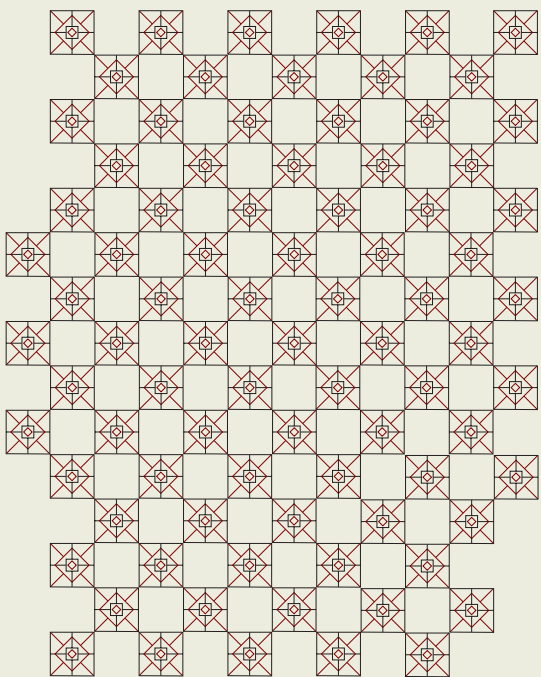
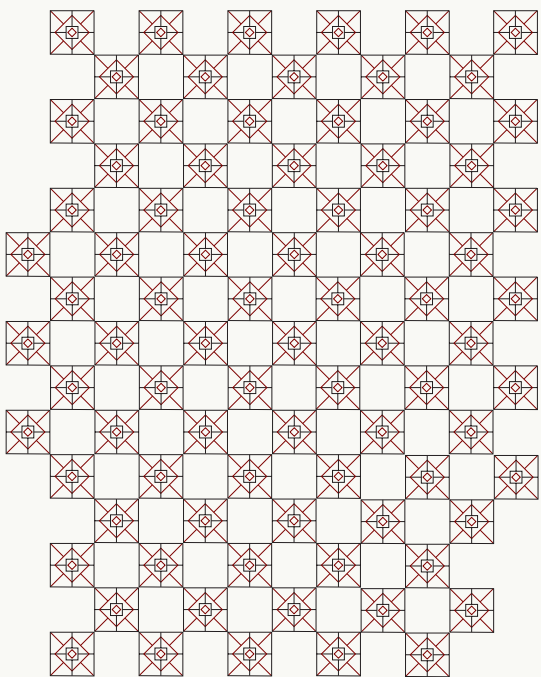




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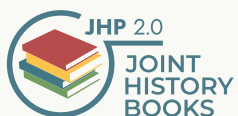
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Banal Nationalism and the (In)visibility of Borders:

The Case of Albania and Greece

Kriton Kuci

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores how the maritime border dispute between Albania and Greece is framed through nationalist narratives and media discourse, revealing the persistence of banal nationalism in contemporary Southeast Europe. While formally a legal and diplomatic issue, the dispute has become a symbolic battleground for the articulation of sovereignty, national dignity, and historical justice. Drawing on theories of banal nationalism, symbolic borders, and cultural nationalism, the paper argues that the dispute is embedded in everyday discursive practices that sustain national imaginaries and perpetuate the symbolic boundaries of the nation-state. Through a comparative analysis of media and political discourse in both countries, the paper demonstrates how the maritime border functions not only as a site of geopolitical negotiation, but as a space where the nation is routinely imagined, performed, and defended.

Keywords

banal nationalism, media discourse, Albania, Greece, maritime zones, delimitation, borders

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the question of borders in Southeast Europe has re-emerged with renewed intensity. Despite processes of European integration and regional cooperation, symbolic and material boundaries remain deeply contested. One particularly illustrative case is the ongoing maritime border dispute between Albania and Greece. Although this issue is ostensibly technical—concerned with the delimitation of Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) in the Ionian Sea—it has assumed a prominent position in the national narratives and public debates of both countries. This paper focuses on how this dispute is framed in media and political discourse in Greece and Albania. It argues that beyond explicit nationalist rhetoric, the issue is shaped by banal nationalism—the routine and often unnoticed reproduction of the nation in everyday life. The maritime border becomes more than a matter of legal demarcation; it transforms into a discursive site where historical memory, sovereignty, and national pride are performed and reaffirmed. By analyzing this dispute through the lens of nationalism theory, and particularly by focusing on the interplay between banal nationalism, symbolic boundaries, and media discourse, this paper contributes to our understanding of how national identities are reproduced and reinforced in contemporary Southeast Europe—even within a nominally post-national or Europeanized context.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Banal Nationalism and the Everyday Reproduction of Borders

The concept of banal nationalism¹, as developed by Michael Billig, provides a foundational framework for understanding how nations are reproduced not only through moments of crisis or high politics, but in the mundane routines of everyday life. Billig's central argument is that the nation is not always dramatically performed, but rather flagged daily, through lingu-

1 Billig, Michael. *Banal nationalism*. London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 1995.

stic, visual, symbolic and ideological cues that reaffirm the existence of the nation as the natural container of political life. These include, for example, the use of national weather maps, references to “our government,” or the background presence of national flags—practices that become so routine they evade conscious scrutiny.

However, it must be said that the most emblematic expression in Billig’s work: “*The metonymic image of banal nationalism is not a flag which is being consciously waved with fervent passion; it is the flag hanging unnoticed on the public building.*”² has often been misunderstood as the central idea of banal nationalism. This interpretation captures only half of the truth. Indeed, Billig himself, when defining banal nationalism, emphasizes that it consists of the ideological habits³ and habits of language⁴ through which the nation is reproduced in everyday life. The material presence of flags, maps, or other national symbols represents only one side of the coin. The other—arguably more significant—side lies in the discursive and ideological routines that normalize nationalism as common sense.

Put differently, national symbols displayed on souvenirs in tourist shops are only one visible dimension. The deeper and more pervasive dimension is precisely the nationalist ideology that, often unconsciously, shapes our perceptions and guides our actions—for example, the seemingly “natural” impulse to buy a souvenir that is framed as belonging to a particular nation. These everyday practices are not neutral; they rest on an already internalized framework of national belonging that is continuously reproduced through discourse.

In the specific case of this paper, banal nationalism is not only detected in the material presence of maps, flags, or national symbols appearing in news items about the maritime border dispute between Albania and Greece. Rather, it emerges more forcefully in the very ways arguments are

2 Ibid., 8

3 Ibid., 6

4 Ibid., 93

articulated and framed. The insistence that “the sea belongs to US,” that “OUR maritime border is sacred,” or that “THE national territory cannot be negotiated” are all discursive moves through which nationalism becomes the taken-for-granted foundation of the debate. Such arguments do not merely express opinions; they encode a particular logic of national belonging and sovereignty that pre-structures public discourse.

Moreover, the banality of nationalism is revealed in the unquestioned assumptions underlying these arguments. The idea that there exists a natural, indivisible “national territory” waiting to be defended is rarely interrogated—it is simply presupposed. Media discourse, political speeches, and everyday conversations alike reproduce these assumptions, ensuring that nationalism remains the silent framework within which debates take place. In this sense, banal nationalism is not limited to the visible symbols of nationhood, but also to the invisible ideological operations that define what can be said, what counts as legitimate argument, and what is excluded from public discussion.

In fact, the power of banal nationalism lies precisely in its invisibility. Unlike overt nationalist mobilizations that call attention to themselves, banal nationalism operates quietly, embedding itself in the structures of language, the framing of news stories, and the rhetoric of political actors. It becomes “naturalized” to the extent that it is no longer perceived as nationalism but simply as common sense. This naturalization is what gives banal nationalism its resilience and its capacity to underpin nationalist mobilization whenever political circumstances demand it.

