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Central Post Office, North Macedonia Technical Report



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1. Summary

The Central Post Office in Skopje, the headquarters of the Post of North Macedonia AD (the POST), was a building of exceptional architectural merit and formed an important part of the reconstruction of the modern city of Skopje after the devastating earthquake in 1963. It forms part of an architectural ensemble with the adjacent Telecommunications Centre. An iconic feature was the Counter Hall which provided postal services to the public.

The Counter Hall and other parts of the building were badly damaged by a fire in 2013 and these zones have been out of use and abandoned since. The cupola above the Counter Hall was destroyed exposing the centre of the building to the elements. It is not only a waste of a useful asset but a poor reflection on the Authorities and the POST that this iconic building has been neglected for so long.

After a mission to Skopje and discussions with the POST, the Nominator of the project to the “7 most endangered programme” and the POST coordinating team (CPOST) and others, this report presents the findings which are briefly summarised here. Reference is made to the details given in §14 Conclusions and Recommendations.

There has been little action taken by the Owner, the POST, as it has other priorities and a lack of adequate funds to restore parts of the building for which it has no need.

The Ministry of Culture has already carried out a useful first study as it now has some responsibility to act as the building is classified as a “protected cultural heritage”. The key decision is to decide who will be responsible for managing the rehabilitation activities and works. This seems most appropriately to be the Ministry of Culture with greater motivation and better access to funds than the POST.

In the immediate future, the building needs to be protected against the elements. Feasibility and technical studies should follow to justify and define further action.

The rehabilitated Counter Hall is proposed for multi-functional cultural / social events. It is proposed to start construction with the basic structural and watertightness works before carrying out the interior works which may need lengthier studies.

Costs and programme are very tentatively estimated at €10 million and 3 years minimum. Early appointment of a task force / project manager is essential to advance the numerous activities and coordinate decisions, including the useful application of the EIB Grant.

In conclusion:

This is a worthwhile and necessary rehabilitation of a distinguished architectural heritage building which is long overdue. It would enhance this key location in the city and provide a venue for cultural and social events to the benefit of all.

Numerous actions are needed on many issues and the key to success is that these processes are firmly managed. An early decision on who should be in charge of the rehabilitation is essential to unlock any action.

2. Purpose, location

The objective of the project is to rehabilitate the Central Post Office, a significant monumental building and a fine example of brutalist architecture, and to bring it back into useful service, following a damaging fire in the Counter Hall a decade ago.

The Central Post Office is the headquarters of the Post of North Macedonia AD (the POST) and the building forms part of a modernist complex which includes the Telecommunications Centre and the offices of a Bank.

The complex is in central Skopje, the capital city of North Macedonia.

3. Context

The city of Skopje suffered a devastating earthquake in July 1963 which destroyed some 75% of the city and directly affected the 500 000 inhabitants. Some 1,000 people were killed and 3,500 injured.

The tragedy gave the opportunity to construct a modern city. The overall concept was developed by the Polish urban planner Stanisław Janowski and supervised by the Polish architect-planner Adolf Ciborowski, who had previously been involved with the reconstruction of Warsaw after World War II. The programme involved creating blocks of development with new enlarged roadways and it made provision for future development. In parallel, a new and revised seismic design code was adopted by the Yugoslav Administration.

The city centre was designed by the Japanese Architect Kenzo Tange with a brief to design a modernist city fit for the 20th century. The Telecommunications Centre was part of this development, and a key part was the iconic Central Post Office with its impressive Counter Hall, both buildings being designed by the Macedonian Architect Janko Konstantinov. The Telecommunications Centre was completed in 1974 and the Central Post Office building in 1979-1980. The complex is situated in a pedestrian area in a central part of the city close by the Vardar River.

The Telecommunications and Postal Services are now separated with the former being privatised and the POST becoming a fully Government owned joint stock company.

The Central Post Office building is of exceptional architectural interest being constructed of reinforced concrete in the so-called “brutalist” style with much exposed concrete. It is considered one of the most successful examples of the style and thus forms an important and iconic part of the modern city of Skopje.

The Counter Hall provided an interface with the clients of the POST where business and sales took place. It continued to provide this useful service until September 2013 when an arson attack destroyed the interior fabric, the central cupola and most of the internal services of the building. Inevitably, the activities in the building were severely restricted. After repairs

and restoration, much of the building is now back in use as offices for the POST personnel, and the building remains the POST's headquarters.

Most of the concrete structure seems to have resisted the fire, but the central part of the building and some peripheral areas have been damaged and are unusable. As the cupola and extensive glass skylights were destroyed, the Counter Hall has been left exposed to the elements for the last 10 years with the continual degradation of its condition. Part of this inaction could be contributed to the need for the Police Authorities to undertake forensic research into the fire, but their final report has now been completed and the investigation closed.

The POST, with the development of modern technology, does not need a Counter Hall as an interface with the public and it thus hesitates to restore this part of the building having other investment priorities and a general lack of resources.

Apart from the initial programme to restore the essential office space for the Post Office, not much action has been taken on the remainder of the building. An initiative in 2020 by the Fraunhofer Institute, a German NGO, for a full feasibility study to be financed by the Getty Foundation was unsuccessful despite its merits. This initiative however had the effect of keeping alive the further interest in restoring the building.

