In-between Spaces: Dual Citizenship and Placebo Identity at the Triple Border between Serbia, Macedonia and Bulgaria

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Abstract

This paper examines identity strategizing in the border region between Serbia, Macedonia and Bulgaria, focusing on the processes which affect the young generation's decision-making. I first examine the case of the Bulgarian minority in Bosilegrad, Serbia, where citizens live in a constructed "own" heterotopic space, belonging neither to Serbia, nor Bulgaria; locals, and especially young people, create fluid identities for themselves which help them to inhabit the vague spaces "in-between" national and ethnic identities, state borders, internal and external "others". Second, I look at young Macedonians in Kriva Palanka, Macedonia, where cross-border nation-making politics create a different heterotopia: of youth at the edge of the Balkan states, who live both here and now, but also elsewhere – in the imaginary and future "West", a "promised land" that will remedy them from the disappointments of their reality. They live in a state of *standby migration* characterized by their latent state, guided by the decision and the first steps towards migration; a phenomenon I call *placebo identity*.

Keywords: young people, identity, standby migration, dual citizenship, Serbia, Macedonia.

Introduction

The "Prespa Agreement" was signed on June 17th, 2018, ending the twenty-seven-year "name dispute" between Greece and Macedonia, which concerned the name of the latter; this name has now been officially changed to Republic of North Macedonia. This marked the first steps towards Macedonia's prospective membership in the EU and NATO but left both Greek and Macedonian societies divided. On the following day, Bozhidar Dimitrov[1] announced on National TV[2] that, while the efforts for resolving the conflict continued, Bulgaria does not have its best interests at heart. According to the former Director of the National Historical Museum (2011-2017), around "120,000 out of about 1,200,000 [in fact the estimate points at 2,200,000] citizens [of Macedonia] *believe they are Bulgarians – they have Bulgarian citizenship and vote in Bulgaria*" (emphasis added). Dimitrov announced that an hour after the signing of the Prespa agreement, he established a local branch of his newly formed political party named "Kubrat" in Kriva Palanka, Macedonia for the town is "full of Bulgarian citizens" [3]. Simultaneously, his team also established a local party structure in the Bulgarian

[1] Bulgarian historian (1945-2018) – infamous among Macedonians and some Bulgarian intellectuals; former Minister without portfolio for the Bulgarians abroad in the previous GERB (Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria; abbreviation GERB meaning in Bulgarian – *coat of arms*) government (July 2009 – February 2011). He has a significant influence in the society, especially with his position concerning Macedonia.

[2] The full interview from June 18th 2018 is available at: **https://btvnovinite.bg/predavania/tazi-sutrin/prof-bozhidar-dimitrov-ne-zashtitihme-balgarskija-interes-dumata-makedonija-ostana.html** [in Bulgarian].

[3] In his words: "This town [Kriva Palanka] and the villages surrounding it are called Bulgarian villages by the North Macedonians themselves". For the full interview see above.

minority town Dimitrovgrad, Serbia[4] . Dimitrov commented his actions as follows:

> I can give myself some credit for this – to have Bulgarian citizens there. Back in 2010 as Minister I helped intensifying these processes. Thirty-five thousand Macedonians received their citizenship then and now are not going to be called with the humiliating "Northern Macedonians" [5]. [In the next] census they shouldn't add "Bulgarian" category as all Macedonians are Bulgarians.

Bozhidar Dimitrov's words pose several important issues related to the wider region and dual citizenship. Some of these problems concern the state's motives for lax dual citizenship policies and how these are employed by the political and intellectual elites to promote irredentist views. Others are related to the identities, identifications and national loyalties of the citizens themselves, as well as their reasons to apply for second citizenship.

The focus of this paper is on the border region between Serbia, Macedonia and Bulgaria, known in the Balkan ethnographic literature as *Shopluk.* It is in Shopluk where the two towns, Kriva Palanka and Dimitrovgrad[6], are located. The region has a long migration history and strong migratory attitudes which nowadays seem to be a strategy for overcoming the limited access to resources (insufficient salaries, inadequate job opportunities and lifestyle options) for the region's young people (17-35). Additionally, both borders – between Serbia and Bulgaria and between and Macedonia and Bulgaria – are external to the European Union, therefore, providing clear-cut picture of everyday life difficulties "here" opposed to the opportunities available only for the "European inside" (as in Jansen, cited in Erdei 2010) – "there". Thus, this region provides interesting cases of various identity processes. In this paper, I focus on two issues: First, I examine the meaning "Bulgarian" has for the young representatives of the Bulgarian minority in *Bosilegrad, Serbia,* prior to their moving to Bulgaria. This will be shown alongside the heterotopic realia (following Foucault's concept) created by the self-perceptions of the locals about the place they live in – in-between two states, inhabited by people who belong to both and none at the same time.

Second, I examine how adopting a second citizenship (Bulgarian), creates a hybrid compensatory identity for those *intending to migrate* from *Kriva Palanka, Macedonia*. The younger citizens live in a state of what I call *standby migration* caused by the intertwining of two factors – disappointment in life conditions provided by the state (leading to detachment) and relying on a more promising future in the "imagined West". This in-between state causes them to adopt a latent social position, where local young people practically live in the limbo caused by the above-stated factors – living simultaneously here and "somewhere imagined". This phenomenon I refer to as *placebo identity*.

Methodology

This paper is based on ethnographic material gathered[7] in a relatively small border region, part of the wider historical-cultural area, known in the Balkan ethnographic literature as *Shopluk.* Research was based in Bosilegrad (Serbia), Kriva Palanka, (Macedonia), and Kyustendil (Bulgaria). I examined how the border affects the mentality of the borderlanders and their identities and identification. The bottom-up approach revealed

[4] During the conversation he uses the old Bulgarian name – Tsaribrod – one of the two big border towns, together with Bosilegrad, with compact Bulgarian minority. This is the reason he noted: "But we have no problems there" – meaning the population is openly declaring its Bulgarian identity in comparison.