In this framework, borders—both material and symbolic—are not static or self-evident entities, but are continually enacted and re-enacted through banal national discourses. As mentioned above the power of banal nationalism lies precisely in its invisibility: it is “*the ideological environment of established nations*”⁵, where the nation is constantly assumed, rarely questioned, and thus made real.

5 Ibid., 6

Borders, in this context, are not only physical demarcations, but symbolic and discursive constructions that delineate who belongs and who does not. As scholars like Anssi Paasi⁶ have argued, borders are produced and reproduced through a process of institutionalization, which involves not only legal codification but also their inscription in narratives, practices, and everyday spatial imaginaries. Paasi's concept of *bordering practices*⁷ highlights how borders are continuously re-asserted through rituals, education, media, and policy discourses, shaping the geopolitical subjectivities of citizens.

This view aligns with the work of Henk van Houtum and Ton van Naerssen⁸, who emphasize that borders are not merely lines on maps but "social constructs" that emerge through acts of inclusion and exclusion. They argue that bordering is an active process of meaning-making, sustained by symbols, stories, and performances that stabilize the identity of the nation-state. Banal nationalism provides the ideological infrastructure for these processes, operating as the silent background against which more spectacular forms of nationalism are staged.

6 Paasi, Anssi. *Territories, Boundaries and Consciousness: The Changing Geographies of the Finnish-Russian Border*. New York: J. Wiley & Sons, 1996.

Paasi, Anssi. "Region and place: regional identity in question." *Tijdschrift voor Economische en Sociale Geografie*, 94/2 (2003): 137–148.

Paasi, Anssi. "The resurgence of the 'Region' and 'Regional Identity': theoretical perspectives and empirical observations on regional dynamics in Europe/Review of International Studies." In: *Globalising the Regional, Regionalising the Global*, ed. Fawn Rick. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009, 121–146.

Paasi, Anssi. "The shifting landscape of border studies and the challenge of relational thinking." In: *The New European Frontiers: Social and Spatial (Re)integration Issues in Multicultural and Border Regions*, ed. Milan Bufon, Julöian Minghi, Anssi Paasi, 361–379. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing Editors, 2014.

Paasi, Anssi. "Boundaries as social processes: Territoriality in the world of flows." *Geopolitics*, 3 /1 (1998): 69–88.

7 Paasi, "The shifting landscape," 369

8 van Houtum, Henk. & van Naerssen, Ton. "Bordering, ordering and othering." *Tijdschrift voor Economische en Sociale Geografie*, 93/2(2002): 125–136.

Further extending this analysis, scholars such as Gearóid Ó Tuathail⁹ and Étienne Balibar¹⁰ highlight how the border is not simply the edge of the state, but a discursive apparatus that regulates belonging, memory, and legitimacy. For Balibar, borders are everywhere—they exist not only at the peripheries of the state, but are internalized through national education systems, the organization of public space, and the symbolic regulation of “us” versus “them.” This reinforces the nation as a fictive ethnicity¹¹—a socially constructed; historically contingent identity that appears natural precisely because of its constant reiteration in banal forms.

Within media discourse, the border often appears not as an object of scrutiny, but as a taken-for-granted backdrop for reporting and commentary. As Deborah Cowen and Emily Gilbert¹² note, even in liberal democracies, the border is routinely normalized through practices of everyday governance—passports, identity checks, customs regimes—which are narrated and naturalized by the media. News stories that reference “national waters,” “foreign interference,” or “threats to sovereignty” invoke the border as an unquestionable frame of reference, often reproducing it through metaphors of protection, encroachment, or historical justice.

In the case of the maritime border between Albania and Greece, such banal framings are clearly at work. Whether in headlines describing “Greek territorial waters” or opinion pieces accusing political actors of “selling out the nation,” the sea itself becomes a symbolic border—flagged through repeated narratives that affirm the legitimacy and boundedness of the nation. These discourses do not rely on extremist nationalism; rather, they are deeply embedded in routine political language, media templates, and public expectations.

9 Ó Tuathail, Gearóid. *Critical Geopolitics. The Politics of Writing Global Space*. Routledge. London, 1996.

10 Balibar, Étienne. *We, the People of Europe? Reflections on Transnational Citizenship*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2004.

11 Balibar, Étienne. “The Nation Form: History and Ideology.” In: *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities*, ed. Étienne Balibar, and I. M. Wallerstein, 86–106. London: Verso, 1991.

12 Cowen, Deborah. & Gilbert, Emily. ed. *War, Citizenship, Territory*. New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2008.

Moreover, banal nationalism interacts with what Mario Antonsich¹³ calls the spatial socialization of the nation—the way people come to inhabit and imagine space through national categories. The maritime boundary is not only a legal construct but also a cultural one: a zone through which Albania and Greece project their geopolitical anxieties and historical claims. Its discursive reproduction reveals how national space is not merely inherited but performed, with the border functioning as both an object of contention and a means of identity consolidation.

Banal nationalism and bordering practices operate through a dialectic of visibility and invisibility. As Roxanne Doty¹⁴ has shown, nationalist discourse often depends on the continuous invocation of threats, outsiders, and past grievances, all of which are framed as justifications for the state's territorial integrity. In this context, banal nationalism serves to naturalize these framings, rendering the border both omnipresent and ideologically neutral—precisely because it is always already assumed.

The relationship between banal nationalism and borders is mutually constitutive. Banal nationalism provides the discursive architecture through which borders are imagined, narrated, and felt. Borders, in turn, serve as spatial anchors for the performance of the nation in everyday life. In contemporary Southeastern Europe, where historical grievances remain potent and EU integration is uneven, these dynamics are especially salient. The maritime border dispute between Albania and Greece offers a clear example of how borders are not only political but deeply cultural, reproduced daily in ways that render the nation both durable and affectively charged.

13 Antonsich, Mario. "Meanings of place and aspects of the Self: an interdisciplinary and empirical account." *GeoJournal*, 75/1 (2010): 119–132.

14 Doty, Roxanne Lynn. *Imperial Encounters. The Politics of Representation in North-South Relations*. Minneapolis : University Minnesota Press, 1996.

Symbolic Borders and Spatial Imaginaries

Borders are not merely territorial demarcations or geopolitical lines; they are socially and politically constructed sites of meaning that carry deep symbolic significance. Theorists of critical border studies have long emphasized that borders must be understood not only in terms of state sovereignty and spatial governance, but also as discursive and affective constructs that play a central role in the formation of collective identity, memory, and power. As such, borders are both material and imagined—simultaneously real and symbolic¹⁵.

Anssi Paasi provides a foundational framework for understanding the symbolic and institutional nature of borders. In his view, borders are not static or self-evident entities but are produced and reproduced through a process of institutionalization that involves four overlapping dimensions: territorial shaping, symbolic shaping, institutional embedding, and social reproduction. This means that borders are constantly being constructed through educational systems, political rhetoric, cartography, media representations, and everyday spatial practices. Even in cases where physical barriers are absent or contested—as in maritime or aerial domains—the symbolic power of the border can remain potent and durable. It is through these representational practices that borders are rendered meaningful and naturalized in the social imaginary¹⁶.

Paasi also highlights the importance of border narratives, which function as cultural scripts that sustain the legitimacy of territorial claims. These narratives are circulated through state institutions, media platforms, and popular culture, forming what he calls the »spatial socialization«¹⁷ of the citizen. The border becomes more than a legal line; it is an affective

15 Paasi, "Boundaries as social processes," 69–88.

16 Paasi, Anssi. "The institutionalization of regions: a theoretical framework for understanding the emergence of regions and the constitution of regional identity". *Fennia - International Journal of Geography*, 164/1 (1986): 105–146.

