Shifting B/Orders: Europeanization and Cross-Border Practices Between North Macedonia and Greece

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Abstract

Since the 2000s, the border between Greece and North Macedonia has undergone a progressive Europeanisation as an external border of the European Union. By looking at the regulations governing border control and the evolution of individual cross-border practices in regard of the local context in borderlands that long shared a common path, this paper questions the way in which the implementation of a new normative order reshuffles the configuration between social orders inherited from distinct historical periods and impact contemporary b/ordering processes.

Keywords: Borders, Europeanisation, Minority, Macedonia, Balkans

1. Introduction

Since the 1990s and the progressive implementation of the Schengen agreements by EU member states, the European Union has become the main actor involved in the management of their borders, both through its normative role and its concrete involvement in numerous actions on the ground. In Greece, the radical changes faced by the country in the 1990s and 2000s, coupled with the rise of intra-Balkan migration and the implementation of the Schengen agreements starting from 2001, led to a radical transformation of its border control. EU regulations now governed Greek border crossings through procedures established at the Union level but implemented at the nation's discretion. Implementing the Schengen acquis, Greece set up a visa regime for short-term stays for the citizens of neighbouring states, establishing at its border a mobility regime regulated at the European level. At the same time, the Union's expansion policy and the integration of the Schengen agreements into the acquis in 1997 extended the impact of European migration policies to the candidate countries, including the so-called Western Balkans in the 2000s. Almost ten years later, the progressive adoption of the Schengen regulations by these countries led to the removal of the visa regime for short stays for citizens from Serbia, Montenegro and

North Macedonia[1] (2009) as well as Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina (2010).

Disrupting the national orders regarding border control by imposing new regulations to the State through the progressive Europeanization[2] of border management, the EU has become the key actor directly influencing the cross-border practices of the local populations through its normative power of inclusion/exclusion (Brambilla 2015). By doing so, it contributed to the multiplication of the actors influencing the functioning of border regions (Amilhat Szary/Fourny 2006) and to what Ansi Paasi called "the increasing complexity of the contexts" (Johnson et al. 2011, 63). The Europeanization at the border between Greece–North Macedonia interacts with these elements, which are connected to the national orders and local configurations, contributing to the modelling of composite and contextual borderscapes (Brambilla 2015) at the intersection of multidimensional processes in these borderlands (Givre et al. 2018). As an example, in the context of migrations or EU cross-border cooperation programs, authors have shown in the Balkans and elsewhere how cross-border dynamics can develop over the use of pre-existing local connections or heritage (Sintès 2003; Malloy 2010; Javourez et al. 2018). The implementation of the EU normative order at the border acts as a new framework for the expression of older cross-border relations or national policies and provides them with a new tool (Blondel et al. 2013; Javourez et al. 2017).

The controlling aspects of this porosity between orders at the border has also been analyzed. In Greece, the continental dynamic that led to the implementation of the EU regulative framework regarding borders in the 1990s has been concomitant to other local ones, influenced over the long

1 The use of the terms *Macedonia/Macedonian* has long been an issue when writing about the region, as their interpretations may vary greatly and carry a strong potential for conflict. However, the Treaty of Prespa signed in 2018 between Greece and what then became North Macedonia settles the name issue and acknowledges the different understanding of *Macedonia* and *Macedonian,* thus providing the author with a guideline and a legal frame. In its article 7, the parties indeed acknowledge that their respective understanding of these terms refers to a different historical context and cultural heritage. This chapter therefore relies on this in its use of *Macedonia* and *Macedonian*. *Macedonia* is used here to qualify a region (mainly) delimited in 1878 to define the last Ottoman territories in the Balkans and encompassing parts of contemporary Bulgaria, Albania, Greece and North Macedonia. Referring to the article 7(2), the term *Macedonian* is used to qualify the territory of North Macedonia, its language, people and their attributes.

2 By *Europeanization* I refer to the process of alignment of the national regulations regarding this border with the European Acquis.

term by representations related to the processes of national construction in the region. In the case of Albanian citizens, Greece established a legal differentiation as early as 1998, granting preferential status to those it considers 'Greeks from Albania'. By doing so, the Greek state echoed such representations in the administrative treatment of migrants from Albania, leading to the *de jure* distinction between supposed Greek-speaking Albanians and other Albanian migrants (Sintès 2008; Javourez/Sintès 2019). Considering the implementation of EU regulations over border management, the region therefore needs to be analyzed in relation to the configurations and dynamics—past and present—of spaces that are presently borderlands between Greece and North Macedonia.

In this context, the European b/order implemented during the 2000s must be considered as a recent evolution in the history of this border regime—a new layer that interacts with local configurations and social orders and contributes to the evolution of both cross-border practices and the border itself. Transposing the critics of the so-called transition to borders studies here, the issue is thus to consider the fluidity between historical periods, the ways in which they may overlap within the same social interactions (Doyon/Brotherton 2008; Gilbert et al. 2008), and how they might be mobilized by actors across the national boundaries. Borders being historically contingent constructions (Del Sarto 2010, 151) connected to a large scope of contexts—be it institutional, historical, cultural, and/or linguistic—contextualization into time and space is therefore necessary to grasp their complexity and to understand local practices. Referring to Sarah Green's (2010) grey zones and to the assertion that different border regimes coexist over a single borderline, this chapter questions the way in which local actors cope with these different layers across the border. In borderlands that have long been included in the same administrative units during the Ottoman rule before being included into different states and targeted by different and sometimes mutually exclusive national constructions, how does the implementation of a new normative order through EU regulations potentially reshuffle the configuration between orders inherited from distinct historical periods? To answer this question, this work is based on extensive fieldwork conducted between 2009 and 2017. During this period, I was living in the city of Bitola (North Macedonia) for approximately five years, investigating the area in the context of my PhD research, both on