[5] Agreement postulates that citizens of the Republic of Northern Macedonia are to be called Macedonians.

[6] Although in the present paper I will focus on presenting the results of my ethnographic fieldwork predominantly from two towns Kriva Palanka and Bosilegrad – the second biggest Bulgarian minority town along the Serbian -Bulgarian border.

[7] Presented data is part of a research project: "Borders and identity construction at the tripoint (Serbia, Macedonia and Bulgaria)", financed by the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences „Program for career development of young scientists, BAS" (2016-2017 – ДФНП №177).

a complex picture of multi-layered self-identifications that are fluid and contextually dependent. Over the course of my fieldwork in Serbia and Macedonia, I conducted 50 in-depth semi-structured interviews and more than 20 informal conversations. I inquired about everyday life at the border, the economic, political and cultural setting (in retrospective as well) of the communities and how they compare to the rest of the country, as well as to states across the borders: How do they perceive the "others" across the state boundaries? What are the similarities and differences? What does it mean to them to be Bulgarian, Serbian, or Macedonian at the border? While conducting the research, I observed and took part in the everyday life and social, cultural and political events.

During my initial visits to Bosilegrad (in 2009 – long before I commenced my dissertation) and to Kriva Palanka (in 2014) I established contacts with both residents and local administration representatives. During my subsequent stays, I used the snowball technique to find people who were considered to have better knowledge of the topics of inquiry. My respondents have various professional occupations, varying from representatives of the educational and cultural sphere (high school teachers, museum representatives), public sphere (journalists, NGO representatives), local administration, small and medium scale businesses and their employees, former and current politicians, high school students, unemployed. While I present phenomena which in their greater part concern the younger generation (ages seventeen – thirty-five years), some of the empirical findings represent "external" perspective – the one of respondents aged thirty-six to seventy-six, which include the age groups of their parents and grandparents. There is a pronounced gender imbalance, with around 70% of my informants being male[8]. All my respondents have either secondary or higher education. Nearly 60% have a university degree.

My "position" in the field changed with the movement between the border towns. In Bosilegrad among the Bulgarian minority I was perceived as "ours", in the sense that as a Bulgarian, I was considered close, and having positive attitude towards the community. Therefore, some of the more intimate cultural borders were immediately subverted and I quickly became a "trusted person". As researcher coming from the "*motherland*", I was granted a higher status – that of a person belonging to a respectable institution who can help the community by shedding light on hardships in the relevant political and social circles. Therefore, many came to me and asked for "an interview". In Kriva Palanka, my position as a Bulgarian was perceived in two ways. First, I was rarely perceived with distrust for my national origin even though many have faced hostile attitudes from Bulgarians over the years (consequence of the "Macedonians are Bulgarians" narrative). Secondly, based on my anthropological traits[9], people often perceived

[8] Based on my observations and interviews, I find the main reason for this to be the patriarchal structure underlining the societies' intra-group relations and consecutively stratifying the public sphere. Despite the topic's undoubted importance, due to the paper's limitations, I will discuss it only briefly. When approached, most women both in Serbia and Macedonia would answer in a similar fashion: "I don't understand anything of politics, ask my husband/boyfriend/man", despite of my re-assurance that we can talk on any aspect of their daily lives, avoiding politicization. Topics of double citizenship, passports, identity, economic situation were perceived by most as highly political/party related (due to the media and political discourses in both countries as evident from the interview with Dimitrov) – spheres usually perceived as male prerogative. Additional concerns, especially in Macedonia, were rising from the worry the authorities (Bulgarian or Macedonian) will suspend the double citizenships if there is too much "fuss" or that Bulgaria will eventually use these "new citizens" to claim a "minority" in the country. Therefore, for fear of information manipulation, or of being heard "by the wrong people", many young people refused to formally speak (often motivated as – "I don't bother myself with these matters"). This attitude led to a lot of conversations done in an informal setting – in cafes, restaurants, or bars. Recording or note-taking during our conversations was often not permitted by my informants.

[9] This follows a widely spread belief for the origin of the proto-Bulgarians, who are said to be Tatars in the

me as "their girl" ("*nashe momice*"). Further, my "ancestry" ("*poteklo*"), my great-grandfather was an honoured Macedonian revolutionary, made individuals more comfortable with me and thus more likely to confide. For the younger respondents, I represented an opportunity to gain a friend from the country which citizenship they strive to acquire.

Theoretical Framework: Dual Citizenship and Identity

Over the past two decades, the classical view of citizenship as sacred (Brubaker 1989) territorial, social and identity-exclusive is said to be in decline, becoming "overlapping and portable" (Harpaz and Mateos, 2018: 1). Its "post-exclusive" nature marks "post-territorial turn" in citizenship with many living outside their countries of birth and possessing dual citizenships (ibid 2018). An important role for these processes has the "lightening" of the symbolic value of citizenship (Joppke 2010) leading to its growing "instrumentalization" (Joppke 2018) by the population seeking to profit economically, gain access to "global mobility, a sense of security or even higher social status". In that context, Harpaz and Mateos define a new "*strategic citizenship*" approach as the bottom-up "instrumental practices pertaining to the acquisition and use of citizenship, along with a concomitant *instrumental-strategic attitude to nationality*" (see also Joppke 2010, emphasis mine), underlining the "key role of global inequality in shaping the meaning and value of citizenship" (2018: 1-2). In a globalized world, where mobility and movement are crucial, dual citizenship becomes a valuable strategy to bypass any constraints (like visa regimes). This leads to inevitable changes in national identity and identifications of the dual passport-holders.