The Telecommunications Centre and the Central Post Office and surroundings were officially classified as a "protected cultural heritage" in November 2022. This national recognition of the zone's architectural merits is important as it widens the possibility of further support from the Ministry of Culture and others and ensures that the buildings are now protected. This protection might have prevented the recent intrusive construction of a parking block immediately adjacent to the main entrance to the Counter Hall, which has not only disrupted this access and the associated pedestrian zone but has diminished the overall architectural impact of the building in its special location by the river.

The Ministry of Culture has now become involved and, thanks to a government allocation of €20 000, has undertaken an assessment of the structural condition of the building. This was carried out under the auspices of the National Institution Conservation Centre (NICC), a Ministry of Culture affiliate, with specialist advice from structural engineers from the University of Saints Cyril & Methodius. These studies were completed by the end of 2022.

The programme of appraisal of the project by the Europa Nostra / EIB-Institute team was disrupted by the COVID 19 pandemic and only became possible in early 2023 which allowed some development such as the above-mentioned structural condition study.

4. Description

4.1 Overall description

The POST Headquarters building is in the so-called “brutalist” style of sculptured reinforced concrete with exposed patterned and textured concrete. It has an unusual circular form, perhaps imitating a lotus flower. It has eight main columns enclosing the central space, the Counter Hall, and these are shaped into inclined cantilevers which join together in a circular ring beam to support the central cupola. A smaller cupola is situated beside the main entrance covering another circular zone used for “telegraph” activities (the Telegraph Hall).

4.2 Existing state

The building comprises three floors and its current state is as follows:

The basement is partly below ground level. It comprises offices and associated circulation space (1300 m²) - currently in use, a central technical zone (500 m²) - also in use, and a further “abandoned/damaged” zone formerly the restaurant and kitchens (540 m²). There is significant water infiltration in several parts of the basement, particularly in the central zone under the Counter Hall which is open to the weather.

The main (ground) floor comprises the central Counter Hall (540 m²) which has been badly damaged inside, the main public entrance (300 m²) with some damage, and the circular Telegraph Hall (205 m²), abandoned but without significant fire damage. The surrounding offices (1200 m²) are currently in use, some having been restored. Some graffiti is in evidence which should be removed and prevented from being repeated in the future.

The first floor is above the main floor with administrative offices (1200 m²) which are in use, and some have been renovated. These offices are around the building’s periphery, the central area being void above the two storey Counter Hall.

The roof comprises a flat peripheral area of reinforced concrete (1,500 m²) with support beams and 19 small circular light points, all in need of repair. An inclined central section of 8 separate reinforced concrete slabs (500 m²) leads to the destroyed central cupola. Between these 8 inclined slabs were skylights made of plexiglass (extruded acrylic material) as was the cupola (7 m diameter). The secondary cupola over the Telegraph Hall has not been damaged by the fire and remains intact.

The total floor area of the three floors is about 5,500 m² with some 60% currently in service as offices, the remainder being damaged to different degrees.

An important feature of the Counter Hall was the interior decoration which comprised specially designed mural paintings by the well-known Macedonian artist Borka Lazeski and these regrettably have been destroyed by the fire.

4.3 The proposed rehabilitation

The general rehabilitation concept is initially to prevent further deterioration of the building. The repairs to the building structure and the integrity of the external envelope would comprise a second priority. The restoration of the interior of the building to provide useful space for the selected activities would then follow. Some overlap in these phases may be convenient to optimise progress.

It is currently envisaged to provide a multi-functional space centred on the Counter Hall and probably to include the secondary circular Telegraph Hall. This exceptional space would offer possibilities for cultural events, such as exhibitions, musical concerts, meetings, and conferences as well as social gatherings.

Much further work is required to select the most suitable activities and then to adapt the interior accordingly. In addition, further thought should be given to including and developing other nearby zones such as the former restaurant, perhaps with a stairway connection up to the main floor.

At this stage it is only possible to outline the main project activities and works to have an overall idea of what could be involved, and these are summarised below:

1. Protection phase

Design and construct a suitable temporary protection for the main Counter Hall, notably to protect the ground floor slab.

2. Preliminary assessment and preparation phase

2.1 Feasibility studies to determine the potential use of the building and the scope of the changes needed to reflect the options considered, including costs and programme. The objective would be to provide a case for action with a business case study to justify funding commitments, in tandem with §2.2.

2.2 Undertake an outline definition of the structural repairs for the whole building and the repairs and rebuilding necessary to ensure watertightness (e.g., roof, cupola, skylights) using information from the existing studies, extended as necessary. Provide indicative costs and programme.

2.3 Finalise the funding to allow detailed design to proceed.

3. Construction work and technical services phases

3.1 Final design, procurement and undertaking the basic repair/restoration of the structure comprising the reconstruction of the central cupola, necessary repairs to the concrete structure, repairs to the roof and the associated skylights and other aspects still to be defined. The aim is to secure the structure and its watertightness, a necessary prelude to further action.

3.2 Final design, procurement and undertaking the renovation of the interior to comply with its intended uses. This would comprise not only the restoration of the ceilings, walls, and flooring but also the re-establishment of the necessary services such as for heating, ventilation, lighting, fire protection and drainage. The extent to which the existing technical

equipment for these services is adequate for the whole building needs to be assessed and then included as appropriate.

Integration with the existing POST's office accommodation and the links to the outside environment via entrances, doorways, steps etc., has still to be defined and these details should be included in the relevant phases.

