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SIMPLE GEOMETRY OF BORDERS. CHANGING CONTROLS OF THE BULGARIAN-SERBIAN NATIONAL BORDER

Abstract: The aim of this study, on one hand, is to trace a purposeful and chronic strengthening of the Western borders as a policy of control regardless of the historical changes in the stages of development of Bulgaria. On the other hand, its objective is to try to open a discussion on how different performances of the border reflect on constructions of relations and perceptions of each other between representatives of the two local communities on the both sides of the state Bulgarian-Serbian border.

Key words: border line, border region, Bulgaria, Serbia, Tourlak's, border fair.

The aim of this paper² (Antova 2010) is to discuss how the long imposed political idea about border as *a line* opposes to the new European concept about border as *a space* (Emerson 2003)³. This new process puts the local notions of Otherness and Sameness at a new level. The aim of this study is to trace a purposeful and chronic hardening of the Western borders as a policy of control regardless of historical changes in the stages of development of Bulgaria from one hand. And from the other hand to try to open a discussion on how different performances of the border reflect on constructions of relations and perceptions of each other between representatives of the two local communities on the both sides of the state Bulgarian-Serbian border. Reflections of forms, which borderli-ness sets are detailed observed in the study of Sarah Green⁴ (Green 2009). The location of this study is the border area of North-West Bulgaria at Bulgarian-Serbian na-

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² This paper was prepared and first presented at the Second Work Group meeting: Travel, Exchanges, Translations Roots and Webs: Transformations of Relations through Crossing, Travel and Translation, held in Sofia at 14-15 May 2010 [IS0803 BG] to COST Action IS0803: Remaking eastern borders in Europe: a network exploring social, moral and material relocations of Europe's Eastern peripheries; project led by Prof. Sarah Green, University of Helsinki. I wish to thank Prof. Sarah Green and Assoc. Prof. Margarita Karamihova (University of Veliko Tarnovo "St. Cyril and Methodius) for inviting me to become a member of the EastBordNet network and in this way opened my road at Border studies!

³ I mean the political idea for construction of Euro regions:

1. Committee of the Regions, Study on organisational aspects of cross-border INTERREG programmes - Legal aspects and partnerships, Interact Point Tool Box, Bruxelles, 2006;
2. Committee of the Regions, The European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC): state of play and prospects, Viena, 2009;
3. Committee of the Regions, The European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC), What Use for European Territorial Cooperation Programmes And Projects?, Viena, 2008;
4. Committee on Regional Development, Rapporteur: Kyriacos Triantaphyllides, Report on the Role of „Euroregions” in the Development of Regional Policy, (2004/2257(INI)).

⁴ First presented to COST IS0803 WG 1 Meeting in Nicosia.

tional border, over 15 km from the town of Belogradchik – the village of Salash. The research had been held in late 2009 and in the summer of 2010⁵. It is implemented in the region of Northwest Bulgaria and Northeast Serbia, where the state Bulgarian-Serbian border passes, in the region of Bulgarian town Belogradchik and Serbian - Knjazevac. One of the things that make impression upon first visit of the region is that the level of poverty is relatively high on both sides of the borderline. The levels of unemployment and migration are considerable too. A particular event provoking research interest is the renewed annual fair, held at the state border between the Bulgarian village Salash and the Serbian village Novo Korito. It was renewed 13 years ago after a long break during the communist time (closed from 1960 to 2000). In the archives of the Bulgarian village data are kept about the fair being held in early 20th century, which proves it's deep cultural roots in the region. Each year the Fair is held for three days and it is associated with the Orthodox feast of St. Procopius. Life history method as well as semi-structured interviews and auto reflective methods are used to create a data base allowing ethnological analysis.

Short Historical Background

Belogradchik and adjacent villages became a border zone since the end of 19th century. At first, the border was established as one between the Serbian kingdom and the Ottoman Empire in 1833. Later in 1878 it became a border between Serbia and Bulgaria. Its final establishment took place after the Treaty of Neuilly (27.11.1919 г.). The whole length of Bulgarian-Serbian national border is 555, 9 km. During Second World War the Border practically disappeared and between 1944 and 1948 it was very porous (Гръев 2009: 216). Temporary removal of border barriers leads to rapid and visible recovery in the region. Interruption or failure of economic and political relations between Bulgaria and its neighbors, especially in the totalitarian period, socially and economically marginalized the border zones for all XXth and first decade of XXI century.⁶ This is most valid for Bulgarian-Yugoslavian border after Tito's break with Comintern and the subsequent cooling of relations between Bulgaria and Yugoslavia.