my own and together with colleagues, geographers and anthropologists[3]. The material presented thereafter was gathered through many interviews as well as participant observation and focuses on borderlands located between Greece and North Macedonia, in the Prespa area as well as around the cities of Florina (Greece), and Bitola (North Macedonia). This area offers concrete examples of the social and territorial dynamics these spaces have been through from the Ottoman imperial order to the national orders and the regional integration processes. This chapter will therefore first address the emergence of a European order at this border to expose its concrete effects on cross-border mobilities between the two countries. Because these regulations impact an individual's external EU border crossing potential this work will present their direct consequences in terms of cross-border mobility flows, in/exclusion dynamics, and inequalities at the border. Progressively moving away from a technical approach of bordering based on the positioning of individuals toward EU regulations, this contextual research will attempt to grasp the complexification of bordering processes at European external border through the analysis of local cross-border practices and their recompositions. It will therefore question the multiple, fluid, and shifting dimensions of borders by examining at-risk bordering processes present in the daily lives of citizens and within institutions such as language, culture, and heritage, thus investigating the interactions between multiple senses of border (Green 2012). By questioning how the functioning of the border as a regulator for mobility and crossing influences its dimensions as a place (Donnan/Wilson 2010), this research follows the critical border studies' agenda to "problematize the border not as a taken-for-granted entity, but as a site of investigation" (Brambilla 2015, 17). Finally, by paying attention to the shared familial, cultural, and linguistic heritage mobilized by local actors in the context of renewed cross-border activities, this research will explore how these elements contribute to the formation of particular (trans)border orders.

3 Such as the Balkabas (Balkans from Below) program funded by the French *Agence nationale de la recherche* (ANR) on the period 2009–2012 or the Integrated Territorial Analysis of the Neighbourhoods (ITAN), in the frame of the European Observation Network for Territorial Development and Cohesion (ESPON) in 2013.

2. A (Western) European B/Order

After the signing of the Schengen agreements in 1985 and in anticipation of their implementation in 1995, the creation of an area in which human mobility would be totally free and not subject to border controls within the EU meant, for the signatory states[4], the development of common rules for access from outside the EU countries. The common policy on short-term visas for so-called third-country nationals from outside the EU was agreed upon in 1990 and introduced in 1993, and was thought of as an initial border control device dedicated to the struggle against illegal immigration. Visa refusal is an effective tool to keep "undesirables" at a distance—those who are considered by national authorities as threats to public order and security, or potential fake tourists who may extend their stay beyond their allotted 90 days (Weber 2007). By the time they came into force in 1995, the Schengen agreements were still intergovernmental and, as such, they had not yet been integrated into the European institutions. However, the community dimension of the agreements is explicit, with the preamble to the convention stating that they will serve as a laboratory for Europe. As a result of this ambition, the Schengen acquis was integrated into the Treaty on European Union through the treaty of Amsterdam in 1997. This integration of the Schengen protocol in the *acquis Communautaire* obligated candidate countries to align with the regulations derived from these agreements. Consequently, any state wishing to join the EU was meant to join the Schengen area and must therefore adopt its regulations, including North Macedonia, which started its Stabilization and Association process with the EU in 2001. However, the migration issue linked to the expansion process illustrates the permanent tensions between the growing Europeanization of migration issues and the importance that national governments retain in these matters. Facing the entry of countries with lower income level than those of Western Europe into the EU, the Union has—under pressure from member states—imposed transitional regimes before their entry into the Schengen Area so that they can implement better control of their external borders. But such measures also appear to be directed against the populations of these states, or certain groups of populations, widely perceived in the Western EU as candidates for mass emigration. Although the EU lifted these restrictions between 2007 and 2008 for most of the Member States that joined the EU in 2004, those affecting Romania and Bulgaria ended on 1 January 2014;

4 Originally Belgium, Germany, France, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands.

however, without leading to their full integration into the Schengen area, seven years after their accession to the Union. Such a transitional regime has also been applied by the EU to Croatia, the latest entrant to the EU, before its integration in the Schengen area on January 2023. The question of the evolution of border regimes at Europe's borders therefore raises the issue of bringing the candidate countries' regulations up to EU standards. Even though it became part of the acquis, this legislation nevertheless emerged in the West, through the disorganized construction of a European response meant to control migratory flows (Wihtol de Wenden 2008, 6). It is the expansion of the EU to the East that led to the unequal export of this policy—to countries whose borders were subject to other realities and issues than those of the fifteen Western European countries who established and implemented the policy. In Eastern Europe, the regulatory changes on migration issues imposed on the candidate countries by the Union disrupted regional cross-border dynamics that had emerged at the beginning of the 1990s (Michalon 2007; Weber 2007). Launched within the framework of a European integration process that made its control a priority, the accelerated securitization of the external border undermined these spatial dynamics through the introduction of a visa regime for nationals of Eastern European and Balkan countries that had not joined the EU by 2004. As an example, the building of the EU's external border in Romania has been a major brake to cross-border relations and mobilities that were the main source of income for a considerable number of Moldovans in the border region (Michalon 2007).

