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THE GREEK-ALBANIAN BORDER AND ITS IMPACT ON LOCAL POPULATIONS

Gilles de Rapper

The end of the Cold War and the fall of the communist regimes in Eastern Europe brought, among other things, a deep transformation of borders in the Balkans. Some borders vanished or became 'soft' borders; others appeared, as in the former Yugoslavia. The border between Greece and Albania is a good illustration of those transformations. Up to 1991, it was rarely crossed by people and goods, and the diplomatic relations between the two countries were extremely limited. At that time however, a huge migratory movement appeared, from Albania towards Greece, while the relations between the two countries were intensifying, including discussions about two controversial issues: the territorial conflict upon Northern Epirus and, connected to it, the status and rights of the Greek minority in Albania.

In this paper, I will look at the experience of local border populations and at their participation in the new border dynamics. The content is based on fieldwork conducted since 2001 in the [567] Albanian district of Gjirokastër. The argument is that while the international border is being crossed, and the national boundary between Greeks and Albanians is being negotiated by Albanian migrants who want to become Greek, local boundaries are being reinforced in the border area, leading to a fragmentation of local society.

I will first present the main features of the border, as part of the history of the area. I will then turn to the meaning of the border by taking the example of a small group of villages, and to the way uses and practices associated with the border reveal lines of division inside local society.

The border: a place of ambiguity

The Greek-Albanian border shares with other Balkan borders a certain number of features that make it a place of ambiguity. Established in 1913, when the Albanian state was created, and when Greece took control over former Ottoman territories in Epirus, the borderline is imposed by the Great Powers and divides a region that had been crossed so far only by administrative boundaries. As such the borderline did not satisfy anyone, though the international commission that was in charge of marking it took several criteria into consideration, including that of mother tongue, which was supposed to distinguish Greek nationals from Albanian nationals.

The making of the former imperial territory into national territories could not be satisfying however, since national identities were not extremely developed at the time outside some intellectual circles, and since those national identities were in competition with other principles of division deeply rooted in local society, such as, for instance, religious affiliation. Thus some inhabitants of the area, being asked by the international commission to whom they belonged, would answer, *in Albanian*, “we are Greek”, meaning in fact that they were Orthodox Christians.

[568] In such conditions, after the border was established, both states worked at the “nationalization” of their border territories, either through the school network or by changing names of numerous places that had come to be perceived as foreign, and had to be replaced by “national” ones.

The existence of national minorities on both sides of the border was an obstacle to this process. National minorities were seen as a threat to the national homogeneity in the borderland. On the Albanian side, there still exists a Greek minority – whose boundaries are a matter of discussion between the two states – located mainly in the districts of Gjirokastrë and Sarandë. Generally speaking, from the Greek point of view, this minority tends to include all the Orthodox Christians of southern Albania, who are supposed to be of Greek national consciousness, even if most of them are Albanian speaking. From the Albanian point of view, the Greek minority consists only of Greek speakers of specific places traditionally recognized as Greek. It does not include the Albanian speaking Christians, nor the Greek speakers who leave their villages to settle outside the “minority zone”.

On the Greek side, an Albanian speaking population, never recognized as a national minority, remained until the Second World War. Muslim in majority, those Albanian speakers were forced to leave Greece, first in the twenties and later at the end of the Italian and German occupation, in 1944. They are called Chams in Albanian and Tsamidhes in Greek.

Due to the state of war between the two countries, starting with the Italian invasion of Greece from Albania, during the winter of 1940-41, the border became a place of danger and a place to be defended. Following the Second World War and the Greek civil war

(1949), at the end of which the two countries remained in opposite geopolitical camps, the border was closed and a restricted or forbidden border zone was created on both sides. Crossings became extremely rare. A first limited opening occurs in 1985, but it is only with the end of the dictatorship in Albania in 1991 that crossing [569] the border became possible again. This was the beginning of the migration of Albanian workers towards Greece, and of a new trade from Greece to Albania.

The history of the border, presented here in its main geopolitical aspects, should not make us forget the ambiguity of the border, which is marked and defended as the sacred boundary of national territory, and at the same time perceived as unable to limit this national territory, since it leaves on the other side important parts of the national population.¹ For some people in Greece, the Albanian districts of Korçë and Gjirokastrë form Northern Epirus, a Greek land still waiting for its liberation from Albanian occupation, while Albanian nationalist parties, together with a majority of people in Southern Albania, pretend that “the borders of Albania go as far as Arta and Preveza”, giving Chamëri, the area inhabited by the Albanian speaking Chams until 1944, a very extensive definition.

The border area has thus a specific importance in the representations of national territory. The ambiguity of the border, the issue of what it can or cannot separate, is often present in the relations between Greeks and Albanians, including on unexpected occasions. A man from Gjirokastrë thus told me a story which happened to him in Greece in 1994. Having no news from his son, migrant in Greece, for several months, he decided to go and look for him. After one month of search, he was arrested by the police in Athens. His tourist visa was no longer valid.