Youth and Young Adults, Culture and Migration in a Globalized World

The collapse of state socialisms in Eastern Europe, coupled with challenges posed by the globalizing world, left young people exposed to a socio-economic transition. This resulted in political changes and worldwide tendencies of labour market fragmentation, limited job and housing options, populism and rising nationalism, migration – forced and otherwise, etc. These circumstances have made young people nowadays unquestionably different than any other generation before them (Trost and Mandic 2018; Trost 2018), having more fragmented and contested identities in comparison to the "former more gated subcultural" generations (Schwartz and Winkel 2016: 16). Due to the plethora of choices young generations now face with regard to travel, lifestyle, fashion, music, etc., their value systems are changing or in other words, their values are now formed not only under the influence of their families and communities, but also under the impact of external stimuli. Culture becomes inherently multifaceted and fluctuating, largely context-dependent and dynamic, thus complicating the individual's self-perceptions – which must be "constantly negotiated and repositioned between local places and global spaces" (Schwartz et al) and their relations home and abroad (Van Mejil 2008: 166).

Migration becomes part of everyday life – online and offline, while travel is becoming more and more accessible to the growing number of people. Motives range – from practical (looking for employment) to cultural ("change in lifestyle, as represented in [multiple] global media") (Van Meijl 2008: 166). It also evokes consequences more "far-reaching" than ever before, due to its "changed scale and diversity" (Van Meijl 2008:172). A large part of the literature on youth and migration examines "push and pull" factors that lead to migration decision. In the region investigated in this article a "culture of migration", where migratory behaviour "extends throughout a community", "increasingly enters the calculus of conscious choice and eventually becomes nor-

Macedonian history textbooks and some academic literature.

mative" (Kandel and Massey 2002: 982), exists alongside global trends. In this paper, I focus on an insufficiently explored question: What is the *intent of migration* and its possible effect on ethnic identifications? When such *intent* is turned into *"standby" migration*, how does it alter the ethnic identifications *prior any actual migration at the point of origin*?

Young people face increased uncertainty due to globalization, dynamic political changes, cultural complexity, divergent narratives of modernity and unpredictability of the future and failure of the states, globally and in the region, to provide adequate social conditions (Hermans and Dimaggio 2007). "Over-information" not only implies a sense of lack of control over multitude of phenomena and events, but "openness and comparing one's own life to people who are better off might produce a psychological threat to people's social identities" (Pratto 2017: 6). Furthermore, over-information causes growing individualism among young people in the region I research, and also compels them to adopt a "take the situation in their own hands" mentality in order to gain access to the life they want.

Borders. Identities, Ethnic Identities.

In this article, borders are generally understood in Frederik Barth terms (1969), in their socio-anthropological dimension – on cultural, ethnic and political level. In his classic work, Barth argues that maintaining the boundaries between ethnic units through "continued dichotomization between members and outsiders", guarantees borders' sustainability. Now it is recognized that ethnicity is highly "dynamic, hybrid and processual" (Mandic and Trost 2018: 3), or as Brubaker notes: identity (ethnic or national) must be analysed in "relational, processual, dynamic, eventful, and disaggregated terms" (as in ibid. 3). Many scholars are engaged in a debate on the analytic usefulness of "identity", which has been "over-conceptualized" and therefore vague (Brubaker and Cooper 2000, Brubaker 2004, Malešević 2006), and thus suggesting a shift towards "identification" and "classification" (Maxwell 2018).

Scholarly approaches have gradually abandoned the idea of borders being simple (physical) dividing lines. Emerging under opposing forces and divergent narratives, borders are understood as "translated into motion between separated entities" in a globalizing context (Konrad 2015:1), leading to their uncoupling from the "national scale" and linking to "identity and belonging *within and beyond the state*" (ibid. 3). Additionally, a greater "tension builds as result between the demarcation of boundaries and the articulation of mobility" (ibid. 4). Brambilla suggests that the concept of *borderscapes* unveils the processual nature of borders, "viewed as dynamic social processes and practices of spatial differentiation" (2015:15). Therefore, the notion marks their fluid and shifting nature "continuously traversed by a number of bodies, discourses, practices, and relationships" relentlessly (re)defining the symbolic borders from within and from the outside (ibid.19). Thus, borders become a definition for both exclusion and inclusion; simultaneous obstacles to be overcome and opportunity-providers used and adapted by the borderlanders for their own ends (Rumford 2008); places of constant (re)negotiation of social, cultural and political boundaries. Such "transitional spaces" are becoming "an interstitial zone of displacement and deterritorialization that shapes the identity of the hybridized subject"- *borderlands*, unlinking the previously unquestioned relation of spaces and fixed identities (Gupta and Ferguson 1992:18).

Case Background

The border region between Serbia, Macedonia, and Bulgaria can be found in the Balkan ethnographic and historic literature under the name of *Shopluk*[10]. Despite showing "some common and stable cultural traits" the region's turbulent history over the past 140 years has led to a five-fold change of borders and national affiliations,

[10] The ethno-historical region remains understudied, as the name origin and clear territory remain largely undefined, (more in: Hristov 2004; Malinov 2008).

leaving the population divided between three national states and different national identities (Hristov 2015: 33). During the 19th-20th centuries, the region was characterised by a temporary male labour migration, which significantly influenced the local cultural system; it changed family and kin structures, specific traditional folk calendar, synchronised with the absence of men.

Following the changing character and destinations of male labourers during different historical periods, Hristov (2015) differentiates four phases in the migration patterns in *Shopluk*. The *first* phase is characterised by agrarian seasonal migration from mountains to valleys (ibid. 35), which ended with the Balkan wars (1912-1913) the dissolution of the Ottoman empire, and the setting of new political boundaries, which separated the region. The *second* phase (beginning of XIX c.) is characterized by seasonal labour migration of builders (especially from the region of Tran, Bosilegad, Kriva Palanka, Kratovo), caused by the "widespread economic desolation and insecurity" following the dissolving of the Ottoman agricultural system (2015: 37). The *third* phase was characterized by cross-border labour migration. After Bulgaria's liberation in 1878, Sofia became the preferred destination for builders from the Tran and Tsaribrod's region and the remaining in the Ottoman empire – Kratovo and Kriva Palanka (Hristov 2004: 6).