5. Technical aspects

5.1 The fire

The fire that destroyed the interior of the upper floors occurred on 15th January 2013. Full details are not readily available, but it appears to have been an intentional arson attack. This is now in the past but a basic lesson to be learnt is to have a proper fire warning and prevention system in place. The fire raged for several hours before burning out and being extinguished by the fire brigade, presumably with water.

The Government had effective ownership of the building at the time of the fire through its 100% ownership of the POST. As is often the case, separate fire insurance is not taken out by governments in these situations, the government effectively accepting to carry the risk. This places some moral commitment on the Government to help restore the damaged building to its former state.

5.2 The state of the structure

The NICC has been involved recently in preparing some aspects of the rehabilitation and in 2022, with a government grant (of €20,000), has undertaken a study of the Structural Condition after the fire with the active participation of Structural Engineers from the Skopje University of Saints Cyril & Methodius under Professor Meri Cvetkovska.

The structure was inspected to determine the effect of the fire and various simulations were carried out. The conclusions were reassuring but more detailed investigation and analysis will be required. While the concrete has reduced in strength due to the high temperatures which may have exceeded 600°C, the cores taken show good strengths well above the original design assumptions of 30 MPa. Numerous cracks are evident but are limited in width, and generally located near the secondary stirrup steel. No major ruptures were observed in the more sensitive parts of the structure.

Moisture from exposure to the elements without a secure roof covering has caused some problems in the main floor slab with reinforcement steel exposure and some associated corrosion.

In conclusion:

It seems that the main concern would arise should the initial design loads be exceeded (heavier cupola, glass lights with double glazing, crowd loading etc.). Further checks on the critical inner ring under the cupola would be merited as a close inspection and tests were not carried out due to access difficulties. Some strengthening of this ring beam has been recommended. Adequacy under seismic loads needs to be verified during final design. Repair work on the main slab, with suitable local cutting out followed by steel protection treatment and concrete patching would be required.

The structural design engineer should have access to this investigation and complement it as necessary with further investigations before final design. It seems that the original “as built” designs are not all available but from the existing drawings considerable information on the reinforcement details is to hand.

There have been comments that there has been settlement in the building due to its closeness to the river. No evidence in terms of settlement cracks has been observed which is not surprising in view of the structure’s robust form.

There is evidence of moisture and mould in some of the basement areas which have been abandoned for several years. This may be due to infiltration or humidity associated with poor ventilation and a review of this phenomena would be advisable by a suitable expert.

5.3 The state of the services

Heat to the building is provided from a city-wide cogenerated plant run by a private company. Any additional heat load to meet the revised needs with the project should be able to be met by the company but this should be checked. However new extra capacity to handle the incoming heat will probably be needed in the building itself, either as an extension to the present installation or probably as a replacement. It would be ideal in terms of efficiency and to preserve the heritage exterior of the building if a centralised air conditioning system could be installed in the whole building. This would allow the existing unsightly external air conditioning units to be removed.

Insulation of the building, especially the roof glazing and windows, needs to be studied to reduce the energy usage as much as possible to comply with modern standards. The trade-off between the extra costs required to support the additional weight of a better insulated cupola and skylights needs careful assessment and appropriate decisions once the facts are clearly established.

The other essential services for the new space such as the electrical and lighting systems and drainage all obviously will need to be reviewed, designed and then incorporated as appropriate, bearing in mind the wider implications on the existing facilities.

A detailed study of the implications of the project on all the services and the potential for improvement and optimisation is an important exercise to be undertaken by an experienced services engineer.

5.4 Integration with the Post Office

As envisaged the building may be split into two activities with the POST remaining in its present offices and other activities taking place in the Counter Hall and other zones now damaged and not currently being used.

It is important that the POST carries out a “space needs assessment” to ensure that it retains the use of areas which it might need in the future; and that it is fully comfortable with others using a substantial and the “noble” part of the building.

At present the POST occupies offices on the first floor (1,200 m²), the main floor (1,200 m²) and the basement (also with much circulation space, 1,300 m²); note that these are approximate areas.

This review should include the peripheral zones in the basement (the former restaurant and kitchens) as well as the Telegraph Hall under the secondary cupola to be sure whether or not these spaces will be needed by the POST at a later time.

5.5 Design for multi-functional use

The building was designed specifically for Post Office use with the Counter Hall being an impressive open space with a circular service interface with the public. The adjacent circular Telegraph Hall also had a specific function. No provision was made for the public in the initial design for facilities such as separate reception areas and toilets. With the new functions likely to be proposed these requirements will certainly be needed.

A circular space is not naturally ideal for many activities such as concerts and conferences where a stage or focal point may normally be required. Clever design will be needed to make adequate provision for these activities. Checks will be needed not only on crowd loading but also for the associated vibrations and noise associated with some modern musical events. Static activities such as exhibitions will be easier to manage. Some form of moveable staging may be necessary to widen the potential uses. The present circular concrete stub wall in the Counter Hall will probably need to be removed and this should not have any structural significance.

The optimisation of the design for multi-functional use will require an initial study into possible uses, followed by a technical assessment as to how these can be accommodated. A wide initial review on the areas to be included should be carried out to ensure a long-term satisfactory result for all parties involved. All this may require some time and iterative actions and clear and timely decisions will need to be made. Therefore, the proposed project strategy is to advance as a priority with the uncontentious and essential structural and watertightness work with the more complicated interior work being done later and separately.