17 Paasi, "Territories, Boundaries and Consciousness," 8.

threshold that separates the familiar from the foreign, the secure from the threatening, the national from the external.

This process intersects with Étienne Balibar's concept of the "fictive ethnicity"¹⁸ of the nation—a socially constructed sense of historical and cultural unity that is continually reproduced through symbolic boundaries. Balibar argues that the border is not confined to the periphery of the state; it is disseminated throughout society via ideological apparatuses such as language, education, and media. As such, the border becomes internalized, operating as a mode of subjectivation that positions individuals within a national logic of belonging. Borders, in Balibar's sense, are not only spatial but also existential—they demarcate the contours of the national »we« through the production of a constitutive »other.«

In the context of the maritime dispute between Albania and Greece, the symbolic dimension of the border is particularly salient. The Ionian Sea functions not simply as a legal or geographical space, but as a discursive terrain onto which both nations project competing narratives of sovereignty, historical justice, and territorial legitimacy. The maritime boundary, while not physically visible, becomes a "floating signifier"¹⁹—an empty sign around which multiple and sometimes contradictory meanings are articulated. It is alternately described as sacred national space, a colonial imposition, or a bargaining chip, depending on the speaker and political context. This polyvalence underscores the fundamentally symbolic nature of border imaginaries.

Moreover, the symbolic construction of borders is often intensified in regions marked by historical contestation, overlapping cultural ties, and shifting geopolitical alliances—features that typify much of Southeastern Europe. Here, borders do not merely delimit territory; they become emblems of unresolved history, victimhood, and national pride. As historian Maria

18 Balibar, "The Nation Form," 96.

19 Laclau, Ernesto. *On Populist Reason*. London: Verso, 2005.

Todorova²⁰ and anthropologist Daphne Berdahl²¹ have noted, borders are often overdetermined—they serve as palimpsests of multiple pasts, layered with imperial, communist, and nationalist inscriptions. In such contexts, the border's symbolic function often outweighs its legal or administrative utility.

The media play a crucial role in reproducing and amplifying these symbolic constructions. News reports, editorials, political speeches, and cultural representations do not simply report on the border; they actively produce it. They frame the border as a site of vigilance, loss, encroachment, or recovery—each framing invoking affective investments that mobilize public opinion and political action. Headlines warning of “violations of our maritime space” or editorials condemning “concessions to foreign powers” are not neutral statements; they are performative acts that reinforce the border's symbolic centrality to national identity.

In this sense, symbolic borders are deeply entangled with Benedict Anderson's approach of the nation as an “imagined community”²². The national community is imagined not only temporally—through a shared history—but spatially, through a shared sense of boundedness. Borders provide the shape and edges of that imagined community, and it is through their constant symbolic invocation that the nation is rendered thinkable, knowable, and emotionally resonant.

Symbolic borders are dynamic and multifaceted constructs that play a key role in national identity formation. They are sustained through cultural narratives, institutional practices, and everyday discourse, and they persist even in the absence of material form. In the case of the Albanian–Greek maritime dispute, the border is more than a line—it is a narrative site, an affective symbol, and a discursive battlefield. Its reproduction in political and media discourse reveals the ongoing work of nationalism in

20 Todorova, Maria. *Imagining the Balkans*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.

21 Berdahl, Daphne. *Where the World Ended: Re-Unification and Identity in the German Borderland*. Berkely: University of California Press, 1999.

22 Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso, 1983.

shaping how space, identity, and legitimacy are imagined and contested in Southeast Europe.

Media, Nationalism, and the Reproduction of Banal Nationalism

The media play a central role in the everyday reproduction of national identity. Beyond their function as intermediaries between political elites and the public, they embed nationalist assumptions into the ordinary flow of reporting. Through routine language, symbolic references, and the repetition of familiar cues, media outlets continuously flag the nation, making it appear natural and unquestionable. Headlines that refer to “our waters,” “our sovereignty,” or “our national dignity” rarely need further explanation; they function as banal reminders of the nation’s existence and its borders.

In both Albania and Greece, this banal reproduction of nationalism is especially visible in coverage of the maritime border dispute. Greek media frequently invoke the language of legality, order, and European responsibility, presenting Greece as the guardian of European stability and portraying the border as an unquestionable extension of national territory. Albanian media, whether pro-government or opposition, similarly treat the sea as inherently Albanian, invoking either technocratic assurances of sovereignty or emotive appeals to betrayal and sacrifice.²³ In both contexts, the border is flagged as sacred and indivisible, silently affirmed as part of the natural order.

Equally important are the absences in these media discourses. Rarely do they explore cooperative alternatives, such as joint resource management, environmental agreements, or shared governance. Instead, the horizon of possibility remains tightly bound to the nation-state framework. This narrowing of perspective is itself a banal nationalist practice, ensuring that

23 Paschalidis, Panagiotis, Kuci, Kriton. “Mapping the dominant media frames between Greece and Albania and exploring alternative frames to override negative stereotypes.” ELIAMEP PUBLICATIONS. Available at: <https://www.eliamep.gr/en/mapping-the-dominant-media-frames-between-greece-and-albania-during-the-year-2022-and-exploring-alternative-frames-to-override-negative-stereotypes/>.

the nation remains the default frame through which space, identity, and legitimacy are imagined.

In this sense, the media do not merely reflect nationalism but actively reproduce it on a daily basis. By embedding the nation into the routines of reporting—through words, metaphors, and silences—they transform nationalism into common sense, making borders appear eternal, holy, and beyond contestation.

THE MARITIME BORDER DISPUTE AS A DISCURSIVE FIELD

Background and Legal Trajectory

The dispute over the delimitation of maritime boundaries between Albania and Greece dates back to the early 1990s, when both countries began efforts to regulate their maritime zones in accordance with international law, particularly the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), to which both are signatories. The core of the disagreement concerns the delimitation of the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) and the continental shelf in the Ionian Sea, areas that are of growing strategic and economic interest due to potential energy resources, fisheries, and maritime traffic routes.

A first significant step came in 2009, when an agreement was signed between the governments of Greek Prime Minister Kostas Karamanlis and Albanian Prime Minister Sali Berisha. The agreement drew lines based on the equidistance principle, granting full effect to several small Greek islands close to the Albanian coast. However, critics in Albania argued that the agreement disproportionately favored Greece, undermining Albania's national interests. In 2010, the Albanian Constitutional Court annulled the agreement, ruling that it violated both the Constitution and international principles by not adequately safeguarding Albania's territorial and maritime integrity. This landmark decision effectively reset negotiations and has

since framed Albanian domestic debates on sovereignty, international law, and foreign policy alignment.

Following the annulment, the issue has remained unresolved, resurfacing periodically in bilateral negotiations, political campaigns, and media discourse. For Greece, the delimitation forms part of a broader regional strategy of EEZ agreements with neighboring states, while for Albania it intersects with questions of national pride, legal sovereignty, and geopolitical balancing between Greece, Turkey, and the European Union.

In 2020, the two countries announced their intention to refer the case to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in The Hague. The decision was presented as a pragmatic step to depoliticize the dispute and anchor it in international law, signaling a mutual willingness to overcome longstanding tensions. Yet, progress has stalled due to domestic political dynamics in Albania—where opposition parties and the public opinion remain skeptical of ceding authority to an international court—as well as broader regional dynamics, including Greece’s relations with Turkey and Albania’s EU accession process.