In 1919, following the treaty of Neuilly-sur-Seine, the territories of Strumitsa (nowadays Macedonia), Bosilegrad, Tsaribrod (Dimitrovgrad) – then in Bulgaria, were annexed to the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes. A large part of the border was mechanically drawn running through houses, graveyards, house yards, often leaving families separated. The arbitrary drawing of borders marked collective memory and became a source and basis of the Bulgarian identity in Bosilegrad. This identity incorporated two narratives: the tragic separation from the motherland, and its resulting abandonment. Feelings of being "forgotten", together with the favourable conditions in the Yugoslav period legitimized a strong Yugoslav identity and led to the subversion of the Bulgarian identity. This narrative inconsistency passed on from generation to generation is one of the explanations nowadays for the divided loyalties among the young people as we will see later on in the presented results.

Balkan wars and WWI led to newly-formed states and complicated political environment on the Balkans. Border restrictions marked the collapse of the traditional trans-border migration and its re-structuring during the *fourth* phase (Hristov 2015: 42-3). After the establishment of the socialist regimes and the rapid industrialization of the 1950s, migration turned inwards to the big cities where most workers finally settled (ibid. 43). The end of 1960s was marked by bilateral agreements signed by Yugoslavia allowing for guest workers (*gastarbeiters)* to seek employment in Western Europe, this time transforming the labour migration and its general direction towards Central and Western-European countries. This policy, exceptional for a socialist country, brought fame to the Yugoslav passport. Other Eastern European countries, among others, recognized the Yugoslav passport for its "powerful status" which allowed for free border crossing and travel in search of economic prosperity. For both Serbians and Macedonians, the comparison between the unfavourable situation of family and friends in Bulgaria and the prestige of Yugoslavia, the relative freedom and economic wellbeing of its citizens, became a powerful memory and a source for Yugonostalgia. Older respondents expressed this longing through stories of the border meetings which brought bitter feelings when compared to their current socio-economic situation and the "reversal of positions" with Bulgaria. Annually, such meetings (*sabor, svidzanje*) meant to reunite separated kin, were organized at different places along the border (more in Germanov et al. 2015). Historically (until 1989), these meetings had an influential role in the life of the local population as they transformed from emotional social encounters to important trading points for deficient goods, as well as smuggling and some illegal activities.

Logically, with the events surrounding the dissolution of the federation in the 1990s, many felt trapped in their newly formed independent states. One generation, who once knew visa-free travels, was now faced with a visa-imposed reality required for 198 countries and administrative areas (Risteski 2014: 81) until the visa liberalization in December 2009 (European Commission 2009). Furthermore, following international sanctions, the decade brought challenges to Macedonia and Serbia. In the period 1991-1995, Serbia was under UN embargo, re-implemented in 1998, which left the country with a struggling economy and exceptionally high poverty levels. Between 1994 -1995 Macedonia was under Greek embargo due to the so called "name dispute". Despite the devastating effect that these sanctions had on the countries, societies and economies, border towns flourished during this period through illegal activities (most prominently petrol smuggling). These periods led to the establishment of two current everyday life strategies: the forming of smuggling channels, as well as the re-establishment of family ties, new connections, and friendships (business and personal). Economic inconsistencies between Bulgaria, on the one hand, and Serbia and Macedonia, on the other, turned the border into advantage – used by locals in the past and present in times of economic struggle.

After Bulgaria's accession to the European Union in 2007, the border kept its vital role for the towns' economies. While this created differences in the price ranges and standards of living, locals continued to use the well-established patterns of illegal activities *(shvertsa),* such as trading across the border anything from cigarettes and alcohol to clothes and electronics. To overcome the economic disproportion (corresponding to the interdependent borderlands as in Martínez 1994: 8–9) between the countries, the population at the tripoint also engaged in strategic identity appropriation, instrumentalizing ethnicity to gain access to the side of the border deemed to be providing a prospect for a better future. Moreover, for the population in the two surveyed regions, the receipt of Bulgarian passports became one of the most convenient ways to restore previous freedom of movement.

Culic argues that some Eastern European countries "may have had or still have unresolved or unsettled territorial disputes with former federal units or their inheritors". Therefore, their policies aim to "rectify past injustices" to citizens left outside of the territory of their "mother country", as in the case of the Bulgarian minority in Serbia, even at the price of taking "unfavourable stances towards dual citizenship" (2009:10). The contemporary naturalization policy of Bulgaria is not designed to resolve demographic or work force problems of the country, but to "win some symbolic battles over the past with neighbouring countries as well as to mobilise domestic voters" (Smilov 2008: 230-1). The main target in this is Macedonia, where the concept of "Bulgarian by origin" assumes that there are ethnic Bulgarians living in the country (ibid. 231).

Due to the specific approach of Bulgaria towards Macedonia and Serbia as having "historically formed Bulgarian communities beyond state's borders" (Ministerski savet 2008:10) the procedure for acquiring citizenship was shortened several times. Currently, the only requirements for applicants are to be eighteen years or older, to have no criminal convictions at a Bulgarian court, and to be of Bulgarian origin. According to the statistics provided by the Office of the Bulgarian President, in the period from 2007 – 2017, Macedonians maintained the leading position by acquiring the largest number of citizenships (58,977). They are closely followed by Serbia among the top five countries with 5,610 applicants (Administratsia 2017). There has been a lot of speculation about the validity of this information, particularly with regard to Macedonia (since Serbia has officially recognized Bulgarian minority) by residents of the border area, claiming that more than 80% of Macedonians have Bulgarian passports; media and Bulgarian officials insist that more than 200,000 Macedonians have them (see Hristova 2017a).

Case I: Bosilegrad, Serbia

Rural mountain areas in the southeast parts of Serbia are traditionally the least developed in the country, and they are characterized by rapid population decline, relative isolation, and inaccessibility (Miljanović et al. 2010: 259). Approximately 70% of the Bulgarian minority in Serbia is in the two municipalities — Bosilegrad and Dimitrovgrad. According to the Serbian Development Agency (Serbian Development 2016), Bosilegrad is among the five most underdeveloped municipalities with a 48.65% unemployment rate. Most people are employed in the administrative structures (58%), about 10.5% are in the industry (wood processing, textile, mining), trade – 7.1%, building – 1.6% (Ofitsialna stranitsa). Bosilegrad has poor connection with other major urban centres. Even though an international road runs through the town which connects Surdulitsa-Bosilegrad-Kyustendil, the road is in subpar condition, which furthers the isolation and underdevelopment of the town and its surroundings.

