everyday space.

This report was prepared by the team of Ss. Cyril and Methodius University within the UPRUN project. The team of Ss. Cyril and Methodius University is responsible for the content and the accuracy of the statements presented in this report.

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Case Study Filtering System

Topic

- ☐ Community Gardening & Urban Agriculture
- ☐ Community Hubs & Cultural Activities
- ☒ Urban Design & Planning Processes
- ☒ Public Space Development & Management
- ☐ Local Economic Development
- ☒ Urban Regeneration & Rehabilitation

Scale

- ☐ Metropolitan / city region
- ☒ City scale
- ☐ Neighbourhood scale
- ☐ Block scale
- ☐ Building scale

Resilience Challenge

- ☒ Environmental and ecological resilience
- ☐ Social & cultural resilience
- ☒ Infrastructure and technological resilience
- ☐ Economic & livelihood resilience

Duration

- ☐ Immediate (less than 1 month)
- ☐ Project-Based (1–12 months)
- ☐ Programme-Based (1–3 years)
- ☐ Strategic (3–5 years)
- ☒ Structural / Transformative (more than 5 years)

Stakeholders

- ☒ Community members
- ☒ Local government
- ☐ Non-governmental organizations (NGOs)
- ☐ Private sector
- ☐ Academic and research institutions

Type of Civic Engagement Supporting Neighborhood Resilience

- ☒ Resident-led and grassroots initiatives
- ☒ Collaborative planning projects or processes
- ☐ Advocacy and capacity building
- ☐ Volunteer and community service projects
- ☐ Short-term, more flexible project-based engagement
- ☐ Long-term, more institutionalized engagement (development of stable structures, etc.)
- ☒ Protest and resistance mobilization
- ☐ Art-and culture-based civic Engagement

Level of Civic Participation

- ☐ Information
- ☒ Involvement or participation
- ☐ Collaboration or co-creation
- ☐ Empowerment
- ☒ Resistance and protest-based empowerment

Empirical Basis and Methodological Approach

As part of the NA TOCHAK civic initiative in Skopje, various actors, including initiators, long-term volunteers, participants, and informal collaborators, have jointly shaped an evolving platform for cycling advocacy and urban mobility activism. Unlike formally institutionalized planning processes, NA TOCHAK operates as a horizontal, open network without fixed membership or hierarchical decision-making structures. Participation is based on voluntary engagement, recurring public actions, and collective visibility in urban space, most notably through the monthly Critical Mass rides.

A key feature of this initiative is the absence of formal governance structures in the conventional sense. Instead, coordination is achieved through informal assemblies, volunteer-based organization, and ad hoc working groups formed around specific actions such as public campaigns, mapping exercises, symbolic interventions, and infrastructure proposals. This open organizational model enables broad accessibility, allowing citizens to participate as equal contributors regardless of formal status, professional background, or institutional affiliation. At the same time, selected interactions with municipal authorities (particularly the City of Skopje and municipalities such as Centar and Aerodrom) have introduced partial and intermittent forms of institutional dialogue, especially in relation to cycling infrastructure planning and mobility policy discussions.

The initiative's activities have produced a wide range of (potential) beneficiaries, including everyday cyclists, pedestrians, students, residents of high-traffic corridors, and broader urban publics affected by mobility inequalities. Beyond direct users of cycling infrastructure, NA TOCHAK's influence extends to planning discourse, municipal awareness of active mobility, and shifting cultural perceptions of public space use. Its outputs—ranging from Critical Mass events and spatial mappings to symbolic interventions and policy proposals—have demonstrated partial transferability, as similar Critical Mass formats and cycling actions have been adopted or replicated in other Macedonian cities, including Tetovo, Bitola, Gostivar, Prilep, and Štip.

As part of the case study, we conducted a total of three qualitative interviews:

- » **One interview with a founding initiator of the NA TOCHAK movement**, who has been involved since its early formation in 2012 and has contributed to the development of Critical Mass actions, public advocacy strategies, and coordination with informal volunteer networks.
- » **One interview with a long-term organizing member of the initiative**, actively engaged in the coordination of monthly Critical Mass rides, communication activities, and collaboration with urban practitioners, schools, and civic partners. This interview provided insight into the internal organizational logic of the movement, including its horizontal structure and decision-making practices.
- » **One interview with a regular participant in Critical Mass rides, representing the perspective of non-organizing beneficiaries**. This interview focused on experiential dimensions of participation, including perceptions of safety, spatial awareness, and the social and emotional effects of collective cycling in Skopje.

