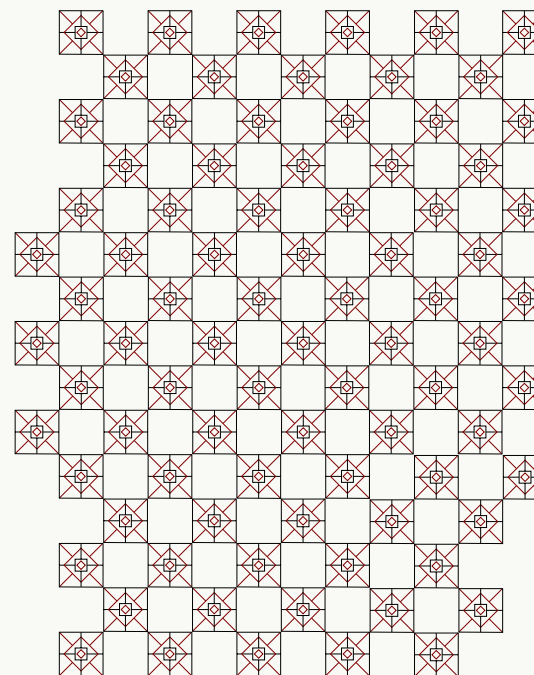


Retro **SPEKTIVE**

*Znanstvena revija za
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sorodna področja*

IX/1



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Retro
SPEKTIVE

Editorial Introduction

9

Foreword

Zvezdana Kovač

Director, Joint History Project (JHP 2.0)

11

The question of borders has long shaped the history of Southeast Europe—not only as lines on maps, but as powerful constructs that define identities, influence political decisions, and frame collective memory. The international conference “*Borders in Southeast Europe: Geography or Imagination?*”, held in Podgorica from 16 to 18 May 2025, invited scholars and practitioners to revisit this question at a time when borders—both real and imagined—are once again at the centre of political and societal debates.

This special issue of *Retrospektive* brings together selected contributions presented at the conference, organized within the framework of the Joint History Project (JHP). It reflects our ongoing commitment to fostering critical, multiperspective approaches to history, encouraging dialogue across divides, and promoting a deeper understanding of the past as a shared and contested space.

The JHP has, since its inception, sought to challenge rigid and exclusive historical narratives by offering alternative ways of teaching and understanding history in Southeast Europe. At its core lies the belief that history is not a fixed account of the past, but a dynamic process shaped by interpretation, context, and dialogue. In that sense, borders are not merely geographical realities—they are also products of imagination, negotiation, and power.

The contributions in this special issue vividly illustrate this complexity. Some authors explore the historical formation of borders and their contested nature. The study of the Austro-Hungarian border after the First World War, for example, demonstrates how borders emerge through a combination of geopolitical decisions and local dynamics, often remaining fluid and unstable long after they are formally established. Similarly, the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina reveals how borders, even when short-lived, continue to shape political perceptions and realities decades later, particularly during times of conflict and post-conflict reconstruction.

Other contributions shift the focus from physical borders to symbolic and imagined ones. The analysis of memory wars in Southeast Europe highlights how national narratives attempt to “claim” historical figures by projecting contemporary borders onto past lives that were often transnational in nature. This process not only simplifies complex histories but also reinforces divisions that transcend time and space.

The role of borders in contemporary political discourse is another key theme addressed in this special issue. As shown in the analysis of nationalist narratives in Montenegro and Serbia, the past continues to be instrumentalized to shape present-day politics, often reinforcing exclusionary identities and undermining democratic values. In a broader European context, the resurgence of authoritarian tendencies further underscores the relevance of border-making processes, where the idea of homogeneous communities is closely linked to practices of exclusion and, ultimately, violence.

Importantly, this special issue also engages with the ways in which borders are reproduced and challenged through education and public discourse. The case of history education in Greece reveals the persistence of conservative, often ethnocentric curricula, but also the potential of bottom-up initiatives to introduce more inclusive and multiperspective approaches. At the same time, new forms of digital expression—such as amateur cartography—demonstrate how borders continue to be imagined and reimagined in contemporary public space, often reinforcing ethno-territorial narratives.

Taken together, these contributions highlight a central insight: borders are not static. They are constantly negotiated, contested, and redefined—through politics, education, media, and everyday practices. Understanding borders, therefore, requires moving beyond traditional disciplinary boundaries and embracing interdisciplinary and transnational perspectives.

This special issue is not only an academic contribution but also a reflection of the broader mission of the Joint History Project. By bringing together scholars from across the region and beyond, we aim to create a

space for dialogue that challenges dominant narratives and opens new avenues for understanding the past. In doing so, we hope to contribute to a more nuanced and inclusive approach to history—one that recognizes complexity, embraces diversity, and resists simplistic divisions.

In a region where borders have too often been associated with conflict and exclusion, rethinking their meaning is both an intellectual and a societal necessity. This special issue is a step in that direction

Borders as Historical Practices

Editorial Introduction

Kornelija Ajlec & Božo Repe

17

Borders are among the most persistent and powerful categories through which the history of Southeast Europe has been written, taught, remembered, and contested. They appear as diplomatic outcomes, military realities, administrative divisions, cartographic claims, symbolic markers, and educational narratives. Yet borders are never merely lines separating one territory from another. They are historical practices: they are produced, justified, naturalized, challenged, and remembered through institutions, maps, textbooks, public discourse, and everyday life.

This special issue of *Retrospektive* brings together selected contributions that approach borders not as fixed geographical facts, but as historically constructed and politically meaningful phenomena. The issue grew out of the international conference “*Borders in Southeast Europe: Geography or Imagination?*”, as noted by Zvezdana Kovač, Director of the Joint History Project, in the preceding foreword. Its publication in *Retrospektive* reflects the journal’s commitment to critical historical scholarship, public history, and the examination of how the past is interpreted, represented, and transmitted in different social contexts.

The articles collected here move across different periods, regions, and disciplinary approaches. Some examine the historical and cartographic production of space, showing how maps, ethnic categories, and territorial claims have shaped the political imagination of Southeast Europe. Others address borders as sites of historical violence and contemporary political contestation from the violent reordering of territory during the Second World War to the persistence of border questions in contemporary media and political discourse. A further group of contributions turns to history education, curricula, and textbooks, asking how borders, neighbours, national narratives, and civilizational imaginaries are reproduced or challenged through teaching.

The order of the issue follows this analytical movement from the production of space, through concrete historical and contemporary border practices, to the classroom and the curriculum. This structure reflects the conviction that borders are not only political or geographical phenomena,

but also historical categories that are represented, narrated, taught, and internalized.

In this sense, the special issue is concerned not only with borders themselves, but also with the work that borders perform. They organize space, but they also organize historical meaning. They separate territories, but they also structure identities. They may appear as natural or self-evident, yet they are continuously made and remade through language, education, political practice, and public memory.

For a journal such as *Retrospektive*, this theme is particularly relevant. The study of borders opens a productive space between academic history, public history, and history education. It invites historians to think beyond national narratives without ignoring the power that such narratives still hold. It also reminds us that the teaching and public communication of history are not secondary to scholarly work, but central to the ways societies understand themselves and their neighbours.

By publishing this special issue, *Retrospektive* seeks to contribute to a more nuanced discussion of Southeast European history—one that recognizes borders as both material and imagined, both imposed and negotiated, both inherited and contested. The contributions gathered here do not offer a single interpretation of borders. Rather, they demonstrate why borders remain such a productive object of historical inquiry: because they reveal how power, space, memory, and identity intersect.

At a moment when borders are again at the centre of political and public debates across Europe and beyond, rethinking their history is not simply an academic exercise. It is also a way of understanding how societies draw lines between states, communities, memories, and futures, and how those lines might be examined critically rather than merely reproduced.

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Borders, Spaces, and Ethnic Maps in South East Europe (An Overview)

Srđan Radović

23

ABSTRACT

Ethnic/ethnographic maps from Balkan authors, similarly to those produced in major European countries, were fixing 'our own' natives in their (our) places, thus spatializing the imagined identity, and binding territory and said identity as to claim legitimacy to certain geographic space. We should be reminded that creating maps (across the eras) is usually not a matter of presentation but of representation, and that maps should be viewed as "contingent and contesting representations, that is, maps as social constructions."; or as John Brian Harley argued, mapmaking "is never merely the drawing of maps: it is the making of worlds."

Keywords

maps, cartography, ethnicity, borders, South East Europe, Yugoslavia

IZVLEČEK

Etnični/etnografski zemljevidi balkanskih avtorjev so, podobno kot tisti, ki so nastajali v večjih evropskih državah, fiksirali »naše« domorodce na njihovih (naših) krajih, s čimer so prostorsko umestili namišljeno identiteto ter ozemlje in omenjeno identiteto povezali z namenom, da bi zahtevali legitimnost določenega geografskega prostora. Spomniti se moramo, da ustvarjanje zemljevidov (skozi obdobja) običajno ni stvar predstavitve, temveč reprezentacije, in da je treba zemljevide obravnavati kot »pogojne in nasprotujoče si reprezentacije, torej zemljevide kot socialne konstrukcije«; ali kot je trdil John Brian Harley, izdelava zemljevidov »nikoli ni zgolj risanje zemljevidov: je ustvarjanje svetov«.

Ključne besede

zemljevidi, kartografija, etničnost, meje, Jugovzhodna Evropa, Jugoslavija

BELLE ÉPOQUE ET AVANT

Ethnographic or ethnic mapmaking (cartography) now has an almost bicentennial 'tradition' in Europe, starting off with classic print map production, continuing until present day with digital cartographic techniques, presentation and accessibility, and abundant and diversified geo-data.¹ This now well-established segment of population cartography has been academically scrutinized by not only geographers, but also historians, sociologists, anthropologists and other scholars. In the 19th century, a plethora of cartographic techniques for mapping populations were developed simultaneously with population statistics in Central and West Europe,² and a number of 'ethnic' maps (of Europe and the world) have been published in 19th century atlases even when not based on factual, empirical data (such as those by Heinrich Berghaus).³ The midcentury already witnessed the regular publication of such maps, whose main, transparent aim was to cartographically (re)present the alleged spread (distribution) of ethnic, cultural and linguistic communities.⁴ Their more subtle aim might have been tied to the expansion of imperialist and colonial ambitions of European powers of the time – as David Campbell states, ethnographic maps (purporting to show the spatial distribution of identity groups), have often served colonial practices of governments through their reduction of dynamic social situations to conceptions of homogenous territory, and being a technology crucial for the fixing of "natives in their places", ethnographic maps were often utilized to justify colonial claims.⁵ Thus, numerous ethnic/ethnographic maps of the world (usually present in general atlases), parti-

1 This paper is a result of research undertaken at the Institute of Ethnography SASA under the contract signed with the Ministry of Science of Serbia no. 451-03-136/2025-03/200173 (04.02.2025).

2 More detailed see Crampton, Jeremy. "The cartographic calculation of space: race mapping and the Balkans at the Paris Peace Conference of 1919." *Social & Cultural Geography*, 7/5 (2006), 733.

3 Winlow, Heather. "Mapping, race and ethnicity." In: *International Encyclopedia of Human Geography*, eds. Rob Kitchin and Nigel Thrift. Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2009, 398–409.

4 See Jöhler, Reinhard. "Die Karten der Ethnographen. Volkskunden, ethnographische Karten, volkscundliche Atlanten (1850–1980)." In: *Beschreiben und Vermessen. Raumwissen in der östlichen Habsburgermonarchie im 18. und 19. Jahrhundert*, ed. Josef Wolf. Berlin: Franky & Timme, 2020, 583–626.

5 Campbell, David. "Apartheid cartography: the political anthropological and spatial effects of international diplomacy in Bosnia." *Political Geography*, 18 (1999), 406.

cular European (or other) regions and countries, or colonial possessions on other continents, have been produced during the 19th century, sometimes based upon census or other demographic returns, but often also on other kinds of empirical (or projected) data. As Vedran Duančić points out, geographers from various countries – first in Europe, later in North America and elsewhere – contributed to the imagining and building of overseas colonial empires in the heyday of European imperialism as well as nation-building efforts across the European continent.⁶

South East Europe outside the Habsburg domain lagged somewhat behind in the production of such ethnic maps (mostly due to the later establishment of geographic and cartographic institutions), but not for long. Also, the Balkan Ottoman lands (European Turkey/Turkey in Europe), and their vicinity were cartographically represented with regards to their purported ethnic composition by foreign, Western scholars, and before the 1870s the most influential maps of this kind were those by Ami Boué, Guillaume Lejean, and Pavel Šafárik.⁷ ‘Native’ ethnic cartographers were also emerging: for example, what could be considered the first thematic map in Serbian cartography, was an “ethnographic map” from 1821 titled *States in which Serbs reside*, by Dimitrije Davidović.⁸ Davidović’s sketched biography (author of one of the first historical overviews of the Serbs, journalist and newspaper editor, a diplomat, state minister, and author of the constitution of the autonomous Serbian polity in 1835),⁹ can indirectly display the context and motivations for the production of maps of ethnic distribution at this time. Emerging nation-states and their intellectual and political forefathers strived to define (imagine) nascent national identities in this part of Europe mostly based on ethnicity, which in itself was also the

6 Duančić, Vedran. “Mapping the uncertain: Difficulties with establishing the ethnic borders in interwar Yugoslavia.” *Boundaries and Borders in the Post-Yugoslav Space*, eds. Nenad Stefanov and Srđan Radović, 125–141. Berlin–Boston: Walter De Gruyter, 2021, 129.

7 See Peckham, Robert. “Map mania: nationalism and the politics of place in Greece, 1870–1922.” *Political Geography*, 19 (2000), 77–95.

8 Grčić, Mirko. “Development of Serbian cartography from the end of XVIII to the beginning of the XX century.” *Zbornik radova – Geografski fakultet Univerziteta u Beogradu*, 67/2 (2019), 34.

9 Kičović, Miraš. “Davidović, Dimitrije.” In: *Enciklopedija Jugoslavije* sv. 3, ed. Ivo Cević. Zagreb: Jugoslavenski leksikografski zavod “Miroslav Krleža”, 1984, 391.

object of political imagining and defining. Those definitions of evolving (and constructed) ethnic and national identities were also territorial, and early ethnic/ethnographic maps from Balkan authors, similarly to those produced in major European countries, were fixing ‘our own’ natives in their (our) places, thus spatializing the imagined identity, and binding territory and said identity as to claim legitimacy to certain geographic space. We should be reminded that creating maps (across the eras) is usually not a matter of presentation but of representation, and that maps should be viewed as “contingent and contesting representations, that is, maps as social constructions.”¹⁰; or as John Brian Harley argued, mapmaking “is never merely the drawing of maps: it is the making of worlds.”¹¹

Ethnographic maps of the Balkans started proliferating with the end of the Great Eastern Crisis, and Turkey’s military and political defeat – as Robert Peckham and Henry Wilkinson state, “political significance was attached to ethnographic maps that purported to demonstrate the distribution of distinct populations and aimed at the ethnographic appropriation of the region /.../ the ambassadorial meeting at Constantinople brought home the principle of the ethnographic frontier for the peoples of Europe with all the force of a thunderbolt.”¹² What followed was a ‘map mania’¹³ which overwhelmed the fervent political and intellectual elites of victorious Balkan nation-states, after 1878 internationally recognized and ready to further expand into the territories of the ailing Ottoman state. The contending Balkan states had, by the beginning of the 20th century mostly procured their own geographic, cartographic and ethnographic assets (experts, publications, maps etc.) to assert their “point of view” and claims on the remaining Ottoman ruled regions in the Balkans, but also Asia Minor. One of the most contested territories in European Turkey was Macedonia, which was evident from the extraordinary focus it gathered from regional and

10 Crampton, Jeremy. “Maps as social constructions: power, communication and visualization.” *Progress in Human Geography*, 25/2 (2001), 242.

11 Harley, John Brian. “Cartography, ethics and social theory.” *Cartographica*, 27 (1990), 16.

12 Peckham, “Map mania,” 79.

13 *Chartomania in Greek* – Peckham, “Map mania”, 81.

international actors, but also ruthless narrative competitiveness and combativeness in Macedonia itself.¹⁴

This “quest for space” through ethno-cartographic means by the leading ‘contenders’ (Greece, Bulgaria, Serbia) for this territory can be epitomized through professional personas of the leading geographers of these countries at the turn of the century. Greek geographer Margaritis Dimitzas (also Margarites Demitsas), worked as a teacher in Macedonia, and had later written geographic school books (1878; 1885) where he asserted political importance of geography, as well as the book *Political geography* (1882); he initiated the establishment of the geographical society and university chair in Greece, and in 1896 published an extensive study (also based on field work) entitled *Macedonia in Speaking Stones and Surviving Monuments*.¹⁵ Bulgarian Vasil Kanchov was also a teacher (and school principal and inspector general) in Macedonia, and upon returning to Bulgaria (1897) he soon became a member of the recently established Bulgarian academy of science and minister of education; he extensively traveled through Macedonia (1888–1897), producing numerous geographic and ethnographic studies on particular areas (including those in Bulgaria and Anatolia), and in 1900, as a sort of a magnum opus, the study *Macedonia: Ethnography and Statistics*, accompanied by a detailed map of ethnic distribution of the region.¹⁶ The one that was not a teacher in Macedonia, but has traversed it during his field trips, was Jovan Cvijić, considered to be the founding father of Serbian geography (but also ethnology) – university professor and chancellor, president of the Serbian academy of sciences, and top civil servant of the Serbian and Yugoslav state (during and after

14 This overt and unabashed land-grabbing attention on Macedonia, supported by ethnographic and cartographic tools, was reviewed and interpreted by Henry Wilkinson in his 1951 study, covering ethnic mapping of this part of Europe from the mid-1700s to the 1940s – Wilkinson, Henry. *Maps and politics: a review of the ethnographic cartography of Macedonia*. Liverpool: The University Press of Liverpool, 1951. One of the most recent academic contributions also dealing with ethnographic cartography of this part of the Balkans is: Ilić, Žarko D. »Istorijska kartografija Srbije i Stare Srbije u drugoj polovini 19. i početkom 20. Veka.« Doctoral dissertation, Filozofski fakultet Univerziteta u Beogradu, 2023.

15 Koulouri, Christina. *Istoria kai yeografia sta Ellinika scholia (1834–1914)*. Athens: Yeniki Grammatia Neas Yeneas, 1988, 28–29, as cited in Peckham, “Map mania,” 81–82.

16 Kolev, Nikolay. *Balgarska etnografija*, Sofia: Izdatelstvo Nauka i izkustvo, 1987, 10, 43.

World War I), produced his major comprehensive book dealing with geography of the Balkans in 1918¹⁷; before and during the Balkan wars, one of his main research focuses was on Macedonia, thus he published a number of works, including a 1906 study *Political and Ethnographic Overview of Macedonia and Old Serbia* (with an ethnographic map), and in 1913 an even more elaborated ethnographic map of the whole Balkan peninsula.

Teachers, geographers, fieldworkers (who would often establish and sometimes lead academic or state enterprises), sought to define and cartographically (re)present communities living in a politically turbulent region. ‘Ethnic’ surveying (mostly through fieldwork while usually ignoring or disregarding the results and demographic categories of Ottoman population statistics)¹⁸, and then mapping of Macedonia, was molded so as to serve political and particular territorial aspirations by almost all “interested parties”¹⁹ and their academic delegates (including aforementioned scholars). Not only the maps, but also narratives, discourses and definitions of ethnicity that was mapped, all served national goals of the anticipated gains in the declining imperial space (and not just in Macedonia). Together with convenient procurement of population data, ethnic cartography strived to redefine and (re)imagine space, simultaneously with defining and imagining of national identities that was in full swing across Europe (not only the Balkans). Spatialization and building of the national identity by competing states (along with the still holding grasp of Ottoman authorities), came with a hefty price for people living in ‘contested’ regions – upon touring the

17 „Balkan Peninsula“, published in Paris in French, and later translated to Serbian and revised in several instances; see Pišev, Marko. *Politička etnografija i srpska intelektualna elita u vreme stvaranja Jugoslavije 1914–1919: slučaj Jovana Cvijića*. Beograd: Srpski genealoški centar, 2013.

18 A minute empirical analysis of how population surveying (and also mapmaking) was conveniently managed to suit particular interests (with regard to Romance speaking populations/Aromanians/Vlachs of Macedonia), can be seen in: Minov, Nikola. “The War of Numbers and its First Victim: The Aromanians in Macedonia (End of 19th – Beginning of 20th century).” *Macedonian Historical Review*, 3 (2012). As Minov argues, “in the war of figures led for Macedonia by prime ministers, ministers, university professors, scholars and journalists, battles were won by adding or subtracting one zero. Scientific research was in the background, giving way to political interests.” – Minov, “The War of Numbers,” 180.

19 „Interested parties“ in the „Macedonian question“ were not just the above mentioned three countries (who were the prime aspirants for territorial expansion into Macedonia), but also other state (including Ottoman of course) and non-state actors.

Balkans after the 1903 rebellion, progressive British journalist Henry Noel Brailsford noted “*the strife between the Christian races, the rivalry of competing empires, the devastation caused in one form or another by the idea of nationality*”.²⁰ Eventually, the future of the European regions of Turkey will be determined by military means, yet the bordering impetus of ethnographic cartography of that era was mostly clear. It was to become even clearer with the end of the World War I, and reordering and (re)bordering of the space of the defeated continental European empires.

Interbellum et postbellum

Ethnographic cartography probably experienced its heyday with the end of World War I and during the Paris Peace Conference (1919/1920). The use of maps, including those “ethnographic”, was one of the pillars of the radical b/ordering of Europe and the world that took place, and a vast number of ethnic distribution maps had been produced in both winning and losing countries of this war. Rarely have the precision and detail of geographical knowledge come to play such a pivotal, and problematic, role in a political deliberation as they did at the Paris Peace Conference:

“Armed with detailed, reliable, objective, and persuasive – or so they believed – knowledge on the physical terrain, communication lines, access to raw materials, historical boundaries, and ‘ethnographic’ (ethnic) composition of the local population, geographers accompanied the delegations of victorious countries large and small. The defeated parties were not invited to the negotiating table, which meant that geographers from countries facing imminent territorial losses presented their counterproposals for the new borders to different audiences and through different channels.”²¹

This Paris “championship of applied geography and cartography” featured several expert teams (and their ‘performance’ has been academically scrutinized in several instances): the most numerous and influential scien-

20 Brailsford, H. N. *Macedonia - its races and their future*. London: Methuen and Co, 1906, x.

21 Duančić, “Mapping the uncertain,” 129.

tific team was the US “Inquiry”²², followed by the UK and France,²³ and then expert teams from smaller countries. Among them was the ‘representation’ of the recently constituted Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, headed by already mentioned Jovan Cvijić; he and the Yugoslav delegation provided several ethnographic maps as to support the favorable delimitation of north and north-western borders of the newborn state.²⁴

It could be argued that the aim of dismantling of multinational empires, coupled with the Wilsonian principle of self-determination, brought the nation-state logic to its pinnacle at this time (together with close association of identity with territory), and ethnographic maps of the era reiterated and strengthened this logic under the guise of scientific and empirical authority.²⁵ The so-called “ethnographic border” was to be instated as a new political border in several European regions as a result of peace treaties and plebiscites, and in several instances ethnic cartography at the Paris conference laid the basis for those delineations. Most of the European countries were not too content with their new borders, but the dissatisfaction was eruptive in the countries that lost the war. Thus, most countries of East Central Europe (and beyond) operated within a framework of several types of borders: “*their internationally recognized borders; the borders they desired at the expense of others; and the borders others desired at their territorial expense*”; obsession with borders persisted and intensified throughout the interwar years.²⁶ As expected, in such a situation of continued public discussions (and resentments) about (new) borders, new ethnic maps were born and the old ones circulated in the public, even more so in countries seeking revisions of their postwar borders, and what could

22 See Crampton, “The cartographic calculation of space,” and Slukan Altic, Mirela. “The Peace Treaty of Versailles: The Role of Maps in Reshaping the Balkans in the Aftermath of WWI.” In: *History of Military Cartography*, eds. Elri Liebenberg et al., 179–198. Cham: Springer, 2016.

23 See Heffernan, Michael. “The Politics of the Map in the Early Twentieth Century.” *Cartography and Geographic Information Science*, 29/3 (2002): 207–226.

24 See Duančić, Vedran. *Geography and Nationalist Visions of Interwar Yugoslavia*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020, 92–102.

25 Radović, “Mapping ethno-politics,” 150.

26 Duančić, “Mapping the uncertain,” 130.

be designated as “map wars”²⁷ was fuming in the 1910s and 1920s. Hence, during the peace conference and in years that followed, a significant corpus of ethnographic and similar maps was published in Germany (e.g. by Jakob Spett and Albrecht Penck), and Hungary (for example the infamous “Carte Rouge” by Pal Teleki).²⁸

By this time, for the most part obvious correlation between ethnic mapmaking and territorial aspirations and bordering, shed additional light at its instrumental character, to insiders at least. Reservations about ethnic cartography were espoused even by one of the Balkan masters of the genre, Jovan Cvijić. Already in 1920, harboring some resentment with some of the outcomes of the Paris conference, Cvijić stated in one text: “Ethnographic maps and ethnographic writings are, as a rule, chauvinistic: the ones who made or wrote them usually assigned transitional areas to the nationality to which they belonged themselves. Professional circles do not trust them [the maps], but there is so many uninformed folks who are perplexed by them.”²⁹ Apparently not intended as confessional writing, such statement comes as a surprising denouncement of ethnic mapmaking from the scholar who was, for at least twenty years, involved in delineating and b/ordering of entire (ethnically complex, ‘transitional’) regions through the same cartographic (and ethnographic) means. This ‘U-turn’ on ethnic mapmaking by Cvijić might be one of the reasons why ethnographic maps were no longer present in geographic publications in the first Yugoslav state in the years to come.