According to Raduski, the period of 1991 – 2002 was marked by major changes in the ethnic composition of Serbia due to the migration waves following the dissolution of Yugoslavia (2011:385). In the same period, the ethnically undefined population has doubled (2007: 84). An established tendency in the decrease of the Bulgarian minority population is evident in all census data[11]. Simultaneously, the number of those who identify themselves as Serbs has increased, while the Yugoslavs (often explained as ethic mimicry) have decreased, a fact that Raduski attributes to the merging of the two (2011:392). It is interesting to note that, according to the last census in 2012, just over 14% of the population of the municipality has not declared its ethnicity (Obshtina Bosilegrad 2011).

An interesting representation of the coexistence of Bulgarian and Serbian histories is seen on one of the two main streets ("Marshal Tito" and "Georgi Dimitrov") in Bosilegrad – a monument of the Bulgarian national hero Vasil Levski (built by Bulgarian companies and citizens) and a fountain reading: "With great love for the citizens of Bosilegrad – 8.09.2006" (built by the Municipality; the date is celebrated for the "liberation of Bosilegrad from the Bulgarian fascist occupation"). The social space of the town is intersected by numerous contradicting narratives and boundaries – social, political, ideological, national. The "banal" replication of the past marks a town in a temporal vacuum with an aging population, situated on the very edge between two states, two systems and two ethnic groups.

The political picture in Bosilegrad points to a deep social gap, seen in the split opinion of the population with respect to the town mayor Vladimir Zahariev[12] from the Democratic Party of Serbia[13]. Zahariev has been a mayor for the past 16 years and, according to many locals, he has

[11] Demographic and ethnic data for Bosilegrad Municipality (Savezni zavod… 1961; 1971; 1981; 1991; Republicki zavod 2002; 2011).

[12] Vladimir Zahariev is also Chairman of National Council of the Bulgarian National Minority in Serbia, established following the law adopted in 2009.

[13] He left it in 2016 after establishing his own party.

Ethnicity	1961	1971	1981	1991	2002	2011
Bulgarian	-	-	-	-	7,037	5,839
Serbian	291	292	616	1,165	1,308	895
Macedonian	40	58	49	-	42	38
Roma	1	13	10	3	-	162
Muslim	-	1	1	10	-	-
Yugoslav	2	255	3,976	1,649	288	20
Others (Montenegrins, Croatians, Albanians, etc.)	27	27	14	11	-	Note: Not stated 1110
Total	18,368	17,306	14,196	11,644	9,931	8,129

monopolized the political, social, and economic sphere at the small town. His name is often seen in the headlines of local and Bulgarian media with allegations of corruption or inappropriate behaviour. Reportedly, the Bulgarian administration "broke ties" with him for "leading personal and vague politics", including "abuse of power related to Bulgarian citizenship procedures" (BGNES 2018). My respondents shared stories of political pressure around local elections, voter manipulation, and repercussions if they were "against" him (such as: "dropping out" from citizenship lists; their children to be removed from the quotas for the Bulgarian universities – as these are in the municipality's prerogatives). One of his most prominent opponents is the Culture and Information Center of the Bulgarian Minority in Bosilegrad (CICBMB). The competition between Zahariev and the Centre divides the town along political, ideological and cultural lines. For example, for years there have been two celebrations of 24th of May (The day of the Slavonic Alphabet and Bulgarian Culture) and two ceremonies at the monument of V. Levski – one of each "group".

The specific power relations in the town and in the region are verbally expressed in the phrase "Bulgarian by profession", often used to mark an "internal other" by the townsmen in both big Bulgarian minority towns at the border. It is used by the inhabitants of Dimitrovgrad for those of Bosilegrad, meaning they "always complain about their miserable situation as forgotten and alienated" (X.[14], 40), but do not work to improve it. Conversely, it is used by Bosilegrad's residents in accusation of the Dimitrovgrad townsmen for instrumentalizing their Bulgarian identity to financially profit from the Bulgarian projects. When used by CICBMB for Bosilegrad's mayor and "his people", it marks their abuse of the system; the same accusation goes both ways. "Professionalized Bulgarians" are those who use their political and social status for their own purpose, unlike those who work *for* the community and its better life. This phrase, when used, always signals another social, political and cultural demarcation line, designating a complex system of societal functioning.

Findings

Bosilegrad was practically empty in the summer of 2016. A girl I met in one of the small grocery stores offered an explanation: most of the young people stay in Bulgaria where they work in Sofia or at the seaside or are on vacation there; others join their families for summer work abroad. Bosilegrad is a town with one of the highest rates of unemployment state-wise and a very limited labour market, and it offers no opportunity for its young citizens. Alexandra, 21, concluded: *"You have to save yourself – there is no life, no prospect, no future".* Additionally, the students do not have the appropriate socializing infrastructure – no opportunities for after-school activities, no safe social spaces, cinemas or sports halls (except for the several restaurants in the town centre where adults would gather to drink, smoke, and dine). Boredom negatively affects life-evaluation of young people, forcing them to compare their situation with that of their counterparts who study on the other side of the border – in Kyustendil:

> *She* [his mom] *is sorry* [to not let him study in Kyustendil] *because she sees how well S. is doing in school – it is a good school, more advanced, he has new friends. It is very bad here! There are no new acquaintances; everything is the same old you know. School here is bad. I see how my cousin in Vienna and even S.* [who studies in Kyustendil] *are studying much more, and it is much harder for them. Here you don't need to do much to have good grades.* [Anton, 17]

According to *Provision 103 of the Council of Ministers dated 31.05.1993*[15]*,* the Bulgarian state covers student taxes, the dormitory, and canteen payments of Bosilegrad and Dimitrovgrad

[14] Names and initials have been changed.