Currently, the matter is suspended in a state of diplomatic limbo: both sides publicly affirm their commitment to resolving it through international law, but practical steps toward submitting a joint case to the ICJ have yet to materialize. In the meantime, the dispute continues to serve as a symbolic touchstone in nationalist rhetoric, a bargaining chip in domestic politics, and a test of how international law can be applied to sensitive bilateral disputes in Southeast Europe.

Methodology and Sample

This study employs Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as its primary methodological approach. CDA is particularly useful for examining how language and discourse contribute to the reproduction of power relations,

social identities, and ideological constructs²⁴. In the context of this research, CDA allows for a systematic investigation of how banal nationalism is embedded in routine political and media texts, rendering borders symbolically visible and nationally charged.

The sample consists of political speeches, parliamentary debates, press statements, and media coverage from both Albania and Greece. Media sources were selected based on their wide circulation, influence, and representation of different political orientations. For Greece, the sample includes national newspapers *Kathimerini*, *Efimerida ton Syntakton*, *Proto Thema*, etc, mainstream television coverage, and digital portals with significant readership. For Albania, the study draws from *Panorama*, *Gazeta Tema*, *Lapsi* etc, and major television debates and online platforms. This range ensures that both elite-driven narratives and popular commentary are captured.

The time frame of analysis spans from 2020 to 2023, covering the period when Albania and Greece agreed to refer the maritime dispute to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) and the subsequent stagnation of the process. This period also encompasses national election cycles in both countries, during which the maritime issue resurfaced as a key site of political contestation and nationalist mobilization.

The analysis proceeds by identifying recurring discursive strategies—such as the use of metaphors of betrayal, the personification of the sea as sacred national territory, or references to external threats like Turkish influence. CDA pays particular attention to lexical choices, intertextual references, and implicit assumptions that structure these narratives. By doing so, it highlights not only overt nationalist rhetoric but also the more subtle, banal ways in which the nation is flagged and borders are normalized in public discourse.

24 Fairclough, Norman. *Critical Discourse Analysis: the Critical Study of Language*. New York: Longman Group limited, 1995.

Wodak, Ruth. Meyer Michael. Ed. *Methods of Critical Discourse Analysis*. London: SAGE Publication Ltd, 2001.

By focusing on discourse rather than on the factual resolution of the dispute, this methodological approach captures the symbolic and affective dimensions of the maritime border, showing how banal nationalism works through everyday linguistic and narrative practices

MEDIA AND POLITICAL DISCOURSES IN GREECE AND ALBANIA

The discourse analysis of Greek and Albanian media indicates that the maritime border dispute is rarely treated as a narrowly technical or legalistic matter. Instead, it is consistently transformed into a symbolic battlefield in which questions of sovereignty, dignity, legality, and belonging are played out. Headlines, lexical choices, metaphors, and selective omissions co-produce the border not just as an international legal issue but as a constitutive element of the national imagination.

What is at stake here is not simply the resolution of a maritime delimitation but the deeper question of how nations define themselves, their boundaries, and their rightful place in Europe. This paper argues that banal nationalism provides the foundation upon which the entire discourse is constructed. In this context, banal nationalism does not merely reside in the visual presence of maps, flags, or national emblems in news items about the Ionian Sea dispute. Rather, it is embedded more forcefully in the very grammar of arguments, in the ways in which claims are articulated and framed. When Greek and Albanian media insist that “the sea belongs to US,” that “OUR maritime border is sacred,” or that “THE national territory cannot be negotiated,” they are not merely reporting or editorializing. They are encoding a particular logic of belonging and sovereignty that pre-structures the terms of public debate. These claims become routine, unremarkable, almost invisible — precisely the quality Michael Billig ascribed to banal nationalism. The repetition of such ordinary linguistic markers, rather than overt nationalist slogans, provides the discursive scaffolding upon which debates about the maritime boundary rest.

From this perspective, even ostensibly technical arguments – about international law, minority rights, or arbitration – are already saturated with nationalism. Nationalism does not appear as a supplement to political discourse but as its taken-for-granted ground. This insight is crucial for understanding the Greek case: whether presented in the language of European legality, geopolitical vigilance, or conditionality, the nation always reappears as the implicit subject of the sentence.

Greek Media and the Legality – Turkey nexus

A recurrent discursive element in Greek media is the persistent suggestion that Albania operates “*under Ankara’s shadow*.”²⁵ Several reports frame Tirana as “succumbing to Turkish pressure,” invoking Turkey’s role²⁶ in the annulment of the 2009 maritime agreement. At the same time, coverage frequently highlights Albania’s purchase of Bayraktar drones, military cooperation agreements, and participation in joint exercises with Turkey, feeding narratives that Albania acts as a space for Turkish ambitions in the Balkans²⁷.

These framings situate the maritime dispute within a broader civilizational confrontation: Greece/Europe versus Turkey/the East. The Ionian Sea is discursively redrawn not as a bilateral space of negotiation or shared opportunity, but as a symbolic frontier where European norms and national sovereignty are tested. By presenting Albanian actions through the lens of Turkish influence, the Greek press encodes a subtle but persistent logic: hesitations or assertive actions by Albania are never neutral or self-deter-

25 Meletis, Nikos. “Ο τουρκικός «δάκτυλος» στα Τίρανα και η βούληση Ράμα για ΑΟΖ” [The Turkish “finger” in Tirana and Rama’s will for the EEZ]. *Liberal.gr*, 29 June 2020. Available at: <https://www.liberal.gr/amynta-diplomatia/o-toyrkikos-daktylos-sta-tirana-kai-i-boyilisi-rama-gia-aaz>.

26 Stoukas, Michalis. “Η συμφωνία Ελλάδας – Αλβανίας για την ΑΟΖ (2009) που δεν εφαρμόστηκε ποτέ.” (The Greece-Albania agreement on the EEZ (2009) that was never implemented). *Proto Thema*, 24 October, 2020. Available at: <https://www.protothema.gr/stories/article/1058441/i-sumfonia-elladas-alvanias-gia-tin-aaz-2009-pou-den-efarmostike-pote/>.

27 “Ο Ερντογάν δώρισε drones καμικάζι στα Τίρανα – Ράμα: «Η Αλβανία ανίκητη με σύμμαχο την Τουρκία.” (Erdogan sent drones kamikazi in Tirana – Rome: »Albania is invincible with Turkey») *To Vima*, 10 October, 2024. Available at: <https://www.tovima.gr/2024/10/10/world/o-erntogan-dorise-drones-kamikazi-sta-tirana-rama-i-alvania-anikiti-me-symmaxo-tin-tourkia/>.

mined, but are interpreted as signs of manipulation or proxy alignment²⁸. This is banal nationalism at work through geopolitical coding: the nation is the invisible point of reference, and foreign influence is framed in terms of how it affects the nation's legitimate claims.

Even when outlets adopt a seemingly moderate tone, the underlying dichotomy remains. *Efimerida ton Syntakton*, by consistently reporting Albanian–Turkish defence deals, diplomatic visits, or historical interventions, the discourse reproduces Albania within a hierarchical regional imaginary: Greece as the autonomous, law-abiding European actor; Albania as dependent, manipulated, or externally influenced.²⁹ This normalization of geopolitical dependency naturalizes the idea that Greece is Europe's bulwark, while Albania remains on the periphery.

The Turkish factor framing interlocks with other discursive strategies, such as conditionality and legalism, to create a coherent nationalist narrative. Albanian hesitation is simultaneously read as a failure to comply with European legal norms and as evidence of Turkish manipulation. The nation, in this multi-layered framing, remains the constant referent: Greek sovereignty, lawfulness, and European identity are assumed, whereas Albanian agency is constrained and interpreted through the lens of external influence. Banal nationalism here is both the substrate and the organizing logic of the discourse, silently structuring how geopolitical realities are understood and narrated in Greek media.