Namely, the period after the end of the Paris peace conference saw very little (more precisely – none) ethnographic maps being made in the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (later Yugoslavia), certainly not

27 Seegel, Steven. *Map Men: Transnational Lives and Deaths of Geographers in the Making of East Central Europe*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018, 57.

28 On Teleki’s work, but also other famous cartographers of this period (and beyond), see Seegel, *Map Men*.

29 Cvijić, Jovan. *Govori i članci (Sabrana dela, knjiga 3, tom 1)*. Beograd: SANU et al., 1987, 342 (translation S.R.). The paper entitled “Borders and composition of our country” (Serbian: *Granice i sklop naše zemlje*) was published on December 16th 1920 in the Belgrade literary journal *Srpski književni glasnik* (New series, vol.1, no. 8).

the ethnic maps of the newborn state. Despite the existing local tradition of such mapmaking (and not only by Serbian, but also other Yugoslav cartographers), fervent production of such maps in other European countries between World wars (including allied, also recently re-established countries such as Czechoslovakia and Poland, also home to diverse ethnic communities), and existing cartographic infrastructure and cadre, a conspicuous twenty year absence of a domestic ethnographic map of the Yugoslav state occurred.³⁰ Discourse of the leading Yugoslav geographer Cvijić (whose legacy and influence will surpass his death for decades), who “offered a unifying geographical narrative and clearly had little interest in pointing to differences and delineation among the Yugoslav ‘tribes’”,³¹ could be one of the reasons for such an occurrence. As Duančić argues, “it was geography, rather than historiography, literature, or art, that decisively influenced how the Yugoslav state was perceived at home and abroad; and it was geographers who provided the most persuasive defense of, as well as the fiercest attacks on the country’s very *raison d’être* – the notion of Yugoslav kinship.”³² Said Yugoslav kinship was imagined in very different ways during the 23 year life-span of the first Yugoslav state, even on official levels (with shifting, sometimes contradictory identity politics), and fragile construction of a basically multinational state (despite public official refutation of that), perhaps did not want any cartographic representations of a land divided by ethnic (‘tribal’) lines – “mapped image of one’s own ‘body of the nation’ segregated along (ethnic) identity lines might not have been desired.”³³

30 Simultaneously, foreign cartographers indeed mapped ethnicity of the Yugoslav state in the interwar period. Probably the most detailed ethnic map of the Yugoslav territory ever (a dotted map entitled *Volkstumkarte von Jugoslawien*), was created in 1938 by Wilfried Krallert and associates. Published in (annexed) Vienna, it was based on returns of the 1931 Yugoslav census, with reinterpreted census categories (ethnicity, language, religion) being mapped on 40 sheets of a 1:200 000 scale map. The political and ideological context of the aggressive and expansionist Third Reich is inevitable when mentioning this map, as is the person of geographer and historian Krallert who was an early Nazi sympathizer in Austria, and later also embedded with German administrations in occupied Yugoslavia – see Biber, Dušan. *Nacizem in Nemci v Jugoslaviji 1933–1941*, Ljubljana: Cankarjeva založba, 1966. Dušan Biber also lists at least seven maps of ethnic distribution of Yugoslavia published in Nazi Germany – Biber, *Nacizem in Nemci*, 304, 305.

31 Duančić, “Mapping the uncertain,” 133.

32 Ibid., 125.

33 Radović, “Mapping ethno-politics,” 152.

That bordering issues and ethnic mapmaking go hand in hand has again proven correct in the Yugoslav case with the end of the World War II, (again) regarding the (re)drawing of the northwestern border of the country. Again summoning in Paris, victors of the war (this time with the defeated countries present), signed peace treaties in 1947, which among other stipulations (partially) determined new Yugoslav borders in what used to be the Italian territory of the Julian March. The definite fate of the city of Trieste and its immediate environs was to be decided in the future, which intensified ongoing Yugoslav activities on the matter. Simultaneously invoking the principles of the “natural border” (“*the port city of Trieste should be in the same state as its hinterland*”), and of the “ethnographic border” (“*the hinterland is ethnically Slovene*”), the Yugoslav side also pulled out the ethnic mapping card, and one of the more elaborate maps (combining color coding and proportional symbols) of ethnic distribution in (former) Yugoslavia was produced already in 1945.³⁴ Combining data from Austrian and Italian censuses in the Julian March, Rijeka/Fiume and Venetian Slovenia (*Beneška Slovenija*), the map visually underlined the already evident fact that Croats and Slovenes represented majority of the region, and definitely in its hinterland.³⁵

Aside from the cartographic pursuit related to the “Triestine question” (and with no pressing border issues after cooling off of tensions after the “Triestine crisis” of 1954), maps of ethnic distribution were not prominent in the overall population cartography in the second, socialist and federative Yugoslavia. Alleging that they have settled the so-called national question, with peoples/nations of Yugoslavia having their own constituent Republics, and national minorities/nationalities having almost the same rights as the Yugoslav nations (also through two Autonomous Provinces), authorities

34 The map was widely circulated with the collaborative book: Novak, Viktor and Fran Zwitter, eds. *Okolo Trsta*. Beograd: Državni izdavački zavod Jugoslavije, 1945. This map primarily authored by geographer Josip Roglič was also adjoined to other editions published in the coming years and dealing with the Julian March, usually aimed at international audiences.

35 In 1954, Zone A of the Free Territory of Trieste (including the city itself) would join Italy, and Zone B Yugoslavia (now territories of Croatia and Slovenia), a situation officially sanctioned by the Osimo treaty only in 1975.

pursued the publicly proclaimed policy of “brotherhood and unity”. Even the most general maps of Yugoslavia usually featured borders of the Republics and Provinces, while a more elaborate distribution of ethnicities was present only in some major publishing projects featuring maps, and apparently not much elsewhere. For example, the first edition of the *Yugoslav Encyclopaedia* (1955–1971) featured no such maps, and in the second edition (1980–1990) there were no ethnic distribution maps in the elaborate entries on Yugoslav republics featuring numerous maps (apart from the entry on Bosnia-Herzegovina). Major geographical publications also rarely featured maps of this sort.³⁶ Also, historical atlases for schools almost never contained ethnographic maps: e.g. in the 1980s, historical atlas first published in Zagreb in 1985 featured no ethnic maps, while the historical atlas first published in Belgrade in 1983 contained two sketched ethnic distribution map (of Austria-Hungary and Vojvodina in the 19th century). This limited presence of the so-called ethnic maps will expectedly change with the dissolution of Yugoslavia and the start of the Yugoslav wars.

MAP WARS AND WAR MAPS

The 1980s witnessed the political and economic crisis in the country with frequent public calls for the redefinition of intra-Yugoslav relations, which by 1991 escalated into the collapse of the socialist political and economic system, and the violent disintegration of the federal state through a series of wars. The dissolution of Yugoslavia was accompanied by political and military efforts for the redefinition and changing of the borders of its former constituent states, with aspiring claims usually being ethnic in character. Ethno-territorial discourses had swung in full force, tightly binding ethnicity, spatiality and borders of the newly constituted states in most public discourses, and are present to great extent until this day.³⁷ This revived emphasis on ethnicity, amid ongoing wars and conflicting territorial claims, expecte-

36 One of the exceptions being the seminal *World Atlas* by the Lexicographic Institute in Zagreb; its sixth edition from 1988 thus had separate maps of spatial distribution for all Yugoslav “nations and nationalities”, along with even more numerous general demographic, and especially economic map displays.

37 Radović, “Mapping ethno-politics,” 153.

dly increased the occurrence of its spatial (re)presentation and imagining, including the publishing of ethnographic/ethnic maps. This could be showcased maybe again through a case of a historical atlas for schools – the first new school historical atlas published in Serbia after the break-up of Yugoslavia (first edition published in 1997), thus presented the interwar Yugoslav kingdom through five maps: three covering its administrative divisions (from 1918 to 1939), one religious distribution, and one displaying ethnic distribution. Similarly, the first Croatian general atlas published in English (in 1993), presented 30 thematic maps, among them one of religious distribution, and one of ethnic distribution in Croatia.

Maps of ethnic distribution in the 1990s were for the most part dealing with territories of Bosnia–Herzegovina and Croatia where wars were raging, but not only them. Cartographers from Zagreb and Belgrade were the most prolific. In Belgrade, Geographic Faculty published a three volume edition entitled *Ethnic area of the Serbs (Etnički prostor Srba)* in 1992/1993, covering ethnic distribution of Serbia, Montenegro, and of Serbs in former Yugoslavia in general (first volume), of Bosnia–Herzegovina in the second, and of Serbs in Croatia in the third volume (each volume was accompanied with several ethnic maps); a separate English language volume was also published, containing a selection of articles and twelve ethnic maps already published in the original volumes.³⁸ In Zagreb on the other hand, officially different publishers but for the most part similar group of authors, published ethnic distribution maps of Croatia and Bosnia–Herzegovina (1991/1992), Serbia and Montenegro (1991/1992), municipalities in Baranja and East Slavonija (1992), North Dalmatia (1993), and Bosanska Posavina region in Bosnia.³⁹ Croatian Statistical Bureau published the complete results of the 1991 census for Croatia in 1992, accompanied by separate ethnic maps for each municipality, and in 1995 the same concept was implemented in the edition covering Bosnia–Herzegovina (including the maps). Political geographer and mapmaker Mladen Klemenčić, himself involved

38 All these thematic maps were based on the data from the penultimate Yugoslav census of 1981.

39 Part for one, these thematic maps were based on the data from the last Yugoslav census of 1991.

in the creation of some of the aforementioned maps published in Zagreb, revealed the context and peculiarities of these projects, which astonishingly resembled situations from earlier ethno-cartographic pursuits: support and advice of political actors to scientists and professionals creating the maps, members of the international community as primary target audience for the maps, intentional use of certain mapping styles and colors, etc.⁴⁰

He also pointed out to diverging cartographic techniques of Zagreb and Belgrade mapmakers, such as emphasizing population size or spatial distribution of ethnicities, *id est* either putting stress on territorial presence (Belgrade), or at population numbers (Zagreb):

It should be stressed that, generally, figures and statistics were interpreted professionally and correctly. Map authors and compilers did not try to falsify figures. The degree of intent in mapmaking is registered primarily through the choice of cartographic technique, including certain elements of the map design (choice of colours). In that regard, one can identify one technique favoured by Croatian sources (pie charts) and another one often used by Serbian mapmakers (choropleth maps). The final score was that ethnic maps reflected reality but at the same time served propagandistic purposes, because they were designed according to prevailing national narratives.⁴¹

Another mapmaking specificity was also noted by Klemenčić, presenting data at the lowest possible level (that of the settlement), by Serbian cartographers. Resembling very detailed and miniscule ethnic surveying and mapping from hundred years before (when academic and political disputes over alleged ethnic character even of the smallest village in contested Balkan regions were taking place), cartographic, and generally spatial rationale of ethnically classifying and re/ordering space down to the tiniest

40 Klemenčić, Mladen. "Ethnic Maps: Between Reality and Propaganda." *Migracijske i etničke teme*, 22/4 (2006), 365–366.

41 Klemenčić, "Ethnic Maps", 377. "The maps were produced mainly by scientific institutions or under the supervision of experts, but with the specific goal to back and justify political standpoints of their respective country's governments during a turbulent period of geopolitical change and transition." – Klemenčić, "Ethnic Maps", 376.

geographical unit was widespread during war-time. This principle was utilized most often by Bosnian Serb military and civilian leaders throughout the war, who even claimed on several occasions that “64 per cent of land was registered to Serbs as most lived in rural areas”,⁴² and that land parcel ownership should also be the basis for future border delineation.⁴³

Ethnic maps created by professionals did at times find their place in the media, but the maps that were most present were war maps. They dominated the print and electronic media of former Yugoslavia 1991–1995, along with cartographic imagery that accompanied perpetual negotiations and proposed peace-plans for Croatia and Bosnia–Herzegovina. The logic of partition along some projected ethnic border lines was often envisaged for Bosnia, and not only by the belligerents and their spokespeople, but also officials from the international community. Ethnically based segregation maps were put forward by international diplomats and peace negotiators in the course of at least four years, who thus legitimized ethnic segregation and construction of de facto interethnic spatial borders within Bosnia (albeit formally with the purpose of ending the war).⁴⁴ Jeremy Crampton likened this approach to the apartheid-era demarcation of Bantustans, and resolutions of the Bosnian war have very much centered on “the singular cartographic delineation of territory”.⁴⁵ Campbell also argued that “*international diplomacy and its cartography has, therefore, through its reliance on an apartheid logic, played an important though not single-handed role in foreclosing the possibility of non-nationalist conceptions of political community in Bosnia*”.⁴⁶ Similar to their predecessors from the 19th and early 20th century, representatives of the European and international community did not go far beyond ethno-territorial logic when dealing with this part of the world, and not just because of the fervor of local nationalisms (past or contemporary).

42 Campbell, “Apartheid cartography”, 421.

43 Ibid.

44 Radović, “Mapping ethno-politics”, 153.

45 Crampton, Jeremy. “Bordering on Bosnia.” *GeoJournal* 39 (1996), 353.

46 Campbell, “Apartheid cartography”, 402–406.

What Klemenčič argues for ethnic cartography of the time, “*that in spite of their relatively high degree of professional correctness, ethnic maps from the 1990s will inevitably be remembered in a negative context marked by intolerance, ethnic cleansing and bloodshed*”,⁴⁷ could easily be applied to ethnic mapmaking from some previous periods as well. Violent and nationalist context of the break-up of Yugoslavia is not that much different from similar situations when contested territories and its people were experiencing war or upheaval, and where reordering of society and bordering of space were pursued by political and state actors; in many places, ethnic mapmaking played a more significant role in such processes than in the (post)Yugoslav case.

47 Klemenčič, “Ethnic Maps”, 377.

Novak, Viktor and Fran Zwitter. *Oko Trsta*. Beograd: Državni izdavački zavod Jugoslavije, 1945.

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Radović, Srdjan. "Mapping Ethno–Politics: Borders and Cartographic Representation in Post–Yugoslav (Virtual) Space": *Boundaries and Borders in the Post–Yugoslav Space*, eds. Nenad Stefanov and Srdjan Radović, 143–163. Berlin–Boston: Walter De Gruyter, 2021.

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Image 1 – Segment of the ethnographic/ethnic map of Ottoman Macedonia (1900)

Image 2 – Segment of the ethnographic/ethnic map of the Julian March (1945)

Image 3 – Segment of the ethnographic/ethnic map of Croatia and Bosnia–Herzegovina (1991)

POVZETEK

Članek podaja pregled in razpravo o etničnem oziroma etnografskem kartografiranju v Jugovzhodni Evropi – podrobneje pa na območju nekdanje Jugoslavije – v 19. in 20. stoletju. Obravnava kontekst, prakse in diskurze, ki so v različnih obdobjih ter političnih in zgodovinskih okoliščinah oblikovali kartografsko (re)prezentacijo etničnosti. Čeprav so etnični zemljevidi – in njihovi ustvarjalci – pogosto zatrjevali, da kartografsko prikazujejo objektivne in empirične podatke o prostorski razporeditvi določenih etničnih skupin, so se le redko uspeli izogniti neizogibnemu političnemu kontekstu, ki je običajno določal njihov nastanek. Kronološki pregled nekaterih teh etnografskih praks v Jugovzhodni Evropi do konca 20. stoletja pokaže, da so bile eden od dejavnikov opredeljevanja prostora, etničnosti in narodnosti, ne pa zgolj orodje za nevtralno predstavitev teh istih kategorij. Eden od političnih kontekstov, ki določajo nastanek teh zemljevidov – razmejevanje meja in mejne prakse nasploh – je morda tudi najbolj očiten pri obravnavi balkanskega in postjugoslovanskega prostora.

Occupation Borders as High-Intensity Border-Making: Slovenia, 1941–1945¹

Kornelija Ajlec and Božo Repe

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ABSTRACT

In April 1941, Slovene-inhabited territory was divided among four Axis powers: Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy, Hungary, and the Independent State of Croatia, each of which claimed that the occupied territory was historically or ethnically its own. This article contributes to phantom border studies on two levels. First, it argues that the key variable in producing the long-term effects of borders is not their duration, but rather the combination of intense coercion, demographic disruption, the replacement of administrative structures, and the violent interruption of established spatial practices. Second, the article distinguishes between classical phantom borders, which emerge through long-term institutional internalization, and coercive occupation borders, which, due to violence and contested sovereignty, produce primarily traumatic and conflictual forms of persistence. Populations often functionally adapted to such borders yet never granted them normative legitimacy. The article further distinguishes between spatial afterlives, which gradually weaken at the local level, and discursive afterlives, that is, legitimizing languages of historical restitution and civilizational hierarchy that remain politically available long after the borders themselves have disappeared. The article thereby refines the existing conceptual framework of phantom borders and proposes a model applicable to other cases of short-lived yet highly coercive border-making in Southeast Europe and beyond.

Keywords

phantom borders, coercive territorialization, occupation borders, spatial afterlives, discursive afterlives, Slovenia, Yugoslavia, Second World War, Southeast Europe

IZVLEČEK

Aprila 1941 je bilo slovensko etnično ozemlje razdeljeno med štiri sile osi: nacistično Nemčijo, fašistično Italijo, Madžarsko in Neodvisno državo Hrvaško, pri čemer je vsaka izmed njih trdila, da je zasedeno ozemlje zgodovinsko ali etnično njeno. Članek k študijam fantomskih meja prispeva na dveh ravneh. Prvič, zagovarja tezo, da pri nastanku dolgoročnih učinkov meja ni odločilno njihovo trajanje, temveč kombinacija intenzivne prisile, demografskih pretresov, zamenjave upravnih struktur in nasilne prekinitve ustaljenih prostorskih praks. Drugič, članek razlikuje med klasičnimi fantomskimi mejami, ki nastajajo skozi dolgotrajno institucionalno ponotranjenje, in prisilnimi okupacijskimi mejami, ki zaradi nasilja in sporne suverenosti ustvarjajo predvsem travmatične in konfliktno oblike ohranjanja. Prebivalstvo se je takšnim mejam pogosto funkcionalno prilagodilo, vendar jim ni nikoli priznalo normativne legitimnosti. Članek nadalje razlikuje med prostorskimi ponotranjenji, ki postopoma in lokalno slabijo, ter diskurzivnimi ponotranjenji, torej legitimacijskimi jeziki zgodovinske restitucije in civilizacijske hierarhije, ki ostajajo politično uporabni še dolgo po izginotju samih meja. Prispevek tako nadgrajuje obstoječi konceptualni okvir fantomskih meja in predlaga model, uporaben tudi za druge primere kratkotrajnega, vendar izrazito nasilnega ustvarjanja meja v jugovzhodni Evropi in širše.

Gljučne besede

fantomske meje, prisilna teritorializacija, okupacijske meje, prostorska ponotranjenja, diskurzivna ponotranjenja, Slovenija, Jugoslavija, druga svetovna vojna, jugovzhodna Evropa

A SPACE WITHOUT A STATE

The study of borders in Europe has shifted profoundly in recent decades. Rather than treating borders as fixed, clearly delineated lines separating political entities, scholars have increasingly approached them as historically contingent constructs, produced and reproduced through social, cultural, and institutional practice. Language, media, education, and visual representation have all been identified as key mechanisms through which borders are naturalized and embedded in everyday life.² Parallel development in critical cartography has further changed traditional understandings of territoriality. Ethnographic maps have been shown to function as active interventions in the production of political space, partializing imagined identities and connecting territory to those identities in order to claim legitimacy over a given geographic space.³ In Southeast Europe more broadly, where imperial legacies, linguistic diversity, and shifting sovereignties have long intersected, such cartographic practices underpinned competing claims to the same territory across successive regimes. These approaches have deepened understanding of how borders persist. But they have also produced an analytical imbalance. By focusing on processes of reproduction and naturalization, they take for granted the prior existence of stabilized borders. In contexts of abrupt political change, external intervention, and absent social consensus, the moment of border creation remains underexplored.

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- 2 Billig, Michael. *Banal Nationalism*. London: Sage, 1995, 8–9, 37–46. On the reproduction of borders through everyday institutional practice and language see Paasi, Anssi. "Boundaries as Social Processes: Territoriality in the World of Flows," *Geopolitics* 3/ 1 (1998): 69–88; and Pasi, Anssi. *Territories, Boundries and Consciousness: The Changing Geographies of the Finnish-Russian Border*. New York: Wiley, 1997, chap. 2–3.
- 3 Harley, J.B. »Deconstructing the Map,« *Cartographica* 26/2 (1989): 1–20. On the political function of ethnographic mapping in Southeast Europe specifically, see Radović, Srđan. "Mapping Ethno-Politics: Borders and Cartographic Representation in Post-Yugoslav (Virtual) Space," in *Boundries and Borders in the Post-Yugoslav Space: A European Experience*, ed. Nenad Stefanov and Srđan Radović. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2021, 143–144. See also Crampton, Jeremy W. "Maps as Social Constructions: Power, Communication and Visualisation," *Progress in Human Geography* 25/2 (2001): 235–252; and Duančić, Vedarn. *Geography and Nationalist Visions of Interwar Yugoslavia*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020. It traces the political mobilization of geographical expertise in Yugoslav state formation.

The Second World War provides one of the most striking instances of such sudden border-making. And while the partition of Slovene-inhabited territory in April 1941 was not the first, it was by far the most radical.⁴ Nazi Germany, fascist Italy, Hungary and the Independent State of Croatia divided the territory already partitioned, ethnically layered and administratively discontinuous, completing its dismemberment rather than initiating it. They did so with different ideological profiles, different administrative traditions, and different visions of what the territory they were seizing was for. The total length of the new occupation borders was 665,5 kilometers. They divided communities, cut across farmsteads, and destroyed pre-existing patterns of movement, trade, and family life across space whose inhabitants had already spent two decades living with the consequences of a prior, internationally ratified partition.

This prior fragmentation was not contextual background. It supplied the raw material, historical ambiguity, jurisdictional overlaps, and demographic complexity from which each occupier fashioned its own narrative of restoration. The absence of a unified Slovene political entity made each of the four territorial claims articulable, if not credible. This article examines how these claims were translated into spatial practice, and what the resulting borders reveal about the long-term effects of short-lived but coercively intensive territorial interventions. The article further argues that the long-term visibility of occupation-era transformations correlates less with the duration of territorial arrangements than with a combination of coercive intensity, demographic disruption, administrative replacement, and the

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- 4 After the First World War, the Slovene ethnic space was divided by two successive international settlements. Following the Carinthian plebiscite of 10 October 1920, the southern part of Carinthia voted to remain within Austria, placing a substantial Slovene-speaking population under Austrian jurisdiction. Under the Treaty of Rapallo (12 November 1920), the western regions, the Julian March, Trieste, Gorizia and Slovene Littoral all the way to Hotederščica, were annexed by the Kingdom of Italy, incorporating approx. 327.000 Slovenes (roughly one-third of the total Slovene population) into the Italian state. The majority of the remaining Slovene-inhabited territory was incorporated into the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, later reorganized as the Drava Banovina (1929). No unified "Slovenian" political or administrative entity existed at the outbreak of the Second World War. On the post-WWI partition of Slovene lands, see Ajlec, Kornelija and Božo Repe. *Dismembered Slovenia*. Ljubljana: University of Ljubljana Press, 2023, 17–43. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4312/9789612970864>; Repe, Božo. "Rapalska pogodba in njeno diplomatsko ozadje," *Retrospektive* 6/2–3 (2023): 11–42. <https://doi.org/10.64651/retrospektive.2023.6.2-3.1>; Balkovec, Bojan. "Zgodovinopisje o rapalski meji," *Retrospektive* 6, no. 2–3 (2023): 43–68. <https://doi.org/10.64651/retrospektive.2023.6.2-3.2>.

interruption of pre-existing spatial routines. Their interaction is especially visible in the comparative structure of the Slovenian case. It argues that occupation borders produced forms of persistence structurally distinct from the long-term institutional sedimentation usually associated with phantom borders.