[15] Provision 103 regulates the educational activities of the Republic of Bulgaria in regard to foreign citizens and individuals without citizenship who are of Bulgarian origin (*narodnost*) and live in Bulgarian communities abroad. (ПОСТАНОВЛЕНИЕ № 103 1: 1993).

students. While education in Serbia is paid, in Bulgaria students can live relatively well without having to pay for their education or accommodations. Consequently, most families choose to send their children to Bulgaria after high-school. In rare cases this decision is motivated by patriotic feelings towards the "motherland"; it is, instead, just a pragmatic step with the final objective being an "escape plan" from their home region and to secure a training in higher education[16]. Fewer students chose to stay in Serbia to study in Nis or Belgrade. Some of my respondents claim that the decision to stay in Serbia is motivated by students' "surbianized"[17] family background. A third, in my opinion, much smaller group, stays within the region to work in the re-opened lead and zinc mine in the nearby village of Karamanitsa, or after gaining Bulgarian citizenship, to work as builders in Serbia or in Western Europe (predominantly Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Spain, etc.).

Some of my younger respondents were sarcastic about their peers' strategies to immerse themselves in the Bulgarian society, or to get a passport:

> *Aim? Of course! The first example I can give is with most of the people who sign up to study in Bulgaria. Until they are eighteen, until 12th grade, they walk around "wrapped in the Serbian flag". But then the period for ranking the good students who are to go to study in Bulgaria comes and they practically "bulgarize" themselves to a point when they "drain their brain" from the effort. After they receive their* [university] *diploma it all goes back the same way, but they don't return here for already obvious for you reasons. They stay in Bulgaria.*

Life at the border and the feeling of being "in-between" two states and their societies, gives the Bulgarian minority the chance to manoeuvre its multiple identities as a life-strategy in times of hardship. As I have argued elsewhere (Hristova 2017; Hristova2017a) the life stories of the Bosilegrad borderlanders provide an overview of identity shifts of the society. For example, in the early periods following 1919 until the 1960s, a clear trace of minority's affiliation with Bulgaria as a beloved kin-state can be seen. It was also due to the fact that most of the actual coevals of the traumatic events from the beginning of the century were still telling their stories and nurturing an emotional relationship with their "lost motherland". Soon after the Tito regime was established, and the times became "calmer", the Yugoslav identity became leading for the minority for different reasons. Many felt part of the Yugoslav nations – more secure, loyal to the "country which has provided them with all they had" (a common expression; now used in terms of Serbia) and which was much more powerful and desired even by their relatives across the border. At this point, Bulgaria, being much poorer and conservative than Yugoslavia, was recognized as the state that abandoned them. In the late 1980s, after the first signs of forthcoming dissolution of the federation, the picture started to change. Many felt that "this is not their war, so why should they fight for Serbia, they are after all Bulgarians" (Boyan, 45). In the 1990s, following the initiative of the people from the region, the Bulgarian state launched a new policy of support for the minority. This contributed to the population's adoption of new positive attitude towards their homeland. The accession to the European Union in 2007 restored the prestige of Bulgaria for them.

Although these identity shifts can be followed linearly, there are also much more conflicted layers of the minority identity. An example is the dubious ethnic self-identification of *bosilegradcani* (but also of the citizens of Dimitrovgrad), following external categorization:

> *When we go to Kyustendil, they say "Here are the Serbs again!", but when we go to Surdulitsa* [a nearby Serbian town] *they say: "Here are the*

[16] It is also fair to note that both in Bosilegrad and Kriva Palanka it is perceived that the Bulgarian universities are providing low-grade education and it is thus relatively easy to receive a diploma from one of these institutions. Using their minority status, Bosilegrad's young people are reporting to receive more attention and less pressure from the professors.

[17] Individuals who have been under strong Serbian cultural and political influence and have consequently started to present themselves as Serbs or express openly pro-Serbian positions.

> *Bulgarians again!". So, we say: from Surdulitsa towards Belgrade there are Serbs, from Kyustendil to here – there are Bulgarians.* [Stefan, 31]

Therefore:

> *Some say as joke: "When we go to Bulgaria – we are Bulgarians, when we go to Serbia – we are Serbs".* [Anton, 17]

The complicated minority identity/self-identification system is preconditioned by positions ascribed *to* them and ascribed *by* them. Since *bosilegradcani* are a national minority in Serbia, the concepts of citizenship, nationality and ethnicity do not coincide. Often in conversations they would refer to me as "you, the Bulgarians" or "they, the Bulgarians" establishing boundaries with me, which should be by presumption "theirs". On many occasions my interlocutors would also speak about "there, in Bulgaria" and "there, in Serbia", creating the heterotopic existence of their own space as a place of "otherness", of non-belonging and of people who are "half Bulgarian, half Serb" (a main way of the young people to describe themselves, especially in Dimitrovgrad, but in Bosilegrad, too) /"Bulgarians, but not exactly" (most of my older respondents). Therefore, they have a specific "us" self-identification, differentiating them both from their co-ethnics and the Serbians. Divided between the locality, making them "different", combined with their specific dialect[18], the Serbian educational system and strong Bulgarian identity narrative, they shift identification to respond to many and ever-changing Others.

According to the context, identity is used strategically to provide the individuals with a "fitting" image for their respective social environment. A main marker of being "a Serbian/Bulgarian" is their use of language, with which the minority would cross ethnic boundaries. Their unbalanced education in both mother and national language often ruins "the disguise" in both situations (A., 24) facilitating the feeling most young people have – the simultaneous belonging and non-belonging to neither Bulgarians, nor Serbians. In such gated community – temporally but also infrastructurally, economically and politically delineated from the rest of the country – the divisions along ethnic lines are nurtured mainly in the families, providing the reproduction of divided loyalties.