Not proclaimed, but systematical policy of gradual depopulation of the Border zone from both countries, lack of significant double jurisdicted properties and laid aside from the national propaganda determined the progressive process of border "clearing" to a real separator of two countries with ethnically different population. There are many published documents and articles that trace the dramatic history of this segment of Bulgarian western border (see Valtchinova 2006). One of the tasks of the study is to prove that in spite the different historical circumstances, the process of strengthening the border was strictly kept and to try to find the correlations among border, borderland and economic backwardness.

⁵ I have been involved as an external expert into the Project "Transition – Voices, Faces, Memory" – Module "Memory and Borders", a Common Project of the Historical Department of Sofia University and Anamnesis Foundation, financed by NSF, leded by Assos. Prof. Mihail Gruev.

⁶ See: Stanev, Marti-Henneberg and Ivanov (2011: 133)

Border Line

My first memories of this area are from the time when I was in the elementary school. Once teachers took us to a trip. The aim of the trip was to visit the quarters of the border troops situated near the place of nowadays Kada Boaz Border Fair. This happened in the early 80's of the 20th century. The border guards demonstrated their well-trained dogs for the purpose of capturing the tremendous diversionist (*diversant*). Perhaps this is the time when I first heard this word “diversionist”, but years later I still did not understand its meaning. So the responsible ones for capturing the diversionists and guarding the borders were 18 – 19 years old boys brought from remote parts of Bulgaria (such was the practice then – regular military service was not allowed to be close to home) for the regular 2 years military service. Almost in every village, located near the border there were such border troops. Today one can still see the barracks where those boys were living for 2 years.

The region of Belogradchik was divided into two zones, called border zone 1 and 2. A border zone 1 was the closer one to the border. My parents got a document that certified that they live in the border zone 1 – without this document they could not visit the grandparents living in the native village of my father. People outside the two separate areas who wanted to visit one of the two border zones had to have a document, called “open list” (*otkrit list*), which described the purpose of the visit and the address of the host. There however had entered at a special border entry control, soldiers guarded around, border inspections were making with special breed of dogs (called *granicharsko kuche*), trained not only to capture but to smell each even dared to think to get close to the border line and the electric current passed in the wire fences separating the two countries. We grew up with these experiences and stories. Many local people from older generations still remind the time when whole Bulgarian villages were divided by wires with electric current. Constant tilled borderline, very strict prohibition regime of access even for locals in both border areas at Bulgarian side had become part of the landscape in the border zone for the whole period of socialism (or at least for the time of Marshal Tito's break with the Comintern) (Грѣв 2009: 227).

Meanwhile, almost everything my generation designated as Western was coming through the Serbian radio and television, for which the border obviously did not exist. For example, every year at the night of December 31 a 24 hours movie marathon started, and then you were not even thinking to go to sleep, but watched TV and movies all night, which were mostly American. During those times, in communist Bulgaria the national TV did not broadcast Western movies. In the public cinemas there were some from time to time, but seldom compared to a flood of Indian and Russian films. Serbian is my first foreign language. I did not really remember when I learned it during my childhood. Russian was far more difficult to me despite the fact that we were studying it from early stages at school. Scarce commodity – from candies and chocolates to records we dreamt about, to blue jeans and gadgets, arrived to us also from Yugoslavia through different unknown channels. That was in the time of socialism.

Yugoembargo

Almost immediately after the collapse of socialism the war in Yugoslavia came and those very few days I spent at home as a student during the holidays were passing under the roar of falling bombs and bursts. Every day media told us that there are accidentally strayed bombs in the border villages and local people from the region of Belogradchik lived in fear.