FRAGMENTATION AS ARGUMENT: COMPETING LOGICS OF TERRITORIAL LEGITIMACY

If occupation borders are high-intensity moments of border-making, their imposition cannot be explained by force alone. For occupation borders to function,⁵ they must be accompanied by processes of legitimization that frame them as something more than the outcome of the last battle. In the Slovenian case, the four occupying powers each developed its own legitimizing framework. Despite their ideological differences, all four made the same structural move: each presented its occupation and/or annexation not as conquest but as restoration, correction, or completion of something that had been unjustly interrupted. This structural similarity was not coincidental. Because Slovene-inhabited territory had never constituted a unified political entity and had been repeatedly redistributed among larger powers, the historical record contained ample material for retrospective claim-making. Each occupier could reach back to a period when “its” territory had belonged to a predecessor state or administrative authority and present the 1941 seizure as the resumption of a legitimate order. As Branimir Janković has observed in the context of post-Yugoslav memory conflicts, such strategies draw imaginary national boundaries through predominantly transnational lives, projecting present political arrangements backward as if they were natural and eternal.⁶ The difference between 1941 and the present is one of degree, not of mechanism.

5 To be administered, obeyed, and partially integrated into everyday life.

6 Janković, Branimir. “Drawing National Borders through Transnational Lives: Memory Wars and the Limits of Historiography,” summary paper presented at the Joint History Project conference “Borders in Southeast Europe – Geography or Imagination?”, Podgorica, 16–18 May 2025.

Historical Claims: Selective Continuities

For Nazi Germany, the annexation of Lower Styria and Upper Carniola was framed as the restoration of historically German lands severed by the post-1918 settlement. Siegfried Uiberreither, head of the civil administration of Lower Styria, conveyed to a crowd in Maribor on 28 April 1941 Hitler’s instruction to him three weeks prior: “Make this land German again.”⁷ The word “again” encoded the claim that this was not acquisition but reacquisition, not a conquest but homecoming. For the Kingdom of Italy, Roman and Venetian precedents supplied the legitimizing genealogy, and contemporary demographic realities were subordinated to claim of historical precedence. The annexation was confirmed, with characteristic delay, by the Chamber of Fasces and Corporations (Camera dei Fasci e delle Corporazioni), the fascist legislature that had replaced Italy’s elected Chamber of Deputies in 1939, whose members were appointed rather than elected, but which served the same legitimizing function within the logic of the fascist state. Italy’s relationship to the Rapallo border of 1920 structured its territorial imaginary further. The territories west of the Rapallo line (Slovenian Littoral and Istria) were treated as nationally claimed Italian territory already subjected to decades of forced Italianization, while the Province of Ljubljana lay to the east, awaiting gradual integration. This distinction explains the different intensity of assimilation across the Italian zone. When Italy capitulated in September 1943, Germany established the Operational Zone of the Adriatic Littoral (*Operationszone Adriatisches Küstenland, OZAK*), incorporating the Province of Ljubljana alongside Trieste, Gorizia, Udine, Pula, and Rijeka. This was not a temporary administrative measure: it pursued one of the longer-term German strategic objectives, linking the Alpine and Adriatic spaces into a single German geopolitical corridor and attaching these territories to the Reichsgau of Carinthia as a step towards permanent incorporation.⁸ For Hungary, the Treaty of Trianon (1920) was the explicit grievance that

7 Repe, Božo. S puško in knjigo. Narodnoosvobodilni boj slovenskega naroda 1941–1945. Ljubljana: Cankarjeva založba, 2015, 24.

8 Cerkenik, Denis. *Med rasizmom in nujno, 1943–1945*. Historia 46. Ljubljana: Založba Univerze v Ljubljani, 2023.

caused the severing of lands governed for a thousand years, now to be restored through parliamentary reincorporation.⁹ The Independent State of Croatia grounded its territorial claims in older pan-Croatian doctrines originating with Pavao Ritter Vitezović at the turn of the eighteenth century, which had positioned Slovene lands as part of a Greater Croatia. These ideas, developed in a very different ideological context during the Habsburg period, were appropriated and repurposed by the Ustashe for their own expansionist programme.¹⁰ In practice, the annexation fell short of this ambition being given only five villages in the Posavje region and a small territory in Styria region.¹¹

Across all four cases, history functioned less as an objective record than as a selectively mobilized repertoire.¹² The same pattern characterizes what Margit Feischmidt has analyzed as the Hungarian neo-nationalist Trianon mythology: although the commemorations invoke a historical trauma, they *»rather speak to current feelings of loss and disenfranchisement, offering symbolic compensation through the transference of historical glory, pride, and self-esteem within a mythological framework.«*¹³ The 1941 Hungarian occupation of Prekmurje and the recurring Trianon revisionist discourse draw on the same deep grammar.

9 Hungary was the only country among the occupiers to annex occupied lands through an act of parliament on 16 December 1941. This was deliberate to show the annexation not as a conquest, but as a constitutional reintegration supporting the restitutive narrative.

10 On the historical development of these ideas in the Habsburg context and Slovenian–Croatian political relations, see Rahten, Andrej. »Croatia Alpestris: Vprašanje umestitve slovenskih dežel v hrvaške pravniške koncepte.« *Annales: Series Historica et Sociologia* 12/1 (2002): 1–10.; and Zajc, Marko. *Where Slovenian Ends and Croatian Begins: The Slovenian–Croatian Border in the 19th and Early 20th Century*. Ljubljana: Modrijan, 2006.

11 Yet the ideological seriousness of Croatian claims is illustrated by the dispute over the municipality of Hum na Sutli, which the NDH sought to obtain from Germany on the grounds that it was the site of the first public performance of the Croatian national anthem *Lijepa naša* in 1864 and ultimately securing it in mid-June 1941. See: Ajlec and Repe, *Dismembered Slovenia*, 100–102.

12 The phrase »selectively mobilised repertoire« draws on Rogers Brubaker's treatment of ethnicity and nationalism as practical categories rather than fixed properties: Brubaker, Rogers. *Grounds for Difference*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2025, 3–28.

13 Feischmidt, Margit. »Memory–Politics and Neonationalism: Trianon as Mythomoteur.« *Nationalities Papers* 48/1 (2020): 130–143. <https://doi.org/10.1017/nps.2018.72>

Ethnic, Demographic, and Civilizational Arguments

Nazi Germany expanded “Germanness” to include populations deemed capable of assimilation. The racial classification commissions operating between 1941 and 1942 sorted the population into four tiers.¹⁴ The logic was circular: populations classified as assimilable were by that classification, already partly German. Italy emphasized the supposed “italianità” of the region’s educated classes, subordinating demographic reality to civilizational claim.¹⁵ Hungary relied on census data from the period of its own rule and collected under conditions of substantial official pressure to register as Magyar, which highlighted the inherently self-confirming character of such evidence.¹⁶ All three also invoked hierarchies of civilization, asserting qualitative superiority that rendered numerical minorities analytically irrelevant: German racial organization, Mediterranean cultural inheritance, Hungarian administrative competence. The NDH's claim followed the same logic in a different register: rather than census data or racial classification, it deployed a historic-legal argument that Slovene ethnic identity was itself a miscategorisation and that the populations of Slovene lands were, properly understood, Alpine Croats, whose true identity had been obscured by centuries of Habsburg administrative division.¹⁷ In this version of ethnographic mapping, identity was not measured but reassigned, with historical jurisprudence substituted for demographic evidence. The practical reach of this claim was minimal, but its structural similarity to the other three legitimizing frameworks is analytically significant. These ethnic and civilizational arguments reflected what Srđan Radović has identified as the fundamental operation of ethnographic mapping: the spatialization of imagined iden-

14 Ajlec and Repe, *Dismembered Slovenia*, 69; Ferenc, Tone. *Nacistična raznarodovalna politika v Sloveniji v letih 1941–1945*. Maribor: Obzorja, 1968, 178–221.

15 Ajlec and Repe, *Dismembered Slovenia*, 69–70; Rodogno, Davide. *Fascism's European Empire: Italian Occupation during the Second World War*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006, 71–96.

16 Ajlec and Repe, *Dismembered Slovenia*, 69–70; Romsics, Ignác. *Hungary in the Twentieth Century*. Budapest: Corvina Books/Osiris, 1999, 197–213.

17 Rahten, “Croatia Alpestris,” 1–10; Ajlec and Repe, *Dismembered Slovenia*, 70.

tity, binding territory, and identity together in order to claim legitimacy over a geographic space.¹⁸

FROM JUSTIFICATION TO PRACTICE: OCCUPATION BORDERS AS SPATIAL REGIMES

The imposition of borders in 1941 did not conclude the process of territorial reordering. It marked its beginning. In Lefebvre's terms, borders had to become not just conceived space¹⁹ but perceived and lived space, something that the populations on either side encountered in their daily routines.²⁰ Von Hirschhausen and colleagues adopt Lefebvre's triad explicitly as the three levels of phantom border analysis, imagined, experienced, and designed space, and the Slovenian case allows all three to be observed in an unusually compressed timeframe.²¹

In the territories annexed by Nazi Germany, occupation borders were conceived not as temporary divisions but as the threshold of permanent transformation. Administrative structures were replaced within weeks, German law was introduced, place names were Germanised. Approx. 63,000 Slovenes were expelled to Serbia and Croatia, with a further 17,000 fleeing voluntarily to the Italian zone. Around 17,000 ethnic Germans from Kočevje/Gottsche were resettled from the Italian occupation zone into

18 Radović, "Mapping Ethno-Politics", 143–144.

19 As in space of planners and decree-writers.

20 Lefebvre, Henri. *The Production of Space*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1991, 33–46. For the application of Lefebvre's triad of perceived–conceived–lived space to spatial analysis, see Schmid, Christian. *Henri Lefebvre and the Theory of the Production of Space*. London: Verso, 2022, 115, 270–279.

21 Von Hirschhausen, Béatrice, Hannes Grandits, Claudia Kraft, Dietmar Müller, Thomas Serrier, and Tim Beurskens. "Phantom Borders in Eastern Europe: A New Concept for Regional Research." *Cambridge University Press Slavic Review* 74, no. 2 (2015): 377–378. <https://doi.org/10.5612/slavicreview.74.2.361>. The authors note that their three levels of phantom border analysis, imagined space, spatial experience, and the shaping of space, correspond to Lefebvre's triad, though with an important modification: unlike Lefebvre, they do not distinguish between the registers of action available to different social classes, arguing instead that "all the levels of society 'imagine' and 'design' or 'shape' the space". Ibidem, 378.

vacated Slovene territories along the Croatian border.²² Population displacement was not a secondary consequence of occupation policy but one of the principal mechanisms through which the new borders were to be stabilized and naturalized. Racial classification commissions sorted the remaining population by assimilability: the higher categories were earmarked for Germanization, the lower for further displacement. Formal annexation to the Third Reich had been planned for 1 October 1941, but was repeatedly postponed, partly because organized armed resistance had begun spreading and growing faster than anticipated.²³ The German project of coercive territorialization extended beyond administrative structures into the visual and symbolic fabric of space. Every settlement was to look German: place names were Germanized, street names and shop signs changed, Slovene-language inscriptions removed from public spaces. The J for Yugoslavia on boundary markers was replaced with D for Deutschland. In the high mountains, symbolic appropriation was equally systematic. The Germans, who had lost Triglav after 1918 when the mountain passed to Yugoslavia, reclaimed it symbolically, depicting it on postage stamps and transferring mountain huts formerly managed by the Slovene Mountaineering Society to the German Mountaineering Society;²⁴ the Aljažev dom hut in the Vrata Valley was renamed Kugy-Haus.²⁵ The occupation borders in the mountains were intended, as Peter Mikša has argued, to mark the national space

22 Ferenc's book *Nacistična raznarodovalna politika* remains the foundational study of Nazi denationalization policy in Slovenia. On the resettlement of Kočevje Germans, see Ajlec and Repe, *Dismembered Slovenia*, 89–114. The Germans intended to expel between 220,000 and 260,000 Slovenes but managed to expel approximately 63,000; a further 17,000 fled voluntarily to the Italian zone (Ibid., 71). The figure of 80,000 sometimes cited in older literature conflates expellees with those who fled voluntarily.

23 Ajlec and Repe, *Dismembered Slovenia*, 69; Ferenc, Tone. *Okupacijski sistemi med drugo svetovno vojno: 1. Razkosanje in aneksionizem*. Historia 12, Ljubljana: Oddelek za zgodovino Filozofske fakultete, 2006, 230–238.

24 Zorn, Matija, and Peter Mikša. »The Rapallo Border between Italy and Yugoslavia after the First World War.« In *Grenzen / Frontières*, ed. Barth-Scalmani et al. Zürich: Chronos, 2018, 165–181.

25 The Aljažev Dom hut in the Vrata Valley was renamed Kugy-Haus after Julius Kugy (1858–1944), an alpinist of Slovenian family origins who wrote exclusively in German, identified publicly as German, and was closely associated with the Küstenland section of the Deutscher und Österreichischer Alpenverein in Trieste. His books on the Julian Alps had been instrumental in making these mountains known to the broader German-speaking and Western European world; in his writings he consistently situated the Julian Alps within the German–Austrian cultural sphere. For the occupation authorities, Kugy was an ideal eponym precisely because his work embodied the »old German–Austrian« alpine tradition, enabling the symbolic Germanization of the Julian Alps to be presented not as crude propaganda but as the restoration of a natural and historically rooted cultural continuity. Ibidem.

“for a thousand years”.²⁶ The Aljaž Tower on the summit of Triglav, erected in 1895 as an act of resistance against the late 19th Century Germanization efforts and the most prominent Slovenian spatial marker in the Julian Alps, became a site of partisan counter-inscription: three partisan patrols reached the summit between May and October 1944 and hung Slovenian flags there, directly contesting the German claim. Visual territorialization mattered precisely because it attempted to transform occupation from a temporary military condition into an apparently permanent spatial order. And it is in this register, as much as in the administrative and demographic registers, that the phantom effects of German occupation were produced. The expulsion of the Slovenian population from the border strip further reshaped the ethnic and demographic structure of the occupied territory: a report on the emptying of the border zone in Upper Carniola from June 1943 documents the scale of population displacement along the German-Italian border.²⁷ The four-component mechanism of coercive intensity, demographic disruption, administrative replacement, interruption of spatial routines operated here at its maximum. The German zone has accordingly produced the most clearly observable spatial and mnemonic traces, though a systematic quantitative mapping of these effects comparable to the Sudetenland case remains to be undertaken.

The Italian case presents a structural contrast. The Province of Ljubljana was granted a special statute of 18 May 1941 that provided for bilingualism and exempted men from military service. These were concessions that High Commissioner Emilio Grazioli publicly presented as evidence of Italian moderation.²⁸ In practice, however, this autonomy was a propa-

26 Ajlec and Repe, *Dismembered Slovenia*, 89–91.

27 SI AS 1626, Pooblaščenec državnega komisarja za utrjevanje nemštva, Urad Radovljica, 1942–1943 [Commissioner of the State Commissioner for the Consolidation of Germanism, Radovljica Office, 1942–1943], box No. 1. *Poročilo o izpeljavi izpraznitve mejnega pasu na Gorenjskem*, Bled, 13 June 1942, translated by Niko Hudelja. Published as appendix in Ajlec and Repe, *Dismembered Slovenia*, 155–156.

28 Ferenc, Tone. *Fašisti brez krinke: Dokumenti o italijanski politiki v Jugoslaviji 1941–1943*. Murska Sobota: Pomurska založba, 1987, 109–115; Ajlec and Repe, *Dismembered Slovenia*, 79.

ganda device that remained unfulfilled.²⁹ The Italian authorities initially excluded the Slovene elites from any form of collaboration, believing that the nascent partisan movement could easily be crushed. Only at the end of 1941 did they begin to recognize the advantages of seeking the consent of the local population.³⁰ The result was a hybrid spatial order in which Italian authority was asserted at every institutional level while the surface of everyday life was left partially intact. Italianization of schools and public administration proceeded steadily but ultimately failed.³¹ The Italian zone illustrates the forced and partial functional internalization without normative legitimacy, where populations learned to navigate Italian bureaucracy, to obtain Italian documents, to conduct transactions in Italian, but they did not accept Italian rule as legitimate or natural. When Italy capitulated in September 1943 and the zone passed to German administration, the incompleteness of Italian assimilation became immediately visible.

In Prekmurje, Hungarian occupation policy was explicitly framed as restitution. The division of the region between Vas and Zala counties replicated the pre-Trianon arrangement, functioning as a symbolic reaffirmation of the restitutive narrative. Mass deportations did not occur, as policy focused instead on systematic Magyarization. Hungarian became the language of instruction, suppression of Slovenian publications was near total, as was the revival of assimilationist civil organizations.³² The Hungarian zone demonstrates that the four-component mechanism can operate with lower intensity on individual components while still producing measurable phantom effects. The relative continuity of administrative organization and the lower level of demographic displacement have resulted in more diminished spatial traces. However, the distinct regional identity of Prekmurje, shaped by its layered experience of Hungarian, Habsburg, Yugoslav,

29 Rodogno, *Fascism's European Empire*, 268–269: »There was to be no further misunderstanding as to the real extent of Slovene autonomy: it was a mere propaganda device and it was to remain a dead letter.«

30 *Ibid.*, 304–305.

31 *Ibidem*, 268; also Ajlec and Repe, *Dismembered Slovenia*, 79–82.

32 On Hungarian Magyarisation policy in Prekmurje, see Romsics, *Hungary in the Twentieth Century*, 197–213; and Ajlec and Repe, *Dismembered Slovenia*, 69–70.

re-Hungarian, and socialist-Yugoslav administrative systems remains visible today and constitutes a genuine phantom effect of the occupation.

The Independent State of Croatia occupied a relatively small territory along the Posavje region and in Styria, amounting to approximately 20 km² with around 800 inhabitants.³³ Its authority was fragile, dependent on German and Italian support. The NDH case is included here not as a parallel to the other three zones but as a theoretically necessary negative instance: it tests the four-component model from below by showing what happens when the conditions for coercive territorialization are absent, due to the fact that it requires institutional resources that cannot be conjured from ideology alone, and that the four-component mechanism can fail entirely when state capacity is insufficient.³⁴ The NDH occupation therefore left no measurable phantom effects (of the kind associated with demographic disruption or administrative restructuring), but the memory of Ustasha violence in the affected communities represents a distinct form of mnemonic afterlife that the four-component model does not fully capture.

Across all four zones, occupation borders reshaped the texture of everyday life. Checkpoints, permit systems, and customs inspections disrupted existing patterns of movement, economic exchange, and social interaction. The material disruption extended to infrastructure. Postal routes were severed and redirected (a misrouted teletype message intended for Šmartno v Tuhinjski dolini, sent instead to the identically named Šmartno pri

33 Ajlec and Repe, *Dismembered Slovenia*, 70.

34 The NDH's limited territorial acquisition reflected its structural dependence on German decision-making rather than any lack of ideological ambition. Before the war, the Ustashe had envisaged integrating all of Slovenia into Greater Croatia; they even planned a referendum for the Slovene population. Germany, however, quickly curtailed these ambitions, restricting the NDH to a narrow strip of land along the river Bregana. The intergovernmental commission established in Rogaška Slatina to demarcate the German-NDH border was tasked with realising Hitler's directives »as consistently as possible and in line with German interests«; at its very first meeting, the German delegation made its position known bluntly, »despite the servility of the Croatian party.« The NDH's sole significant diplomatic success in the negotiations was the acquisition of the municipality of Hum na Sutli, obtained on the basis of the emotional argument that it had been the site of the first public performance of the Croatian national anthem *Lijepa naša* in 1864 and the location of a mansion owned by its author, Antun Mihanović. Even this concession was initially contested by German economic interests on account of the glassworks at Straža, owned by Volksdeutsche, which supplied electricity to Rogaška Slatina and the surrounding area. The transfer of authority over Hum took place in mid-June 1941. Ajlec and Repe, *Dismembered Slovenia*, 99–101.

Litiji seven kilometers away, caused the temporary cancellation of an entire border-strip clearance operation), labour markets were restructured around German administrative requirements,³⁵ and in Prekmurje the wartime Germany-Hungary agreement on oil extraction from the Petišovci fields diverted the entire regional oil supply to the Reich, subordinating local economic circulation to the extractive logic of the occupying power.³⁶ The oral testimonies collected during the research project³⁷ convey the borders not as lines on maps but as physical presences through the barbed wire, the watchtowers, the guards who might or might not let you through. They also convey the borders' permeability: smuggling was universal, informal arrangements with border officials were common, and the practical management of everyday life required constant negotiation with formal structures of control. The oral record from the project's regional studies provides concrete illustration. In Prekmurje, residents with land on both sides of the German-Hungarian border were issued permit booklets, to cross at designated points.³⁸ Marija Debelak of Petanjci recalled: »We [...] had to have papers for dual-ownership rights. These were permits. [...] Small booklets, inside was a photograph and the personal details. We got them at the municipal office.«³⁹ This interaction between institutional imposition

35 Mikša, Peter, and Matija Zorn. *Življenje ob meji: Rogaška Slatina in Obsotelje kot jugozahodna meja nemškega rajha, 1941–1945*. *Historia* 33. Ljubljana: Založba Univerze v Ljubljani, 2020, 50, fn. 36, citing interview with Jože Plemenitaš; and Ferenc, Tone. *Nacistična raznarodovalna politika*, 268–270.

36 Kerec, Darja. *Hlev je bil pod Nemci, hiša pod Madžari: okupacijske meje v Prekmurju 1941–1945*. *Historia* 38. Ljubljana: Založba Univerze v Ljubljani, 2021. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4312/9789610604532>, 23–24, fn. 31 and 33, citing *Documents on German Foreign Policy 1918–1945*, No. 580. The Germany-Hungary oil agreement was signed on 31 May 1941.

37 The already mentioned project *Make this Land German ... Italian ... Hungarian ... Croatian! The Role of the Occupation Borders in the Denationalization Policy and the Lives of the Slovene Population* led by Božo Repe between 2017 and 2020.

38 *Ibid.*, 29, caption to fig. 16 (video recording available at http://be.com/watch?v=j_LQrWi2Nbc). Testimony of Rudi Gaber.

39 *Ibid.*, 22, fn. 28.

and everyday practice (what Carnevale and Wilson term the borderscape) is central, not peripheral, to the analysis of occupation borders.⁴⁰

PERMEABILITY AND RESISTANCE: THE LIMITS OF OCCUPATION BORDERS

Despite the efforts of the occupying powers to stabilize and normalize the new territorial divisions, occupation borders in Slovene-inhabited territory never became fully consolidated spatial orders. This reflects the deeper structural tension inherent in coercive territorialization where the imposed framework had to operate simultaneously against the pre-existing social, economic, and cultural networks that the borders cut through but could not dissolve.

Smuggling was the most universal response and the clearest evidence of the borders' permeability. Agricultural products, livestock, salt, tobacco, and manufactured goods circulated through informal networks that bypassed official controls. These were not merely criminal transactions. For many families, they were survival strategies. In the process, the border was experienced not as an impermeable barrier but as a variable obstacle: dangerous, but navigable with the right knowledge, contacts, and timing.⁴¹ Partisan units operated deliberately across occupation zones, exploiting a structural feature of the system its architects had not fully anticipated: the

40 Carnevale, Davide N. and Thomas M. Wilson, »Place-making, Politics and Borderscapes in Southeastern Europe.« *Anthropology of East Europe Review* 38/ 1 (2021): 1–18. The »borderscape« concept, developed by Rajaram, Prem Kumar and Carl Grundy-Warr, eds., *Borderscapes: Hidden Geographies and Politics at Territory's Edge*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007, is defined by Carnevale and Wilson as requiring both the materiality of borders and their experiential dimensions: »The border is above all a place, a 'distinct space where people live; it encompasses both the idea and the actuality of where things are.« Rajaram and Grundy, *Borderscapes*, 4, citing Donnan, Hastings and Thomas M. Wilson. *Borders: Frontiers of Identity, Nation and State* Oxford: Berg, 1999, 9.

41 On smuggling as an everyday practice in the occupation border zones, see the testimonies collected and archived at <https://okupacijskemeje.si> website; and the local microhistories in Balkovec, Bojan ed. *En krompir, tri države: Okupacijske meje na Dolenjskem 1941–1945*, *Historia* 37. Ljubljana: Založba Univerze v Ljubljani, 2021. <https://doi.org/10.4312/9789610604563>; Vehar, Maja and Peter Mikša. *Obmejni trikotnik: okupacijske meje med Idrijo, Žirni in Polhograjskimi Dolomiti, 1941–1945*. *Historia* 36. Ljubljana: Založba Univerze v Ljubljani, 2021. <https://doi.org/10.4312/9789610604525>; Balkovec, Bojan ed. *Vinceremo, videt čemo: Okupacijske meje v Beli krajini 1941–1945*. *Historia* 34. Ljubljana: Založba Univerze v Ljubljani, 2020. <https://doi.org/10.4312/9789610603146>; Mikša and Zorn, *Življenje ob meji; Kerec, Hlev je bil pod Nemci, hiša pod Madžari*.

multiplicity of authorities, each with its own enforcement priorities, produced gaps and inconsistencies that could be used strategically. A formation pursued by German forces in Lower Styria could cross into the Italian zone; a group operating in the Ljubljana area could retreat into the forests of Lower Carniola where the German-Italian border created jurisdictional uncertainty. The border thus became, from the partisan perspective, a resource of operational flexibility.⁴² The coexistence of four occupation regimes also generated inter-occupier friction. Disputes over jurisdiction, over the allocation of resources and infrastructure that crossed administrative lines, and over the handling of refugees and political suspects arose repeatedly. The spatial order the occupiers sought to impose was, from the inside, considerably messier than its formal architecture suggested. This inter-occupier instability is itself significant for the theoretical argument: it confirms that occupation borders, unlike long-established administrative lines, never achieved the systematic coherence that enables genuine internalization.⁴³

42 On partisan operations across occupation zone boundaries, see Pirjevec, Jože. *Partizani*. Ljubljana: Cankarjeva založba, 2015, 87–156; and Tomasevich, Jozo. *War and Revolution in Yugoslavia, 1941–1945: Occupation and Collaboration*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001, 320–380. The operational use of inter-zonal inconsistencies as a partisan tactical resource is not systematically treated in the existing historiography; this dimension is developed from the archival evidence in Ajlec and Repe, *Dismembered Slovenia*, 215–247.