5.6 The protection against the elements

As noted above, the Counter Hall has been exposed to the elements since the fire as the cupola and the skylights were destroyed. The main impact now appears to be on the main floor base slab as it remains well saturated and steel corrosion is becoming an issue. The structure above this is in reinforced concrete and in reasonable condition and so generally able to continue to resist the elements.

The ideal solution is to restore the cupola and the roofing as soon as possible to ensure no further ingress of rain or snow, and this has been proposed in several recent budgets prepared by the POST including again in 2023. Despite this, no action has been taken and this seems unlikely again this year, probably for financial reasons – the latest estimated cost was about €220 000.

In view of this lack of progress and the increasing need to protect the interior, a temporary cover solution has been proposed. Details have not been made available, but it is understood that a high-level cover in some synthetic material supported by a metal frame has been suggested at an estimated cost of about €15,000-20,000. In the current context this is a significant amount, and it was suggested that a cheaper solution should be sought. It has been noted that the slab on the main floor is what really needs protecting and an option might be to provide a protection at that level, suitably tented to ensure ventilation and run-off into the existing gutters around the Counter Hall. This solution might be inconvenient for access to the Hall but it would permit easier access to the cupola and roof, thus facilitating inspection for the next stage of reconstruction.

The whole issue needs to be studied in the coming weeks so that an optimum solution for the temporary protective cover can be found rapidly with completion aimed to be before the winter.

6. Implementation

6.1 The Owner

The Post of North Macedonia AD (the POST) is a 100% state-owned but independent joint stock company responsible for all postal services in the country. It is under the Ministry of Transport and Communications.

The issue of ownership has been raised and the Director General of the POST has clearly stated the wish to retain ownership of the whole building which is understandable as it is the Headquarters of the POST.

6.2 The Nominator

The project was nominated to the “7 most endangered” programme by Angelina Taneva-Veshoska, Director of the Institute for Research in Environment, Civil Engineering and Energy (IECE). This North Macedonian organisation has experience in education, research and

capacity development in the fields given in its title. Practical responsibility for the Nominator's activities has been taken over by Suzana Kasovska Georgieva, Deputy Director.

6.3 Other interested parties

The Nominator (IECE) and the POST have set up a POST coordinating team (CPOST) comprising the representatives of these organisations, respectively Suzana Kasovska Georgieva and Blagica Stojcevska, head of Civil Engineering and Investment. In addition, independent consultant Dr Georgi Georgiev, who was involved in the Fraunhofer Institute submission, forms part of this team. The future role of the team needs to be more clearly defined.

As the Telecommunication centre and the Counter Hall are in a designated cultural protection area, any restoration or changes are under the control of the Cultural Heritage Protection Office of the Ministry of Culture. The Ministry of Culture has recently shown an active interest in preserving this important heritage building and, as noted elsewhere, has carried out a study under its affiliate the NICC on the structural condition of the building.

6.4 The Project management

The organisation which seems most interested in and capable of managing the technical rehabilitation is the Ministry of Culture, and it is suggested that the overall responsibility for advancing the project should be with this Ministry and undertaken by one of its organisations, for example the NICC.

Clearly close cooperation with the POST and its facilities management team is required at every stage and some form of agreement should be entered into to ensure this. It is also recommended that a separate project management team is set up at an early stage to manage the various activities.

6.5 Design / Consultants

In the past some designs have been completed, for example for the rebuilding of the cupola, and this previous work should be reviewed and used as a basis for future work. The structural condition study should also form a base document together with details of the concrete tests carried out previously. All existing design and investigative work need to be assembled and be made available to those carrying out the next stages of the design.

In view of the probable need to phase the works, as suggested elsewhere, it is likely that several consultants may be involved in the various activities and phases. All this requires close coordination under a competent project manager.

6.6 Contractors

In view of the nature of the works, competent contractors are essential and so a suitable selection procedure to ensure this should be adopted. It may be that firms from outside North

Macedonia become involved to supplement the local resources and, if so, this may well increase costs significantly.

6.7 Programme

It is proposed that phasing of the actions should take place to allow these to proceed in a logical and optimised manner. The phasing will clearly need to be refined when more information becomes available and will have to match the available finance.

Bearing this in mind, an ambitious target programme for the works might be as follows:

1. Protective phase

Probable duration for definition/design one month.

Probable duration for installation is two months.

Start September 2023, completion December 2023 (before winter).

2. Feasibility studies leading to decision to proceed

Probable duration 6 months.

Start September 2023, completion March 2024.

3. Structural works, including design and procurement

Probable duration 12 months.

Start June 2024 completion June 2025.

4. Interior works, including design and procurement

Probable duration 15 months.

Start March 2025, completion June 2026.

Programming of the operational issues will be needed to ensure no administrative delays occur and that when completed physically the space can be put into use expeditiously. The benefits only occur once the space is put into operation.

7. Procurement

There is a need to have appropriate consultation / tendering for the selection of the various consultants and for the main contracts according to North Macedonian law, preferably aligned with EU requirements.

The contract strategy and the packaging of the lots will need to be adapted to the local conditions and this is a task which the experienced project management team will need to address. Some form of prequalification may be desirable.