Case II: Kriva Palanka, Macedonia

Kriva Palanka is located at the Northeast region of the country, twelve kilometres from *Deve Bair* border crossing, and is considered to be the main region connecting the country with its neighbour, Bulgaria. European corridor G-8 passes through the town connecting Skopje with Sofia. Because of the close proximity to the border, trade (legal as well as the illegal) is well developed, and so is "food" and cultural tourism. Many Bulgarians do their weekly and monthly grocery shopping in Kriva Palanka due to the shared understanding that the food is cheaper and of better quality in Macedonia. Many of them, including organized touristic groups, also visit the "St. Joakim Osogovski" Monastery. Located two kilometers from the town, it attracts many cross-border tourists (Hristova 2014).

Near the town there are two industrial sites – the mines "Toranica" and "Bentomak", a textile manufacture, etc. The employment rate in the Municipality is among the lowest in the country – 32.0% (Регионите во Македонија 2017:120), while the unemployment rate reaches 42.2%, 18.5% higher than the national average and the highest among the eight regions (Drzhaven zavod 2017: 34). For the entire region, about 41% of the unemployed do not have secondary education diploma, 33% have high school diploma and only 10% have a university degree (Trenovski et al. 2016: 13). Employees in the informal economic sphere have similar percentage to the national one, about 22% (for the aged between 25 and 54). In this respect, the age groups over

[18] Bulgarian linguistic literature marks the dialect as belonging to the group of the so called "transient" dialects marking the linguistic boundary between the languages. The local dialect was called *Shopski* and most respondents would describe it as "something in-between Bulgarian, Serbian and Macedonian".

65 and of 15 – 24 show the highest levels of 80% and 45%, respectively. The region has a predominantly young population (ibid. 15) and an ethnically homogeneous profile with Macedonians accounting for about 97% of the population[19].

The end of 2017 led to a change in Macedonia with SDSM winning most of the local elections against VMRO-DPMNE – voter turnout not predicted by any opinion polls. Arsenco Aleksovski (VMRO-DPMNE), mayor of Kriva Palanka for two mandates, lost to Borjanco Micevski (SDSM). According to the Macedonian Center for International Cooperation (MCMS) the former is ninth of the ten wealthiest candidates in the country prior to the elections. Aleksovski, who led the elections list in 2013, declared over € 1.5 million (Либертас 2017). Four different criminal investigations of abuse of political position and power were launched against him before the elections (TV 24 2018). Moreover, due to "serious indications of illegal and dubious activities", which led to accruing MKD 55 million (about € 900,000) in debt, the new mayor urges an independent audit agency to investigate the Municipality's documents for the previous year (Либертас 2017a).

During my research, the dominance of VMRO in the social and political sphere was incontrovertible. Everyone praised local and central authorities, and the city's landscape was marked with many graffiti stating the party's election number from the lists from previous elections and posters of their candidates. The brand new Virgina stars in front of the Municipality were an alarming reminder of Skopje's central urban parts. Conversely, traces of opposition were also evident. Months after the "Colorful Revolution" in Skopje, the Kriva Palanka City Hall still had traces of colorful "bombs" reminding of the events even here – at the very "edge of the state". "Vandals!", the old man who guarded the building exclaimed to me. People were not happy to discuss controversial topics such as the wiretapping scandal or even "Skopje 2014". As I mentioned earlier, the fear of discussing politics and the local and state VMRO party structures was evident. A young man told me his father (who was at a high administrative position, and thus connected to the party) physically threatened one of his teachers, *"because he was being too hard on him".* Everyone who held a public or administrative position was part of the party structure. This was the case with Y., 43, who shared: "*Here if you are not with them* [VMRO] *you cannot even come close to my position*".

Findings

During the summer of 2016, cafes were full of people throughout the day – an image hardly corresponding to the astoundingly high levels of unemployment in the municipality. Nevertheless, "help needed" signs, placed on the windows of almost every café and shop, remained unanswered. When I asked Igor, age seventeen, why he wouldn't take such a job but is considering going to Slovenia or Italy as soon as he finishes high-school instead, he answered:

> *It's not a matter of having absolutely no job positions. It's a matter of how much they pay you…You work for 8-9-10 hours as a waiter and they pay you what? 6000-7000 denars* [around 100-120 euro] *a month. You can't afford anything. Here you can't*

[19] Demographic and ethnic data for the town of Kriva Palanka (Republic of Macedonia 1948-2002).

	Total	Macedonians	Albanians	Turks	Roma	Vlachs	Serbs	Bosniaks	Others
1948	1,967	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
1953	2,539	2,009	3	81	336	0	70	-	40
1961	2,844	2,360	1	12	-	-	60	-	411
1971	4,955	4,301	6	16	369	-	118	-	145
1981	8,860	8,243	0	9	297	0	120	-	191
1991	11,271	10,517	0	1	479	1	122	-	151
1994	11,166	10,538	0	0	506	2	65	-	55
2002	14,558	13,758	0	2	668	2	88	1	39

> *even go out much. We used to have a disco, now we have only the casino. To go out we have to go to Blagoevgrad* [a relatively big Bulgarian border town]. *You must save yourself and go abroad.*

Social media and the contact of young people with their families and friends abroad, give them a clear idea of the "dream life", where you work, and live "as a normal person". The accumulation of information creates a positive narrative about the migrant experience abroad associated with the image of "the West". In my conversations with the young citizens of Kriva Palanka, almost all of them were already preparing to leave the town and the country. They described "the West" primarily based on the stories of migrants already living abroad and on social media publications. They considered economic and social well-being self-evident through migrants' material possessions, such as expensive cars and branded clothes, demonstrated during their visits back home. This "imagined West", built on the hopes and dreams of better job opportunities, more money, good quality of life, for some – even better education, was a counterpoint of their own disappointing reality[20]. As David, a forty-three year-old school teacher explained:

> *Unfortunately, this is a big problem* [talking about the passports]. *From an economic point of view, young Macedonians between eighteen and twenty think that there, in the European Union, money is falling from the sky. So, they follow the lead and take Bulgarian passports, as this is the only way to go there.*