Security Council of the United Nations adopted a series of resolutions by which economic sanctions were imposed upon Serbia and Montenegro. Resolution 713, adopted on 25.09.1991, had imposed total embargo on any type of arms trade on the entire territory of the former Yugoslavia. Resolution 757 (30/05/1992) indicated wide range of measures that had restricted critical economic ties to Serbia and Montenegro. It prohibited any import of goods and materials produced in Serbia and Montenegro. It was prohibited to export all kinds of products and materials to Serbia and Montenegro, with the exception of food and medicine, specifically defined by the list adopted by the Sanctions Committee. Serbia and Montenegro had been denied any access to various global funds. Finally, it was forbidden any scientific and technical cooperation, as well as flights to and from the country. By resolution 787 (11.16.1992) the transport in Serbia and Montenegro without specific permission from the Sanctions Committee of the United Nations was banned. The second embargo was imposed in response to the war in Kosovo and was officially terminated by the contract from Kumanovo on 10.06.1999. It mainly concerned the import and export of fuel. Bulgaria was the first to impose a total ban on trade in fuels and production of all the chemical industry. This act directly opened the channel for the illegal fuel trade. So, the *Yugoembargo* brought news about the captured tanks with fuel and once again we were witnessing that these territories were crossed by criminals (Karamihova, Antova 2011). And we knew that petrol mafia is widespread across the border although every day we saw our own friends to carry over in all kinds of ways any quantity of petrol they were able to transfer. Years later it became clear that actually most of the local town business was launched by the money earned during the Yugoembargo time (Karamihova, Antova 2011).

In 2006 I went for the first time on the Kada Boaz Border Fair. Then for the first time I met real Serbs who lived just on the other side of the border. I realize how close we live and how far we are. So far I have seen and heard these people only from television (I have already pass through Serbia several times by bus while I traveled to Central and Western Europe but never had chance to communicate with Serbs). We have been living divided for such a long time that the three day Pass Fair was only time to walk around the two sides of the border, to see each other and to promise to have a beer again during next year's fair at the same time and the same place. We had nothing to do in common. This really provoked me to check whether this sense of remoteness is ingrained in local people. And it turns out that it is really very strong - for years we have been persuaded in different ways that border areas are very dangerous territories as if it were not those same villages in which most of us city kids spent their summer holidays. All they instill the idea that we were guarded by someone very dangerous Other. Later these were again dangerous territories where no normal person goes, except maybe some ready to violate law.

The unfinished story of the local check point

Since 2000 each year a promise to open a border check point has been declared during the Kada Boaz Fair from the officials. This check point is still not established. And this will not happen soon – now this border is an external border of the European Union. The question here is whether, even if it opens, it will meet the expectations of locals, or this would be just another bubble – as the new checkpoint Ilinden at Bulgarian-Greek border on the road to Drama, established at 2005 (Karamihova 2012). This along with new processes of trans-local “tourlak”⁷ identity construction are favorite topics of the local authorities from both sides and they normally are used as a convenient opportunity for exchanging visits. These two conversations periodically re-open during local elections and are presented into speeches of all candidates, no matter what party they present. Actually, the “tourlak” identity is only a convenient political instrument and is hardly visible as a basis for bringing together Bulgarians and Serbs, living in the direct neighborhood (Karamihova, Antova 2011).

“We are Tourlaci, We are Heroes”. A Historical Background

The Kada Boaz Fair is held at the state border between Bulgarian village Salash and Serbian village Novo Korito each and every year at almost the same time – middle July. It was renewed 10 years ago after a long break during the communist time (closed from 1960 to 2000). In the archives of the Bulgarian village there are data about the fair being held in early 20th century, which testifies to its’ deep cultural roots in the region. The annals show that in 1936 the fair was renewed. The history of the Fair is something to be investigated, but my preliminary hypothesis is that before the national border divided this territory, may this was the place of celebrating *kurban* (ritual sacrifice) between the two villages. The border crosses these lands after several times redrawing of the national territories as a result of few wars. The lands around the river Timok had been given to Serbia due to the Russian-Turkish military Treaty from 1829. The entire region is populated with the ethnographic group, called *tourlaci* and in Serbia – *bulgarashi*. Each year the Fair is held for three days and it is associated with the Orthodox feast of St. Procopius. Actually this fact is unknown to most of the locals from both sides. Only elderly people and some people from local administration interested in local history know about it. This fact is also never mentioned at the open ceremonies of the fair too. Instead, the most important fact that on both sides lives the population of the ethnographic group tourlaci is always emphasized. Almost all the partners’ contacts between authorities and individuals from Bulgaria and Serbia in this border territory are based on the local patriotic tradition of tourlac population. “We are tourlaci, we are heroes” is the slogan of the local population from both sides of the border. There is no important religious center in this part of Bulgaria or in Serbia. The 3th Bulgarian Kingdom (1878-1944) use to be entirely secular in nature and then the aggressive propaganda of the communists had come after 1945. The analyze shows that the fact that Bulgarians and Serbs are Orthodox Christians is not