“I was not ill-treated,” he said, “but I was wondering why they arrested me: I am neither Black nor Arab, and I was doing nothing wrong. There was a map on the wall of the office, in the police station; the policeman asked me to show him on the map where the border was, according to me: in Arta or on the Shkumbin?”

[570] By answering “Arta,” the name of a Greek town claimed by Albanian nationalists, the man was presenting himself as a nationalist, a defender of the Cham question, and was thus taking the risk of being classified with the less wanted Albanian visitors in Greece. By answering “Shkumbin,” the northern border of Northern Epirus claimed by Greeks, he had a chance of being classified as a member of the Greek minority in Albania, for whom it is possible to go and work in Greece. The answer he actually gave to the policeman – or says he actually gave – illustrates the use that can be made of the border ambiguity, of the fact that, whatever the state control on the border may be, the border is unable to separate what cannot be separated:

¹ For a more extensive view of this history, see Winnifrid, Tom. J. 2002. *Badlands - Borderlands. A History of Southern Albania / Northern Epirus*. London, Duckworth.

“I told him,” he said, “that the Greek and the Albanian languages have 2,000 words in common. I told him that Northern Epirus exists, but it is neither Greek nor Albanian; Northern Epirus has been a multiethnic state.”

According to him, this means that the question of the border is not a question of being Greek or Albanian, that it is artificial and imposed from above to a “multiethnic” reality in which all groups, including the Muslim – to which he himself belongs – should have the same rights.

A first attitude vis-à-vis the border can thus be to minimize its importance and relevance, and to assert the existence of a trans-border community, distinct from the populations living in the rest of both countries. But at the same time this trans-border community is said to exist, it is recognized as a “multiethnic” community. And this is what I want to argue now: there is a double process on the Albanian side of the border (but also on the Greek side), towards a greater permeability of the state border, and towards a strengthening of boundaries between local communities.

The international border and local communities

This process can be observed not only in the representations, but also in the practices of the border; both reveal lines of division [571] inside local society. Two facts must be kept in mind: 1) the existence, in Albanian rural society, of a number of boundaries, which we can call ethnic boundaries, and which delimit local groups recognized on the basis of shared customs, reference to a common origin or endogamous marriage patterns; 2) the fact that the Greek state offers better opportunities – in terms of migration – to the members of the Greek minority in Albania.

This is due to the fact that Greek law knows two categories of foreigners: the ones of Greek descent, called *omogeneis*, “of same origin,” and the absolute ones, or *allogeneis*, “of other origin.” Candidates to migration to Greece, although they are all Albanian citizens, must fall into one of these two categories when they apply for a visa. Members of the Greek minority, as *omogeneis*, are allowed longer residence and work permits in Greece.

Due to the ambiguous definition of the Greek minority, and also to the fact that “Greek descent” does not have to be evidenced anymore, but self-declared, the local meaning of the category *omogeneis* is somehow flexible: it can be applied to individuals who are not officially members of the Greek minority or who consider themselves to be Albanian but, for the sake of crossing the border, claim a Greek descent or a Greek national consciousness. In local terms, this category is translated as “Northern Epirote.”

This does not mean however that everyone can claim to be Northern Epirote or that local boundaries are fading away. A Muslim inhabitant of Labëri, for instance, even if he changes his first name for a Christian or Greek name, even if he manages to obtain forged documents stating that he is a member of the Greek minority, will always remain a Muslim

in the eyes of the “real” or “true” Christians, who are making fun of those “men with a moustache who are getting baptized.” Thus in a Christian village, a man – an Albanian married to a woman from the Greek minority whose sons are migrants in Greece – explains:

[572] My sons have kept their Albanian nationality, even if their mother is Greek.² They did not try to obtain the Greek nationality. The Labs [i.e., people from Labëri] are the ones who pretend to be what they are not, as if they were Christians, they are getting baptized; do you realise? Men with a moustache who are getting baptized! We, Albanians from the borderland, the Greeks consider us closer to them, because we are Orthodox. We don’t have to cheat.

What we see from this example is the importance, for members of the various local groups, to be situated in terms of distance and proximity from the border, from Greece and from the Greek minority. There is an implicit hierarchy in all this: the most privileged are the Greeks from Albania, members of the minority; in second position are the Aromanians, who are for most of them originating from the Greek side of the border and thus recognized as *omogeneis*, even if, when in Albania, they claim a specific Aromanian identity. The Albanian speaking Orthodox, as we have just seen, are considered close to the Greek minority, a closeness reinforced by mixed marriages, while the Muslims appear as the most distant from the category of *omogeneis* and, as such, can only manage by cheating. Among the Muslims, the Chams are the least welcome in Greece, owing to their real or imaginary claims on their former properties in Greece.