43 Inter-occupier friction is documented throughout Ajlec and Repe, *Dismembered Slovenia*. On German-Italian tensions over the demarcation of borders and the status of the Province of Ljubljana, see pp. 79–81: Italy sought larger territorial gains and greater political influence, but Germany was unwilling to relinquish its leading position; as Ciano recorded in his diary, the Italians »did not trust the Germans, but being the weaker ally they had to adapt.« On the German Gauleiters' attempts after Italy's capitulation in 1943 to convert operational zone boundaries into permanent borders, attempts blocked by the German Foreign Ministry on diplomatic grounds, see pp. 101–103. On the unresolved border between Hungary and the NDH, which was never formalised by agreement due to disagreements over Banat and Međimurje: »Germany made decisions about the most important matters... Both states lobbied heavily for their respective interests in Berlin, with the Hungarians being significantly more successful«, see pp. 125–126. On the general observation that »occasional conflicts occurred between occupiers that were otherwise allies,« see p. 14. For the broader argument that the messiness of inter-occupier relations prevented the occupation spatial order from achieving systemic coherence, see also p. 14, pp. 79–81, pp. 101–103, pp. 125–126.

OCCUPATION BORDERS AND PHANTOM BORDERS

The problem with Duration

The phantom borders concept, as formulated by von Hirschhausen and colleagues, understands phantom effects as the product of socialization processes within former territories: “Structures and institutions created by political actors may change very little, or not at all, over longer periods of time,” and “the spaces and institutions created in this way can endure well beyond the lifetime of their originating states.”⁴⁴ In their empirical illustrations, the primary examples are long-established borders as mentioned in previous chapter. The implicit model is one in which the depth of phantom effects correlates with the duration and institutional density of the border in question. The Slovenian case challenges this model. The occupation borders of 1941–1945 lasted four years at most. They were not preceded by decades of gradual institutionalization. They were imposed abruptly, contested immediately, and abolished legally within weeks of the war’s end. By the duration model, they should have left minimal phantom effects. Yet the evidence (demographic, infrastructural, and mnemonic) shows otherwise. This finding is not unique to Slovenia. Korčák and Netrdová’s quantitative analysis of the Sudetenland, which serves as a comparable case of a short-lived but intensely enforced occupation border, confirms strong phantom effects for all measured indicators at the municipal level more than fifty years after the expulsion of the Sudeten Germans.⁴⁵ The Slovenian case, as much as the Sudetenland case, therefore establishes that duration is not the primary variable. What generates durable phantom effects is not the age of a border but the combination of mechanisms by which it

44 Von Hirschhausen et al., »Phantom Borders,« 370.

45 Korčák, Matěj and Pavlína Netrdová. »Historická hranice Sudeť a současná sociálně-prostorová diferenciace Česka: kvantitativní pohled na dlouhodobý dopad institucionálních změn,« *Geografie* 127/4 (2022): 365–390, <https://doi.org/10.37040/geografie.2022.011>. The study analyses 2011 census data at the level of individual municipalities and confirms »a strong effect for all indicators, proving the importance of historical context when interpreting the current socio-spatial differentiation« (abstract). See also Netrdová, Pavlína, Matěj Korčák and Vojtěch Nosek. »Measuring and Mapping the Existence of Phantom Borders at a Local Scale: Example of Sudetenland in Czechia.« *Journal of Maps* (2024), <https://doi.org/10.1080/17445647.2023.2300260>.

is imposed and lived: coercive intensity, demographic disruption, administrative replacement, and the violent interruption of pre-existing spatial routines. Occupation borders, unlike classical administrative borders, never achieved normative legitimacy. They were subjected to forced functional adaptation: inhabitants obtained permits, restructured trading habits, developed smuggling routes, but nonetheless the occupation borders were never accepted as legitimate or natural. Their phantom afterlives are therefore not the sediment of long-term institutional embedding but the residue of rupture. Similar happened in the Sudetenland, where the expulsion of Germans, the resettlement of new populations, and the consequent disruption of social and economic networks proved more consequential for subsequent regional development than the duration of the border itself.

While von Hirschhausen and colleagues acknowledge that phantom effects are contingent rather than automatic, the Slovenian and Sudetenland cases suggest that the existing phantom borders literature has primarily theorized persistence through long-term institutional sedimentation, leaving the effects of short-lived but coercively intensive border regimes comparatively underdeveloped.

Two Types of Phantom Borders

Classical phantom borders become phantom through long-term institutional sedimentation. Embedded through administrative practice, legal culture, infrastructure, and generational socialization, they gradually become the spatial order taken for granted. When abolished, they leave behind the sediment of this gradual embedding, here termed sedimented phantom borders, whose persistence weakens as the underlying structures are dismantled or replaced.

Occupation borders, by contrast, follow a different logic, here termed forced and partial functional internalization without normative legitimacy. Populations obtained permits, developed smuggling routes, restructured trading patterns, adapted daily routines, but never accepted these borders as legitimate or natural. They remained contested impositions. Their

phantom status became visible only retrospectively, after the collapse of the regimes that had sought to normalize them. Inhabitants experienced them as coercion, while partisans treated them as impositions to physically eliminate. Their phantom effects are therefore the residue of rupture rather than the sediment of normalization. This article terms this dynamic traumatic persistence.

The generative mechanism already implicit in the preceding analysis can be specified as a four-component model:

1. *Coercive intensity*: the degree of physical enforcement;
2. *Demographic disruption*: the scale of forced population movement and resettlement;
3. *Administrative replacement*: the completeness with which existing institutional structures were dismantled and replaced;
4. *Interruption of spatial routines*: the degree to which pre-existing patterns of everyday movement, economic exchange, and social interaction were disrupted.

Each component contributes independently to the depth and durability of phantom effects. At times all four operate together, as in the German occupation zone, producing at maximum intensity the most clearly observable traces. The variation between the German zone, where all four components were present, and the Hungarian zone, where coercive intensity and demographic disruption were significantly lower while administrative replacement proceeded fully, within a single case study provides internal comparative evidence for this multi-component model. This formulation resolves a vulnerability in simpler intensity-based arguments: how intensity is measured, and why do some intense interventions leave fewer durable effects than others? The four-component model answers by disaggregating intensity into its constituent mechanisms.

Spatial and Discursive Afterlives:

The literature on phantom borders has focused primarily on spatial afterlives. Most phantom border research has therefore concentrated

on demographic, infrastructural, economic, and electoral patterns that correlate with former border lines (maps, statistics, electoral geography, quantitative indicators) and has produced important results in cases from Sudetenland to Poland and Ukraine.⁴⁶ But it misses a second dimension that is equally important and follows a different temporal logic: discursive afterlives, or the persistence of the legitimizing grammars through which borders were originally justified.

Spatial afterlives are typically local and regional, weakening as the material fabric of space is rebuilt and demographics stabilize. Discursive afterlives are nationally and transnationally scalable because they remain embedded in political language, commemorative practice, and educational systems rather than in a fixed physical location. They can lie dormant for decades and be reactivated rapidly under conditions of political crisis, without any corresponding change in the material landscape. A formal territorial settlement addresses spatial afterlives but it does not address discursive ones, which persist in the political repertoire regardless of what treaties stipulate. The legitimizing grammar deployed in 1941 did not originate with the occupation itself. The occupation instead concentrated, operationalized, and partially legitimized pre-existing repertoires of historical restitution, ethnic protection, and civilizational hierarchy, leaving them discursively available for future political mobilization. Their contemporary resonance therefore reflects discursive availability. This is visible in the continued political mobilization of the Treaty of Trianon in Hungarian public discourse, which Feischmidt analyses as a mythomoteur speaking to current feelings of loss and disenfranchisement,⁴⁷ in Egrý's account of how

46 For quantitative analyses of phantom borders in electoral geography, see: on Poland, Zarycki, Tomasz. »The Electoral Geography of Poland: Between Stable Spatial Structures and Their Changing Interpretations,« *Erdkunde* 69, no. 2 (2015): 107–124. <https://doi.org/10.3112/erdkunde.2015.02.02>; on Ukraine, von Löwis, Sabine. »Phantom Borders in the Political Geography of East Central Europe: An Introduction,« *Erdkunde* 69/ 2 (2015): 99–106. <https://doi.org/10.3112/erdkunde.2015.02.01>; also see Hirschhausen, Béatrice von. »Phantom Borders and Ambivalent Spaces of Identification in Ukraine,« *L'Espace géographique* 46/2 (2017): 126–139. On the Sudetenland, see Korčák and Netrdová, »Historická hranice Sudeť a současná sociálně-prostorová diferenciacie Česka,« 365–390.

47 Feischmidt, »Memory-politics and Neo-nationalism: Trianon as Mythomoteur.« On the concept of mythomoteur as a constitutive myth driving nationalist mobilization, see Smith, Anthony D. *The Ethnic Origins of Nations*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1986, 57–68.

the centenary commemorations reframed Trianon as a postcolonial »common catastrophe of Central Europe«, a discursive innovation that detaches memory politics from specific territorial claims while preserving the grammar of historical victimhood,⁴⁸ and in recurring Italian debates over the Adriatic borderlands. Sabine von Löwis has shown that the east-west division of Ukrainian politics cannot be reduced to the passive inheritance of Soviet administrative geography: spatially grounded identities, while rooted in historical experience, are not inherently political but, using her own formulation, »*may be political exploitable*«. This is a distinction that aligns with the concept of discursive availability proposed here.⁴⁹ The spatial-discursive distinction proposed here extends this observation: phantom effects operate simultaneously on both axes, and the two axes require different analytical tools and different political responses. This distinction has direct implications for understanding why territorial settlements in post-conflict Southeast Europe so often fail to resolve the underlying political tensions. Those tensions are rooted not in spatial legacies, which formal agreements can address, but in discursive availability, which they cannot. These legitimizing languages did not disappear in 1945. They were embedded by four years of state practice into the political vocabulary of the region, where they have remained available for later mobilization.

48 Egrý, Gábor. »The Greatest Catastrophe of (Post-)Colonial Central Europe? The 100th Anniversary of Trianon and Official Politics of Memory in Hungary.« *Rocznik Instytutu Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej* 18/2 (2020): 123–142, <https://doi.org/10.36874/RIESW.2020.2.6>. Egrý shows how the 2020 commemorations reframed Trianon as a »common catastrophe of Central Europe« legible through a postcolonial lens. It is a discursive innovation that detaches the memory politics from specific territorial claims while preserving the grammar of historical victimhood.

49 von Löwis, »Phantom Borders in the Political Geography,« 103. Von Löwis argues that spatially grounded identities and cultural distinctions, while »not necessarily political,« »may be political exploitable« (her own formulation) a distinction that captures the structural availability of historical spatial memories for political mobilization without implying deliberate instrumentalization. This aligns with the concept of discursive availability proposed in this article as analytically more precise than »political reusability.

SOUTHEAST EUROPE AS PALIMPSEST: THE SLOVENIAN CASE IN REGIONAL CONTEXT

Any generalization from the Slovenian case to Southeast Europe must begin from a basic historiographical caution: the region is not a coherent analytical unit but a historically constructed and internally differentiated space.⁵⁰ The forms and effects of occupation border-making varied significantly across different contexts. This article does not claim that the Slovenian case is representative, but it does claim that, as an extreme case, it renders the mechanisms of coercive territorialization unusually transparent.

Southeast Europe can be understood as a historical palimpsest: a space in which successive territorial orders have been layered upon one another without fully erasing the traces of what came before.⁵¹ The territory divided by the four Axis powers in April 1941 was not a blank slate as it already carried multiple layers of prior territorial inscription: the Habsburg administrative framework, partially dismantled after 1918; the internationally ratified partition by the Treaty of Rapallo; and the interwar Yugoslav arrangement of the Drava Banovina. None of these earlier layers had been fully erased. The occupation borders of 1941 were inscribed onto this already-written surface, exploiting its ambiguities, its jurisdictional gaps, and its historical sediment as raw material for competing legitimizing claims.⁵² The occupation borders of 1941 constituted one particularly concentrated inscription in that layered spatial order. The borderscape framework of Carnevale and Wilson provides the appropriate regional context for situating this inscription. Religion constitutes one of the most durable phantom border axes in Southeast Europe, and one underrepresented in the quantitative phantom

50 Todorova, Maria. *Imagining the Balkans*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997, 161–183, 197–198; and in the Todorova-Sundhaussen debate summarised in von Hirschhausen et al. »Phantom Borders,« 377. See also Mishkova, Diana. *Beyond Balkanism: The Scholarly Politics of Region Making*. London: Routledge, 2018, 1–12, where the author argues that the Balkans and Southeast Europe should be understood not as given geographic or cultural realities but as historically constructed frameworks of scholarly interpretation, shaped by shifting political and disciplinary agendas across different national and transnational academic subcultures.

51 Von Hirschhausen et al., »Phantom Borders,« 388, citing Troebst, Stefan, in Creuzberger, Stefan et al., eds. *Wohin steuert die Osteuropaforschung: Eine Diskussion*. Cologne: Böhlau, 2000, 63.

52 Carnevale and Wilson, »Place-making, Politics and Borderscapes,« 10–11.

borders literature. The Ottoman-Habsburg confessional boundary, separating Catholic and Orthodox Christian populations with Muslim communities as a third layer, produced a spatial grammar of religious difference that survived the dissolution of both empires. The breakup of Yugoslavia, and above all the wars in Bosnia and Herzegovina, demonstrated how discursive afterlives operating along religious lines can be reactivated with devastating effect in the absence of any corresponding material border: the tripartite confessional geography of Bosnia, a sediment of Ottoman administrative and demographic organization, became a template for territorial partition that had no formal basis in existing borders. The occupiers did not merely encounter pre-existing confessional divisions, they actively reinterpreted them as political and civilizational borders. The occupation borders of 1941 intersected with these older religious fault lines, most visibly in the NDH zone, where the Ustasha regime framed its territorial claims and violence in terms of Catholic Croatian identity against Orthodox Serbs and Muslims, adding a further layer of mnemonic inscription onto an already multiply-written surface.⁵³

The spatial traces are most clearly observable in three domains: demographic disruption, particularly in German and Italian zones affected by forced expulsions and resettlement; wartime and immediate postwar spatial practices, including patterns of movement and informal economic networks; and forms of social and spatial memory, as reflected in oral testimonies and local narratives of division, control and violence. Unlike the

53 The observation that religion constitutes a durable phantom border axis in Southeast Europe draws on the broader framework of von Hirschhausen et al., »Phantom Borders in Eastern Europe,« 376–377. On the Ottoman confessional geography of Bosnia-Herzegovina and the millet system as its structural legacy, see Bringa, Tone. *Being Muslim the Bosnian Way: Identity and Community in a Central Bosnian Village*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995, 19–21: the Ottoman administrative system organized collective identities around religious community membership (Catholic, Orthodox, Muslim), producing »a complete overlap between the notion of a separate nation and membership in a specific religious community,« a legacy that persisted through Habsburg and Yugoslav administrations alike. For the historical development of Bosnia-Herzegovina's confessional geography and the competing Serbian and Croatian nationalist claims that instrumentalized it, see Donia, Robert J., and John V.A. Fine. *Bosnia and Herzegovina: A Tradition Betrayed*. London: Hurst, 1994. On the territorial partition of Bosnia along confessional lines during the 1992–1995 war as an instance of discursive afterlives becoming operative in the absence of existing formal borders, see also Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans*, 186–189. For the NDH's instrumentalization of Catholic identity against Orthodox Serbs and Muslims as an occupation-era layer within this longer confessional geography, see Ajlec and Repe, *Dismembered Slovenia*, 70–71; and Tomasevich, *War and Revolution in Yugoslavia*, 320–380.

Sudetenland case, where these effects have been studied through systematic quantitative methods at the municipal level, the Slovenian traces have been approached primarily through a series of regionally focused micro-historical studies, each examining a specific border zone through archival sources, cartographic analysis, and oral testimonies. Together these studies provide comprehensive empirical coverage of the occupation borders, but a comparable quantitative spatial analysis remains to be undertaken. Any claim about the extent and distribution of phantom effects must therefore remain empirically modest: what can be identified are not uniform outcomes but site-specific and unevenly distributed effects.

One finding is clear enough to state with confidence and supports the multi-component model: the long-term visibility of occupation-era transformations correlates less with the duration of territorial arrangements than with the combination of coercive intensity, demographic disruptions, administrative replacement, and interruption of spatial routines. The variation between German and Hungarian zones within a single case study provides internal comparative evidence for this claim. This axis of comparison offers a productive framework for future research across Southeast Europe,⁵⁴ where the diversity of occupation models provides the natural variation needed to test the model further. The Slovenian case from 1941–1945 is, in this reading, not only a historical object of study but a methodological model: it demonstrates what coercive territorialization produces, how it operates, and why its effects outlast the political arrangements that generated them.

CONCLUSION

The Slovenian occupation borders of 1941–1945 demonstrate that durable phantom effects can emerge not only through long-term institutional sedimentation, but also through coercive forms of territorialization under

54 From the radical coercion of the German zone to the managed continuity of Hungarian rule in Prekmurje.

conditions of contested sovereignty. Unlike classical phantom borders, which become phantom through gradual socialization into a taken-for-granted spatial order,⁵⁵ occupation borders generate traumatic persistence, the residue of rupture rather than the sediment of internalization.

The article has proposed two contributions to the phantom border's framework. The first is the four-component model (coercive intensity, demographic disruption, administrative replacement, interruption of spatial routines) as a more analytically specific alternative to the undifferentiated concept of intensity. The second is the typological distinction between sedimented and coercive occupation phantom borders, with the further internal distinction between spatial afterlives and discursive afterlives. Spatial afterlives weaken locally and gradually; discursive afterlives (the grammars of historical restitution, ethnic protection, and civilizational hierarchy) are nationally and transnationally scalable, can lie dormant and reactivate rapidly, and are not dissolved by formal territorial settlement. Grasping this asymmetry is essential for understanding why post-conflict territorial politics in Southeast Europe so often fails to end the conflicts it formally resolves.

With due caution, the case suggests that contemporary high-intensity territorial interventions may also generate long-term spatial and mnemonic sediments whose effects will outlast formal political settlements, though the long-term consequences of such processes remain, at present, impossible to assess.

55 Von Hirschhausen et al., »Phantom Borders,« 370.

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POVZETEK

Aprila 1941 so nacistična Nemčija, fašistična Italija, Madžarska in Neodvisna država Hrvaška razdelile slovensko etnično ozemlje. Vsak od štirih okupatorjev je aneksijo utemeljeval z lastnimi zgodovinskimi, etničnimi ali civilizacijskimi argumenti, a pri tem posegal po strukturno enakih potezah: zasedbo je prikazoval kot restitucijo ali popravo zgodovinske krivice, ne kot osvajanje. Nemčija je govorila o vrnitvi zgodovinsko nemških dežel, Italija o rimskih in beneških precedensih, Madžarska o restituciji ozemlja, odtrganega s Trianonsko pogodbo, NDH pa je Slovence razglašala za „alpske Hrvate“.

Iz primerjalne analize štirih okupacijskih con izhaja štiristopenjski model trajnih učinkov kratkotrajnih, a zelo prisilnih meja: intenziteta prisile, demografski pretresi, zamenjava upravnih struktur ter prekinitev uveljavljenih prostorskih rutin. Primerjava med nemško cono, kjer so vse štiri sestavine delovale z maksimalno intenzivnostjo, in madžarsko, kjer sta bili intenziteta prisile in demografska destabilizacija bistveno nižji, ponuja notranjo primerjalno evidenco za ta model.

Članek predlaga tipološko razlikovanje med klasičnimi fantomskimi mejami, ki nastajajo z dolgotrajnim institucionalnim ponotranjenjem in postopoma slabijo, ter prisilnimi okupacijskimi mejami, ki povzročajo vztrajanje travm kot ostanek preloma, ne kot preostanek normalizacije. Ključno je tudi razlikovanje med prostorskimi ponotranjenji, ki so pretežno lokalna in postopoma slabijo z obnovo materialnega tkiva prostora, ter diskurzivnimi ponotranjenji, torej legitimacijskimi jeziki zgodovinske restitucije in civilizacijske hierarhije, ki so nacionalno in nadnacionalno prenosljiva ter ostajajo politiki na voljo ne glede na formalne ozemeljske dogovore in se v razmerah krize hitro ponovno uporabijo. To razlikovanje pojasnjuje, zakaj ozemeljske ureditve po spopadih v jugovzhodni Evropi tako pogosto ne razrešijo temeljnih političnih napetosti. Slovenija v letih 1941–1945 je metodološki model za razumevanje prisilne teritorializacije v jugovzhodni Evropi in širše.

**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, Jul'ian 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*. Berkeley: 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-boylisi-rama-gia-aoz>.

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-aoz-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-symmachon-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 "Δυσαρέσκεια 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-oriothetisis-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/amyndia-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 Agrolampos, Mrapmpis. “Παιχνίδι καθυστερήσεων” (Delay game) *Efimerida ton Syntakton*, 22 December, 2022. Available at: https://www.efsyn.gr/politiki/exoteriki-politiki/371996_painhidi-kathystereon.

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 Europeanness, 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 Vasili, 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/#gsc.tab=0>.

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 lay-

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 aplikuar, 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-trojës-fshihet-tradhëti-kombëtare-e-ramës/>.

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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Teaching History in Contemporary Balkans:

*A Comparative Analysis Based on the Survey
of the Observatory on History Teaching in
Europe*

Angelos Palikidis

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ABSTRACT

This paper offers an overview of the latest survey on history teaching in Europe (2021–3), focusing on Southeast European countries (Albania, Cyprus, Greece, North Macedonia, Serbia, Slovenia, Türkiye). It demonstrates how curricula and textbooks are developed within different administrative structures. Results show that while national history remains prominent, there is a growing emphasis on European and world history. Teachers face challenges such as rigid curricula, overloaded content, and limited training in modern perspectives. A gap persists between academic and school history, especially in emerging fields in historiography, like gender, cultural, environmental studies, memory, and migration. Despite rapid digitalization, formal education struggles to integrate these developments, affecting students' historical thinking.

Keywords

survey, history didactics, history education, Balkans, history curricula, textbooks

IZVLEČEK

Prispevek ponuja pregled najnovejše raziskave o poučevanju zgodovine v Evropi (2021–2023), s poudarkom na državah jugovzhodne Evrope (Albanija, Ciper, Grčija, Severna Makedonija, Srbija, Slovenija, Turčija). Prikazuje, kako se učni načrti in učbeniki razvijajo znotraj različnih upravnih struktur. Rezultati kažejo, da nacionalna zgodovina ostaja pomembna, hkrati pa se vse bolj poudarjata evropska in svetovna zgodovina. Učitelji se soočajo z izzivi, kot so toga učna načrtovanja, preobsežne vsebine in omejeno usposabljanje za sodobne pristope. Še vedno obstaja vrzel med akademsko in šolsko zgodovino, zlasti na novih področjih zgodovinopisja, kot so študije spola, kulturne in okoljske študije, spomin ter migracije. Kljub hitri digitalizaciji formalno izobraževanje težko vključuje te novosti, kar vpliva na razvoj zgodovinskega mišljenja pri učencih in dijakih.

Ključne besede

raziskava, didaktika zgodovine, zgodovinsko izobraževanje, Balkan, učni načrti za zgodovino, učbeniki

INTRODUCTION

Since its establishment as a distinct school subject in the educational systems of the nation-states history teaching has held significant importance in shaping collective identities –national, ethnic, religious and regional – as well as in fostering a sense of belonging among different or even diverse groups and communities. Over the past two centuries, the so-called “national historians” developed long, nation-centered narratives upon which the national identities of their peoples were built. These identities were grounded on two imaginary perceptions: the image of the national self and the image of the “evil other”. Ethnocentric narratives taught in the schools of European nation-states were based on this Manichaeian pattern. Histories of eternal national, international, or internal conflicts fostered the obsession that ideal societies are homogeneous—comprising individuals with the same origins, race, language, and faith or doctrine—that threatened homogeneity should be eliminated or marginalized.¹

From the end of the 19th century and throughout most of the 20th, history teaching reproduced and disseminated the official narratives of nation-states, serving as a main pillar of irredentism and territorial claims against neighboring countries.² Especially in the Balkans, a region characterized by significant ethno-cultural diversity, the “grand ideas”—such as “Great Greece,” “Great Bulgaria,” “Great Serbia,” “Great Albania,” or “Great Turkey”—were rooted in a strong collective historical consciousness, primarily shaped in school classrooms. These ideas fueled ethnic cleansing policies and bloody wars, leaving wounds in Balkan societies that persist to this day.³

1 Carretero, Mario, Rodríguez-Moneo, María and MikelAsensio. *History Education and the Construction of a National Identity*. Charlotte: Information Age Publishing Inc., 2012.