8. Environment, sustainability, social

Efforts should be made to ensure that the works are designed and undertaken to comply with the latest requirements on the environment and with the concept of sustainability. The building rehabilitation should obviously comply with all building regulations and planning requirements. Energy saving in terms of improved insulation and modern heating should be adopted to take advantage of this opportunity to upgrade the overall building to the extent possible. This is an urban site and appropriate measures to contain dust, noise and general disruption to the city's life should be adopted during construction. Best practice in recycling and waste disposal through ISO 14001 procedures is recommended.

The building, especially the exterior, should be restored as close as possible to its original design to respect its architectural heritage, which is a main reason for its restoration. The distinctive bold sculptural impact of the building should be retained externally and reflected internally to the extent possible.

The rehabilitated building will provide a significant improvement to the immediate area which has inevitably become blighted by having a partly burnt-out building in its midst. This should not be allowed to continue much longer as it reflects badly on the POST and the City. The fact that the building has distinct architectural merit makes this 10-year neglect even more disappointing.

The design and construction will provide employment, tentatively estimated at 150 man years, and further employment will be created by the operation and maintenance and through the various activities, all of which will be positive.

In time, when properly restored the project should provide great scope for cultural and social activities to the overall benefit of the City of Skopje.

9. Use

The various uses of the restored facility need to be carefully studied at an early stage and decisions made on the requirements and this will ensure that the technical design can be made appropriately.

A study to review possibilities should be undertaken to assess the actual needs of the city in terms of conference facilities, business meeting rooms, cultural events such as exhibitions (either long term or temporary) and musical and social events. The study should propose a business case for the various activities and draw conclusions as to the most suitable activities to support. The technical design should then reflect this potential. Flexibility to cater for several options needs to be built in with the possibility of various seating configurations. Acoustics may be a challenge especially if musical events are proposed and specialist advice should be sought.

The arrangements to receive guests should be studied including access and security, toilet facilities etc. The integration with the existing offices should be studied to ensure minimum disruption on either side. It appears that toilet facilities for the POST's offices exist on the main floor level near the entrance and these might be considered amongst other options for conversion to use by the public for events in the Counter Hall.

10. Operation and maintenance

The arrangements of how the events will be managed and by whom needs to be studied and agreed. Many options are available including outsourcing the operation to a specialist private organisation and this might be the simplest option as the POST is unlikely to be interested in being involved. It is possible that the Ministry of Culture and even the Municipality of Skopje might be interested, depending on the events to be staged, and this all needs to be reviewed.

The Operator should be required in its lease agreement with the POST to properly maintain the interior of the facility. The overall maintenance and operation of the building and its services such as heating, lighting, ventilation should remain with the POST.

All these responsibilities need to be agreed between the Operator and the POST as owner and remunerated appropriately.

11. Investment cost

The project has not yet been defined in any detail so any estimate of costs will be very approximate and only broadly indicative. However, to help fix ideas an estimate is required with the certainty that it will continue to be refined as the project advances.

The following indicative investment costs are presented in this spirit:

Phase 1 Protective phase.
between €5,000 and €20,000.

Phase 2 Preparation phase.
between €30,000 and €50,000

Phase 3.1 Waterproofing, roof, and structural repairs:
between €2,000,000 and €4,000,000.

Phase 3.2 Interior restoration and services upgrade:
between €3,000,000 and €5,000,000.

Thus, an indicative overall cost envelope of about €10 million.

Cost inflation, changes in definition and other factors could increase this very tentative estimate. Delay in decision making will also impact negatively on the costs. Again, it is stressed that these are very tentative estimates.

12. Economic review and financing possibilities

The building is of considerable interest as a fine example of the so-called Brutalist architectural style with much exposed concrete, well reflecting the spirit of the late 1970s and the modern revival of Skopje after the devastating earthquake. It is one of the iconic symbols of the city and this is enhanced by its central position near the river. This heritage building has a significant economic value in terms of prestige and possible tourism, but it is difficult to assess the effect with any precision.

In addition, the new facility could provide additional high-quality space for various cultural and business events. It is unlikely that such a multi-cultural centre will be financially justified overall but with proper planning and promotion it should fully cover its operating costs and annual expenses.

The financing of the rehabilitation will be complicated as funds for such investments in the country are scarce. In view of the nature of the project, grant financing is highly desirable as the project investment will not fully support a loan. The hope is that once the investment is made the operation phase can be sustainable so that not only the operator but also the POST will benefit.

The most desirable source of grants would be the EU through its various programmes. It has shown some interest and support but is fully committed to essential basic infrastructure and with similar programmes for the next several years. Other possibilities include a USA programme, the “Ambassadors Fund for Cultural Preservation” which might be a possibility for support. Local funding is also scarce but there might be possibilities for some contribution from the Government and possibly the City of Skopje. The City forms part of the Euro Cities network with contacts with international financial institutions and this could facilitate funding.

A serious study into the funding possibilities will be required once the basic proposals for a viable project and programme have been defined, following on from the basic feasibility studies as proposed.

13. EIB Grant

The EIB has provided a grant of €10,000 to each project selected for the “7 most endangered programme” to act as a catalyst to advance the project or to carry out some essential priority investment.

Two main activities have been identified as priority:

- to take immediate action to prevent further deterioration of the structure by protecting it from the elements.
- to undertake feasibility studies to provide justification for a decision to proceed with financing the project.

The importance of the weather protection was confirmed by the structural survey and the site visit reinforced this. Various options for the covers need to be reviewed, as discussed elsewhere, but this could form a part of the grant.