Regarding North Macedonia, the history of the management of its border with Greece is a classic example of the evolution of the external border's control in the context of European expansion. The evolution of its status started in 2001 with the signing of the Stabilization and Association Agreement between the country and the European Union, after which the Macedonian army—in charge of border control up to that point—was replaced by the police. It is this transfer of competence between ministries that paves the way for what European terminology refers to as 'integrated management of external borders', in which the control of irregular crossings is a fundamental element. This issue has been subject to a special protocol, various points of which commit the state to struggle with irregular border crossings by encouraging regional cooperation in border control while, at the same time, strengthening it by allocating more resources. Thus, a *Granična Policija* (border police) appeared and has since occupied a central position along the border. National legislation on the reception

of foreigners, asylum, and the fight against organized crime were also reformed to follow European regulations.

The issue of control also involved the adoption of legal instruments for managing cross-border flows and targeted more than just candidates for entry into North Macedonia. Indeed, a second component regarding border regulations intended to prevent the illegal stay of Macedonian citizens within the Union and the Schengen area: the EU placed North Macedonia on its negative visa list[5]. At the time, the EU expressed its suspicion toward North Macedonian citizens who were either perceived as candidates for illegal migration or as vectors of organized crime and potential trafficking. According to the EU, it was therefore appropriate that the North Macedonian State contribute to this surveillance by adopting measures to control its citizens' cross-border mobility by accurately identifying them in the framework of European control databases such as the Schengen Information System (SIS). By 2008, the set-up of infrastructure and control equipment at border crossings and the implementation of databases analysing migration trends and monitoring organized crime were the last obstacles to short-stay visa regime liberalization mentioned by the European Commission (unknown author 2008). Finally, in December 2009[6], this visa regime was lifted, but only for North Macedonian citizens who held a biometric passport, which were not implemented in the country until 2007. As a result, North Macedonian citizens have been able to travel freely to the Schengen area for a maximum of 90 days within a 180-day period.

3. Shifting Mobility Regimes

At the beginning of the 2000s, the EU had become one of the main actors regulating the border between Greece and North Macedonia. The implementation of the Schengen agreements in Greece in 2001 meant the introduction of a visa regime based on EU directives[7] for Macedonian

5 Countries whose citizens need a visa to enter Schengen.

6 The liberalization of the visa regime applied to citizens from North Macedonia, Serbia, and Montenegro in 2009, and to citizens from Albania and Bosnia in 2010.

7 Greece has refused to follow EU policy in its entirety by excluding North Macedonia from the application of the Schengen agreements. However, the visa application procedure for Macedonian citizens was almost identical to that of the classical Schengen visas. The main difference was that this exclusion allowed Greece to pursue a strictly

citizens. Even though cross-border mobilities rose again after a dramatical fall during the 1990s within a context of strong diplomatic tensions, the newly implemented procedure had a direct effect on cross-border mobilities which never reached their pre-1990s level of significance (Vereni 1998; Mikula 2010, 216).

The path followed by the European Union since the 1980s has led to the formation of four distinct categories of citizens, according to the conditions of their access to EU territory. The first category consists of citizens of the EU Member States, who can move freely within the Union[8]. The same applies to the second category, which includes citizens of states associated to the EU: members of the European Economic Area (EEA). Third are the citizens of states the Union placed on its positive list whom do not require a visa to enter the Schengen area for short stays, unlike the citizens of states on the negative list whose entry is conditional on the acquisition of this sesame (Bigot/Guild 2005, 3–4). Within the Greek–North Macedonia borderlands, the gradual closure of the EU border has reduced the possibilities of mobility for Macedonian citizens during the 2000s as they found themselves included in the fourth category presented above.

Looking at the figures, it appears that annual cross-border mobilities were low between 2000 and 2007, with around 20,000 entries of Macedonian citizens into Greece per year. However, entries into Greece rose in July and August, which illustrates the importance of tourism and the seasonality of mobility flows during the summer months, particularly on the Aegean seaside. Proximity cross-border mobilities within the borderland were thus quite rare, except for the few who got the chance to acquire a long-term visa, often in connection with their professional activity. The visa-regime and its application procedure created a symbolic distance between North Macedonia and Greece, a distance directly perceived by inhabitants of borderlands who could no longer go to previously familiar places only a few kilometres away from their homes without going through the Greek embassy in Skopje or the Greek consulate in Bitola (opened in 2006). This created a strong feeling of enclosure. In Bitola, 15 km away from the border, those who had benefited from the circulation regime of the 1980s now ex-

bilateral policy regarding the granting of these visas, which it widely used through a policy very favourable to the entry of Macedonian citizens on its territory (Kondonis 2005).

8 Even though transitory measure still applies to Bulgaria, Croatia and Romania, these countries' citizens have the possibility to travel to EU territory without any visa-regime been applied for short stays.

perienced the near-impossibility of crossing and entering the neighbouring city of Florina, in Greece—a confinement and downgrade from Yugoslav times.