In addition to interviews, the case study draws on field observations of Critical Mass events, analysis of visual and digital materials (photographs, videos, and social media documentation), and review of

publicly available campaign content and mapping outputs produced by the initiative. This combined empirical basis allows for a comprehensive understanding of NA TOCHAK as both a civic movement and a spatial practice, situated at the intersection of grassroots activism and urban mobility transformation.

Compendious summary

The *NaTochak* initiative, centred around the monthly *Critical Mass* cycling actions, represents a relevant and timely example of civic activism oriented toward resilient urban transformation in post-socialist contexts.

Classified as a grassroots civic movement, it addresses multiple urban challenges simultaneously. First is the mobility inequality and environmental degradation, as access to safe, affordable, and dignified means of transport is lacking in Skopje and it promotes eco-friendly transport alternative like bicycles. Second is the spatial exclusion as some vulnerable groups don't are excluded from full use of the public space and this initiative raises the question on who has the right to the city. The third challenge is the public participation in planning decisions as *NaTochak* is creating visibility and submitting concrete proposals to influence how infrastructure is designed in the city.

Unlike formal NGOs, *NaTochak* operates as an open, horizontal platform that prioritizes attendance, consistency, and participatory tools over institutionalization. Its relevance lies in how it mobilizes urban citizens to claim visibility and agency in a city where planning is often top-down and car-centric. The initiative bridges the gap between protest and practical solutions by coupling symbolic interventions with concrete policy suggestions and informal spatial mappings.

This case study uses a few qualitative research methods. In addition to interviews with one of the initiators, a long-term organizing member, and a participant in the *Critical Mass* rides, the study is informed by field observation like attending their events and the analysis of digital and visual materials (videos, social media, campaign posters). Public documents, campaign materials, and informal conversations also contributed to understanding the strategies and impacts of the action.

Neighborhood challenge

Unlike many civic actions tied to a specific site, *NaTochak* operates across the urban fabric of Skopje, responding to system-wide spatial challenges rather than a single neighborhood. Its primary concern is the city's mobility landscape—one heavily shaped by decades of car-centric planning, fragmented infrastructure, and limited investment in non-motorized transport. Streets are often unsafe for cyclists, and bicycle lanes, where they exist, are disconnected, poorly maintained, or end abruptly. Sidewalks are frequently occupied by parked vehicles, narrowing the space for pedestrians and making alternative mobility options feel both inconvenient and dangerous.

While the initiative has citywide scope, particular focus has been placed on vulnerable but highly used corridors, such as the area around the Old Railway Station and Boulevard Partizanski Odredi, where there is a convergence of the lack of protected cycling infrastructure, high-speed traffic, and general decaying infrastructure. These routes, despite their importance for connecting different types of building categories (educational institutions, housing, workplaces, commercial centers and health institutions) remain symbolic samples of the wider failure to integrate sustainable transport into urban development plans for Skopje.

At its core, the movement addresses a form of spatial and environmental injustice: the absence of safe, accessible, and dignified infrastructure for those who choose (or must rely on) cycling. This lack not only discourages sustainable travel but also limits who feels entitled to occupy and shape public space in the city.

Response to the challenge

NaTočak emerged as a spontaneous response to the everyday difficulties of cycling in Skopje, where car-dominated infrastructure left little space for safe, inclusive, and sustainable mobility. What began as informal rides among friends quickly developed into a city-wide movement that used public space not only as a means of transport but as a stage for collective visibility, advocacy, and reimagining urban life.

The group's central method was the organization of Critical Mass rides—monthly, open, non-hierarchical cycling actions through city streets, inspired by a global movement that began in San Francisco in 1992. The concept behind Critical Mass is simple: when a group of cyclists ride together in large numbers, they reclaim visibility and safety that is often denied to them in car-dominated traffic. Today, Critical Mass rides take place in over 300 cities worldwide, functioning as a symbolic and physical assertion of cyclists' right to the road.