28 Νίκος Δένδιας: "Η Ελλάδα δεν έχει πρόβλημα με όποιον συνεργάζεται με την Τουρκία αλλά με τον τουρκικό αναθεωρητισμό." (Nikos Dendias: Greece does not have a problem with anyone who cooperates with Turkey, but with Turkish revisionism). *To Vima*, 21 December, 2022. Available at: <https://www.tovima.gr/2022/12/21/politics/nikos-dendias-i-ellada-den-exei-provlima-me-opoion-synergazetai-me-tin-tourkia-alla-me-ton-tourkiko-anatheoritismo/>.

29 "Δυσaréσκεια στην Αθήνα για τα Bayraktar στην Αλβανία." (Dissatisfaction in Athens over Bayraktar in Albania). *Efimerida ton Syntakton*, 21 December 2022. Available at: https://www.efsyn.gr/politiki/exoteriki-politiki/371921_dysareskeia-stin-athina-gia-ta-bayraktar-stin-albania?amp.

Legalism and the Moral Geography of Belonging

Media coverage in Greece emphasizes the country's willingness to submit the dispute to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in The Hague. This move is repeatedly described as evidence of Greece's "*commitment to legality and European norms*."³⁰ By contrast, Albanian hesitations or delays are often interpreted as proof of political immaturity, hidden agendas, or reluctance to shoulder responsibility³¹.

Such reporting rarely frames these hesitations as the result of technical, bureaucratic, or procedural constraints; instead, they are implicitly moralized, creating a stark contrast between Greece as the responsible, law-abiding actor and Albania as the deficient or unready partner.

Here, banal nationalism is articulated through what might appear as neutral legal language. The repeated invocation of the ICJ, arbitration procedures, and EU legal standards constructs a seemingly objective narrative, yet these narratives are saturated with nationalist assumptions. By presenting itself as the state of legality and the guardian of European norms, Greece simultaneously positions Albania as the state of deficiency, reinforcing an asymmetry of authority and competence³². This is the core of the moral geography: Greece is anchored firmly within the "Europe of law and order," whereas Albania remains on the margins, portrayed as needing guidance, oversight, and discipline before it can be considered

30 Pollatos, Makis. "Ελλάδα-Αλβανία: Τι σημαίνει η παραπομπή της οριοθέτησης των θαλασσίων ζωνών στη Χάγη

Γιατί ο Αλβανός πρωθυπουργός Έντι Ράμα κατηγορήσε την αντιπολίτευση της χώρας του ότι περίμενε την «κατάκτηση» από την Ελλάδα – Το μήνυμα Δένδια προς την Άγκυρα μέσω Τιράνων." (Greece-Albania: What does the referral of the delimitation of maritime zones to The Hague mean. Why Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama accused his country's opposition of waiting for the »conquest« by Greece – Dendias' message to Ankara via Tirana). *Protothema*, 21 October, 2020. Available at: <https://www.protothema.gr/politics/article/1057188/ellada-alvania-ti-simainei-i-parapobi-tis-oriothetisi-ton-thalassion-zonon-sti-hagi/>.

31 Filis, Konstantinos. "Ο διαρκής ανθελληνισμός της Αλβανίας και η ΑΟΖ." (Albania's persistent anti-Hellenism and the EEZ) *Liberal. Gr*, 7 December, 2022. Available at: <https://www.liberal.gr/amynta-diplomatia/eimaste-konta-stin-oriothetisi-aoz-me-tin-albania>.

32 Almpanis, Giannis. "Προσφυγή στη Χάγη: Με το βλέμμα στην Τουρκία η συμφωνία με την Αλβανία." (Appeal to The Hague: The agreement with Albania with an eye on Turkey). *CNN*, 20 October, 2020. Available: <https://www.cnn.gr/politiki/story/239259/prosfygi-sti-xagi-h-symfonia-me-tin-alvania-odigos-kai-gia-tin-anatoliki-mesogeio>.

fully legitimate within European frameworks. The rhetoric of legality thus functions less as a neutral or technocratic discourse and more as a vehicle for banal nationalism, normalizing hierarchical relations between the two states.

Opinion pieces reinforce this geography by combining legal argumentation with everyday nationalist cues. For instance, a *Kathimerini* column under the title “Ελλάδα – Αλβανία, ΑΟΖ μέσω Χάγης” argued that referral to the Hague is a sign of “*maturity and responsibility*,” presenting Greece’s approach as both rational and morally superior.³³ Other editorials repeatedly emphasize phrases such as “*our territorial waters*” and “*our European obligations*,” framing them as self-evident realities rather than politically contested claims. By embedding nationalism in ordinary, routine language rather than in overtly sensationalist headlines, these texts exemplify Billig’s concept of banal nationalism: the nation becomes the invisible, unquestioned point of reference for all political reasoning, shaping what is considered normal or acceptable discourse.

Moreover, the moral geography is reinforced through contrastive framing. Reports frequently juxtapose Greece’s alleged adherence to legal procedures with Albania’s perceived hesitation, casting the latter as hesitant, unprepared, or even politically manipulative.³⁴ The repeated presentation of these narratives over time creates a sense of inevitability: that Greece’s stance is the natural, unquestionable framework through which the maritime dispute must be understood, while Albania’s actions are always measured against this benchmark.

33 Tzimas, Stavros. “Ελλάδα – Αλβανία, ΑΟΖ μέσω Χάγης.” (Greece – Albania, EEZ via The Hague). *Kathimerini*, 23 October, 2020. Available at: <https://www.kathimerini.gr/opinion/561129280/ellada-alvania-aoz-meso-chagis/>.

34 Pagadakis, Dimitris. “Το μετέωρο βήμα του Ράμα για τη συμφωνία της Ελληνοαλβανικής ΑΟΖ
Ο κάποτε φέρελπις Αλβανός πρωθυπουργός, κάνει ότι μπορεί για να μην προχωρήσει η οριοθέτηση της ΑΟΖ ανάμεσα στις δύο χώρες με προφανή στόχο να εξυπηρετήσει τα σχέδια του Ερντογάν.” (Rama’s precarious step towards the Greek-Albanian EEZ agreement The once hopeful Albanian prime minister is doing everything he can to prevent the delimitation of the EEZ between the two countries from proceeding, with the obvious aim of serving Erdogan’s plans). *Proto Thema*, 14 December, 2022. Available at: <https://www.protothema.gr/world/article/1317427/to-meteoro-vima-tou-rama-gia-ti-sumfonia-tis-ellinoalvanikis-aoz/>.

This normalization of Greek legal and moral authority illustrates how banal nationalism operates at the level of discourse structure rather than dramatic rhetoric. The insistence that Greece's obligations are both European and lawful, and that Albania's delays signal deficiency, turns routine legal reporting into a performative act of national self-definition. Over time, such framing pre-structures public debate: even discussions of neutral procedures, such as arbitration or ICJ referral, are read through the lens of national identity, belonging, and sovereignty. In this way, banal nationalism shapes not only what is said but what is assumed to be meaningful, legitimate, or possible in the public sphere.

The Conditionality Narrative

A recurring motif in Greek reporting is the framing of Albania's EU accession as conditional upon resolving bilateral disputes. Media often stress that Greece supports Albania's European future, but only if Tirana proves capable of fulfilling its obligations regarding borders, minority protections, and international norms. The very language of "obligations" and "responsibilities" presumes a hierarchical relationship: Greece, as an established EU member, is cast as the examiner or gatekeeper, while Albania appears as the applicant, hesitant or unprepared³⁵. This is banal nationalism at work. The conditionality frame naturalizes the assumption that Greece speaks as "Europe," while Albania must demonstrate its worthiness to enter³⁶. It is not presented as a political choice but as an obvious necessity: a candidate state must respect borders, protect minorities, and adhere to legal obligations. By embedding these expectations in routine reporting, Greek media transform the bilateral issue into an index of Albania's overall civilizational readiness.