During fieldwork in the city in spring 2009, a few months before the lifting of the visa regime and prior to its announcement, the mention of this obstacle almost automatically led citizens I interviewed to reference the past, when the border was not perceived as an insurmountable obstacle. The blame was often set on the Macedonian passport, which no longer allowed travel beyond Serbia, Albania, or Kosovo. This document, issued to an individual by the state of which he or she is a citizen, was the designated target of a joke often told to me during interviews: when I asked participants where they could go without a visa, they frequently answered "to the supermarket". This joke, popular in Bitola at the time, perfectly illustrated the state of mind of Macedonian citizens regarding this document and its perception as a boundary object (Häkli 2015). In the context of EU mobility regime, the passport identifies an individual as *de jure* member of the community of citizens of a state, while at the same time defining these citizens of countries outside the Schengen area in their interaction with the circulation regime imposed on them. It thus breaks the individual link between the citizen and the state by reducing the individual to a community whose possibilities for cross-border mobility are reduced (Jansen 2009).

The Macedonian passport suffered in comparison with its Yugoslav predecessor, presented as allowing its holders to travel freely to most countries. Illustrating its strength, this narrative of free movement also transpired in the discourse of the youngest generation who had not directly experienced it but heard their parents and relatives reminisce about a time when they could travel without embarking on visa procedures that were as expensive as they were risky and stigmatizing. These allusions underlined the degrading aspect of a visa procedure which was pointed out to me: although Yugoslav citizens could circulate without great difficulty, it was now necessary for Macedonian citizens to prove that their travel would not be a pretext for illegal immigration into the visited country or the Schengen area. As stated before, access to international migration toward the EU is a matter of recognition and belonging to a group of 'trustworthy' citizens. For the citizens of the former Yugoslav republics whose European integration seemed the furthest away, independence has thus, from their point of view, marked a major setback that goes beyond the sole question of mobility. As Stef Jansen (2015) describes in the Bosnian and Serbian contexts, it is a

feeling of downgrading that lies at the bottom of that geographical confinement, and an impression of injustice, of an abnormal situation regarding a reference to a normal life drawn from the Yugoslav past. In border regions such as the Bitola area, that feeling was even stronger as the impossibility of regular border-crossings toward Greece overlapped with the mobilities of Greek citizens coming daily to North Macedonia to engage in commerce. Except for a slight increase in August, no peaks in border crossings were observed during summer. The structures of Greek and Macedonian mobilities were therefore completely different and reflected particular practices. This trend is particularly accurate in the case of the border crossing known as Niki/Medžitlija, next to the city of Bitola: while mobilities from North Macedonia follow a seasonal pattern, the intensity of Greek border crossings is higher and more stable over the year, highlighting their commonality in everyday life. A survey conducted in 2010 by the State Statistical institute of North Macedonia at the border also testifies to the local dimension of these cross-border mobilities from Greece. The border cities of Bitola and Gevgelija were their main (and almost exclusive) destinations for travels dedicated to leisure and health: 91.52% of the people asked mentioned these two cities as their final destination in North Macedonia. On the other side as well, individuals travelling from Greece to North Macedonia came from the border areas on a regular basis. In the villages visited in the Florina region, the proximity of the border to the city of Bitola was often presented as the main reason for the frequent mobilities in this direction, while most of the informants stated they were going to the Macedonian city to do their daily shopping or fill their car's gas tank, activities whose price difference in the Greek market justified the economic interest of this trip. But from the Macedonian perspective, that dynamic was simultaneously viewed as an economic opportunity and a symbolic decline since, during the 1980s, the situation was almost exactly the opposite: after the fall of the dictatorship, intense cross-border mobilities developed between the regions of Bitola and Florina (Vereni 1998). Many Yugoslav citizens were going to Florina to buy products that were difficult to obtain on the Yugoslav market in exchange for a 600-drachma visa. Branded clothing, fruit, chocolate, margarine and roasted coffee were all products that were rare or unavailable in the then Yugoslav city.

The liberalization of the visa regime in December 2009 put an end to this inequality and clearly shows the connection between European regulations and cross-border mobilities at the external border, since mobilities of

Macedonian residents have been directly impacted by their states' position toward the Schengen acquis. Indeed, a general increase in border crossings of Macedonian residents into Greece was first noticed in 2010 and was followed by an intensification of cross-border mobilities that reached three million entries into Greek territory in 2015[9]. These massive figures highlight the proximity established between the two neighbours since the end of the visa regime, as well as the attraction exerted by northern Greece on Macedonian residents, the city of Thessaloniki emerging as a major centrality in the region. The liberalization of the short-stay visa regime has been the starting point for the construction of new cross-border relations after almost 20 years of low Macedonian mobilities towards Greece. Macedonian citizens increasingly reconnected with neighbouring places from the border region and engaged in cross-border shopping. Whether it is German supermarket, fish merchants in the market, music stores, stationery store or motorcycle equipment stores, Florina businesses that specialize in a sector not well represented in Bitola are once again attracting a large cross-border clientele.

These practices, emerging again after having almost disappeared in the early 1990s, look like a rebalancing when compared to the previous period. The process is indeed similar: in part, it was a matter of consuming goods and services that are also available in the country of origin but at a lower price, as in the case of purchases made in hard-discount supermarkets. But these cross-border movements also follow another logic, one which is rooted in the continuity of movements dating from the Yugoslav era and which reflects the persistence of imbalances in the integration of the two states into the global economy. It is thus a question of obtaining goods and services from across the border that the local or even national market does not offer, illustrating the complexity of scales at work in these cross-border economies (Amilhat Szary 2015). This new balance of cross-border mobilities brings a new dimension to a region straddling this national border which previously existed only for holders of Greek citizenship, those belonging to the right category of citizens, or the lucky holders of a Greek visa.