2 See: Mirela-Luminita Murgescu, ed. *Teaching Modern Southeast European History*. Alternative Educational Materials. Workbook 2: Nations and States in Southeast Europe. Thessaloniki: CDRSEE, 2005.

3 Luigi Cajani, Simone Lässig in Maria Repoussi, ed. *The Palgrave Handbook of Conflict and History Education in the Post-Cold War Era*. Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019.

The scope of historical education is also complemented by other formal, informal, and non-formal forms of collective historical education, which are part of an open hybrid space known as “public history.” These include political discourses, school ceremonies, illustrations on schools and public buildings and spaces, historical anniversaries, military education, monuments, literature, cinema, television, comics, the press, and the internet. Conversely, public space—whether conventional or digital, real or imagined—allows national, ethnic, racial, linguistic, religious, sexual, and other minorities to oppose the dominant group’s narrative by asserting their own right to memory. This gives rise to the so-called “anti-history,” accounts and interpretations that challenge the mainstream historical narrative, exposing biases and omissions.⁴ Moreover, they feel that they are performing a duty of remembrance for those have condemned to oblivion and silence, that is, to what Jankelevitch call “shameful amnesia”.⁵

The complex landscape of contemporary societies is affected by many factors which continuously create conflicting conditions across social, political, religious, cultural, environmental. In my opinion, some of these factors are particularly critical for the future of our societies, as they play a significant role in fostering authoritarian ideologies:

- the democratic deficit of national and European political institutions;
- the prevalence of market rules at the expense of constitutional freedoms and human rights;
- the emerging nationalism, mainly in the ex-communist countries;
- increasing social and economic inequalities;
- large-scale immigration to Europe, mainly from war-torn and impoverished regions of the Middle East and Africa;
- fundamentalism, anti-Semitism and islamophobia;
- the rise of the neo-fascist extremism, xenophobia and racism;

4 Ferro, Marc. *L'Histoire sous surveillance: Science et conscience de l'histoire*. Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1985; Evans, Richard. *In Defense of History*. New York: Norton and Company, 2000, 165–192. Deal, Nicholas, Hart, Christopher, Mills, Albert. *Anti-History. Theorization, Application, Critique and Dispersion*. Leeds: Emerald Publishing Limited, 2024, 19–34.

5 Rieff, David. *In Praise of Forgetting: Historical Memory and its Ironies*. New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2017, 64.

- the restriction of freedoms and human rights in the name of anti-terrorism measures;
- the fragmentation of European citizens' consciousness –local, national, European and global;
- the strengthening of informal historical education sources at the expense of the academic ones.

If historical consciousness is the lens through which the past informs our understanding of the present and the future,⁶ then historical education—across all its forms (formal, non-formal, and informal)—becomes a social and political issue. The fundamental question “What kind of historical consciousness do we want our students to develop?” is closely linked to the existential question for our societies “What kind of citizens do we want to shape through education?” and ultimately, “Why do we need to teach history today?” This underscores that historical consciousness remains an issue of identity, shaping attitudes, values, and social and political behaviors that emerge from them.

Despite the many and increasingly diverse sources of historical knowledge, schools still play a crucial role in shaping young people's historical consciousness. Not only does national educational policy—reflected through curricula and textbooks—have a significant impact, but teachers also exercise a decisive influence. Their disciplinary and pedagogical expertise, along with their perceptions of the past shaped by the socio-cultural environment in which they live and teach, are key factors in the knowledge they impart and the teaching methods they employ. Research consistently shows that both the official curriculum and the so-called “hidden curriculum” strongly influence students' ideas.

However, as the primary institutional pillar of history education, schools, along with organizations responsible for teacher training, curriculum development, textbooks, and educational materials, remain mainly responsible

6 Rösen, Jörn. “Historical Consciousness: Narrative Structure, Moral Function, and Ontogenetic Development.” In: *Theorizing Historical Consciousness*, ed. Peter Seixas, 63–85. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004, 63–85.

for contributing, with scientific rigor and appropriate pedagogical methods, to the development of students' historical thinking.⁷

The survey: organizers, methodology, outcomes

The Observatory on History Teaching in Europe (OHTE) is an enlarged partial agreement of the Council of Europe, currently comprising 19 member states (Slovak Republic and Montenegro joined recently). Following its declaration, the overall goal is to promote quality history education, and its core mission is to provide a clear picture of the state of history teaching, based on reliable data. Through surveys that lead to general and thematic reports, and in cooperation with the European Union and various stakeholders, such as EuroClio and the Georg Eckert Institute, OHTE organizes research projects and on-site events or webinars.

Accordingly, the *General Report on the State of History Teaching in Europe* is the main outcome of a three-year survey (2021–2023) carried out in 16 member states (Albania, Andorra, Armenia, Cyprus, France, Georgia, Greece, Ireland, Luxembourg, Malta, North Macedonia, Portugal, Serbia, Slovenia, Spain, Türkiye). Seven of those countries are located in Southeast Europe (Albania, Cyprus, Greece, North Macedonia, Serbia, Slovenia, and Türkiye). The survey and the drafting of the Report were conducted by a research consortium, composed of the Scientific Advisory Board, EuroClio and four academic experts in history education.

This survey, although not including all European countries, is one of the most large-scale and in-depth surveys have ever taken place in Europe, and definitely it is the latest. A triangular methodology has been composed, consisting of quantitative and qualitative tools: (a) a Questionnaire for the Educational Authorities Survey of each member state (EAS), (b) Teachers' Questionnaire Survey (TES), translated into all languages of the OHTE member states and distributed in an online format and (c) a series of ele-

7 Seixas, Peter and Tom Morton. *The Big Six: Historical Thinking Concepts*. Toronto: Nelson Education, 2013.

ven Focus Group interview meetings with history teachers and educators (EFG). The General Report was released in December 2023 and published in 2024, providing to researchers, educators, authors and policy makers a huge amount of data to elaborate with.

While the rationale of the EAS was to provide official information, directly collected from the ministries of Education or the competent state institutions, the TES and the EFGs were designed to collect detailed, in-depth evidence at the practitioner level. This method enables official information to be complemented with (and compared to) the teachers' aspects.

In the TES part of the survey participated a total of 6.521 history teachers, of which 61.37 % identified as female and 33 % as male. Also, 35 % come from rural and 65 % from urban schools. Regarding the type of school in which the respondents teach (public or private), the 95 % come from public schools, while 5 % from private.

The data of all types of empirical research have been organized around six sections:

1. The place of history in the educational system
2. History curricula
3. History textbooks and other educational resources
4. History teaching in practice
5. Learning outcomes and assessment
6. History teachers and their education.

Respecting the space limitations of this publishing I will demonstrate some of the most stimulating data, mostly focusing on the teachers' views, methods and everyday practices.

Remarkable differences have been marked among the Balkan countries regarding curriculum development and textbook production. The key factor is the degree of centralization of the educational system of each country. In international research on education policy, a substantial distinction is made between centralized and decentralized educational systems. The

most reliable indicator of the degree of centralization in education is related to the processes involved in developing history curricula. According to recent findings from the OHTE and EuroClio surveys, as well as the scientific literature, at the one end of the spectrum lie countries where curricula are exclusively produced by the ministries of education; conversely, at the other end are countries with a decentralized administrative structure, where local and regional administrations, civil society institutions or minority and ethno-cultural communities are actively involved in curriculum development or, even, are solely oversee curriculum development (table 1).

Member states in which civil society organisations participate in curriculum development	Albania	Ireland	Portugal
	Armenia	Malta	Slovenia
	France	North Macedonia	Spain
	Georgia		
Member states in which civil society organisations do not participate in curriculum development	Andorra	Greece	Serbia
	Cyprus	Luxembourg	Türkiye

Table 1: Stakeholder involvement from civil society in curriculum development

In the Balkan countries history curricula are typically prescribed at national level. According the data provided by the state authorities, while in Cyprus, Greece, Serbia and Türkiye curricula are under the state control, in Albania, North Macedonia and Slovenia civil society organizations may participate. However, in Albania Cyprus, North Macedonia, Serbia and Slovenia ministry officials reported that minorities groups are also involved in curriculum design (table 2). All member states claimed that topics of minority groups –cultural, ethnic, linguistic, national, religious or sexual/gender– are included in curricula. Certainly this does not mean that all kinds of groups have ever inhabited the country or still living in it, have been included in the curriculum, since it was practically impossible to spe-

cify the question to each group; for example, when asked about Roma and Travelers, Greece, Türkiye, and Slovenia stand out. Accordingly, a vast range of responses comes out when teachers asked if ethnic, linguistic, religious and socio-cultural groups are adequately represented in history textbooks; about half from Albania, North Macedonia, and Serbia agreed, while teachers from Cyprus and Greece expressed skepticism.

Member states in which representatives of minority groups participate in curriculum design	Albania	Ireland	Serbia
	Cyprus	North Macedonia	Slovenia
	Georgia		Spain
Member states in which representatives of minority groups do not participate in curriculum design	Armenia	Malta	Türkiye
	Greece	Portugal	

Table 2: Involvement of minority groups in curriculum development

In Serbia, the situation is quite exceptional. Eight minority languages are constitutionally recognized—Albanian, Bosnian, Bulgarian, Croatian, Hungarian, Romanian, Ruthenian, and Slovak—along with schools specifically serving minority students. Any of these languages can be used in history teaching, depending on the region. Additionally, adaptations to the national curriculum can be made to reflect the history and culture of minority communities.

Conversely, gender history tends to be marginalized across the majority of Ohte member states, both in the content of history textbooks and in the frequency with which teachers incorporate it into their lesson plans. (figure 1).

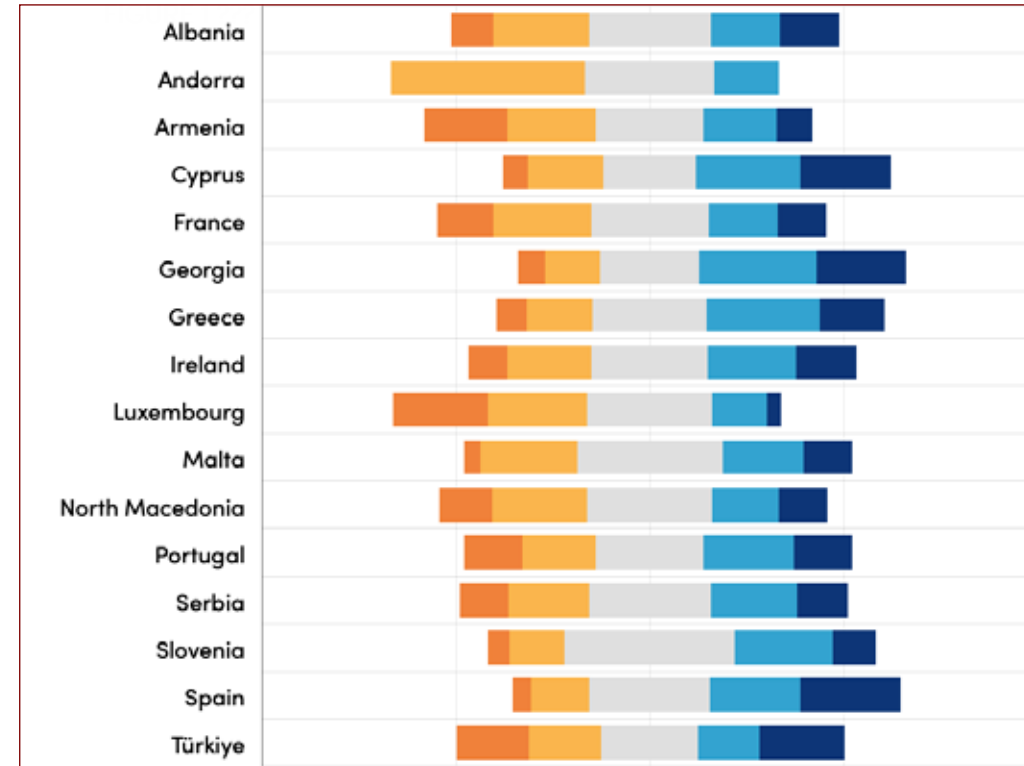


Figure 1: Views of TES respondents, by member state, on the place of gender history in history textbooks (n = 4564).⁸

Regarding the question “How rigid is the curriculum structure and its requirements, and how much room for discretion is there for you to organize your teaching?” (figure 2), the highest number of positive responses come from history teachers in Albania, while the lowest are from teachers in Cyprus, Türkiye, and Greece. Similar patterns are observed in responses to the key issue of addressing diversity in history teaching. Overall, however, many teachers perceive curricula as inflexible and feel there is limited space for taking initiatives or designing their own projects with students.

⁸ The TES asked teachers: “Please indicate the extent to which the following items apply in your opinion to the history textbooks that are available”.

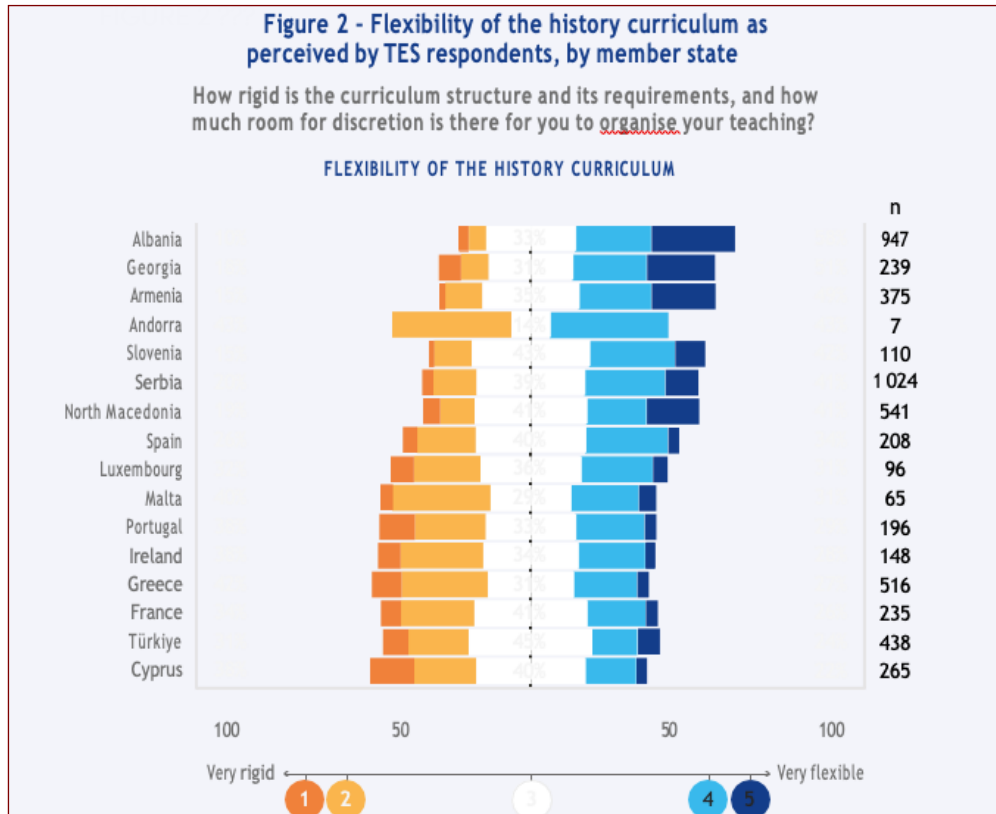


Figure 2: Flexibility of the history curriculum as perceived by TES respondents, by member state (n = 5410).⁹

The findings on the use of educational resources in the history classrooms (figure 3) are particularly interesting. Among 17 options, the most commonly used by teachers are textbooks (83 %) and their notes (61%), followed by websites and databases (51 %) and primary documentary resources (46 %). Conversely, many teachers avoid engaging with non-disciplinary forms of history, such as comics and video games, despite their popularity among young people. Additionally, a notable number of teachers acknowledge

9 The TES asked teachers: "How rigid is the curriculum structure and its requirements, and how much room for discretion is there for you to organise your teaching?"

that textbooks can impose constraints on their teaching plans, that the knowledge they offer is often outdated, and that textbooks tend to present a nation-centered narrative. It is worth noting that there were no significant differences between teachers from different Balkan countries. In contrast, fewer teachers from Western countries report being strongly bound to textbooks.

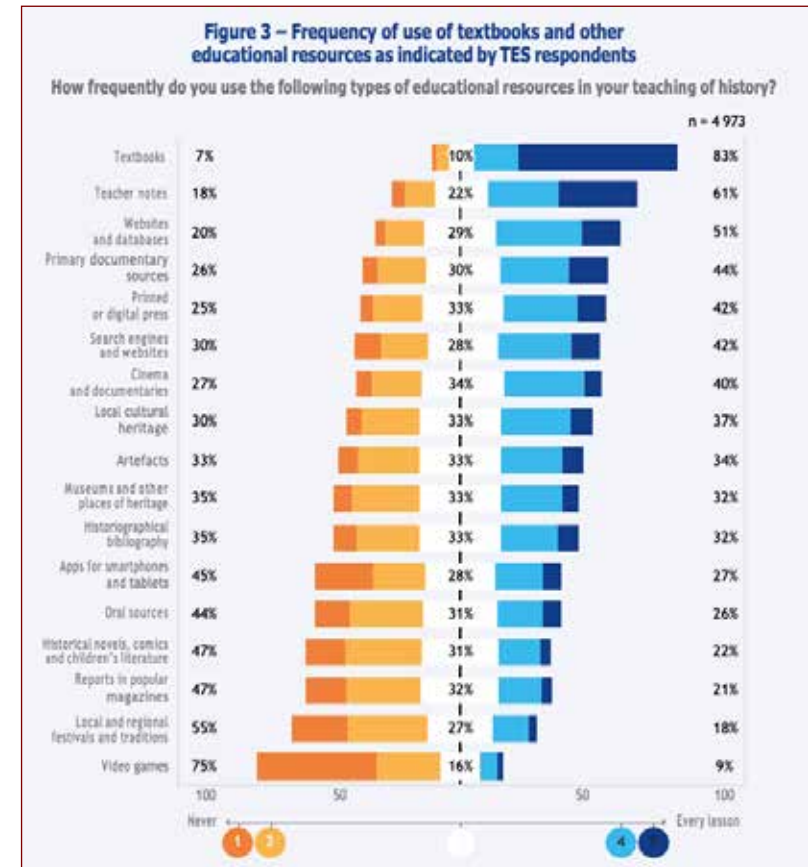


Figure 3: Frequency of use of textbooks and other educational resources as indicated by TES respondents (n = 4 973).¹⁰

10 The TES asked teachers: "How frequently do you use the following types of educational resources in your teaching of history?"

In terms of geographical scale (table 3), the great majority of history teachers emphasize national (54,6 %), European (48,04 %), and world history (44,37 %) rather than the subnational and supra-national areas (local and regional). National history is particularly prominent in Serbia (72 %), Türkiye (69 %), and Greece (66 %). Similar percentages are met in teaching political and military history.

Item	National history	European history	World history	Regional history (supra-national)	Local/Regional history (Subnational)
Mean (sd)	3.44 (1.58)	3.27 (1.14)	3.18 (1.45)	2.72 (1.19)	2.39 (1.40)
Not very or least relevant (%)	32.52	27.36	33.31	46.69	60.11
Moderately relevant (%)	12.87	24.59	22.31	27.03	13.18
Very or most relevant (%)	54.60	48.04	44.37	26.26	26.71

Table 3 – Emphasis on geographical scales of history¹¹ (n = 4 302)

Regarding the question which forms of history teachers prioritize, social, economic, political and military history prevail. However, other fields, such as art, gender, cultural and environmental history, also take a considerable portion (figure 4). It is important to note that there are notable differences between primary and secondary school teachers; primary school teachers

11 The TES asked teachers: “How much emphasis is given to the following levels of history? Rank the following five options on a scale from 1 (least relevant) to 5 (most relevant)”.

appear to be more open to incorporating new perspectives than their colleagues in high schools.

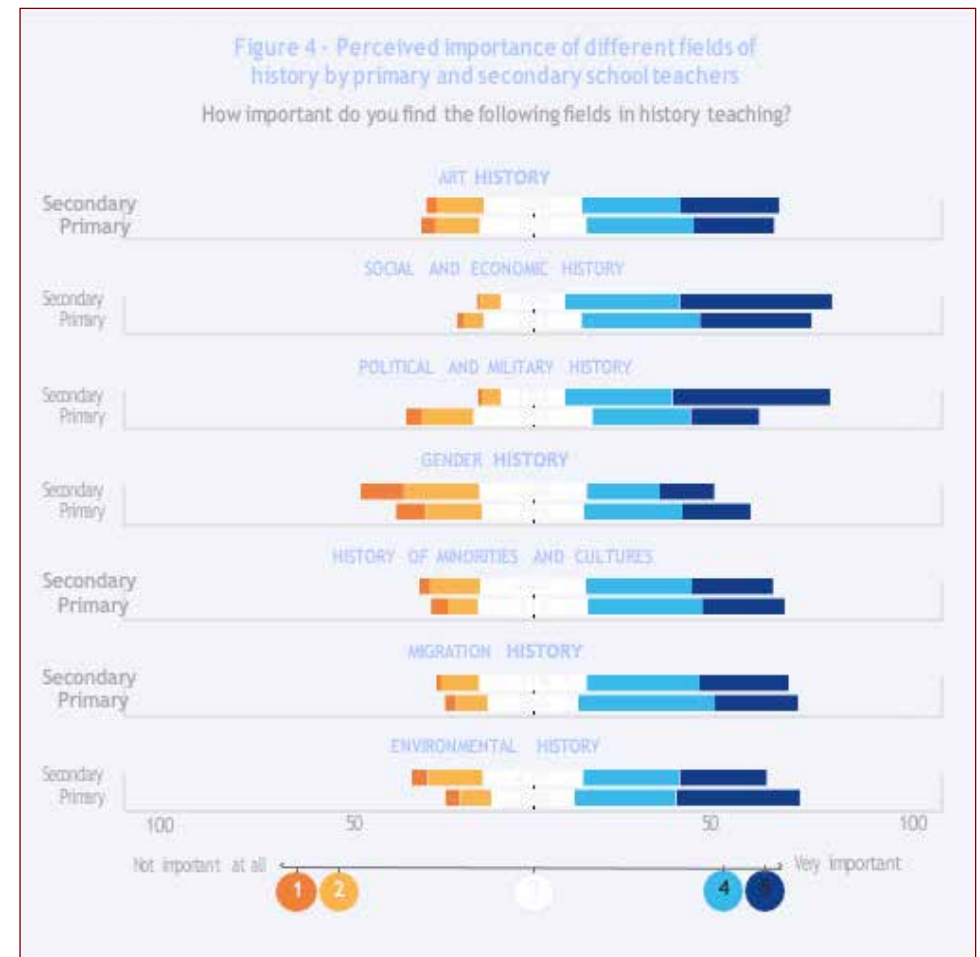


Figure 4 – Perceived importance of different fields of history by primary and secondary school teachers (n = 4 279).¹²

12 The TES asked teachers: “How important do you find the following fields in history teaching?”.

Regarding methods and teaching practices, teachers identified the most influential factors in their work (table 4). Consistent with other survey findings, textbooks and exams rank as the top two influences, followed by teacher training seminars. At the lower end of the spectrum are students' needs and interests (figure 5). This does not necessarily imply that teachers are unconcerned about their students' needs or uninterested in their interests and concerns. On the contrary, faced with numerous adverse factors affecting their work, many teachers feel unable to effectively meet their students' expectations.

Item	History textbooks	Exams	In-service professional development	Initial teacher training	Student needs and interests
Mean (sd)	4 (1.1)	3.55 (1.17)	3.4 (1.21)	3.19 (1.28)	2.91 (1.44)
(Very) small influence (%)	10.16	18.07	21.93	30.21	37.05
Moderate influence (%)	17.75	25.85	27.96	26.77	24.96
(Very) strong influence (%)	72.09	56.08	50.11	43.02	37.99

Table 3 – Factors most influential in teaching practice as indicated by TES respondents¹³ (n = 4 135)

13 The TES asked teachers, "Which factors are most influential in determining what and how you teach in practice? Ranging from 1 (least influential) to 5 (most influential)".