In Skopje, *NaTočak* adapted this format to the local context, using it as both a mode of campaign and a form of celebration. Critical Mass rides in Skopje traditionally take place on the last Wednesday of each month, starting at 17:30 in the colder months and at 19:00 during summer. Although the regular gatherings gradually slowed during the COVID-19 pandemic, the momentum has begun to return. After a pause of more than two years, the most recent ride, # 91 titled “Hello Skopje, it is critical,” marked a hopeful reactivation of the movement. These rides served as practical interventions, drawing attention to unsafe intersections, disconnected cycling lanes, poor signage, and lack of political will to support active mobility.

In particular, NaTočak targeted major arteries such as main boulevards in the city, and the central city area, where the absence of safe cycling infrastructure intersects with daily commuting needs.

Over time, the initiative expanded beyond street presence. Organizers and volunteers collaborated with urbanists, students, and schools to produce maps of dangerous areas, visualize cycling networks, and propose design improvements. In one case, they staged a symbolic intervention in front of the Ministry of Transport by painting a temporary bike lane—demonstrating how minimal effort could produce visible change.

The group also built relationships with select municipal governments, most notably the Municipality of Centar and earlier administrations in the City of Skopje, where some proposals were discussed or partially adopted. One such outcome was the implementation of protected bike lanes along specific corridors. However, progress remained fragmented, and support varied with changes in political leadership.

Throughout, NaTočak remained intentionally horizontal and flexible, with no fixed leadership or formal structure. This allowed the group to respond to urban challenges with a combination of tactical actions

(rides, symbolic interventions), strategic advocacy (policy proposals, public presentations), and spontaneous visibility (viral videos, ghost bikes). By shifting between these measures, the initiative has both grassroots energy and institutional importance.

Rather than imposing a new spatial vision, NaTočak worked with what already existed like underused bike paths, overlooked intersections, and symbolic landmarks, by inviting residents to see them differently. In doing so, it responded to the challenge of mobility injustice not only through critique but by modeling alternatives in public view.

Mechanisms of civic engagement

Civic participation in NaTočak did not follow official procedures or structured planning processes. There were no public hearings, formal consultations, or official platforms for dialogue. Instead, engagement happened through more informal, open, and recurring practices and above all, through the monthly Critical Mass rides. These events were open to everyone. There were no memberships, no registrations, no expectations, just an open call to show up and ride. That simplicity was key. It made participation easy and welcoming, and over time, the rides built a strong sense of visibility, presence, and belonging. Some even had a couple of thousands of attendees.

While NaTočak did not run formal co-design workshops, the movement did create space for citizen input in other ways. Organizers and volunteers gathered information about unsafe streets and intersections, mapped missing infrastructure, and collected feedback both online and in person. They collaborated with students and professionals to visualize what a more cycling-friendly Skopje might look like, and those ideas were sometimes turned into proposals shared with local institutions. The process was more fluid than formal, it relied on creative tactics, symbolic actions, and a lot of mutual trust. People also participated in less direct ways. Many joined just by riding, some came once, others became regulars. What mattered was presence. For many, it was the emotional experience like the joy, the rhythm of moving through the city together and the feeling of taking up space in a place usually dominated by cars, that kept them coming back. That emotional connection built a public culture around cycling, even if participants weren't consciously framing or thinking of it that way.

In some cases, the action sparked other small-scale initiatives. After experiencing Critical Mass, some residents organized donation-based bike corners, others began small neighborhood conversations about traffic and shared space. So while the initiative wasn't built around formal participatory tools, it opened space for community-led actions to emerge in parallel. Relationships with institutions varied. Some municipalities, like Centar (the central part of the city) and Aerodrom (peripheral area), showed interest and engaged with NaTočak in small ways like offering logistical support or taking on parts of proposed plans. The City of Skopje had moments of collaboration, two of the previous mayors were open to collaborate with the now-defunct Coordinating Body for Cycling Traffic made of members from NaTočak. This coordinating body served as a platform where *NaTočak* could contribute input during the planning of the Skopje Velo-City Project, a larger mobility initiative. On the other hand, national institutions, were less responsive, especially when it came to more structural or long-term changes.

In terms of inclusion, the open nature of the initiative was a strength but it wasn't without limitations. While everyone was welcome, participation still required physical ability, a sense of safety, and access to a bicycle. Some neighborhoods were more visible than others, depending on where the rides passed or where events were focused. But overall, NaTočak managed to create a space where many could participate on their own terms, whether through cycling, helping organize, sharing on social media, or simply showing up to cheer the crowds.