Nevertheless, that period of intensification of local cross-border relations offered a terrible contrast with the developments happening at this external border of the EU by that time. Indeed, during 2015, the worsening of the so-

9 To compare, North Macedonia had an estimated population of 2,071,278 inhabitants in 2016.

cioeconomic situation and the intensification of fighting in the Middle East led to significant population flows, primarily from Syria. While the majority found refuge in the border countries (Turkey, Jordan, and Lebanon in particular), hundreds of thousands sought to reach western and northern European countries within the Schengen area. Facing the strengthening of controls in the central and western Mediterranean, this wave has gradually been redirected towards the Balkan peninsula, highlighting a Balkan route used increasingly since the beginning of the 2010s. From 2015 to 2016, thousands of people gathered in Idomeni, a refugee camp in Greece located a few kilometres away from the border with North Macedonia, hoping to cross into Serbia toward Hungary, Croatia, or Slovenia. In summer 2015, a corridor was established between North Macedonia and Austria in order to secure and control the migrant groups. However, between September and November 2015, this regional cooperation progressively ended. Hungary initiated this process by closing its borders with Serbia and Croatia and installing fences to prevent irregular border crossing attempts. Fences then appeared at the border between Austria and Slovenia, Slovenia and Croatia, and finally between North Macedonia and Greece. As a result, the Balkan corridor permanently closed in March 2016, prior to the evacuation of the Idomeni camp in May 2016. It is however important to state that the so-called Balkan Road did not fully disappear and that migratory flows in the region continue. As migration studies have long demonstrated, the strengthening of the controls does not make the migratory flows disappear but redirects migrants on new, often more dangerous routes (Bathaïe 2009, Dujmovic/Sintès 2017).

Whereas the Balkan countries outside the EU were previously perceived as emigration countries, they became so-called transit countries[10] during the 2010s. The migration crisis of 2015–2016 then highlights a form of novelty, as the Balkan countries found themselves caught between the injunctions of a European Union calling for border control and the feeling that they were, in the end, only marginally concerned by mobilities in which their territories did not seem to be the final destination. These injunctions to control borders have made the position now occupied by the Balkans in the European migratory control system explicitly visible. Moreover, they are intimately linked to the mobility regime of the citizens

10 "Transit country" is a category that emerged in the 1990s and refers to countries that constitute stages along a migratory route whose final destination is in Western or Northern Europe (Bacon et al. 2019).

of the Balkan countries: their alignment with the Schengen acquis and the strengthening of the filtering dimension of borders, with the aim of fighting 'irregular migration', have notably enabled Serbia, Montenegro, and Northern Macedonia (2009), and then Albania and Bosnia-Herzegovina (2010), to see their citizens exempted from short-stay visas for travelling to the Schengen area and thus enabling the return of local cross-border mobilities. While EU regulations at the border were mainly dedicated to fighting illegal migration to EU territory, the evolution of that order in a European semi periphery (Boatca 2006) such as North Macedonia—neither in nor out—allowed the expression of local developments of cross-border mobilities that must be analyzed in light of the many shared features and common heritage of these borderlands.

4. Local Social Orders: Cross-border Linguistic Dynamics at the Border

Up until 1913, the wider Macedonian region was under Ottoman rule and most of the areas now crossed by borders then belonged to the same administrative units, the *Vilayet* of Monastir (Bitola) in the case of Bitola and Florina. After the Balkan wars, most of the area was divided between Greece and Serbia in the Treaty of Bucharest (Lory 2011). This first event, which formally initiated the territorial fragmentation of Macedonia, led to significant cross-border migrations with the departure of many residents of Bitola to Florina and Thessaloniki, the United States, or in the case of the Jewish Sephardic community, toward Israel. Between 1946 and 1949, waves of refugees from the Greek civil war leaving Greece for Yugoslavia and other socialist countries from the Eastern bloc, the majority of whom were Slavic-speakers[11] from the region stretching from the shores of Lake Prespa to the city of Edessa, reinforced these movements (Monova 2001). Moreover, it is within these peripheral spaces in Greece and North Macedonia that one can still find the largest number of speakers of a language used in the neighbouring country. The regions located around the prefectures of Florina and Edessa in present-day Greece are still populated by

11 Like Anastasia Karakasidou in 1997, I consider the term Slavic-speaker to be a lesser evil than other denominations to name these individuals speaking Slavic vernacular dialects close (sometimes very) to Macedonian language, even though it is not a neutral term. However, by qualifying a linguistic practice, it cannot be qualified as ethnonym and do not project national affiliation, leaving the possibility to the interlocutor to specify his/her own position.

many Slavic-speakers (Boeschoten 2001; Voss 2003; Javourez 2017). In the city of Bitola and some of the surrounding villages that used to be partly populated by Greek-speaking Aromanian populations, cross-border family ties and language skills have been reactivated since the 1980s among families that did not move to Greece, or further after the Balkan wars (Javourez et al. 2018). Today, we can see how the cross-border distributions of ethnic, linguistic, or family groups over the past century both exacerbated the former diplomatic tension as well as bridged both sides of the border.