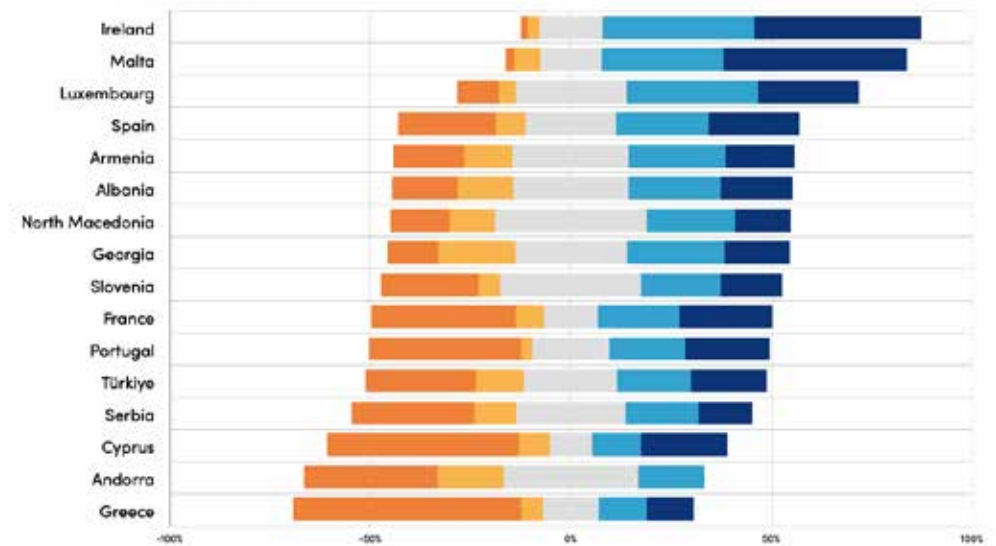


Figure 5: Influence of student needs and interests in teaching practice as indicated by TES respondents, by member state (n = 4 135).¹⁴

Accordingly, at the highest place teaching practices have been set "delivering lectures/presentations" (figure 6), with Türkiye (84 %), Serbia (81 %) and North Macedonia (79 %) performing the highest scores. Regarding the cross-curricular links, history teachers most frequently connect their subject with Geography (86 %), Civics (74 %), Art (68 %), and Literature (66 %).

Finally, some the most significant findings of the TES questionnaire are the outcomes of the question "Which of the following represent your concerns/obstacles for quality history teaching in your context?" (figure 7); in other words, what is investigated at this part are the teachers' views on the factors that hinder quality history education. Participant teachers could select multiple options from a range of 11 choices. The most cited issues are limited time allocated for history lessons, curriculum overload, and the frequency of educational reforms. Resources and budget limitations, class size, assessment requirements, reduced personal preparation time,

14 The TES asked teachers, "Which factors are most influential in determining what and how you teach in practice?".

and the degraded status of history in schools also present significant challenges. Although ranked lower, nearly 20 % of teachers emphasize the lack of appropriate training opportunities and the neglect of best practices that could enhance their teaching methods and approaches.

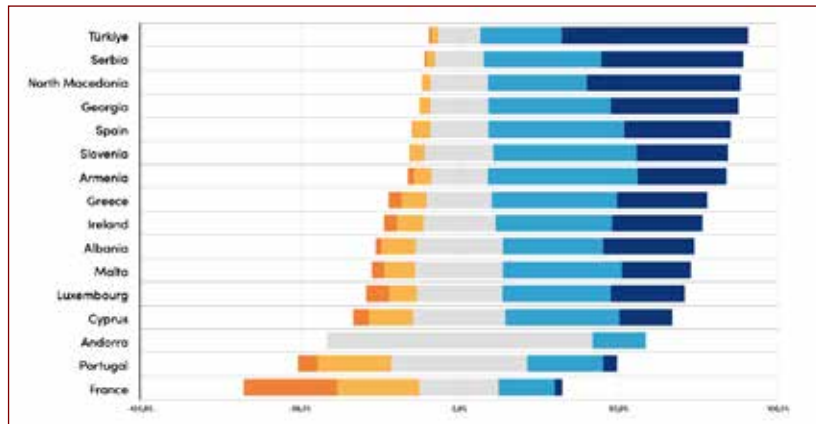


Figure 6: Use of lectures/presentations as indicated by TES respondents, by member states (n = 4 537).¹⁵

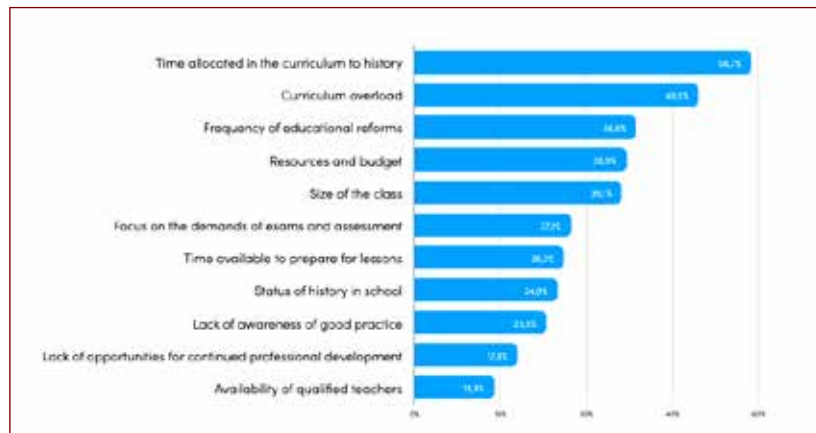


Figure 7: Concerns about or obstacles to good-quality history teaching as indicated by TES respondents (n = 4 606).¹⁶

¹⁵ The TES asked teachers, "How often do you use these methods for teaching and learning history?".

¹⁶ The TES asked teachers, "Which of the following represent your concerns/obstacles for quality history teaching in your context? Please tick all that apply". It was possible to select multiple options. The percentages represent the total number of times each option was selected in relation to the overall responses to this question.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

To sum up, the most critical outcomes of the OHTE survey are as follows:

1. The gap between academic history and school-taught history remains substantial and may be expanding, especially regarding new fields such as gender, memory, migration, cultural, health, environmental, and childhood history.
2. National and European histories are emphasized more frequently than local and regional histories.
3. Political and military histories continue to dominate over other forms of historical study.
4. Public history (non-formal and informal) significantly influences both teachers' and students' historical consciousness, yet formal education appears insufficiently prepared to address this shift.
5. Despite the growing importance of digital history, there is a notable gap in teacher training programs (both pre- and in-service) concerning digital tools and methods that tackle misinformation, propaganda, and the misuse of history.
6. The main challenges faced by history teachers in delivering quality history education include: (a) frequent reforms, (b) overloaded curricula and insufficient time to implement enquiry-based and student engaging learning activities, (c) an overemphasis on content knowledge and linear narratives rather than historical thinking competences and thematic approaches, (d) the prevalence of textbook-centered and lecture-based teaching methods, (e) examinations that prioritize memorization and prove to be key factors in determining what and how to be taught, and (f) inadequate teacher training programs that fail to address current topics or acknowledge young people's concerns.

To this end, international independent projects and initiatives, such as the Joint History Project in Southeast European countries, have made a valuable contribution both to teachers and educators at the national level and to transnational cooperation endeavors.

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POVZETEK

Prispevek obravnava pregled rezultatov najnovejše obsežne raziskave o stanju poučevanja zgodovine v Evropi, ki jo je izvedel Observatory on History Teaching in Europe (2021–2023). S posebnim poudarkom na državah jugovzhodne Evrope, ki so sodelovale v raziskavi (Albanija, Ciper, Grčija, Severna Makedonija, Srbija, Slovenija in Turčija), članek primerjalno preučuje načine oblikovanja učnih načrtov in učbenikov za zgodovino v okviru različnih tipov upravljanja ter deležnike, ki sodelujejo v teh procesih, odvisno od stopnje centralizacije izobraževalnega sistema posamezne države.

Raziskava razkriva, da nacionalna zgodovina sicer ostaja prevladujoča, vendar se vse bolj poudarjata tudi evropska in svetovna zgodovina. Učitelji pa se soočajo z izzivi, kot so toga učna načrta, preobsežne vsebine in nezadostno usposabljanje za obravnavo različnih perspektiv ter sodobnih vprašanj. Študija prav tako ugotavlja vrzel med akademsko zgodovino in tistim, kar se poučuje v šolah, zlasti glede novih področij zgodovinskega raziskovanja, kot so spolne študije, kulturna in okoljska zgodovina ter študije spomina in migracij. Kljub porastu digitalne in javne zgodovine formalno izobraževanje te trende težko učinkovito vključuje, kar ovira razvoj kritičnega zgodovinskega mišljenja pri učencih in dijakih.

"History Education in Greece:
How do Borders and Neighbors
Fit in Conservative Curricula?
Cracking the Canon with
Bottom-up Initiatives"

Vassiliki Sakka

ABSTRACT

This article examines history education in Greece through the lens of borders and neighbouring relations, highlighting the disconnection between conservative curricula and contemporary democratic and intercultural needs. Drawing on research about teachers' attitudes, recent policy developments and examples of public discourse, it argues that official curricula remain ethnocentric, largely exclude minorities and migration, and neglect critical peace and human-rights education. At the same time, it documents bottom-up initiatives—teacher training, public history projects and transnational collaborations—that seek to introduce multiperspectivity, regional history and agonistic memory. The article concludes that strengthening and disseminating such initiatives is crucial for fostering active, tolerant citizenship.

Key Words

History education, borders, ethnocentrism, peace pedagogy, multiperspectivity, agonistic memory, active democratic citizenship, teacher training

POVZETEK

Ta članek obravnava pouk zgodovine v Grčiji skozi prizmo meja in sosedskih odnosov ter opozarja na prepad med konzervativnimi učnimi načrti in sodobnimi demokratičnimi ter medkulturnimi potrebami. Na podlagi raziskav o stališčih učiteljev, nedavnih razvojnih trendov v šolski politiki in primerov iz javnega diskurza avtorica zagovarja tezo, da uradni učni načrti ostajajo etnocentrični, v veliki meri izključujejo manjšine in migracije ter zanemarjajo kritično vzgojo za mir in človekove pravice. Hkrati članek dokumentira pobude od spodaj navzgor – izobraževanje učiteljev, projekte javne zgodovine in nadnacionalna sodelovanja –, ki si prizadevajo uvesti večperspektivnost, regionalno zgodovino in agonistično spominjanje. Članek sklene, da sta krepitev in širjenje takšnih pobud ključnega pomena za spodbujanje aktivnega in strpnega državljanstva.

Ključne besede

pouk zgodovine, meje, etnocentrizem, pedagogika miru, večperspektivnost, agonistično spominjanje, aktivno demokratično državljanstvo, izobraževanje učiteljev

INTRODUCTION

The definition of borders evolves over time. In the 21st century, borders are shaped not only by geography and diplomacy, but also by culture, social class, mindset, and other invisible lines that influence people's identities and attitudes. With globalization and large international groups like the European Union (EU) and NAFTA¹, sending mixed messages, the importance and location of state borders can change greatly. Borders and the regions around them carry both practical and symbolic meanings, which can conflict with each other. To understand them, we need to look closely at local situations but also consider the wider context, especially as social boundaries are becoming less connected to physical ones.² As Agnew notes, we acknowledge the necessity of borders, for various reasons, but we also know that they are somehow inherently problematic; thus, we need to approach them not only as a fixed situation but as a challenge to be overcome and reweighed.³

Yet, living in Southeastern Europe often feels like experiencing time both frozen and accelerated. In this context, boundaries hold meaning because they possess a kind of narrative credibility; they matter to people because they fit into meaningful stories and experiences.⁴

What is the place of history teaching when approaching, defining and exploring borders? Is school history enough or appropriate means for this? What is the role of public history, public discourse and public pedagogy on the subject? What about school history curricula?

1 NAFTA is strongly attacked lately by tariff politics implemented by D. Trump, as president of U.S.A.

2 James Anderson in Liam O'Dowd. »Borders, Border Regions and Territoriality: Contradictory Meanings, Changing Significance.« In *Regional Studies*, 33/7 (1999): 593–604.

3 John Agnew. »Borders on the Mind: Re-framing Border Thinking.« *Ethics & Global Politics*, 1/4 (2008): 175–191.

4 Klaus Eder. »Europe's Borders: The Narrative Construction of the Boundaries of Europe.« *European Journal of Social Theory*, 9/2 (2006): 255–271.

Learning history goes beyond acquiring cognitive skills and problem-solving abilities, because it always occurs within social and cultural contexts, and the subject matter itself carries values and questions of identity. Therefore, understanding and designing effective history-learning environments—both in and out of school—is crucial, as they exert a wide range of influences.⁵

THE SITUATION OF HISTORY EDUCATION IN GREECE

In the Greek educational system, the renewal of the Curriculum – at least in the subjects of Social Sciences/Humanities such as History – is a long and sad story. History Curricula in Greece –at least until now– tend to be quite conservative in terms of updated content, academic freedom and methodology. During the last 15 years there were two attempts to reform (update, enrich, make more inclusive) history curriculum, being short breaks with returns to 'safe' conservative paths; though the governments in both cases were quite liberal/ "progressive", nevertheless they were not practically supportive to significant or even minor changes, fearful of "political risk". So, topics such as border people, minorities, traumatic and contested issues or multiperspectivity are constantly excluded from the content, while there is a backlash of ethnocentric-even nationalistic topics inserted in the "new" curriculum (2021), hidden under pompous liberal/progressive expressions and aims. History is considered a "public property"⁶ and as such corresponds to the public discourse and political rhetoric.

The absence of the Pedagogy of Peace from the country's curricula means another strong deficit in education for creating active citizenship. Peace Pedagogy/Education for Peace, as well as Human Rights Education or Holocaust Education, either as separate curricular subjects/ stand-alone

5 Joseph L. Polman. »Historical Learning and Identity Development on the Borders of School.« Presented at *Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association*, Seattle, 10.–14. april 2001.

6 Maria Repoussi. »History Education in Greece.« In: *Facing, Mapping, Bridging Diversity. Foundation of a European Discourse on History Education*, ed. Elisabeth Erdmann and Wolfgang Hasberg, 329–370. Schwalbach/Ts.: Wochenschau Wissenschaft, 2011.

programmes, or integrated into a History or Civic Education curriculum⁷, are powerful poles for cultivating critical historical and political consciousness in students and contribute significantly towards democratic civic education and identities (Stevic, 2017). We think that didactic approaches reframed in the (Critical) Pedagogy of Peace and Agonistic Memory can serve pedagogical goals such as the cultivation of active citizenship and critical thinking through difficult, controversial and traumatic issues in school.⁸

We believe that in order to approach any difficult historical topic (conflictual, traumatic and controversial) in school,⁹ we should have in mind the basic principles of Critical Education for Peace, as well as those of Global Education for Active Citizenship. At the educational level, analytical tools have been developed that suggest ways of approaching this, such as the framework provided by the 4Rs (recognition, redistribution (=equitable distribution of resources), representation, and reconciliation), which combine precisely these dimensions and explore what sustainable peacebuilding means through the lens of social justice.¹⁰

The general- socio political situation in Greece mirrors the long lasting effects of crisis affecting all domains of everyday life and education as well (severe financial cuts, financial shortage, mentality of defeat/ frustration); in spite of positive steps and recovery, during recent years, education faces the same problems of poor financing and a conservative backlash- at least in humanities and art subjects in schools, the latter being literally expelled,

7 Expelled now from Upper High School, as a result of political priorities and financial cuts.

8 Anna Cento Bull, Hans Lauge Hansen in Francisco Colom González. »Agonistic Memory Revisited.« In: *Agonistic Memory and the Legacy of 20th Century Wars in Europe*, ed. Stefan Berger and Wulf Kansteiner, 16–24. Cham: Springer, 2022; Anna Cento Bull and Hans Lauge Hansen. »On Agonistic Memory.« *Memory Studies*, 9/4 (2016): 390–404; Michalinos Zembylas in Zvi Bekerman. »Key Issues in Critical Peace Education Theory and Pedagogical Praxis: Implications for Social Justice and Citizenship Education.« In: *The Palgrave International Handbook of Education for Citizenship and Social Justice*, ed. Andrew Peterson, Richard Hattam, Michalinos Zembylas and James Arthur, 265–284. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.

9 Maarten Van Alstein. *Controversy and Polarization in the Classroom. Suggestions for Pedagogical Practice*. Brussels: Flemish Peace Institute, 2019; Maarten Van Alstein. *Polarization and Conflict. A Non-Violent Approach*. Brussels: Flemish Peace Institute, 2022.

10 Mario Novelli, Mieke Lopes Cardozo and Alan Smith. »The 4Rs Framework: Analyzing Education's Contribution to Sustainable Peace-building with Social Justice in Conflict-Affected Contexts.« *Journal on Education in Emergencies*, 3/1 (2017): 14–43.

while there is a strong turn on constant examing and testing, which according to the results of Observatory for History Teaching in Europe research (2023), poison every attempt of alternative and creative approach in history teaching.

Cultural diversity is supposed to be a constant feature of European states; nevertheless, many national education systems, including the Greek one, adopt monocultural ideologies and cultural supremacy to promote rigid and predetermined national identities. School curricula are inefficient when referring to cultural diversity. Consequently, minority culture and history remain outside of the curricula due to the monolithic history education. So, even a metaphorical use of »border crossings« which often characterizes cross-cultural educational needs, is missing. Curricula reflect the perspective of the hegemonic group, which does not include or integrate or is influenced by the culture of the »other«.¹¹ Thus, intercultural historical education is literary absent.

The new history curricula for compulsory education (Primary and Lower High School/Gymnasium) are completely indifferent, conservative and timid, both in content and methodology, recycling traditional forms, while in Upper High School (Lyceum) there is a suggestion for thematic history which is not exactly thematic: there are numerous topics to be dealt with (20–25) for each grade, and not 3–5 as it should be in order to be examined in depth, distributed and implemented in the spiral mode of antiquity, medieval/ byzantine, and modern era, vague and disorienting, revealing the inefficiency of the creators and creating problems for teachers and students. In these topics, migration, borders and regional history are either absent or approached through ethnocentric lens.

11 Fotini Georgiadis in Zisimos Apostolos. »Border Crossing of History Education in Multicultural School Contexts in Greece: An Intercultural Approach.« *The International Journal of Learning*, 16/1 (2009): 153–168.

Mobility is key to understanding human history, as people have always been on the move¹², and migration is a fundamental condition of today's globalised world.¹³ So, it is important that history of migration is taught in schools. It is not included, though, in Greek History Curriculum. The study of social dynamics – like migration, as well as globalisation, interculturality, and plurality of identities – offers excellent starting points:¹⁴

- » “To relate past and present realities.
- » To link migration to personal choices, family strategies, and hybrid identities, thus transcending the nation-state perspective.
- » To develop inclusive, multi-perspective, interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary educational approaches.
- » To overcome both the political narrative that sees migrants –by default– as a threat or danger to contemporary societies, and the narrative that sees them a priori as a factor of enrichment.
- » To reflect on the concept of borders”:¹⁵

The topic of migrants and migration is linked with general capabilities and cross-curriculum priorities¹⁶, such as:

– ethical understanding (i.e. explore and reflect on ethical issues, concepts, and decisions)¹⁷

12 The researcher refers to *external and internalized borders* that immigrants evolve, while analyzing the literary work of Gazmend Kaplani, Albanian immigrant, writer and scholar now, to Greece and several countries, as case study (Oikonomou, 2018: 269).

13 Maria Oikonomou. »Learning New Languages: A Literature of Migration in Greece.« In: *Immigrant and Ethnic-Minority Writers since 1945. Fourteen National Contexts in Europe and Beyond*, ed. Wenche Stevens and Sandra Vlasta. Leiden–Boston: Brill, 2018.

14 Panagiotis Gatsotis. »The Recent Albanian Migration to Greece. Didactical Challenge, Comparative Approaches.« In: *From History to Historical Education*, ed. Giorgos Kokkinos, Efi Lemonidou and Kostas Kasvikis, 447–470. Athens: Pedio, 2024.

15 Gatsotis, »The Recent Albanian Migration«, 452–453.

16 Dr Gatsotis presented the topic of migration and history curricula in a conference (November 2023) in Athens on the anniversary of 30 years of Albanian Migration in Greece.

17 Reference to second order historical concepts (Seixas & Morton, 2012).

– and intercultural understanding (i.e. develop multiple perspectives, world views, and empathy; reflect on cultural diversity, and the relation between cultures and identities).¹⁸

So, the cannon is there, tight and demanding. What can teachers do to face this situation and fuel the creative interest of pupils for the subject and its values?

Teachers struggle with the content, the overloaded curriculum, the tests and exams. There is no quality time, or time at all, for supplementary work, for workshops, for extra curricula activities, for creating new learning environments. But there is always a way to crack the cannon, even if it is not enough to reverse substantially the situation.¹⁹

As long as history education aims to support democratic values, teachers should seek not only students' mastery of historical knowledge but also their meaningful appropriation of it. Our goal is for learners to transfer their historical thinking from the school environment to real-world contexts. Appropriation functions as a form of “identity work.” Since appropriation is an »identity project«, identity development in historical learning environments becomes an important issue.²⁰ Placing the past in its historical context is a demanding task—one that requires resisting presentism—but it remains a deeply valuable practice. Engaging in historical contextualization matters because it helps us develop the social and cultural awareness needed to navigate the diversity of today's world. There is a need to train students in ambiguity and build their tolerance for complexity.²¹ Yet this raises a crucial question: how can such goals be achieved when official

18 Ibid.

19 Vassiliki Sakka. »Cracking the Canon, Escaping Curriculum.« *Public History Weekly*, 9/4 (2021).

20 Polman, »Historical Learning«.

21 Wineburg, Sam. *Why Learn History When It's Already on Your Phone?* Chicago–London: University of Chicago Press, 2018.

history curricula remain outdated and unsupportive? How can we educate an active citizen?²²

BORDERS AND NEIGHBORS

Regional history practically does not exist in Greek history curriculum. Minorities of different ethnic, linguistic and religious groups are not mentioned, while officially, the only recognized minority in Greece is the “muslim minority of Thrace”, without mentioning its Turkish origin. Neighboring countries within Greek history curriculum exist as enemies (or allies) during conflicts and wars. There is actually no alternative approach, especially connected f.i to the Ottoman period as one of imposing (or resulting in) cultural proximity – in spite of course the significant cultural and religious differences and painful past. Contemporary history is deprived of topics on the special cultural anthropology and geography of the Balkans. There are deficiencies and silences when referring to neighboring to Greece countries: Albania, North Macedonia, Bulgaria, Turkey. Conflicting and traumatic issues are silenced and not mentioned or approached and when there is a mention it is one sided: the Greek perspective. But history of past glory, justified defending wars, and bitter defeats fuelling trauma and hatred are outdated and often poisonous. It is sad that multiperspectivity or reflective approaches are still missing from the contemporary curricula while we completed the first quarter of 21st c. It is sad that we experience the rapid and increasing influence of hate speech and ultra right- even neo-fascist influence not only in electoral bodies but in teenagers and youths as well. Recently, in Thessaloniki 28 young people were arrested accused of having formed a criminal organization²³ as a successor of Golden Dawn – actually guided by the imprisoned leader of the convicted neonazi party. The older was 28 years old and the majority from 16- 23 years old, with great

22 UNESCO. Global Citizenship Education and the Rise of Nationalist Perspectives: Reflections and Possible Ways Forward. Paris: UNESCO, 2018.

23 “Θεσσαλονίκη: 13 ανήλικοι στη συμμορία των ακροδεξιών – Κλοπές και ληστείες από το 2019” iEidiseis.gr, 7th May 2025. Available at: <https://www.ieidiseis.gr/ellada/485271/thessaloniki-13-anilikoi-sti-sym-moria-ton-akrode-xion-ekanan-klopes-kai-listeies-apo-to-2019/> (access: May 2026).

influence in school population of the city – especially in Vocational Schools. The Prespa Agreement²⁴ between Greece and North Macedonia fueled the nationalistic discourse – a long story in Greece, and this discourse was supported officially by the two leading parties in Greece, nowadays the ruling New Democracy party and PASOK the opposition leader party, finding almost mirroring / identical attitude in the neighboring country. In 2019 the new minister of education, a young woman, declared that “we do not need social history- we must build national consciousness and this is the role of school history”²⁵. Nationalism is on the rise, and the frightening element is that exclusionary forms of it (“Us vs Them”) prevail.²⁶ Neonazi party members and followers created a hate strategy against refugees (remember what happened to Greece in 2015–16, when tens of thousands refugees fled the Syrian war and flooded the Greek island), LGTBIG+ people, neighboring countries. The liberal major of Thessaloniki was attacked in the streets of the city²⁷ during demonstrations defending “the Greekness of Macedonia”, as the person, the traitor, who opened Thessaloniki to hostile people: Turkish and Israeli/ Jewish tourists, renaming streets, supporting Kemal Atatürk’s house as a museum, and the building of a Holocaust Memorial in the city among others. The Regional Director of Macedonia was among those who called the mob for this attack. The desecration of Jewish cemeteries and monuments are a common activity – and they are not related to the recent Israel – Palestinian conflict. Of course they are the same people that at the same time are pro Israel and anti-Islam now. But a significant number of pupils are intoxicated, poisoned and colleagues and teachers in Thessaloniki – and not only- have a hard time dealing with them.

24 “Prespa Agreement.” *Wikipedia*. Available at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prespa_Agreement (access: May 2026).

25 “Πίσω ολοταχώς... η Κεραμέως: Θέλει ιστορία με εθνική συνείδηση.” *Avgi.gr*, 5th September 2019. Available at: https://www.avgi.gr/arheio/323158_piso-olotahos-i-kerameos-thelei-istoria-me-ethniki-syneidisi.(access: May 2026).