35 Agrolamos, Mpampis. "Παιχνίδι καθυστέρησης" (Delay game) *Efimerida ton Syntakton*, 22, December, 2022. Available at: https://www.efsyn.gr/politiki/exoteriki-politiki/371996_paihni-di-kathyste-riseon.

36 Nedos, Vasilis. "ΑΟΖ: Δένδιας – Τσάκα με επίκεντρο το συνυποσχετικό" (EEZ: Dendias – Tsaka with a focus on the co-contract). *Kathimerini*, 3 December, 2022. Available at: <https://www.kathimerini.gr/politics/562167604/aoz-dendias-tsaka-me-epikentro-to-synyposchetiko/>.

Across outlets, the same logic consistently appears: Greece is positioned as the custodian of European norms, while Albania's progress is continually measured against these standards. Through repetition, legalistic vocabulary, and normalized expectations, the discourse subtly flags the nation, framing Albania as needing to earn its place within the European order.

Discursive Silences

Equally significant in Greek media coverage are what remain unsaid. There are no reports that highlight the potential economic, environmental, or strategic benefits of resolving the maritime dispute—such as joint energy exploration, shared environmental initiatives, or regional investment in the Ionian Sea. Instead, the dominant framing positions the sea primarily as a border of national belonging, rather than as a site of potential cooperation. Even when arbitration or technical negotiations are mentioned, they are consistently interpreted through the lens of national identity: agreeing to arbitration signals alignment with European norms, while hesitation is read as geopolitical ambivalence.

These silences reinforce banal nationalism by making assumptions about the nation and its territory appear self-evident. Maps, infographics, and repeated phrases like “our territorial waters” subtly convey that Greece's claims are natural, unquestioned, and morally justified. Discussions of cooperative opportunities, mediation efforts, or proposals from Albania tend to be brief and subordinate to the dominant narrative of national rights and European legality.

The effect of these omissions is cumulative. By routinely excluding cooperative or neutral frames, the maritime boundary is reproduced as a symbolic frontier rather than a space of shared possibilities. This selective reporting reinforces the perception that Greece is the standard-bearer of legality and Europeaness, while Albania occupies a marginal, reactive position. The silences are therefore not incidental—they are active components of banal nationalism, shaping public understanding of what counts

as legitimate, necessary, or natural in debates over sovereignty and national territory.

Albanian Media and the Sovereignty Narrative

Albanian media present the maritime border dispute overwhelmingly as a matter of sovereignty, dignity, and historical justice but also as a matter of national betrayal. Headlines such as “*They Sold the Sea!*”³⁷, “*A national betrayal is being consumed!*”³⁸, or “*National betrayal will enter history!*”³⁹ dramatize negotiations as existential threats to the nation. Reports in outlets such as *Panorama*, *Gazeta Tema*, *Koha Jone*, *Lapsi.al*, and *Balkanweb* repeatedly underscore that the issue is not merely technical but a question of national survival. Even when coverage adopts a calmer, technocratic register—emphasizing that arbitration at the ICJ aligns Albania with European and international legal norms—the underlying logic remains the same: the sea is constructed as a metonym for the nation, an uncompromisable inheritance that cannot be ceded without dishonour. In this way, public discourse equates maritime zones not only with resources or borders but with the very essence of Albanian statehood.

The dramatization often takes the form of historical continuity, framing the dispute as yet another chapter in a long story of foreign encroachment. Media narratives frequently invoke past territorial grievances—from the partition of Albanian lands in 1913 to Cold War border tensions—as precedents that demonstrate Greece’s “perpetual designs” on Albanian ter-

37 “Shitja e detit nga Rama si Shën Naumi i Ahmet Zogut.” (Rama’s sale of the sea as Ahmet Zogu’s Saint Naum) *Koha Jone*, 23 July, 2021. Available at: <https://kohajone.com/kryesore/shitja-e-detit-si-shen-naumi-i-ahmet-zogut/>.

38 »Po konsumohet një tradhti e madhe kombëtare?«, Vasili: Çështja e kufirit detar, shembulli me dramatik se si narkoqeverisja trajton problemet madhore.« (»Is a great national betrayal being consumed?«, Vasili: The maritime border issue, the most dramatic example of how narco-government deals with major problems) *Balkanweb*, 1 August, 2024. Available at: <https://www.balkanweb.com/po-konsumohet-nje-tradhti-e-madhe-kombetare-vasili-ceshtja-e-kufirit-detar-shembulli-me-dramatik-se-si-narkoqeverisja-trajton-problemet-madhore/#gsc.tab=0>.

39 »Marrëveshja e Detit“, Hoxha: Këtë tradhëti kombëtare do ta shënojnë në histori.« (»Sea Agreement«, Hoxha: This national betrayal will be marked in history) *TPZ.al* 30 October, 2020. Available at: <https://www.tpz.al/marreveshja-e-detit-hoxha-kete-tradheti-kombetare-do-ta-shenojne-ne-histori>.

ritory⁴⁰. This framing amplifies anxieties of national betrayal: government officials who pursue compromise are accused of “selling out” or “handing over Albanian waters.”⁴¹ In such accounts, sovereignty is not presented as a negotiable legal framework but as a sacred trust inherited from the nation’s founders, to be safeguarded at any cost. The critical stance is most prominent in opposition media, which frequently portray the government’s handling of the maritime border dispute as a betrayal of national interests. Prime Minister Edi Rama is often accused of “selling the sea to Greece,” a framing that taps into broader anxieties about sovereignty, territorial integrity, and the historical continuity of Albanian claims. Such narratives draw on long-standing nationalist sentiments and function as a political tool to challenge the government’s credibility in foreign policy, dramatizing the dispute as a matter of existential importance. At the same time, pro-government outlets strategically employ similar rhetoric, invoking the 2009 agreement to remind the opposition of its own past role in “selling the sea to Greece.” This discursive interplay demonstrates how banal nationalism operates across political divides: the sea is repeatedly coded as the essence of the nation, and accusations of betrayal—whether directed at the government or the opposition—serve to reinforce a shared understanding of territorial sovereignty as non-negotiable. Through repetition, emotive language, and historical references, both sides construct the maritime dispute as a symbolic site where national honour, political legitimacy, and party competition intersect.

40 “Deti qe na bashkon dhe ndan me Greqine.” (The sea that unites us and divides us from Greece) *SOT*, 1 September, 2020. Available at: <https://sot.com.al/opinion-editorial/deti-qe-na-bashkon-dhe-na-ndan-me-greqine-769/>.

41 “Marrëveshja e detit me Greqinë, Berisha: Rama e shiti! S’ka vend në botë që toleron një tradhtar si ai.” (Maritime agreement with Greece, Berisha: Rama sold it! There is no place in the world that tolerates a traitor like him). *Balkanweb*, 26 September, 2022. Available at: <https://www.balkanweb.com/marreveshja-e-detit-me-greqine-berisha-rama-e-shiti-ska-vend-ne-bote-qe-toleron-nje-tradhtar-si-ai/#gsc.tab=0>.

Nomination and Predication

In this discursive field, Albanian media consistently nominates Albania as the “defender of territorial integrity” and “custodian of sovereignty,”⁴² adopting roles imbued with moral weight and historical continuity. Political leaders are framed as inheritors of national suffering, as those who must stand guard over borders passed down through generations but who usually don’t. Remarks such as “Rama is selling the sea”⁴³ or “Berisha sold the sea to the Greeks”⁴⁴ portray the actual or the former Prime Minister not simply as negotiating, but as betraying national trust. When Albania is praised, it is for “standing firm,” “not yielding,” or for defending national honor; when criticized, it is with vocabulary of betrayal, humiliation, or loss.