Beyond these local configurations, the current border separates two nation-states that often project mutually exclusive border narratives on borderlands, narratives that have long been at the core of the diplomatic conflict opposing these countries through the so-called *Name Issue*. Appearing on the international stage[12] after the proclamation of independence of the Republic of Macedonia (1991), the conflict resulted from Greece refusing to recognize the country under its constitutional name, arguing that it would inevitably lead to irredentism over the provinces in northern Greece bearing the name of Macedonia (Thrace, Central and Western Macedonia). But the threat on territorial integrity was not the only element advanced by Athens to explain this refusal or the Greek embargo[13] on North Macedonia in 1994–1995, since the defence of Hellenism and Hellenic heritage has also been presented as another key dimension of this conflict[14]. The agreement reached in 2018 and implemented in 2019 officially solve this bilateral issue through a name change—from Republic of Macedonia to Republic of North Macedonia—as well as through the establishment of rules regarding the use of historical symbols and figures such as Alexander the Great. However, behind these official considerations was the question of cultural diversity in Northern Greece and the presence of Slavic-speaking populations which long fed the fear of irredentism (Skoulariki 2003). The

12 Tensions regarding that issue are in fact older and already opposed Greece and the then Socialist Republic of Macedonia in the beginning of the 1960s. However, they were diluted in the context of the Greek–Yugoslav relationship up to the end the federation.

13 After the proclamation of independence of the Republic of Macedonia, Greece refused to recognize the country under that name. The refusal led to long period of tensions and negotiations and led to the imposition by Greece of an embargo at its border with what is nowadays North Macedonia (February 1994–October 1995).

14 The term *Macedonia* inevitably refers to ancient Macedonia, to the kingdom of Philip II and to the empire of Alexander. The fact that a state takes the name of Macedonia was then seen by the Greek government and a significant part of public opinion in the country as an attack on what they consider their historical and cultural heritage.

Slavic-speakers, whose integration into the Greek state is historically a source of uncertainty, were feared to be a relay in Greece for Macedonian expansionist discourse, and whose presence exposed a long-neglected and denied cultural diversity in the Greek national territory.

However, the sharing of the language is one of the most salient features of the Bitola/Florina borderlands; the sharing of Macedonian language and local Slavic vernacular dialects promotes mutual understanding. There are no precise figures on the number of Slavic-speakers in Greece since there is no official recognition of any minority in Greek Macedonia. Most of the studies on this issue have been concentrated in the region of Florina, and to a lesser extent in Aridaia (Vereni 1998; Boeschoten 2000, 2001; Karakasidou 1993, 2002; Voss 2003a). But Slavic-speakers are present in a wider area: they are also prevalent around the towns of Kozani, Ptolemaida, and Kastoria in Western Macedonia, or even Kilkis, in the eastern part of the border regions. In his 2003 study of Slavophony in the region, Christian Voss specifies that between 50 and 60% of Slavic speakers in Greece—approximately 200,000 people—are concentrated in the prefectures of Florina and Pella (2003a). Although an estimate, this figure reflects the potential importance of this population and responds to the Greek census of 1951, in which only 41,017 Slavic-speakers were counted. Anastasia Karakasidou states that in the prefecture of Florina, by the beginning of the 2000s, 50% of the villages inhabited by this population knew of the local Slavic dialect, as well as in 23% of the villages in which several languages were spoken including Slavic vernacular (Karakasidou 2002, 131). Similarly, in the villages of Florina and Aridaia prefectures, a study conducted in 1993 by Riki van Boeschoten for the European Commission gives us a precise idea of what the distribution of Slavic-speakers in these areas was at the time. They appeared to be most common in the Florina region, a combined 15,228 of the inhabitants (42% of the total population). In the Aridaia region, the mixed villages were more common, comprising 50% of the total population, as opposed to 22% for the Slavic-speaking villages (Boeschoten 2001).

This study also introduces a novel facet in the evaluation with the consideration of the level of language practice according to age: it appears that the level of practice of the Slavic vernacular decreases with the age of the speaker, with a few exceptions where the language was still commonly used by all age groups. However, slavophony was presented as irretrievably declining in these regions at that time, with the youngest people often having

only a passive knowledge of it. Despite this, the author highlights preservation factors, such as the relative isolation of villages, the sparse number of intermarriages, and the low levels of urbanization and industrialization limiting the melting pot effects. The vitality of popular traditions, which have been on the rise since the late 1990s, also appears to be a key factor in preservation and revitalization. With the return of singing during village holyday festivals, the inhabitants of these areas once again come in contact with a vernacular heritage, which often constitutes a first step towards a broader learning of the language. In 2005, Ioannis Manos described a peculiar event he observed in July 1999 regarding this issue, on the occasion of the celebrations of St. Elijah village festival (*Panagir*) in Meliti (*Ovčarani*, according to its Slavic name). The village organized two separate festivals. The main festival took place in a large schoolyard in the presence of the media and regional officials. Organized by the Elpida association, the event was identified as Greek. The music played was exclusively in that language, as were the official announcements. But an alternative event was also held in one of the main village parks, organized by an association claiming its Macedonian identity (Manos 2005). During the 2010s, while I was conducting fieldwork in the region, I attended this event on several occasions. Things had changed since 1999: it was now the association presenting itself as *Macedonian*, referring to the claim for a local Macedonian minority that organized its celebration in the schoolyard, while the Greek one took place in the park. Slavic vernacular, presented as Macedonian language, was the main language of this event, which saw the participation of artists from the neighbouring Republic such as the turbofolk singer Suzana Spasovska, whose songs are wildly successful in Greek Macedonia despite being highly sensitive in the bilateral diplomatic context[15]. The two parallel festivals still occurred, but their hierarchy had evolved at the same time the minority question had become less conflictual in the 2000s. The festival presented as local by Manos, and Macedonian by its organizers, had attained a central position in the village, both symbolically and spatially. Initially organized separate from the main traditional festival, it gradually imposed itself on the locality until the inversion of the locations of the two events, revealing both