To see more exactly what these groups are and what relations they have to the border, I will present briefly the case of a small region in the district of Gjirokaštër, a group of a dozen of villages known under the name of Lunxhëri. Those villages are interesting because they are known since the beginning of the 19th century as inhabited by Albanian speaking Orthodox Christians, in opposition to the neighbouring areas of Kurvelesh, in Labëri, Muslim in majority, and of Dropull and Pogon, “traditional” Greek minority zone.³

[573] During the communist period, the population of Lunxhëri changed to the point that the Lunxhots *stricto sensu*, Albanian speaking and Orthodox Christian, are not a majority anymore. Lots of them left the country at the beginning of the communist regime and used former migratory networks to settle in Greece and in America; others moved to the cities, and especially to Tirana. At the same time, Muslim families arrived from Kurvelesh and settled in Lunxhëri, where employment in the state farms offered them better conditions than the ones they had in their mountains. At the end of the fifties, the

² There is a distinction in Albanian between citizenship (*nënshtetësi*), or being a citizen of a particular State, and nationality (*kombësi*), which is belonging to a nation. Members of the Greek minority in Albania are Albanian citizens of Greek nationality.

³ For a more detailed presentation, see de Rapper, Gilles 2005. Better than Muslims, not as good as Greeks: emigration as experienced and imagined by the Albanian Christians of Lunxhëri, in *The New Albanian Migration*. King, Russell, Mai, Nicola and Schwandner-Sievers, Stephanie (eds.) Brighton-Portland, Sussex Academic Press, pp. 173-194.

state decided that the semi-nomadic Aromanian shepherds should become sedentary shepherds and many of them chose to settle in the villages of Lunxhëri, which they already knew because they used to stop there on their way between winter and summer pastures, and where many empty houses were available.

Today, the population of Lunxhëri is clearly perceived as consisting of three distinct groups, which do not intermarry: the Lunxhots, the Muslims and the Aromanians. In some cases, the three groups are also visible in the occupation of space, as in the village of Karjan, where the oldest part of the village, on the slope of a hill, is inhabited by Christians. The Muslims occupy the foot of the hill, while the Aromanians have settled on the side of the road leading to the village.

[574] The relations between the three groups were not excellent during the communist period. From the Lunxhot point of view, both Muslims and Aromanians are invaders and they are responsible for the decline of Lunxhëri, which used to be a wealthy and well developed area at the time of the old migration, the *kurbet*. From the Christian point of view, Muslims are backward and violent mountaineers, while from the Albanian point of view, Christian and Muslim alike, Aromanians are stupid nomadic shepherds. Due to their origin on the other side of the border, they were also suspected of spying and plotting in favour of Greece. Many of them were sent to prison or persecuted on such accusations.

What happened in the nineties, when migration to Greece started? Although the three groups were not official members of the Greek minority and as such have had more difficulties to cross the border legally, and although there has been occasionally cooperation between members of the three groups, altogether, migration only served to strengthen the feeling of separation and distinction between the three groups.

The Aromanians were the first to leave, taking advantage of the fact that they had relatives in Greece, but also wanting to escape from racism and inferiority status in Albania. They were also the first ones to come back in Lunxhëri, bringing experience and some capital which they invested in trade, agriculture or construction work.

The Lunxhots soon followed them, taking advantage of their previous experience of migration to Greece, before the Second World War, and also of their proximity, through religion, with Greece and the Greek minority. They seem however less willing to come back to Lunxhëri: they either stay in Greece or settle in cities on their return to Albania. Those who stayed in the villages are the poorest and those who did not succeed in Greece. They can only envy and regret the economical, political and often demographic domination of the Aromanians, who used to be the lowest group in local society, but have now become its most successful members.

[575] Finally, the Muslims are the ones who have the most difficulties to migrate and to stay permanently in Greece. Contrary to the Aromanians and Lunxhots, their migration is not a family migration; it is largely illegal and their work conditions in Greece are

generally worse. They perceive themselves and are perceived in Lunxhëri as the *laissés-pour-compte* of migration.

To conclude, the argument can be summarized as follows: The border between Greece and Albania is an external border of the European Union, a place where border crossings and migration have to be controlled. Greece offers non-EU citizens a possibility to bypass migration regulation: to be recognized as Greeks from abroad, as foreigners of Greek origin. Given the local history of the border area, some Albanian citizens can apply for the status of “Greek origin” more easily than others. While the national boundary between Greeks and Albanians is being negotiated by Albanian migrants who want to become Greek, local boundaries are being reinforced in the border area, leading to a fragmentation of local society along pre-existing lines which take a new meaning in the context of migration.

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