Discussions have taken place for some time on the feasibility studies with the POST and CPOST. The initial idea proposed was to undertake four main exercises namely, a survey of the state of the damaged structure, a study on possible uses, an outline proposal into how the space could be adapted to these uses with an overall cost estimate, and then an outline business case.

Since then, the Ministry of Culture has undertaken an on-site structural survey and study, so the first item has been largely completed. By this initiative the Ministry of Culture has become the organisation most active in progressing the project after years of inaction.

Before advancing with further studies, it is necessary to know who will be responsible for the rehabilitation project, and that these studies are coordinated with the entity responsible for the future works, otherwise the work could be useless and/or simply ignored.

It is proposed that the main issues to be addressed in preparing the rehabilitation and justifying it adequately to attract support (consistent with activities outlined in § 4.2.1 “Preliminary Assessment and preparation phase”) could be as follows:

1. Assess the potential use of the Counter Hall and the associated space for multi-functional activities by studying the local needs for cultural, social, and business activities and based on these needs and suitability, propose activities which might most appropriately use the new space.
2. Determine how these proposed activities could be accommodated in the space available and prepare an outline proposal, perhaps with variants, with approximate investment costs of the interior renovation work.
3. Based on information available from previous studies, prepare an outline work schedule of the structural rehabilitation work and the necessary services for the damaged areas and then prepare a cost estimate. This work would complement the interior renovation work mentioned in §2 above.
4. Undertake a preliminary business case based on the proposed activities to explore the operational sustainability. Review the options for the operational structure for these activities and make proposals which might also include the private sector.

Ideally these studies should be undertaken by someone familiar with the local cultural scene with an economist/financier and an architect/engineer working together, perhaps from locally based consultants or a group of experts. The output would be a report covering the four main themes cited above, perhaps issued in phases. This feasibility exercise needs to be complemented later by further work as all aspects have not been covered as the focus has

been on the key rehabilitation points. Detailed Terms of Reference will need to be established following discussions and these need to be adapted to the available funds (see below).

Agreement needs to be reached in advance on who might manage these studies. Several possibilities exist which include the Nominator of the project (through the IECE), the POST itself in some form or the Ministry of Culture. The contents and the proposals need to be agreed by all relevant parties including the entity responsible for carrying out the rehabilitation works.

The objective is that the Grant should act as a catalyst and be as effective as possible in the interests of the project. The “Feasibility Studies” as outlined above should ideally be considered as a single set, preferably to be done together to be most effective. In this case the cost would probably exceed the value of the Grant (especially if the Protective cover is included) and so other financing would be required to complete this phase. This should not be a problem for the Grant, but the complementary amount would need to be clearly available before proceeding.

Further discussions and inputs are required on defining the activities to be included and the means of undertaking the work. If other funds are unavailable to complement the Grant, a reduced definition will be necessary. Timing is important as normally the EIB Grant should be committed before the end of 2023.

14. Conclusions and recommendations

This rehabilitation project has been a long time in its gestation.

It is evident that such an important architectural heritage building needs to be restored to its former glory for the owners, the POST, the city of Skopje and for the Nation, who all should have a real pride in it.

The problem has been a lack of resources and of priority, leading to this lack of action. The POST has confirmed that it has no need of the damaged space, apparently having adequate space for its current needs; but the POST is keen to retain the ownership of the whole building. The Ministry of Culture has many other obligations, but its priorities may now have changed as the building has been designated as part of a “protected national heritage”.

The structural damage resulting from the fire appears to be of limited extent, as revealed by the recent survey, provided the loads are not increased. Further review by the structural engineers appointed for the design will be required.

The future use of the available space has been generally agreed to be multi-functional for possible cultural, business, and social events. This has still to be further studied and defined.

In view of all this, it seems appropriate to try to relaunch the rehabilitation with a long-term strategy of several phases. The essential first step is to provide a clear scope and justification of the investment to attract possible funders, both national and others.

There seems to be a lack of information on some issues relating to the rehabilitation, but this might be partly due to language difficulties.

The following recommendations are made in this context:

1. Better coordination between the key parties is necessary. The POST and the Ministry of Culture, the City of Skopje and others need to work better together. The POST's coordinating team could play a role in this general coordination.
2. The rehabilitation should ensure, to the extent possible, to retain the significant features and grandeur of the original building as conceived by the architect.
3. The key decision is to decide who will be responsible for managing the rehabilitation works. This seems most appropriately to be the Ministry of Culture who have more motivation and better access to funds than the POST. But a decision needs to be made as soon as possible to allow progress to be made.
4. Once this responsibility is agreed, a task force / project manager should be set up and a whole series of detailed decisions need to be made.
5. The initial decision proposed is to provide for adequate protection to the Counter Hall, following a study of the options. The next step is to review and agree on the feasibility studies including their financing. The EIB Grant could contribute to these two activities, once further details are available.
6. The feasibility studies are to address some of the main questions, notably the potential uses of the space, followed by the adaptations needed to provide for these uses, and the likely costs involved. Several options may be retained to be studied from the business perspective to lead to the optimum solution providing a sound justification for the investment (or at least the sustainability of the operational phase). This will be an iterative process and carried out by a multi-disciplinary team comprising economists, designers, and financial experts.
7. The structural repair works and securing the overall external envelope are priority actions which are proposed to be undertaken separately and in advance of the interior rehabilitation, which may require further, maybe lengthy, studies.
8. An internal POST "space needs assessment", notably, but not only, concerning the intermediate zones (e.g., the circular restaurant, kitchens and toilets) should be undertaken to check whether these areas are wanted by the POST in the long term.
9. The whole building and its surrounds need to be considered in any rehabilitation to ensure that full advantage is taken of the efforts to upgrade and modernise the building and that the POST also benefits from the initiative. This applies notably to improved energy efficiency and modern fire warning and protection.
10. The arrangements for the operational phase with the Owner(s) need to be considered at the appropriate time with decisions to be made on who will manage the use of the new space and under what conditions.