15 Her most famous hit in the Greek context being *Aleksandar Car Makedonski* (Alexander Macedonian King), which chorus is quite equivoque: The Greeks were mistaken—On a foreign grave they cried—For a foreign king they rejoiced—Mother Macedonia—To the whole world will show—Alexander Macedonian king.

the revival of a local linguistic heritage and the power relations between communities in the village.

This change took a particular dimension in 2010 when a member of the EFA-Rainbow party—a party presenting itself as the party representing the Macedonian minority in Northern Greece—was elected as president of the village. Meliti has long been a special place to the Macedonian minority in the region. While it is sometimes criticized for promoting a vision close to the nationalism then promoted by the North Macedonia right wing party VMRO-DMPNE (Manos 2010), its struggle for linguistic practice has nonetheless been pioneering in the region and has contributed to the return of songs in the local language. This terminology, *local*, presented as locally used by Ioannis Manos, is increasingly omitted for the denomination *Macedonian* in the district of Florina, but also further away from the city, in villages that have also emerged as outposts for the promotion of this linguistic heritage and cultural cross-border connection. From 2011 to 2017, I visited several of these festivals in villages surrounding Florina, locally identified as inhabited by Slavic-speakers. The Macedonian songs were present in most of these villages, a local configuration that was already evident in 2003 (Voss 2003b) and continued to develop in the following decade. Upon hearing the first notes of these pieces—a repertoire of songs imported from neighbouring North Macedonia or from the Macedonian communities overseas—festival participants rushed to the dance floor. But if singing songs in Macedonian language is now common in northern Greece, especially in the Florina district, the repertoire and the organization of these festivals can vary strongly according to the local configurations of each village. In reaction to this repertoire and some of the irredentist songs played there, a more neutral heritage—presented as being local and not imported from across the border—has been promoted and developed, distancing itself from the claims of a Macedonian identity in the region.

Music and folklore therefore play a leading role in the revitalization of this local cultural and linguistic heritage, the music and the language of the songs being a criterion when deciding to attend one of these events. Receiving a large audience from North Macedonia, the Meliti event now has a cross-border dimension, attracting both artists and audience from the other side of the border. However, other, smaller, festivals are also an opportunity for people to reconnect with places linked to their family stories, especially since the end of the visa regime made it easier for them to enter Greek territory. Moreover, the European b/order and the removal of the visa regime also eased the participation of artists from North Mace-

donia: the aforementioned Macedonian singer, Suzana Spasoska performed in Meliti for the first time in July 2010, a few months after the lifting of this visa regime for Macedonian citizens. Since then, other artists or bands from North Macedonia performed there as well as in other places throughout northern Greece. However, the sensitivity of the Macedonian question in the region has sometimes disrupted this new mobility regime; some of these artists such as Suzana Spasosvska or Jordan Mitev have been refused entrance into Greek territory by the Greek authorities, illustrating the interactions between European and national orders at the border as well as local dynamics influenced by former territorial configurations.

5. Dealing with Orders, Switching the Border

Regardless of their local dimension, these cultural and artistic exchanges indicate how this Slavic vernacular revival must be looked at in relation to the cross-border dynamics in the region. According to Christian Voss (2003b), the maintaining and even revitalization of these linguistic practices in the Florina district in the 2000s was connected to the persistence of important cross-border connections between the city of Bitola and its former hinterland. Indeed, the informal commercial relations across the border are strongly influenced by this linguistic dimension, as the widespread practice of a language contribute strongly to the orientation of these flows towards specific places and people, differentiating them from some of their competitors. This is the case of a merchant in the Florina market, who receive frequent visit from people from Bitola specifically coming to his shop in regard to its fluent Macedonian. Coming from a linguistically mixed village in the Florina plain located between the border and the city, he learned the basics of the language at home from his parents and grandparents. He has taken advantage of this in his daily work and developed an informal activity, supplying several restaurants on the other side of the border.