⁷ The ethnographic group, called tourlaci, populate the entire Border region.

important for border population and the local ethnographic group become the most important unifier. Not only the same customs, food and songs, but local border population speaks almost the same language: “We do not need a translator”- local representative said.

The Kada Boaz Border Fair – a New Border Space

In fact the idea of the Fair was to create a three-day space for family meetings of divided from the state border tourlak’s families. The family meetings are common practice at the three days fair. Every year cosines from both sides of the state border hugs and raise cheers. One can see tables all over where divided relatives share what happen to them during the year. The Fair is place and time to gather not only people staying in the region but a vast number of migrating in the country and abroad are coming too. Due to the marginalization of the region by both countries the number of migrated local population is even more than 50 %.

After 2000 Bulgaria took a leading role for the residual Yugoslavia. There arises an interesting question of where exactly the West is? After the accession of Bulgaria to EU it became “the West” for population from the Serbian side. This is visible especially in political connections between Bulgarian and Serbian politicians. There are several of them which are regular visitors of the Kada Boaz Border fair almost every year. For example, one of them is Bulgarian socialist Michail Michov, who is a former interior minister. Another significant figure from the borderland is the Serbian Prime Minister Mirko Cvetkovich who was born in Novo Korito village. So the national politicians together with the local authorities make efforts for opening of a border post and therefore to improve the economic and social environment in the region.

The fair is held on a big field with a makeshift entrance through which passes from one to the other side of the border. Traders are flocking here from all over Bulgaria to offer their goods. Grill and beer are always present on the Bulgarian side. The same situation is in Serbia, where are offered mainly pigs on a spit and Serbian specialties on the grill with beer from the region. In the confined space of the Fair the movement is free, but there are border troops all over and the cars are often stopped for inspections, mostly for illegal transfer of goods. For example, few years ago the driver of the former mayor of a Bulgarian city was caught transferring master box of cigarettes to the Serbian side. The local people from Belogradchik are joking that every year consumption is different. Few years ago Serbs bought bags of sugar; last year there was a big sale of bicycles, produced in a neighboring of Belogradchik municipality. Local Bulgarians speak: “Serbs buy everything wholesale, even boxes with light bulbs. Prices are few times higher, but nevertheless for Serbs here is cheaper”.

Due to the long period of separation and breaking of all links between local people, the first to recover are the micro type of economic networks. This is why the Kada Boaz Border fair is seen from Bulgarians primarily as an opportunity for profit in all ways, even not completely legal. The networks are short lasting because of the economic situation on both sides. The truth is that the trade of goods is active in Bulgarian part while Serbs are offering mainly beer, grilled meats and sweets. This activity of trade relations on Bulgarian part of the Border once again shows how the paradigm has been changed – if before 1989 the former Yugoslavia was West for Bulgarians, after the acces-

sion of Bulgaria to EU Serbs start to look to Bulgaria as West, from where they can receive goods of good quality on low prices.

At a second place are activated connections between NGO's, which although few, have regular character thanks to the opportunities of the new communications and finances, provided for trans-border projects in recent years.

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Historically viewed, Bulgarian-Serbian National border really has united people in different periods of crisis only when it functioned as a virtual line of division. Especially in the last 20 years or more, while creating a common field of economic interest, people of the border zone do not dream about removing of border. On the contrary, at the really hard transitional period the border line has become a source of profit, determining future strategies of the local people. Also historically laden along with its transformation to an external European border, hardly could change it to a space in terms of Euroregion's idea. At the same time one can easily see, when going to the Kada Boaz Border Fair that the national symbols fade in comparison to the local – costumes, songs, and customs represented. Fair is significant dent in the Border and establishes a temporary space for (future) community. The new idea is clear in the sentence of a Serbian married in Bulgaria: "Once Borders had divided people, now again Borders have to unite them."

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