26 UNESCO, Global Citizenship Education

27 “Άγρια επίθεση και ξύλο στον Μπουτάρη -Τον έριξαν κάτω [εικόνες & βίντεο]” *Iefimerida.gr*, 19th May 2018. Available at: <https://www.iefimerida.gr/news/417694/agria-epithesi-kai-xylo-ston-mpoytari-ton-erixan-kato-eikones-vinteo> (access: May 2026).

For centuries, invasions and wars in the Balkans have driven population movements, leading to a persistent and ongoing reshaping of the region's distribution, with overlapping influences of religions, languages, ethnic groups, and cultures. This is something that History Curricula do not approach properly.

The history of recent Albanian-Greek migration, which began in the 1990s, effectively illustrates how neighboring and mixed populations' histories overlap under the multifaceted pressure of a changing global environment.²⁸ The majority of immigrants in Greece of Albanian origin, now second generation, are thriving, while having suffered discrimination, exploitation and humiliation as almost all migrants. These populations are almost invisible in curricula: history, language, literature etc.

As the Ministry of Education and the leading political personnel are incapable or indifferent to face the situation- or even acknowledge it, bottom up initiatives are important and necessary.

BOTTOM UP INITIATIVES

Various researches conducted on history teachers (2006, 2015, 2023)²⁹ reveal that teachers feel not well equipped to face situations like these. They lack proper initial and in service training on content knowledge, pedagogical and methodological tools to deal with contested and traumatic issues. A significant number revealed that they do not feel safe or ready to face disputed issues in class, while another significant number seem to not question the nationalistic or ethnocentric narrative. Also, as Carretero suggests, historical master narratives are represented by people in and out of school, following Anderson's classical idea of imagined communities, so

28 Gatsotis, »The Recent Albanian Migration«.

29 Kokkinos, Stavros. »Initial Training, Attitudes and Resistance of History Teachers.« *Paedagogical Trends in Aegean*, 2/1 (2006): 5–11; Sakka in Karakatsani, »Citizenship and History Teaching«.

we have to understand how this is happening.³⁰ Apparently, there is a lot of work to be done in terms of practice, training and educational research.

Since 2013, after the assassination of hip hop antifascist musician Pavlos Fyssas by Golden Dawn members³¹, teachers' unions, scientific associations, universities, artists and intellectuals have organized numerous events, performances, conferences, workshops, publications addressing the public and especially teachers on how to deal with hate speech, face neo-nazism, anti-semitism, islamophobia and nationalism. Topics such as "Nazism and school", "Holocaust and Greek Jews", "10 questions and answers on the Macedonian Issue", "30 years of Albanian Migration and Greek Education"³², "Afro-diasporic communities in Greece"³³ tried to deal with these issues, filling the void of institutional and state policy and action.

The Albanian project³⁴, The Lausanne Project³⁵ and Changing Democracies project³⁶ gave the opportunity to history teachers to meet with colleagues from other countries and share experience and questions, based on oral testimonies by people from different environment and culture, only to see that problems of communication and democracy are alike. The problem is that these very interesting and creative initiatives do not reach broader audiences and usually are attended by the "usual suspects".

30 Carretero, Mario. »Teaching History Master Narratives: Fostering Imaginations.« In: *Palgrave Handbook of Research in Historical Culture and Education*, ed. Mario Carretero, Stefan Berger and Maria Grever, 511–528. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.

31 "Pavlos Fyssas." *Wikipedia*. Available at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pavlos_Fyssas

32 <https://www.aheg.gr/logotexnia-kai-zoi/>

33 "Africa Amongst us*" *The Museum at a Glance*. Available at: https://www.benaki.org/index.php?option=com_events&view=event&type=1&id=1016327&lang=en (access: May 2026).

34 "Voicing the Albanian Experience in Greece." *Snfphi*. Available at: <https://snfphi.columbia.edu/projects/voicing-the-albanian-experience-in-greece/> (access: May 2026).

35 "The Lausanne Project." *The Lausanne Project*. Available at: <https://thelausanneproject.com/>. (access: May 2026).

36 "Changing Democracies." *Evens Foundation*. Available at: <https://evensfoundation.eu/projects/changing-democracies>. (access: May 2026). N. 13 and 14 consist bilateral or multilateral projects on History Teaching among Association for History Education in Greece (AHEG) and other European associations and institutions, such as Euroclio et al.

AHEG, since 2018, has cooperated, co-organized and implemented material via conferences, teacher training courses, seminars and publications³⁷, among which the material produced by Joint History Project. It is not enough.

Consider the educational material: textbooks still refer/ use historical maps as symbolic supports to master narratives and history education. We need an attempt to establish a fruitful dialogue among the field of border studies, history education, sociocultural psychology, and the history of cartography. Seminal studies on borders have asserted that the historical maps included in textbooks are basically an imagined representation, so we have to examine the processes of cultural production and consumption of historical maps and their relationship to historical master narratives (f.i. the case of Argentina).³⁸ Names of areas and geographical elements too: "Gulf of America", "Blue Fatherland". Historical maps and historical claims are the fuel of nationalism.

Collective memory is the spine of national memory. Globalization era does not affect national states when promoting their grand narratives supporting national identities, not giving up their illusions of destiny and grandiose – which usually are triggering conflicts. History teaching continues to play a crucial role on building national memory, often based on silences, monophonic narratives and victimhood stories. History textbooks, historical knowledge and commemoration ethos build different images of a nation/state³⁹.

Disputed areas in the borders are a controversial issue worth discussing in class. But this process demands skilled and well prepared and equipped teachers.

37 "Άλλα λόγια." *Aheg.gr*. Available at: www.aheg.gr (access: May 2026).

38 Parellada, C., Carretero, M., & Rodríguez-Moneo, M. "Historical borders and maps as symbolic supports to master narratives and history education." *Theory & Psychology*, 31/5 (2020): 763–779.

39 Wertsch, 2018

More and more schools are joining Erasmus and e-twinning projects. It is very important to turn and focus on the neighboring countries, colleagues and classmates. It is very important to cooperate and co-organize educational and study visits among us. It is very important to cross mental borders and get to know each other in order to fight deep rooted negative stereotypes. I have in mind the "Imagine" project in Cyprus⁴⁰ which is under attack by nationalistic circles.

CONCLUSION

The revival of Joint History Project is strongly connected with the above and it is a project of utmost importance and interest. The valuable educational material has to be disseminated to more teachers, pupils, students and future teachers. It is a brave and scientific educational initiative covering many areas and topics, always useful and handy / friendly to user and pedagogically sensitive. As I cooperated in both editions but mostly in the second series of contemporary history after 1945, suggesting ways to use the material, I feel like thanking everyone involved for giving me this unique opportunity to work on this material. Let us hope that there will be a continuity to this, as this kind of activity resulting to valuable material is desperately needed.

40 "Imagine peace education." *Association for Historical Dialogue and Research*. Available at: <https://www.ahdr.info/our-work/imagine/>.

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SUMMARY

The article analyses how Greek history education handles borders, neighbours and diversity within a highly conservative, exam-driven curriculum. It shows that official syllabi marginalise regional history, minorities, migration and difficult or traumatic issues, reinforcing monocultural and nationalist narratives. In a socio-political context marked by economic crisis, rising nationalism and hate speech, history teaching rarely promotes multiperspectivity, peace pedagogy or active citizenship. Nevertheless, teachers' unions, academic networks and projects such as AHEG initiatives, the Joint History Project and international collaborations try "from below" to crack the canon and create critical, inclusive learning environments that foster democratic and intercultural competences.

POVZETEK

Članek analizira, kako pouk zgodovine v Grčiji obravnava meje, sosede in raznolikost v okviru izrazito konzervativnega, z izpiti zaznamovanega učnega načrta. Pokaže, da uradni učni načrti potiskajo na obrobje regionalno zgodovino, manjšine, migracije ter zahtevne ali travmatične teme, s čimer utrjujejo monokulturne in nacionalistične pripovedi. V družbeno-političnem kontekstu, ki ga zaznamujejo gospodarska kriza, naraščajoči nacionalizem in sovražni govor, pouk zgodovine le redko spodbuja večperspektivnost, pedagogiko miru ali aktivno državljanstvo. Kljub temu učiteljski sindikati, akademske mreže in projekti, kot so pobude AHEG, skupni zgodovinski projekt (Joint History Project) in mednarodna sodelovanja, poskušajo »od spodaj« razrahljati kanon ter ustvariti kritična in vključujoča učna okolja, ki spodbujajo demokratične in medkulturne kompetence.

Reimagining Civilization and
Nationhood through Education:
“The Century of Türkiye
Maarif (Educational) Model”

Kenan Çayır

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ABSTRACT

This study critically analyzes the 2024 “Century of Türkiye Maarif (Educational) Model” curriculum reform, implemented by the Ministry of National Education following the Ak Party’s 2023 electoral victory, which coincided with the centenary of the Turkish Republic. The paper investigates the ideological underpinnings of the new curriculum, specifically its manifestation in the 9th-grade history textbook. Despite claims of a holistic approach which integrates moral and ethical dimensions with essential 21st-century skills, the study argues that the reform reconstructs history to serve a pan-Turkic and Turkish-Islamic civilizational narrative. Employing critical discourse analysis, the findings indicate a reification of the Turkish-Islamic synthesis, wherein medieval Turkish-Islamic scholars are presented as foundational figures in the development of modern scientific paradigms. The curriculum constructs an expansive, pan-Turkic geographical narrative, reclassifying regions and ethnic groups (e.g., Bulgarians, Hungarians) as Turkic. It also promotes a nationalist teleology that depicts contemporary Turkey as a technologically advanced nation while critiquing European civilization. This analysis concludes that the model, rather than fostering critical thinking, serves to forge a specific civilizational consciousness aimed at symbolically restoring Turkey’s civilizational standing and deconstructing perceived Eurocentric historical narratives.

Keywords

the *Maarif* Model; curriculum reform; textbooks; Turkish-Islamic synthesis; nationalism; the Century of Türkiye

IZVLEČEK

Prispevek kritično analizira kurikularno reformo iz leta 2024 z naslovom »Izobraževalni model Stoletja Turčije (Century of Türkiye Maarif Model)«, ki jo je po volilni zmagi stranke Justice and Development Party leta 2023 uvedlo turško Ministrstvo za narodno izobraževanje, sovпада pa je s stoletnico Proclamation of the Republic of Turkey. Prispevek raziskuje ideološke temelje novega kurikuluma, zlasti njihovo izraženost v učbeniku zgodovine za 9. razred. Kljub trditvam o celostnem pristopu, ki povezuje moralne in etične razsežnosti z nujnimi veščinami 21. stoletja, študija trdi, da reforma rekonstruira zgodovino z namenom služiti panturški in turško-islamski civilizacijski pripovedi.

Z uporabo kritične diskurzivne analize ugotovitve kažejo na utrjevanje turško-islamske sinteze, pri čemer so srednjeveški turško-islamski učenjaki predstavljeni kot temeljne osebnosti pri razvoju sodobnih znanstvenih paradigem. Kurikulum oblikuje obsežno panturško geografsko pripoved ter regije in etnične skupine (npr. Bolgare, Madžare) ponovno opredeljuje kot turške. Prav tako spodbuja nacionalistično teleologijo, ki sodobno Turčijo prikazuje kot tehnološko napredno državo, medtem ko kritizira evropsko civilizacijo.

Analiza zaključuje, da model namesto spodbujanja kritičnega mišljenja služi oblikovanju specifične civilizacijske zavesti, katere namen je simbolno obnoviti civilizacijski položaj Turčije in razgraditi zoznane evrocentrične zgodovinske pripovedi.

Ključne besede

model *Maarif*; kurikularna reforma; učbeniki; turško-islamska sinteza; nacionalizem; Stoletje Turčije.

Following the Justice and Development Party's (JDP) 2023 electoral victory, which coincided with the centenary of the Turkish Republic, the Ministry of National Education (MoNE) has opened the draft of "The Century of Türkiye *Maarif* (Educational) Model» for compulsory courses at all educational levels for public consultation in April 2024. The *Maarif* Model comprises a Framework Text and a new curriculum consisting of 14 different courses.¹ Although the MoNE claimed that the new curriculum emerged as a result of a decade-long comprehensive study, its introduction was unexpected by experts, as it was not mentioned in any of the development plans of the last decade or in the 2021 National Educational Council.² During the preparation period the MoNE announced that "the meetings had been held with more than 1000 teachers and academics."³ However, civil society institutions published reports criticising the MoNE for a lack of transparency regarding the stakeholders and the entire process.⁴ Following a brief public consultation period, the draft was approved by the Board of Education in May 2024. The new curriculum is set to be implemented gradually, beginning in the 2024–25 academic year in preschool, the first grade of primary school, the fifth grade of middle school, and the ninth grade of high school. In previous years, the MoNE adopted textbooks published by private publishing houses following their approval. However, it has declared that the textbooks for the new curriculum will only be prepared by the MoNE. Ultimately, the new textbooks prepared by the MoNE during the summer of 2024 were introduced in the 2024–25 academic year without undergoing a pilot scheme.

1 "Türkiye Yüzyılı Maarif Modeli Öğretim Programları Ortak Metni." MoNE. Available at: <https://tymm.meb.gov.tr/upload/brosur/2024programortakmetinOnayli.pdf> (access: August 2024)

2 Karataş, İbrahim Hakan. "Türkiye Yüzyılı Maarif Modeli Hakkında." *Alanyazın*, 5/1 (2024): 6–11.

3 "The Century of Türkiye Education Model." MoNE. Available at: <https://www.meb.gov.tr/the-century-of-turkiye-education-model-new-curriculum-draft-opened-for-public-opinion/haber/33489/en> (access: August 2025).

4 "Eğitim Askıda. Eğitim Reformu Girişimi'nin Milli Eğitim Bakanlığı Taslak Öğretim Programları İnceleme ve Değerlendirmesi." ERG. Available at: https://www.egitimreformugirisimi.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/EGITIM-ASKIDA_ERGnin-MEB-Taslak-Ogretim-Programlari-Inceleme-ve-Değerlendirmesi.pdf (access: August 2025)

Although the MoNE states that the model aims "to raise a national character above all ideologies" the new curriculum emerged amid historical and current political divisions in Turkish society.⁵ The model's name has sparked controversy surrounding Turkey's secular and religious values, with the main opposition party, the Republican People's Party, filing a lawsuit to cancel it. This controversy stems from two key points. The first is about naming the model as "Maarif Model". *Maarif*, a term originating from Arabic, is favored by Islamic-conservative intellectuals over the standard Turkish word for education, *eğitim*. *Maarif* is often used to refer to a form of »authentic education« rooted in Turkey's Islamic cultural history.⁶ Secondly, "the Century of Türkiye" is a political slogan used by the JDP in the 2023 elections. It signifies a shift from celebrating the Republic's first century to asserting ownership over the next. The slogan frames Turkey as a new civilizational power, emphasizing strategic autonomy in defense and foreign policy, critiquing Westernization as a form of modernization, and drawing on Ottoman-Islamic heritage.⁷ Within this context, the Framework Text presents the curriculum reform as a crucial tool »to raise a civilization building generation« and pave the way for »The Century of Türkiye".⁸ The model states it will raise students who both embody ethical values and possess 21st-century skills.

This study employs critical discourse analysis to investigate the ideological underpinnings of the new *Maarif* Model curriculum. First, the paper provides a brief introduction to the model's stated rationale and pedagogical principles, as set out in the Framework Text. However, the core of the analysis focuses on a critical examination of the historical narrative found in the 9th-grade History textbook, supplemented by references to other subject textbooks. The analysis contends that the new materials present an expansive, pan-Turkic geographical narrative extending from the Balkans

5 "Türkiye Yüzyılı Maarif Modeli," 54.

6 Topçu, Nurettin. *Türkiye'nin Maarif Davası*. İstanbul: Dergah Yayınları, 2015.

7 Fidan, Hakan. "Turkish Foreign Policy at the Turn of the 'Century of Türkiye'." *Insight Turkey*, 25/3 (2023): 11–26.

8 "Türkiye Yüzyılı Maarif Modeli," 4.

to Central Asia and reclassify certain ethnic groups (e.g. Bulgarians and Hungarians) as Turkic. Furthermore, the paper argues that the curriculum promotes a nationalist teleology which depicts contemporary Turkey as a technologically advanced nation, while simultaneously offering a critique of European civilisation. Ultimately, this reform is argued to be a strategic effort to dismantle Eurocentric historical narratives and establish a Turkish-Islamic civilizational imaginary based on a selective and idealized historical reconstruction.

THE MAARIF MODEL: SKILLS, COMPETENCES AND THE VIRTUE-VALUE-ACTION FRAMEWORK

The Framework Text outlines the pedagogical principles of the new *Maarif Model*, presenting it as a holistic system that encompasses a »student profile, skills framework, the virtue-value-action model, system literacy, and knowledge clusters of the field«. ⁹ The model's desired student profile is defined as the "virtuous and competent human" (*erdemli ve yetkin insan*), described as someone who combines moral integrity with practical skills. The model views education not merely as a transmission of knowledge but as a transformative process that shapes character, behavior, and worldview. This is further articulated through the aim of raising students with »ontological, epistemological, temporal, and axiological integrity.« Consequently, the ideal graduate of this new model is portrayed as a »perfect human being« (*kâmil insan*) who achieves integrity across "soul and body," "knowledge and wisdom," "past and future," and "moral consciousness and aesthetic perspective". ¹⁰

Through its emphasis on the unity of "body and soul" and "material and spiritual," the Framework Text develops an implicit critique of the secular, Western-oriented educational system of the Republic's first century. This critique posits that the previous system caused a fragmentation of human

⁹ "Türkiye Yüzyılı Maarif Modeli," 3.

¹⁰ Ibid, 6–7.

integrity, an argument long articulated by prominent conservative-Islamic intellectuals in Turkey. For instance, Nurettin Topçu argued that Turkish education, by prioritizing rationality and material progress in its Western and secular-inspired model, neglected spiritual and moral development. This, he contended, disconnected Turkish youth from their Islamic heritage and Anatolian wisdom, leading to a "civilizational crisis". ¹¹

The *Maarif Model* can thus be conceptualized as an effort to remoralize education and revive Turkey's civilizational claims. As the Framework Text notes, the model's goal is to produce »generations who do not adapt to civilization, but those that are active builders and developers of civilization«. ¹² This statement underscores the *Maarif Model*'s departure from earlier educational approaches that sought to adapt to Western civilization, instead aiming to build a distinct civilization for the Century of Türkiye that

"reaches the summit of material development with national and spiritual values". ¹³



Figure 1: Virtue-Value-Action Framework of the Maarif Model

¹¹ Topçu, 2015.

¹² "Türkiye Yüzyılı Maarif Modeli," 4.

¹³ Ibid, 3.

The *Maarif* Model employs a Virtue-Value-Action Framework as a cross-curricular component to guide its educational approach (Figure 1).¹⁴ This framework is built upon three core »roof values«: Justice, Respect, and Responsibility. These foundational values are presented as interconnected with a range of other values, including patriotism, family unity, honesty, diligence, conscious living, sensitivity, and compassion. Defined as the »moral compass« of the model, this framework redefines educational success to encompass moral formation, where knowledge is deemed meaningful only when it is grounded in ethical character and expressed through responsible action. The Framework Text articulates the model's ultimate objective: to progress »from actions to values, from values to virtuous people, and from virtuous people to the ultimate goal of 'Peaceful Family and Society' and 'Peaceful People in a Livable Environment'«. ¹⁵ The text further notes that the »main basis of the values in the model is our national and spiritual values which are the references of our own civilization world,« while also acknowledging that »the universal dimension of values has not been ignored». ¹⁶ However, the model does not clarify why specific values like justice, respect, or responsibility are considered exclusive to "our own civilization" or how they are intended to be integrated with their universal dimensions.

The Virtue-Value-Action Framework is one of three cross-curricular components in the *Maarif* Model, alongside "social-emotional skills" and "system thinking and literacy skills".¹⁷ The latter two components appear to be influenced by the K-12 Skills Framework, developed through a 2022 collaboration between the MoNE and UNICEF.¹⁸ System literacy is defined as students' ability to comprehend and navigate complex systems across

14 The English version of the figure was taken from Yalçıntaş, Zeynep. 21st-Century Skills and the Transformation of Education in Türkiye. In "Redesigning Education: 21st-Century Skills Report." Available at: <https://ilke.org.tr/en/yayin-detay/redesigning-education-21st-century-skills-report> (access: August 2025).

15 "Türkiye Yüzyılı Maarif Modeli," 36.

16 Ibid., 54.

17 Ibid., 34.

18 Aşkar, Petek, and Arif Altun. "K-12 Beceriler Çerçevesi: Türkiye Bütüncül Modeli Üzerine Bir Çalışma." *Milli Eğitim Dergisi*, 52/1 (2023): 925–940.

various domains (e.g., nature, economics, society), and it encompasses nine distinct skills: digital, financial, data, cultural, sustainability, citizenship, art, knowledge, and visual literacy.¹⁹ While system literacy is designed to develop cognitive and analytical abilities, socio-emotional skills—such as empathy and cooperation—are intended to foster ethical and self-management capacities. The model posits that these three components will not be taught in isolation but will be integrated across the curriculum through various subjects, group projects, and classroom activities. Together, they serve the model's holistic objective: to cultivate students with "ontological, epistemological, and axiological integrity" who are both virtuous and competent, and who will build a civilization grounded in national and spiritual values.

This approach reflects the enduring aspiration of nationalist, conservative, and Islamic circles to forge a modern nation rooted in indigenous cultural values.²⁰ The MoNE's promotional slogan, "from the roots to the future," encapsulates this synthesis of cultural heritage and modern progress. Unlike previous reforms, the model's new textbooks symbolize a significant revision of the previous historical narrative, introducing new categorizations, terminology, and additions. This revision will be demonstrated in the following analysis.

TURKS FROM "TURKISTAN CIVILIZATION" TO THE PRESENT TIME

The model's textbooks were written by a team of teachers and academic editors who were commissioned by the MoNE. The 9th-grade History textbook was authored by a team of 18 teachers and four academic edi-

19 "Türkiye Yüzyılı Maarif Modeli," 56.

20 Çayır, Kenan. "Avrupalı Olmadan Önce Biz Olmalıyız: Yeni Öğretim Programları ve Ders Kitapları Işığında Türkiye Modernleşmesine Dair Bir Okuma". *Kuram ve Uygulamada Eğitim Bilimleri*, 9/4 (2009): 1659–1690.

tors, all listed on the cover.²¹ The authors write the textbook by following the detailed curricular guidelines published by the MoNE.

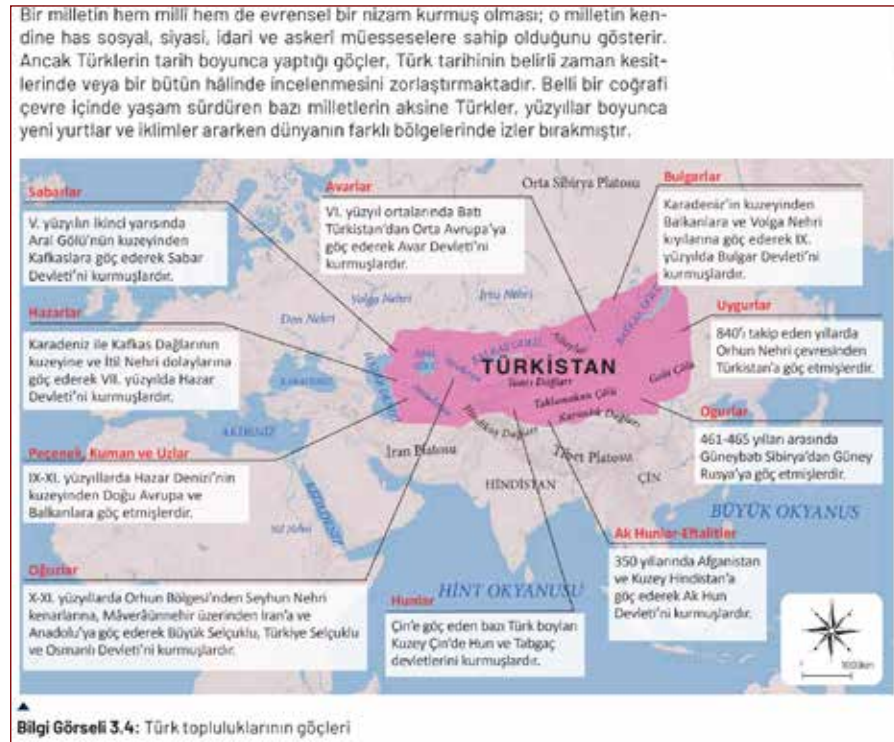


Figure 2: Migration of the Turkish Communities.²²

The 9th-grade History textbook is structured into three chapters: “History in the Construction of the Past,” “Ancient Civilizations,” and “Medieval Civilizations.” The new textbook revises the terminology for the Turkish homeland, identifying it as “Turkistan” rather than the previously used “Central Asia,” a change that is visually documented in Figure 2. The text attributes the origin of “Turkistan” to Chinese, Western, and Iranian sources, justifying this by stating that “there are no written sources surviving from

21 Kaymakçı, Selahattin. et. al., ed., *Tarih 9. Sınıf Ders Kitabı*. Ankara: MEB Yayınları, 2024.

22 Ibid., 178.

the Turks of Antiquity”.²³ The following excerpt from the textbook illustrates this point:

The region in Asia inhabited by the Turks has historically been called Turkistan. Turkistan stretched from Lake Baikal in the northeast and the Gobi Desert in the southwest to the Caspian Sea in the west. The region, which was called Turkhia (Turkey) by Westerners from the VIth century onwards, was called Turkistan, meaning “Turkish homeland” by the Iranians and Arabs.²⁴

The new textbook revises the concept of “civilization basins” by including Turkistan, a significant departure from the previous curriculum which omitted it from the list of major Ancient civilizations.²⁵ The new list now includes Mesopotamia, Egypt, Anatolia, Europe, and Turkistan.²⁶ This change is part of a broader narrative that portrays Turks as a nation that left a historical footprint across the world while seeking new homelands. The Figure 2 displays various Turkic tribes’ –including Bulgarians, Uyghurs, Huns– migration to different parts of the world. The textbook notes that at the end of the 4th century AD, the Huns, “the first Turkic tribe to migrate west from Turkistan,” brought some elements of modern civilization to Europe, such as today’s “modern clothing”:

The culture of wearing trousers was carried to the western lands by the Huns who later went to Europe. Likewise, the culture of wearing jackets and underwear spread to Europe through the Turks. In other words, we can say that the foundation of the modern clothes we wear today was laid by nomadic Turks.²⁷

The textbook presents Turks as the nation that first domesticated the horse and invented the horse carriage. Notably, the invention of the horse

23 Ibid., 105.

24 Ibid., 93.

25 Yüksel, Erol. et.al., ed. *Tarih 9 Ders Kitabı*, Ankara: MEB Yayınları, 2021.

26 Kaymakçı, et. al., ed. *Tarih 9. Sınıf Ders Kitabı*, 12.

27 Ibid., 163.

carriage, which was previously attributed to “humankind” in the former history textbook, is now credited specifically to “Turks.” Such examples suggest that certain elements of the self-glorifying narrative characteristic of the 1930s Turkish History Thesis continue to resonate in the present. In this way, the new textbook reproduces the early Republican project of portraying Turks as the civilizational pioneers of humanity. Moreover, through a revised categorization, Turks are now situated within an imagined “Turkistan civilization,” envisioned as possessing a homogeneous ethno-cultural identity.