Case study findings and lessons learned

The *NaTočak* initiative showed that civic engagement, even when informal and volunteer-based, can reshape how public space is perceived and used. While it didn't change city infrastructure overnight, it helped shift the conversation around mobility and public space in Skopje. Through monthly visibility, symbolic actions, and persistent advocacy, *NaTočak* positioned the bicycle not only as a mode of transport but also as a tool for justice, care, and participation.

Some spatial outcomes followed: new bike lanes appeared in parts of the city, new bicycle parkings were built and infrastructure improved around schools and public buildings. Extremely important was also the fact that local institutions started acknowledging cyclists as part of the traffic system. Even though, these may seem like small steps they reflect broader changes in planning discourse and urban culture and especially in the context of Macedonia.

What stood out was how participation didn't require formal tools. There were no big planning sessions or elaborate consultations. Instead, what worked were consistent, low-barrier ways for people to take part: showing up to ride, sharing feedback online, or lending time and skills to the cause. In some cases, this even extended to symbolic acts like placing ghost bicycles (painted in white and placed where there was a traffic accident) or painting red lines (desired bike lanes along dangerous streets) actions that had emotional weight and public impact.

Another important lesson came from how *NaTočak* activated everyday urban environments, not just main roads and sidewalks but those overlooked in-between spaces where bikes are often squeezed out: intersections, road edges, or sidewalk margins. These were the very places where mobility, safety, and public rights came into tension and where new possibilities for shared space could be imagined. The movement didn't rely on large-scale interventions, but rather showed how existing space could be seen and used differently. This reframing was both symbolic and practical. It helped people imagine the city not only as it is, but as it could be: more connected, calmer, and shared.

There were also clear limitations. The lack of steady funding and institutional support meant that the group's capacity was limited. Volunteers had to carry most of the load, which made the initiative hard to sustain at the same intensity over time. While the movement had moments of recognition from the city and some municipalities, these relationships didn't always last. Long-term transformation was often slowed down by bureaucratic disinterest, shifting political will or lack of technical follow-through. Another issue was that while participation was open, it wasn't always evenly distributed. People needed access to a bike, time to participate, and a certain level of comfort moving through traffic. This created barriers for some especially in parts of the city that were less connected or less visible in the rides.

Still, the initiative's impact can be measured not only in infrastructure, but in the way it helped people feel ownership over public space. In that sense, *NaTočak* created a kind of civic infrastructure that left a lasting mark on the city's culture of participation.

Conclusion

The case of *NaTočak* shows how sustained civic action, even when informal and self-organized, can begin to reshape both urban discourse and practice. While the initiative never positioned itself as a formal planning body, it opened up space for participation in ways that felt intuitive, responsive, and accessible. Through the recurring format of Critical Mass rides, *NaTočak* made visible the everyday risks and inequalities embedded in Skopje's urban mobility, while also offering a glimpse into a more just, sustainable and inclusive city.

One of the most important contributions of the initiative lies in its ability to shift the terms of debate. The movement reframed cycling not only as a transport issue but as a question of spatial justice, public health, environmental responsibility, and the right to the city. By using public space creatively and persistently (through symbolic rides, red lines, ghost bikes, or public mapping) the group managed to open both community and institutional conversations that had long been stagnant. Rather than relying on official participation channels, *NaTočak* created its own modes of engagement: open invitations, open expression, and everyday presence in public space. This gave residents a real sense of involvement, even if they weren't part of a formal process. They didn't need to know how to read maps or make design proposals to contribute meaningfully. And this mattered especially in a context where post-socialist planning traditions often remain centralized, expert-driven, and politically unstable.

The initiative also left behind something more subtle: a shift in how people see their streets. It showed that the city is not fixed, and that its everyday spaces (intersections, sidewalks, street edges, etc.) are not just for cars, but for people. This reframing of space was both symbolic and practical, revealing how urban environments can become flexible and multifunctional when trust and imagination are present. In that sense, *NaTočak* proposed a quiet but powerful spatial strategy: to work with what is already available and make it visible through collective use.

While the impact of *NaTočak* was shaped by limitations (uncertain funding, inconsistent institutional support, and the fragility of volunteer energy) its influence can be seen in how mobility has become part of Skopje's public conversation. Young people, kids and women, and citizens from different parts of the city now see cycling as a rational, even joyful, way to move through space. The legacy of the movement also lives on in smaller activities and in the slow but real expansion of cycling infrastructure.