Greece, by contrast, is nominated as the “demanding neighbour,” the “expansionist state,” or “the one putting pressure on Albania.”⁴⁵

These nominations are coupled with predications that carry strong emotive force. Terms like “humiliation,” “danger,” “capitulation,” “betrayal,” even implicit comparisons with traitors, appear repeatedly. Repetition is central: across different outlets, these nominations and predications recur in opinion pieces, news reports, and even editorials, reinforcing the sense that sovereignty is non-negotiable. The effect is a binary logic where Albania is either the virtuous guardian or the betrayer—no middle ground. Such framing constrains public discourse by making any compromise suspect, any

42 “Çfarë thoshte Gjykata Kushtetuese për “12 miljet” në vendimin e vitit 2010.” (What the Constitutional Court said about the «12 miles» in the 2010 decision). *Lapsi.al*, 28 August, 2020. Available at: <https://lapsi.al/2020/08/28/cfare-thoshte-gjykata-kushtetuese-per-12-miljet-ne-vendimin-e-viit-2010/>.

43 Vasil, Petrit. “Rama po shet detin te Greqia”, LSI zbulon çdo ndodhë me kufijtë pas zgjedhjes së Presidentit të ri.” (»Rama is selling the sea to Greece«, LSI reveals what is happening with the borders after the election of the new President). *Balkanweb*, 26, May, 2022. Available at: <https://www.balkanweb.com/rama-po-shet-detin-te-greqia-lsi-zbulon-cdo-ndodhe-me-kufijte-pas-zgjedhjes-se-presidentit-te-ri/>.

44 Pasha, Myslym. “Si Berisha shiti detin te grekët dhe prilli fitues i Gjykatës Kushtetuese.” (How Berisha sold the sea to the Greeks and April won the Constitutional Court). *Pamfleti*, 1 May, 2023. Available at: <https://pamfleti.net/forum/si-berisha-shiti-detin-te-greket-dhe-prilli-fitues-i-gjykates-kushtetuese-i168968>.

45 Dervishi, Dashnor. “Greqia bën presion për çdo çështje të lënë pezull.” (Greece presses for every pending issue). *Koha Jone*, 20 August, 2021. Available at: <https://kohajone.com/magazine/greqia-ben-presion-per-cdo-ceshtje-te-lene-pezull/>.

negotiation potentially shameful. Sovereignty becomes not just a political goal, but a virtue whose violation is unthinkable in national terms.

This dynamic produces what might be called a sovereignty-grammar: phrases like “our maritime borders,” “territorial integrity,” “national sea,” or “preserving sovereignty” are used without qualifying whose maps, whose rights — they are always implicitly Albanian. The nation is not spoken of as one actor among many, but as the singular moral referent. Negotiation with Greece, no matter if in legal form like ICJ arbitration, is depicted through predicative frames as either preserving honour or risking dishonour. The media thus shapes a public logic where to vacillate or compromise is to betray the ancestors and damage the dignity of the nation.

Intertextual Anchors: The 2009 Agreement

The annulled 2009 maritime agreement functions as one of the most powerful intertextual anchors in Albanian media discourse. Rarely is the current dispute discussed without reference to it. Outlets across the spectrum label the agreement a “national error”, a “historical shame”, or an “unjust agreement”)⁴⁶. The effect of this repetition is not only to delegitimize the actors who signed it but also to pre-structure public debate on any subsequent negotiations: the very possibility of compromise is shadowed by the specter of betrayal.

Such invocations serve two important functions. First, they historicize suspicion, placing present negotiations into a narrative of repeated injustice. By warning that “history must not be repeated,” journalists and commentators conflate past and present, ensuring that every diplomatic step is read against a background of vigilance. Second, they construct what might be called a palimpsest of grievance: the memory of 2009 is laye-

46 “Mbushen 17 vjet nga dita kur Sali Berisha i fali detin Greqisë, me një urdhër të paligjshëm.” (17 years have passed since Sali Berisha ceded the sea to Greece, with an illegal order). *Report Tv*, 23 August, 2024. Available at: <https://report-tv.al/lajm/mbushen-17-vjet-nga-dita-kur-sali-berisha-i-fali-detin-greqise-me-nje-urdher-te-paligjshem>.

red upon contemporary debates, saturating them with the weight of past humiliation.

The discursive power of the 2009 agreement lies in its transformation from a legal document into a mythic cautionary tale. It is retold not for its technical details but for its symbolic resonance: it embodies the dangers of weak leadership, the risks of foreign manipulation, and the eternal duty of Albanians to defend sovereignty. The repetition of phrases such as *"the 2009 agreement was the worst."*⁴⁷ reactivates collective memory every time the maritime border is discussed. In this way, the annulled agreement becomes a permanent intertextual warning sign, disciplining both political elites and public opinion to view any compromise with suspicion.

Metaphors and Symbolic Constructions

Albanian discourse frequently employs highly affective metaphors that tie the maritime dispute to moral and historical significance. The sea is framed as the domain of national heroes, whose sacrifices secured Albania's territorial integrity, while traitors are those who compromised these gains in past agreements or during current negotiations, including references to the annulled 2009 maritime accord.⁴⁸ Such metaphors transform technical negotiations into a symbolic battle, where the maritime boundary is no longer a cartographic line but a site of honour, heroism, and betrayal. By linking the sea to heroic defence and treachery, these constructions encode a logic of sovereignty in which compromise is morally fraught.

The discourse often claims that *"any concession to Greece would be a betrayal of the nation and the efforts to defend the national territory,"* presenting diplomatic hesitations as threats to Albania's heroic legacy. The

47 Mecollari, Artur. "Marrëveshja e vitit 2009 mbi det, për shkak të parimeve të aplikuara, ishte me e keqja e mundëshme." (The 2009 agreement on the sea, due to the principles applied, was the worst possible). *Shqiptarja*, 29, August, 2020. Available at: <https://shqiptarja.com/lajm/rreth-debatit-mbi-zgjerimin-e-gjeresise-se-detit-territorial-te-greqise>.

48 "Pas "Minishengenit" dhe "KalitëTrojës" fshihet tradhëti kombëtare e Ramës." (Behind the "Mini-Schengen" and the "Trojan Horse" lies Rama's national betrayal). *Telegraf*, 26 December, 2020. Available at: <https://telegraf.al/politike/pas-minishengenit-dhe-kalit-te-trojes-fshihet-tradhetia-kombetare-e-rames/>.

Ionian Sea is framed as a space that must be defended against traitors, with repeated references to the 2009 agreement as a prior act of betrayal, cautioning against repeating such compromises in current negotiations. Maritime sovereignty is consistently depicted in terms of heroism and vigilance, portraying ongoing talks as a continuation of historic struggles where failing to defend national claims would risk turning Albania into a “Trojan horse” for foreign interests⁴⁹.

These metaphors function as banal nationalist cues, flagging the nation in everyday reporting. By repeatedly equating borders with betrayal, vigilance, and the threat of traitors, Albanian media naturalize a sense of collective belonging and moral obligation. Even in technical or legalistic reports, metaphorical language reasserts the symbolic stakes: headlines like “*Prison or an Avni Rustem*”⁵⁰ for the traitors of the nation who sell the sea?”⁵¹ convey that the nation is inseparable from its maritime domain and that any compromise is treated as a betrayal of national integrity.