Figure 3: Attila Door prepared for the 14th Eurasian Festival.²⁸

²⁸ Ibid., 183.

The example of the “Eurasian Festival in Hungary, commonly referred to as the Great Kurultáj,” presented in Figure 3, demonstrates how the construction of ethno-cultural identity has been extended into the contemporary period.

The example in Figure 3 shows the 14th Eurasian (Turanic) Festival in Hungary, a cultural event celebrating the shared cultural heritage of Hungarians and Central Asian countries. Based on this festival the textbook notes that

Hungary is an important country in terms of Turkish history. Hungarians, who trace their past to the Hun Turks, emphasize the Hun–Hungarian unity in their legends since the 13th century...The fact that there are many words with the same and similar meanings in Hungarian and Turkish today is an important proof of the origin of Hungarians. Today, Hungarians, who are aware of their past, have reached the level of awareness of Turkishness to organize the 14th Turan Festival in August 2014.²⁹

While the festival celebrates a shared history, it also generates controversy due to its connections with far-right groups and its emphasis on ethnonationalist symbolism. The event has recently gained support from Prime Minister Orbán, who has become known for his anti-European Union, anti-immigrant, and Islamophobic rhetoric. A geo-economic analysis is crucial to understanding this support. As Hungary’s ambassador to Kazakhstan stated, “Westerners are entering new markets with their capital. Hungary does not have this capital. But it has the historical and cultural capital to reach the East.”³⁰ Thus, the festival can be seen as a component of Hungary’s broader cultural diplomacy and its efforts to forge partnerships with Turkic Central Asian states.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Korkut, Umur. “Resentment and Reorganization: Anti-Western Discourse and the Making of Eurasianism in Hungary.” *Acta Slavica Iaponica*, 38 (2017), 71–90.

The History textbook presents the claim that Hungarians have “reached the awareness of Turkishness” through a festival, without offering any contextual explanation. Such a statement reflects an ethnocentric perspective, lacks sociological accuracy, and appears to contradict the model’s declared aim of cultivating critical thinking and cultural literacy. The idea of a “greater Turkic world” is further promoted in the textbooks through the inclusion of a “Map of the Turkic World” (Figure 4), which identifies both “independent Turkic nations” such as Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, and Turkic communities across other states. Previously confined to a limited number of subjects, this map now appears systematically in every textbook under the Maarif Model. In doing so, the curriculum advances an expansive, pan-Turkic geographical imagination stretching from the Balkans to Central Asia, while reclassifying groups such as Bulgarians, Hungarians, and Kazakhs as Turkic nations. The same narrative is reiterated across subjects; for instance, the 9th-grade Turkish Language and Literature Preparatory Class textbook encourages students to reflect on “unity, solidarity, and cooperation in the Turkic world,” and to design an imaginary tour based on the “Map of the Turkic World”.³¹

The History textbook constructs a linear and uninterrupted account of Turkish history, beginning with the notion of “roots” redefined as the “Turkistan civilization.” This framework reflects what Tanil Bora characterizes as an “imagined” historical continuity, in which Turks are depicted as a unified political subject transcending diverse periods and geographies.³² In doing so, the narrative essentializes nationhood, presenting the Turkish nation as a transhistorical and almost metaphysical entity detached from contingent historical realities. The second chapter reinforces this construction by incorporating Islam and the Turkish-Islamic civilization into the same continuous timeline.

31 Evirgen, Arife Ece and Sezaver. Çapçı Sipahi, ed. *Türk Dili ve Edebiyatı Hazırlık Sınıfı Ders Kitabı*. Ankara: MEB Yayınları, 2024, 139.

32 Bora, Tanil. “Ders Kitaplarında Milliyetçilik,” In *Ders Kitaplarında İnsan Hakları: Tarama Sonuçları*, Çotuksöken Betül ed. İstanbul: Tarih Vakfı Yayınları, 2023, 65–89.



Figure 4: The Map of the Turkic World

RECONSTRUCTING TURKISH-ISLAMIC CIVILIZATION IN THE MEDIEVAL AGE

In its discussion of the Turks’ conversion to Islam, the History textbook perpetuates the Turkish-Islamic Thesis, a historical narrative that has been influential in Turkish education since the 1980s.³³ (Copeaux 1998). This narrative asserts that Islam was not only compatible with the Turks’ pre-Islamic religion, *Gök Tanrı* (Sky God), but also played a crucial role in preserving their national identity. The following excerpt from the new history textbook illustrates this perspective:

The Turks embraced Islam not by force of arms but through their own free will and desire, as part of a natural transition process... Additionally, the similarities between the *Gök Tanrı* (Sky God) religion and Islam, as well as Islam’s compati-

33 Copeaux, Etienne. *Tarih Ders Kitaplarında (1931-1993): Türk Tarih Tezinden Türk-Islam Sentezine*. İstanbul: Tarih Vakfı Yurt Yayınları, 1998.

bility with the Turkish temperament, facilitated this process. Indeed, Islam played an important role in preserving the Turks' national identity.³⁴

This narrative thus presents Islam as a continuous rather than an interruptive force in the "imagined" historical development of the Turkish nation. As a result, the Turks are framed as a leading historical actor in the medieval age. Consistent with the treatment of the ancient age, the medieval period is also divided into distinct "civilization basins." As shown in Figure 5, the textbook identifies three such basins: "Islam civilization basins, Western (European) civilization basin and Asian civilization basins".



Figure 5: Civilization Basins in the Medieval Age.³⁵

This civilizational framing is designed to achieve two objectives: first, to elevate the status of Turkish-Islamic identity as a central actor in the medieval world, and second, to explicitly undermine Eurocentric accounts of historical progress. The Western civilizational trajectory is depicted in the figure as follows: "The few cathedral and monastery schools that were

considered institutions of higher education in medieval Western Europe did not develop until the 13th century and remained regional in nature. The formation of important cultural centers in Italy, France, and England took place later in the process".³⁶

The historical framework presented in the *Maarif Model's* textbooks and Framework Text, particularly its use of »civilization basins« and concepts like »ontological, epistemological integrity,« is heavily influenced by the work of Ahmet Davutoğlu.³⁷ As a key intellectual in Islamic circles and former political leader of the Justice and Development Party, Davutoğlu's scholarship positions civilization as the fundamental unit of historical analysis. He defines civilization as the societal reflection of a systematic worldview, arguing that each one possesses a unique »self-perception/self-understanding« (*ben-idraki*) that signifies inherent philosophical and cognitive differences.

Davutoğlu's analysis contrasts different civilizations based on this concept. For example, he characterizes Chinese civilization as having a "strong and local self-perception," which is comprehensive but lacks a universal claim. In contrast, he views Western civilization as having a "strong and rigid" self-perception, rooted in notions of historical exceptionalism and technological dominance, but limited by its "epistemological closure" and hierarchical worldview. He argues that this rigidity prevents genuine engagement with other civilizations. By comparison, Davutoğlu theorizes Islamic civilization as possessing a "strong and flexible self-perception." He contends that Islamic civilization has historically been open to other cultures, fostering social peace and pluralism. He critiques Western civilization for its moral relativism and spiritual emptiness, arguing that Islamic civilization, with its holistic epistemology (balancing science and morality, revelation and reason) and universal moral values (e.g., justice, mercy, responsibility), is uniquely positioned to resist Western influence. He concludes that

34 Kaymakçı, et. al., ed., Tarih 9. Sınıf Ders Kitabı, 212.

35 Ibid., 240.

36 Ibid.

37 Davutoğlu, Ahmet. *Civilizational Transformation and the Muslim World*. Kuala Lumpur: Brill, 1994. Davutoğlu, Ahmet. "Medeniyetlerin Ben-idraki." *Divan*, 1 (1997): 1–53.

Muslims must revive their “civilizational consciousness” through intellectual decolonization and institutional reforms in education, law, and politics.³⁸

This perspective informs the Framework Text’s emphasis on the unity of “soul and body” and “knowledge and wisdom,” as well as its designation of core values (justice, respect, responsibility) as “our national and spiritual values, which are the references of our own civilization”.³⁹ This intellectual foundation also accounts for a major revision in the Maarif Model curriculum: the rewriting of history to highlight the contributions of “Turkish-Islamic scientists” (*Türk-İslam bilim insanları*). A key feature distinguishing these new textbooks is their effort to integrate the contributions of these medieval-era figures into every subject, from History and Geography to Mathematics, Science, and Biology. These “Turkish-Islamic scientists” are consistently presented as pioneering innovators who laid the groundwork for modern Western civilization.

The History textbook highlights the theme of civilizational interaction, emphasizing that the Western world’s intellectual development was indebted to Islamic scholars who transmitted and reinterpreted the works of ancient thinkers during the medieval period. This point is exemplified in the following excerpt:

Intercultural interaction manifests itself in the form of influence from both contemporary civilizations and earlier ones. For example, Islamic scholars studied the accumulated knowledge of ancient civilizations, particularly those of the Old World, and reinterpreted them to contribute to the common world heritage. Scholars such as Ibn Sina, Biruni, and Al-Khwarizmi were pioneers of scientific developments during the Abbasid period. Indeed, the reason why al-Farabi is called “Muallim-i Sani” (the second teacher) is that he introduced the works of Aristotle, who is considered the first teacher, to world civilization with a new perspective. On the other hand, the Western world also benefited from the

38 Davutoğlu, 1994. And Davutoğlu, Ahmet. *Stratejik Derinlik: Türkiye'nin Uluslararası Konumu*. İstanbul: Küre Yayınları. 2011.

39 “Türkiye Yüzyılı Maarif Modeli,” 54.

knowledge and accumulated experience of the Islamic world to build their current civilizations.⁴⁰

Although the textbook highlights the formative role of Islamic civilization in the making of the Western world, it simultaneously advances, in line with Davutoğlu’s argument, a critique of Eurocentric historiography: “*The idea that civilization developed in a specific closed basin without any significant interaction with other human communities is a reflection of the notion of purity put forward by modern Western civilization to explain its own development*”.⁴¹

Historical evidence supports the claim that knowledge from ancient civilizations circulated through the East before being reintroduced to Europe, particularly via translation efforts. Indeed, historians such as Henri Pirenne recognize the importance of Islamic contributions to European civilization. Yet, the representation of Turkish-Islamic scholars in the textbooks contains two significant shortcomings.

First, the textbooks label medieval Islamic scholars as “Turkish-Islamic scholars,” thereby framing civilizational history through an explicitly ethno-religious lens. The History textbook itself defines “basin” as “a piece of land or region whose boundaries are determined by administrative and economic unity, similarities in soil, climate, and plant characteristics, or the fact that the people living there are of the same ethnic origin”.⁴² Accordingly, by attributing the advancements of the Middle Ages solely to “Turkish-Islamic scholars,” the textbooks present civilizational progress as the product of a single ethno-religious group. This narrative omits the contributions of other groups, such as Jewish or Christian scholars in Andalusia. Thus, while Davutoğlu’s scholarship conceives of Islamic civilization as pluralistic, the textbooks’ historical narrative does not reflect this civilizational diversity.

Second, the textbooks contain scientifically inaccurate claims. For example, the 5th-grade Science textbook presents Akşemseddin as having

40 Kaymakçı, et. al., ed., *Tarih 9. Sınıf Ders Kitabı*, 243.

41 Ibid., 231.

42 Ibid., 255.

“discovered microbes and introduced them to the scientific world,” adding that his contributions “paved the way for the discovery of many diseases and medicines”.⁴³ This assertion is scientifically flawed, as noted by Yavuz Unat of the Turkish Philosophy and Turkish History of Science Associations, who argues that the discovery of microbes would have been impossible in a period before the invention of the microscope.⁴⁴ Similarly, the claim that Ali Kuşçu “drew the first map of the Moon” is also criticized by Unat as an impossibility without a telescope. Consequently, the textbooks advance a non-scientific discourse by attributing foundational innovations in various fields to “Turkish-Islamic scientists.”



Figure 6⁴⁵

This discourse also establishes a clear boundary between Western and Islamic/Eastern civilizations, emphasizing to students that the term “Dark Ages” is exclusively applicable to the Western world. As illustrated by a comic strip in the History textbook, this message is conveyed through a dia-

43 Yener, Dündar, Elif Benzer and Tezcan Kartal, (ed.). *Fen Bilimleri 5. Sınıf 1. Kitap*. Ankara: MEB Yayınları, 2024, 143.

44 Unat, Yavuz. “MEB ders kitabında İslam Dünyası’ndaki bilim insanlarıyla ilgili yanlışlar.” Available at: <https://gazetebilim.com.tr/meb-ders-kitabinda-islam-dunyasindaki-bilim-insanlariyla-igili-yanlislar/> (access: August 2025).

45 Kaymakçı, et. al., ed., *Tarih 9. Sınıf Ders Kitabı*, 186.

logue between characters (see Figure 6). A male character initially states, “My friends, did you know that historians refer to the period of approximately one thousand years as the Middle Ages? The Middle Ages: The Dark Ages.” He is then corrected by a female character who responds, “In fact, the Dark Ages is only valid for the West. The description of darkness does not apply to the Eastern world in the Middle Ages.” The male character then supports her, claiming, “I agree with you. In this era, reason and science have prevailed in the East.”

The textbook reinforces this narrative with two reflection questions: “What do you think are the reasons for the differences between Western and Eastern civilizations in the Medieval Ages?” and “Write three sentences beginning with ‘In my opinion’ about Western and Eastern civilizations in the Middle Ages.” This approach promotes a simplified and essentialist view of civilization. Moreover, it reproduces a Western-Eastern dichotomy and a binary mode of thought that oversimplifies the complexity of historical interactions.

The 9th-grade History textbook concludes with the medieval age, with later historical periods to be covered in the 10th grade during the 2025–2026 academic year. Therefore, the textbook itself does not address the representation of contemporary Turkey. However, a unifying image on the back cover of all subject textbooks summarizes the model’s portrayal of modern Turkey. Titled “Our Technology Journey,” this visual montage includes images of key national defense and technological projects, such as the Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (İHA), the National Ship (MİLGEM), the Armed Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (SİHA), the Turkish Space Agency (TUA), the Information Valley, TURKOVAC, the first domestically produced automobile, the Turkish Republic Ship (TCG Anadolu), and the National Combat Aircraft (KAAN). These are presented as recent “national development initiatives” that position Turkey as a regional and global power. The images frame the Republic’s second century under the JDP as “the Century of Türkiye” and position the *Maarif Model* as a key tool for restoring the Turks’ status as a civilizational actor.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The Century of Türkiye *Maarif* Model represents one of the most ambitious and wide-ranging reforms in the Turkish education system. The MoNE introduces the model as a holistic framework that seeks to integrate the moral and ethical dimensions of education with the literacy and competency skills deemed essential for the 21st century. Central to this vision is the reconstruction of a historical narrative oriented toward cultivating what the Framework Text describes as a “civilization-building generation.” Within this framework, the History curriculum adopts an explicitly civilizational lens. History is reinterpreted through the analytical category of “civilization basins,” which provides the main structuring principle of the narrative. In this account, Turks are portrayed as a nation at the forefront of civilizational progress in both the ancient and medieval periods. As evidence, the History textbook redefines Central Asia—previously referred to as the Turkish homeland—as the “Turkistan civilization,” which is framed as laying the groundwork for modern civilization. With respect to the medieval era, the textbooks emphasize “Turkish-Islamic scientists” as key innovators whose contributions enabled the rise of modern science and ultimately Western civilization.

Notably, the *Maarif* Model’s History textbooks do not directly address the historical question of why the Ottoman Empire and later Turkey fell behind the West in the process of modernization. Instead, they employ civilizational references as a means of “re-linking the roots” and recovering the “ontological and epistemological integrity” allegedly fractured by the Western-secular educational paradigm of the Republic’s first century. The model thus seeks to shape the second century of the Republic into the “Century of Türkiye,” which will be defined by the technological achievements of its “virtuous and competent” students.

The Framework Text also identifies critical thinking as one of the core competencies to be developed within the curriculum. In principle, history education can serve as a powerful medium for cultivating critical thought, particularly by engaging students with multiple sources that present diver-

gent interpretations of the same event. Such an approach, by questioning the notion of a single and exclusive truth, encourages students to analyze, compare, and evaluate evidence.⁴⁶ The *Maarif* Model’s History textbook, however, does not adopt this multiperspective pedagogy. Rather, all of its sources and narratives reflect a singular, ethnocentric perspective. This perspective constructs an imagined historical continuity of a homogenous Turkish nation and culture extending from antiquity to the present. In the process, it mobilizes non-scientific claims (e.g., attributing scientific innovations to solely “Turkish-Islamic scientists”) and silences historical pluralism. For example, while the textbook acknowledges the belated adoption of the printing press in Ottoman history, it omits the fact that Armenians, Greeks, and Jews had already established printing presses within Ottoman lands.⁴⁷ History, therefore, is narrated almost exclusively through a Turkish-Islamic lens.

Ultimately, the model employs history teaching as a tool to forge civilizational awareness in contemporary Turkey by reconnecting ethno-national and ethno-religious “roots.” Yet this project rests on a civilizational narrative that is fundamentally essentialist. Civilizations are represented as possessing fixed essences and an independent ontological status. Both “Western” and “Islamic” civilizations are reified as coherent, bounded entities. Thus, although the *Maarif* Model seeks to challenge Eurocentric historical narratives, it reproduces essentialist dichotomies between East and West that are themselves products of orientalist historiography. Consequently, the model and its History textbook fall short of fostering a genuinely pluralistic historical imagination for what is envisioned as “the Century of Türkiye”.

⁴⁶ Murgescu, Bogdan, and Halil Berkay, eds. *The Ottoman Empire. Teaching Modern Southeast European History: Alternative Educational Materials, Workbook 1*. Thessaloniki: Center for Democracy and Reconciliation in Southeast Europe (CDRSEE), 2009.

⁴⁷ Kaymakçı, et. al., ed., *Tarih 9. Sınıf Ders Kitabı*, 50.

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POVZETEK

Članek obravnava obsežno turško šolsko prenovo iz leta 2024, znano kot »Izobraževalni model Stoletje Maarif Türkiye«, ki jo je uvedlo Ministrstvo za nacionalno izobraževanje. S kritično analizo jezika in pomenov preučuje idejna izhodišča novega učnega načrta, zlasti smernice in učbenik zgodovine za 9. razred. Pri tem pokaže, kako prenova skuša razgraditi evrocentrične zgodovinske pripovedi in vzpostaviti posebno turško-islamsko civilizacijsko predstavo.

Članek se začne z opisom političnega in vzgojno-izobraževalnega ozadja modela Maarif. Učni načrt, ki je bil nepričakovano uveden po zmagi Stranke pravičnosti in razvoja na volitvah leta 2023, v svojem naslovu združuje politično predvolilno geslo »Stoletje Türkiye« in tradicionalni arabski izraz za izobraževanje, *Maarif*, ki mu dajejo prednost islamsko-konservativni krogi. Na vzgojni ravni okvir uvaja »Model vrline, vrednot in delovanja«, namenjen oblikovanju »krepostnega in sposobnega človeka« (erdemli ve yetkin insan). Študija trdi, da takšna zasnova vsebuje prikrito kritiko posvetnega, v Zahod usmerjenega šolskega sistema prvega stoletja republike. Novi model se zato predstavlja kot prizadevanje za obuditev turških civilizacijskih ambicij, ne pa kot prilagajanje zahodnim merilom.

Novi učni načrt gradi premočrtno zgodovinsko pripoved o turški identiteti, ki jo razume kot trajno in skoraj nespremenljivo bistvo. Učbenik zgodovine za 9. razred na primer običajni izraz »Srednja Azija« nadomešča s »turkistansko civilizacijo« ter zarisuje širok panturški prostor od Balkana do Srednje Azije. Različne zgodovinske in etnične skupnosti, denimo Madžari in Bolgari, so umeščene v skupni »turški svet«. Članek poleg tega izpostavlja idejni okvir »turško-islamske teze«, ki turški sprejem islama prikazuje kot naraven in neprekinjen razvoj, s katerim naj bi Turki ohranili svojo narodno identiteto.

Učni načrt zgodovino razporeja v ločene »civilizacijske bazene«. Takšna delitev srednjeveško islamsko civilizacijo prikazuje kot odprto, znanstveno razvito in večvredno, medtem ko zahodnoevropski srednji vek zoži na

podobo »temnega veka«. To nasprotje med civilizacijami se utrjuje s stalnim poudarjanjem »turško-islamskih znanstvenikov« kot resničnega temelja sodobne znanosti, in sicer v učbenikih različnih predmetov.

Model tako poučevanje zgodovine uporablja kot sredstvo za vzgojo civilizacijske zavesti v sodobni Turčiji. To počne z vnovičnim navezovanjem na etno-nacionalne in etno-religiozne »korenine«. Vendar takšen projekt temelji na civilizacijski pripovedi, ki civilizacije razume kot zaprte in notranje enotne celote. Tako »zahodna« kot »islamska« civilizacija sta predstavljeni kot skladni, zaokroženi in skoraj nespremenljivi enoti. Čeprav si model Maarif prizadeva izpodbiti evrocentrične zgodovinske pripovedi, hkrati obnavlja poenostavljeno nasprotje med Vzhodom in Zahodom, ki je samo proizvod orientalističnega zgodovinopisja. Zato model in njegov učbenik zgodovine ne razvijeta resnično raznolike zgodovinske predstave za to, kar je zasnovano kot »Stoletje Türkiye«.

Kontakti avtorjev

Kornelija Ajlec, dr.

University of Ljubljana, Faculty of Arts, Department of History
Aškerčeva cesta 2, SI-1000 Ljubljana, Slovenia
kornelija.ajlec@ff.uni-lj.si

Kenan Çayır, dr.

İstanbul Bilgi University, Department of Sociology
Eski Silahtarağa Elektrik Santrali Kazım Karabekir Cad. No:2/13 TR-
34060 Eyüpsultan-İstanbul
kenan.cayir@bilgi.edu.tr

Zvezdana Kovač

European Fund for the Balkans
Majke Jevrosime 20, 11000 Belgrad, Serbia
info@jointhistory.net

Kriton Kuci, dr.

Department of Political Science and International Relations
Faculty of Law and Humanities, Mediterranean University of Albania, 52
Gjergj Fishta Blv, Tirana Albania
kritonkuci@umsh.edu.al

Angelos Palikidis

Professor of History Didactics
Department of Humanities, School of Humanities, Democritus University
of Thrace, P. Tsaldari 1, Komotini, P.C. 69100, Greece
apalidik@hs.duth.gr

Srdan Radović, dr.

Institute of Ethnography of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts
Knez Mihailova 36, 11000 Beograd, Serbia
srdjan.radovic@ei.sanu.ac.rs

Božo Repe, dr.

University of Ljubljana, Faculty of Arts, Department of History
Aškerčeva cesta 2, SI-1000 Ljubljana, Slovenia
bozo.repe@ff.uni-lj.si

Vassiliki Sakka, dr.

Association for History Education in Greece
Dervenakion 2, Petroupoli, 13232 Athens, Greece
vassilikisakka@gmail.com

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