For urban planners and policymakers, this case suggests that resilient cities are not built only through technical planning but also through how people interpret, value, and actively engage with their shared environments. Civic engagement doesn't always need to be formal or bureaucratic to be impactful. Sometimes, steady presence, collective movement and symbolic gestures through the city can do just as much.

In the future, efforts like *NaTočak* could be strengthened by more open and ongoing collaboration between communities and public institutions. Municipalities might consider supporting these types of grassroots initiatives not only financially but also by recognizing them as valuable partners in long-term

mobility and spatial planning. Tools like participatory mapping, temporary urbanism, or neighborhood-level mobility forums could help bridge the gap between informal activism and institutional change.

Although its structure makes it hard to replicate in a conventional sense, the *NaTočak* approach is still widely adaptable. Its core principles (horizontal organization, open access, symbolic visibility and a deep connection to everyday urban life) offer useful hints for civic initiatives elsewhere. In fact, the Critical Mass format itself has already proven replicable across hundreds of cities worldwide, precisely because of its simplicity, openness, and strong visual and emotional impact.

The first Critical Mass in Skopje took place on 30 May 2012 under the motto “*Skopje on bicycle!*”, and is still ongoing. Over the years, the initiative spread to other cities as well — including Tetovo, Gostivar, Bitola, Prilep, and Štip — each adapting the format to their own pace, scale, and street conditions. These events have varied in size, from several dozen to over a hundred participants, depending on weather and local energy. Some local groups, such as *NaTočak Gostivar*, formed their own informal structures and even celebrated multiple anniversaries, showing that grassroots mobility activism has resonance beyond the capital.

The success of Critical Mass in multiple Macedonian cities highlights the model’s flexibility — it doesn’t require large funding, complex coordination, or formal leadership. What it does require is local motivation, shared frustration, and a willingness to be visible. In cities struggling with inequality, disconnection, or top-down development models, these small but persistent actions may prove key to building not only better streets, but stronger urban communities.

Attachments

References

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NaTočak Photos database on Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/NaTochak/photos_by

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[https://mk.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D0%9A%D1%80%D0%B8%D1%82%D0%B8%D1%87%D0%BD%D0%B0_%D0%BC%D0%B0%D1%81%D0%B0_\(%D0%B2%D0%B5%D0%BB%D0%BE%D1%81%D0%B8%D0%BF%D0%B5%D0%B4%D0%B8%D0%B7%D0%B0%D0%BC\)](https://mk.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D0%9A%D1%80%D0%B8%D1%82%D0%B8%D1%87%D0%BD%D0%B0_%D0%BC%D0%B0%D1%81%D0%B0_(%D0%B2%D0%B5%D0%BB%D0%BE%D1%81%D0%B8%D0%BF%D0%B5%D0%B4%D0%B8%D0%B7%D0%B0%D0%BC))

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Photos



Critical Mass Skopje, #91;

Source: <https://umno.mk/91-kriticna-masa-vo-skopje-gletka-shto-raduva/>; Photo by: Мaja Јаневска-Илиева



Critical Mass Skopje, #91;

Source: <https://www.facebook.com/photo?fbid=1113542737479476&set=pcb.1113544497479300>



Critical Mass Skopje, #23,

Source: <https://kanal5.com.mk/23-kritichna-masa-vo-skopje/a200722>

**ПОДОБРИ ЗАКОНИ
ЗА ПОУБАВИ ГРАДОВИ**
— поддршка за променише —




♥ PEPITAL

СКОПЈЕ КМ #72 датум: 25.04.2018, среда почеток: 17:30, плоштад Македонија	ШТИП КМ #18 датум: 25.04.2018, среда почеток: 17:30, пред Нештин	ПРИЛЕП КМ #47 датум: 25.04.2018, среда почеток: 17:30, споменик Александар Македонски	БИТОЛА КМ #48 #роденденска датум: 26.04.2018, четврток почеток: 18:00, пред Аурум	ГОСТИВАР КМ #априлска датум: 29.04.2018, недела почеток: 17:00, пред споменик Гостивар
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Critical Mass under one motto: "Better laws for better cities." in 5 cities across the country;

Source: <https://kanal5.com.mk/23-kritichna-masa-vo-skopje/a200722>



Critical Mass in Gostivar

Source: <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=457684887724479&set=gm.1442634136053399&id=1442633976053415>

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