He is only one example of many shops with Slavic-speaking owners or sellers frequented by both people in Bitola and in the wider region. The same process also happens for non-Slavic speaking people coming from Greece to North Macedonia. Shopkeepers of the Bitola *Čaršija,* who reported welcoming the highest number of customers coming from Greece, also declared having good knowledge of the Greek language, often learned through seasonal work experiences in Greece. However, the limited number of these examples and the relatively low knowledge of Greek language in

Bitola region prevents any comparison regarding the impact of the cross-border sharing of slavophony, the real common denominator between the two border spaces. In both cases though, language is one of the major elements orienting cross-border flows between the Florina and Bitola districts, in which the practice and understanding of Macedonian and Slavic vernacular remains widespread. In that context, the return of local, short-range, cross-border flows connecting the border regions in both directions after 2010 had a direct effect on local linguistic dynamics. Twenty years after the end of Yugoslavia, inhabitants from Bitola region were back in the Florina district and once again became valued customers to local shop owners, especially in a context of deep economic crisis in Greece. Following these trends, Slavic vernacular thus re-emerged as a positive skill and an asset to ease communication with these customers coming from neighbouring North Macedonia. Menus written in Macedonian language became a common feature of local restaurants, as did the employment of Slavic speaking waiters. Therefore, the evolving European regulations made the expression of old proximities inherited from the Ottoman territorial configuration possible again. The importance of language illustrates how elements belonging to different historical periods and social orders can coexist and be mobilized by actors within one shared social interaction. Here, EU regulations make it easier for Greek or Macedonian citizens to cross the border for consumption purpose while using the cross-border repartition of languages inherited from Ottoman time and post Ottoman territorial fragmentation.

Taking place in a space characterized by an important common history, the analysis of these events allows us to observe the way in which border and social orders can interact to bring out the emergence of new territorialities[16] at the border. In 2013, during an evening in Greece, I sat with three colleagues in a small café in a village located in the immediate vicinity of the border between Greece and North Macedonia. While we were asking the owner questions about the village and the border, the man considered us with curiosity and a touch of mistrust, progressively asking us about our origins and the purpose of our stay in the region. It was only after several exchanges that I spoke to him in Macedonian, explaining that I was living and working in a town nearby in North Macedonia. Suddenly, the atmosphere completely changed. His initial suspicion was replaced by

16 All the relations that a society cultivates with otherness (Raffestin 2012).

a warm attitude. Our host offered us glasses of Tsipouro and pulled up a chair to sit with us. Along with the language, the environment also seemed to change dramatically. The references were now common: the bicycle, on which a young man was riding back and forth in the street, was purchased in Bitola, a town this man knew well because he had cousins there[17]. He then went through memories of trips to Skopje and Tetovo in the company of these same cousins, about his frequent trips to the city of Bitola in North Macedonia, which he hoped would soon be connected to his village after the long-expected opening of the border checkpoint situated at the exit of his village. It was now my Greek-speaking colleagues who were dependent on my translations. The space of the street had not changed in any way, but its tone and atmosphere were completely different from those we had found when we moved in. We were speaking *our* language (*Naše*) and were among *ourselves* (*Naši sme*).

6. Conclusion

My encounter with the man in the café is the strongest of many examples that directly highlights the sociolinguistic effect of switching from Greek to Macedonian language. It echoes many other situations that illustrated the way language plays a significant role in the production of space. Places referred to by local inhabitants coming from Slavic-speaking families do not exist on most 20th and 21st century maps since they refer to old Slavic names of local villages, changed after 1920 by the Greek state, making it difficult for a non-local to initially identify the places referred to by interlocutors. Together with the language, individuals internalize values, norms, ideals, and historical myths specific to the society they belong to (Di Méo/Buléon 2005), and which reflect on the social orders and spatial representations. Space thus looks different in relation to the language in which it is thought of and expressed and emerges in its multidimensional nature. In the examples presented above, the common linguistic practice allows the expression of close cultural and historical references, from the proximity connected to the sharing of an eminently local linguistic

17 Originally from the same village, these cousins were moved to Poland as refugees during the Greek civil war before settling in Yugoslav Macedonia, in Bitola.

heritage to references to the Greek civil war[18]. The switch I experienced that evening summarizes the multiple dimensions of the relationship to place, and the fluidity and contextuality of bordering and othering (van Houtum/van Naerssen 2002). While the state border between Greece and North Macedonia has long been targeted by Greek narratives which aim to comfort and to legitimize its sovereignty on these northern territories by distancing the inside from the outside, the 2009 evolution of EU regulations made the reconnection between both sides of the border possible through increased mobilities, and thus enhanced the expression of cultural proximity—the sharing of the language being one of its features. Through these practices, the EU regulations contributed to the building of a cross-border *linguascape* (Ivkovic 2019) binding together places, language, narratives, and locutors of the Macedonian language or Slavic vernacular. As they speak Macedonian spontaneously, the Macedonians who cross the border evolve in a space strongly dominated by this dimension, invisible to the eye and ear of the visitor who does not share this cultural trait, illustrating the selectivity and the opportunistic dimension of border spatialities (van Houtum 2010). This set of elements partially attenuates the border crossed throughout this mobility by displacing the symbolic boundary superposed to it and blurring the otherness of the places and their inhabitants. In the context of difficult Macedonian–Greek relations, then dominated by the expression of competing nationalisms, these "small local arrangements/approaches that make everyday life more liveable" (Blondel 2016, 435) represent a mediation, a tactic (de Certeau 1990) developed to escape the control of national division at the border by mobilizing alternative social orders.

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18 The Greek civil war represents the last major event in the socio-territorial fragmentation of the region. Indeed, more than 100,000 of these refuges were living in countries from the Eastern bloc in the 1950s (Danforth/Van Boeaschotten 2012, 68) This massive wave therefore reinforced the cross-border distribution of individuals originating from the same region and families.

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