The effect of these symbolic constructions is to pre-structure public discourse, making compromise appear not only politically risky but ethically unacceptable. By linking contemporary diplomacy to defending the legacy of national heroes and resisting traitors, media narratives cultivate a moral geography in which Albania is the vigilant custodian of its sacred inheritance, while any yielding—even within frameworks like ICJ arbitration—is interpreted as repeating historical betrayals. These figurative framings thus reinforce the sovereignty narrative, ensuring that maritime negotiations are

49 “Marrëveshja e Detit: Kalvari i një “Kali Troje” që i kushton Shqipërisë mbi 354 milje detare.” (The Sea Agreement: The Ordeal of a »Trojan Horse« That Costs Albania Over 354 Nautical Miles). *Gazeta Shqip*, 27 August, 2020. Available at: <https://gazeta-shqip.com/me-rendesi/marreveshja-e-detit-kalvari-i-nje-kali-troje-qe-i-kushton-shqiperise-mb/>.

50 Avni Rustemi (1895–1924) was an Albanian nationalist activist and political figure, known for assassinating Essad Pasha Toptani in 1920 in defense of Albanian sovereignty and considered a symbol of resistance against perceived traitors to the nation.

51 Xhani, Mili. “Burgu apo një “Avni Rustem” duhet për tradhtarët e Kombit që shesin edhe detin?!” (Prison or an »Avni Rustem« is needed for traitors to the Nation who sell even the sea?!). *Koha Jone*, 29 August, 2020. Available at: <https://kohajone.com/kryesore/burgu-apo-nje-avni-rustem-duhet-per-tradhtaret-e-kombit-qe-shesin-edhe-detin/>.

continuously interpreted through the lens of heroism, treachery, and national honor.

Discursive Silences

As in Greek media, Albanian coverage of the maritime dispute rarely emphasizes cooperation, compromise, or joint benefit. Opportunities for shared resource management, environmental governance, or regional economic development are almost entirely absent from public reporting. This absence is not incidental; it functions discursively to construct the maritime border as a site of existential risk rather than a potential arena for collaboration. By failing to highlight cooperative avenues, the media naturalizes a zero-sum framework: the sea is either defended or lost, sovereignty is preserved or betrayed. The lack of discussion of joint initiatives implicitly reinforces the narrative that the nation must always be vigilant, and that any concession may equate to historical or moral failure.

Editorials consistently omit any mention of shared energy or fishery projects, focusing instead on Greek “pressure” or historical grievances. Opinion pieces frequently frame arbitration and negotiation purely as tests of national courage, rather than as mechanisms to generate mutual benefit. Reports describe potential ICJ outcomes almost exclusively in terms of victory or humiliation, with no reference to the possibility of a mutually agreed settlement providing economic or ecological advantages. Such silences are not neutral; they guide audience perception, ensuring that public debate is pre-structured around defence, risk, and honour, rather than strategic collaboration.

This discursive pattern amplifies banal nationalism by establishing the nation as the default lens for interpreting any event. Even technically oriented reporting that details legal arguments or ICJ procedures is framed within a moral and affective universe where sovereignty and national dignity are paramount. By excluding cooperative or integrative frames, Albanian media reproduce a sense of national exceptionalism: the nation is always the custodian of its sea, the final arbiter of its borders, and the sole moral

referent in debates over territory. Consequently, the silence on possibilities of bilateral partnership or regional integration reinforces the broader sovereignty narrative, making the maritime boundary a contested, morally charged threshold, rather than a site of shared opportunity.

Convergence of Discursive Practices

Although Greek and Albanian discourses differ in tone and emphasis, they converge in crucial ways. Both rely on historical references and geopolitical linkages—whether to Turkey, past agreements, or Europe’s conditionality mechanisms—to dramatize the border. Both employ lexical and metaphorical strategies that inflate the sea into a metaphor for the nation itself. And both avoid discussing pragmatic benefits, thereby reinforcing the perception of the dispute as a zero-sum game.

Most importantly, both contexts reveal the banal operation of nationalism. The dispute does not need constant mobilization of extremist rhetoric. Instead, the nation is flagged in routine headlines, everyday lexical choices, and repeated silences. Terms like “our sea,” “our sovereignty,” or “our European path” reproduce the border as an unquestioned reality. In this sense, banal nationalism and symbolic bordering intersect: the maritime boundary is not simply defended but continuously imagined, narrated, and naturalized in daily discourse.

What unites the Greek and Albanian framings is the symbolic inflation of the maritime border into a metaphor for the nation itself. In both contexts, the sea becomes a space onto which anxieties about national strength, historical justice, and geopolitical alignment are projected.

These narratives are rarely accompanied by discussion of pragmatic outcomes—such as economic cooperation, environmental coordination, or joint maritime resource development. Instead, the emphasis is on loss, threat, and dignity. This reflects the operation of banal nationalism, where the nation is flagged not through dramatic spectacle but through the routine invocation of national space and sovereignty in everyday discourse.

The maritime dispute, in this reading, is not just a negotiation over territory—it is a site of discursive labour, where the nation is imagined, narrated, and symbolically defended.

CONCLUSION

The maritime border dispute between Albania and Greece exemplifies how nationalist imaginaries continue to shape international relations in Southeast Europe, even within the framework of EU integration and formal diplomacy. Although the dispute is legal in form, it is deeply symbolic: through media discourse, political framing, and public rhetoric, the sea becomes a space where sovereignty, dignity, and national belonging are routinely performed and reaffirmed. In both countries, the dispute illustrates that borders are not merely lines on a map but **cultural and discursive constructions**, reproduced daily through language, images, metaphors, and silences.

The analysis reveals that Greek media frame the dispute through the lens of legality, conditionality, and geopolitical vigilance, positioning Greece as the “law-abiding European actor” and Albania as hesitant, evasive, or externally influenced. Albanian media, meanwhile, mobilize narratives of sovereignty, betrayal, and uncompromisable inheritance, portraying the sea as sacred territory and any concession as national humiliation. Despite differences in tone, both contexts converge in elevating the maritime boundary into a metaphor for the nation itself embedding nationalism into the routines of everyday reporting and political commentary.

The case illustrates Billig’s insight that nationalism is often banal, reproduced subtly through ordinary language and practices, and Paasi’s view of borders as symbolically constructed institutions. It also confirms Balibar’s notion of fictive ethnicity: the maritime boundary functions as a marker of identity, belonging, and moral order, delineating who is inside and outside the imagined national community. Nationalism persists not only in dramatic spectacles or overt displays but in the ordinary, repetitive, and normalized articulations of sovereignty and territorial integrity.

The persistence of these symbolic framings also challenges the assumption that processes of European integration automatically erode nationalist narratives. On the contrary, what we observe is a resilient adaptation of nationalism: far from disappearing, it is embedded into the very language of Europeanization, legality, and modernization. In Greece, nationalism is banalized through appeals to law and conditionality; in Albania, it is banalized through appeals to sovereignty and dignity. Both modes reaffirm the nation daily, while obscuring possibilities for cooperation or shared governance of maritime resources.

Ultimately, the Albanian–Greek maritime dispute reveals that borders are not just lines on maps but cultural practices—performed, narrated, and symbolically defended in everyday life. The sea, far from being neutral territory, emerges as a frontier of the nation, carrying the weight of history, identity, and memory. By analyzing these discourses, we see how banal nationalism ensures that even in an era of open borders and European integration, imagined boundaries remain deeply entrenched.

The case thus offers broader lessons for Southeast Europe: it shows how the unresolved legacies of the past continue to shape the present, how borders are symbolically inflated into markers of dignity and justice, and how nationalism survives not in dramatic spectacles but in the banal, everyday discursive labor that keeps the nation alive.

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