In conclusion:

This is a worthwhile and necessary rehabilitation of a distinguished architectural heritage building which is long overdue. It would enhance this key location in the city and provide a venue for cultural and social events to the benefit of all.

Numerous actions are needed on many issues and the key to success is that these processes are firmly managed. An early decision on who should be responsible for the rehabilitation is essential to unlock any action.

Details of mission, persons met, meetings

The appraisal team:

Graham Bell. Board member Europa Nostra
Mario Aymerich. Consultant EIB-Institute
Peter Bond. Consultant EIB-Institute

The report has benefitted from the advice and experience of all three members of the appraisal team whose views are incorporated in the report.

Meetings:

Monday 29th May. Preliminary with Nominator and POST coordinating team* and site visit.

Tuesday 30th May. Structural report with Prof. Cvetkovska and NICC Director.
Director General of the Post Office.
Representatives of EU Delegation in Macedonia.
General with the Nominator and team, NICC Director.

Wednesday 31st May. Representatives of the City of Skopje.
Final meeting.

Persons met:

Post Office. Bujare Abazi. Director General
Blagica Stojchevska* Head of Civil Engineering and Investments.

Nominator: Suzana Kasovska Georgieva* Deputy Director IECE

Consultant with coordination function: Dr Georgi Georgiev*.

Ministry of Culture:
Konstantin Dimitrovski. Director of National Institution Conservation Centre.

Technical consultants:
Prof. Meri Cvetkovska. University of Ss Cyril & Methodius, Faculty of Civil Engineering. Skopje.
Dr. Ana Ivanovska Deskova. Uni. Ss C & M, Faculty of Architecture, Skopje.

Skopje City Administration.
Lazar Kuchera. Department of International Cooperation. City of Skopje.
Antonio Karalanov. Same as above.

EU Delegation: Julian Vassallo. Deputy Head of Delegation.
Sanja Frkovic-Gelevska. Programme Manager.

EIB Representative (informal contacts): Björn Gabriel.

Appendix 2

References

- Nomination form to the “7 Most Endangered”. IECE. 2021.
- Project proposal. IECE et al. 2021
- Initial proposal for the use of the EIB Grant and associated documents IECE et al. 2022.
- Terms of Reference of Conservation project - architectural phase. NICC. 2022.
- Detailed plans, drawings, and photographs from the POST. 2021. These have been used in this report.
- Report on the Structural condition. NICC. 2022.
- Detailed report on the Structural condition and summary “Analysis of fire damaged structure”. Prof. Meri Cvetkovska. 2022/3.
- Summary of meetings during the Mission in May 2023. POST coordinating team.



The CPO in its prime, before the 2013 fire



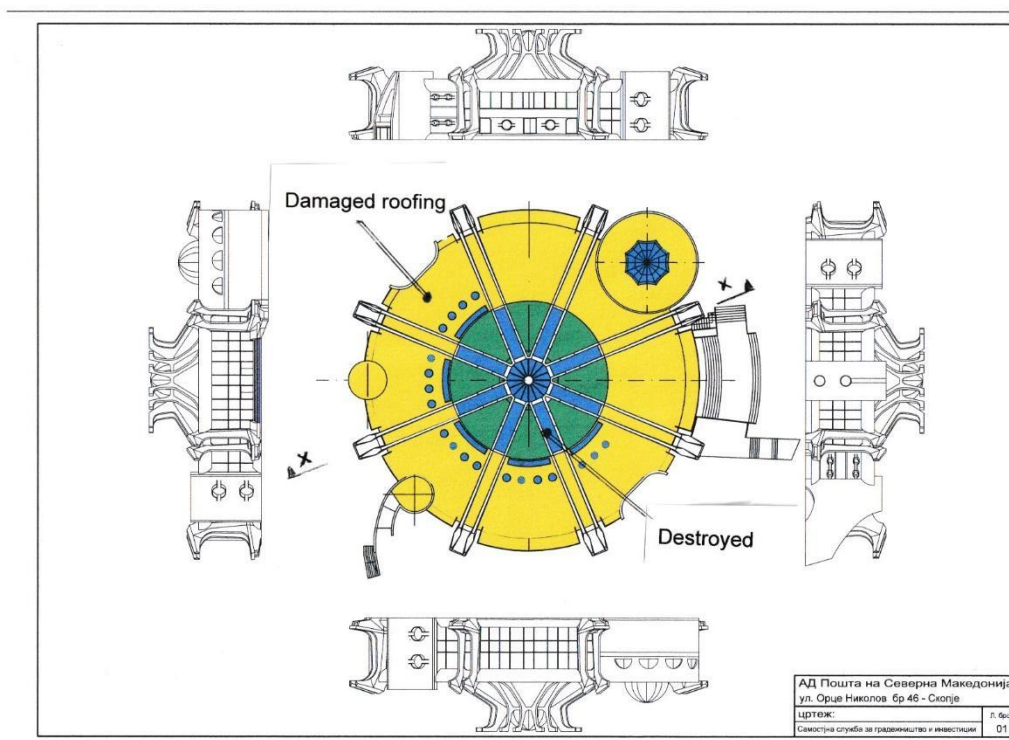
The CPO after the fire, no central cupola and skylights



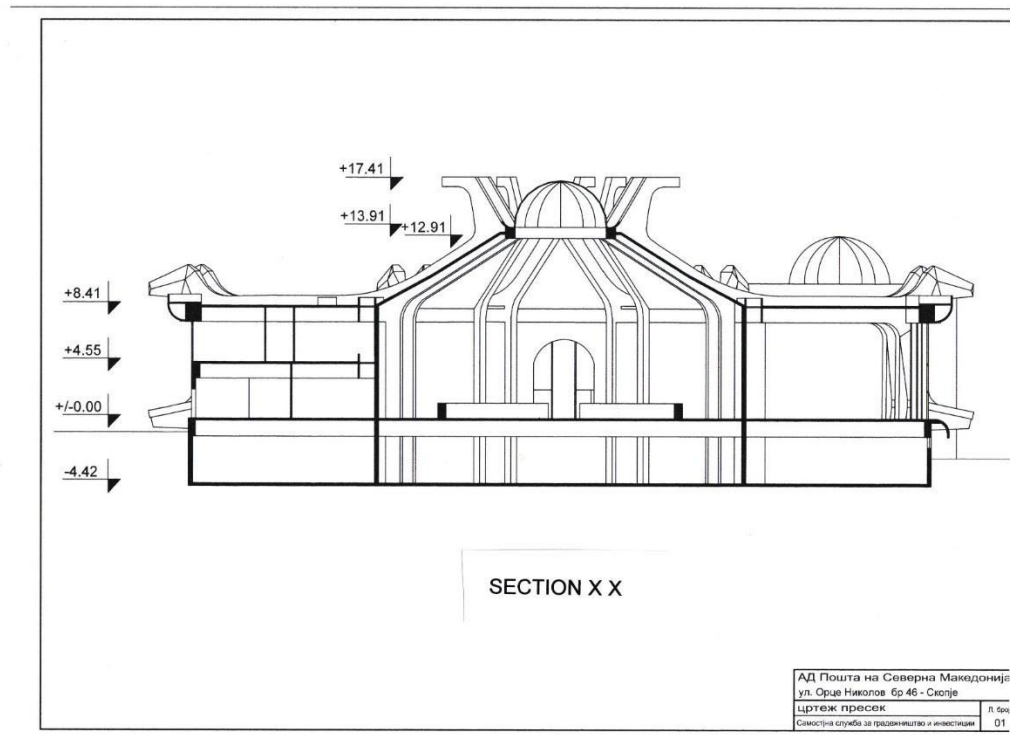
The Counter Hall before the fire



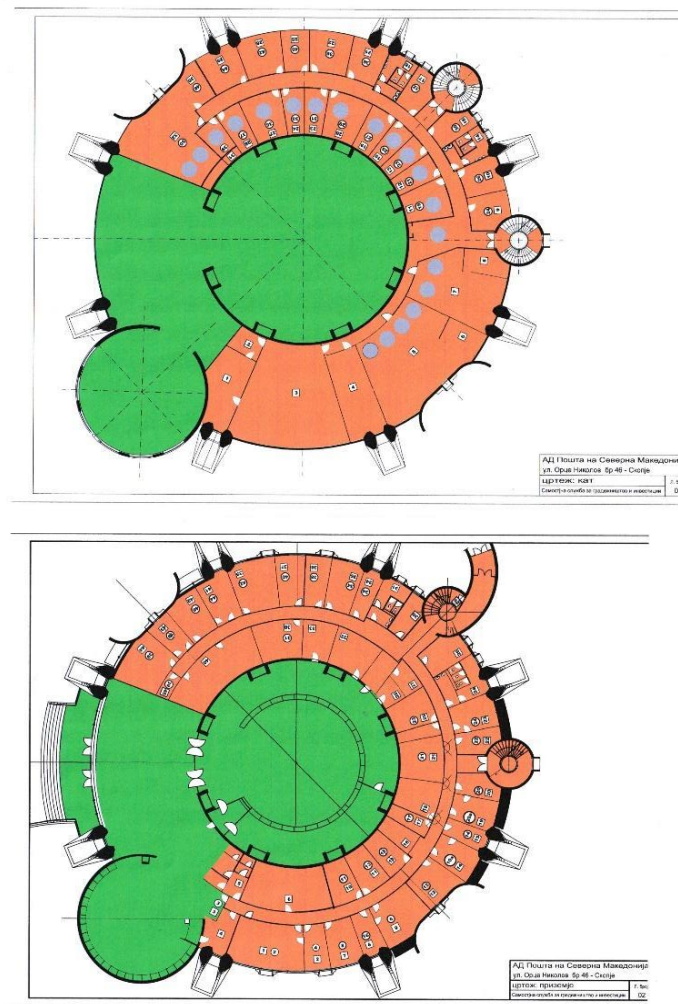
The Counter Hall after the fire (2022 photo)



Roof plan and façade elevations



Cross section XX through building



Appendix 3/4

Second floor plan. (green void, orange in use)

Main floor plan (green damaged / not used, orange in use).

Basement floor (as above, blue technical in use)