Plans to go to the "Promised Land" became an indication that young people "take their lives in their hands" and want to prosper, unlike those who remain. For most of my respondents, choosing the country for provisional migration depends mostly on the size of wages, regardless of the standard of living. Promising narratives of life abroad are insufficiently discussed; aspects like the poor conditions in which many people live in order to save as much money as possible are omitted from conversation. Therefore, young people build high expectations with very little concrete information about their countries of choice. Even more importantly, young people do not want to know more, indicating the "anticipation" of which Merton (1968) speaks. The words of Darko, nineteen, sum up the attitudes of his peers:

> *I don't want to study anymore… I just want money* [What about the language then? – M.] *Well, everyone learns it when they start working there. At least they know enough to get around. My uncle works in a construction brigade and I will probably go live with him…He is in Germany now. But I want a restaurant job or something like that…*

The lack of motivation to become an active part of the prospective society marks the migratory attitude of young people and points to the possible low levels of inclusion if migration is successful. Mobility (labour, permanent or other) becomes an escape plan for young people who are deeply dissatisfied with the current state of affairs in their country, without any prospects for improvement in the near future. Many young people, especially those who do not aim at commencing undergraduate studies, rely predominantly on the social capital they have (family and friendship) to provide them with the necessary environment in the new country.

Young people in Kriva Palanka, ages eighteen to twenty-five, found it very important to show me their positive attitude towards Bulgaria or the Bulgarians, or even better: to show that we are not so different. They often approached me, jokingly asking if I have "good and pretty" girlfriends who would like to marry a Macedonian. This became a common "icebreaker" in the conversations with young *krivopalancani*. Part of their rationale was that a possible marriage would shorten the long wait for passport acquirement.

[20] Counter-intuitively, most of the Kriva Palanka citizens, irrespective of their age, were EU sceptics. Their concerns are due to daily contacts with Bulgarians who were visiting the town for grocery shopping because of the quality of food and lower prices. This gave them a name among the locals: "Meat-tourists". The fact that their neighbours prefer to travel to another country to ensure even simple supplies, raises concerns about the same outcome for Macedonia after its accession.

In my first days in Kriva Palanka, the cafés were full of young people, as the summer was approaching its end and the festival period (mainly the Monastery's Saint Patron day) was about to begin. This is when all young people come back from Skopje or their work/study abroad (often only once a year) and the streets were crowded. It was easily noticeable that I am not a local, as they have never met me, and after realizing I am Bulgarian, they would usually cheerfully say: "We are all Bulgarians here!" – piling their ID cards on the table, they invitingly said, "Come and sit with us". Of course, it was a common joke and after some time they would say that the Bulgarian passport is nothing more than an "airplane ticket" ("*Bugarski pasos e kao avion!"- N., 21*). Witticism related to the citizenship and their newly acquired status was the usual way my informants preferred to communicate on the topic. Just some fifteen years ago, as Dragan, forty-seven, told me, many were disapproving of that so *"you would keep quiet and eventually they will find out* [you took Bulgarian passport] *when you leave".* On the contrary, nowadays "everyone has it" and this is the main legitimizing factor for the young people to apply for their second citizenship. Humour, nevertheless, served to outline contradictions of the topic which are still present in the social discourses. This coping strategy was the way to avoid the stigma associated with the betrayal of their own society and the categorization they considered to have been subjected to by Bulgaria and its society (respectively me). Exaggeration of the citizenship effect downplays the importance of obtaining another passport and aims to ridicule the absurdity of a situation in which they would "be ethnically transformed".

Although all my respondents claim that the process of obtaining a Bulgarian passport does not affect their own national affiliations and loyalties, it still categorizes them institutionally and therefore externally as Bulgarians. Zoki, a twenty-two year-old football player, was invited to play for a team in Western Europe. During the transfer, his Macedonian citizenship became an obstacle for the team managers because it "was becoming very complicated", so he decided to take a Bulgarian passport to solve the problem. When I asked him if the citizenship interview made him feel "less Macedonian", he denied: "*you just say all those stupid things that you believe in the country, you love it, and you care for it and they give you the passport".* For Zoki, and many others, obtaining a second citizenship was a way to cope with career obstacles and therefore passport for him bears no symbolic value and does not automatically imply loyalty.

Discussion: Strategizing Identity

It has become clear that one of the main life strategies of the young people at the border in question is migration, reflected in high positive attitudes toward migration among younger generations. Shared intent of migration itself as well as the actual migratory activity in the region affects those who stay behind – high school students and young people up to age thirty-five, who still have not made a decision about their future life. People's everyday life was underlined by two main discourses: the bad conditions in the country, and in their hometowns specifically, made migration the only way of "saving oneself". Although the case cannot be treated as *forced migration*, its rationale resonates with it. Therefore, as "Thomas Theorem" indicates: "If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences"(Merton 1968: 475). Though my respondents actively decide to migrate, they feel they are forced by the situation to do so and act consecutively.

The inability of individuals to foresee the future of their own society and country is a clear sign of a societal crisis. The group uncertainty resulting from the insurmountable difficulties of the present and disbelief that any qualitative improvement will occur over their lives enhances the longstanding mistrust in the state (whose efforts do not appear to lead to the creation of infrastructure, development or support of the development of the labour market, etc.). Except for the relatively small Roma and Serb communi-

ties in the municipality, Kriva Palanka has a fairly homogenic ethnic profile. However, the population feels that it is under a great threat from the Albanian population of Macedonia, considered to be internal ethnic "other", aiming to overtake "their" country**.** This, together with the dissatisfaction with the overall economic situation and the general state of the country, "is not in favour of the civic identity" (Hrsitova, Cekik 2013: 52). This (prolonged) disgruntlement with the state leads to possible delineation of national and ethnic identity, of deterritorialization of ethnicity. In this context, the personal decision for migration is not only possible but also very likely. Migration (or intent of) becomes a part of the everyday life strategies resulting in a closed strategic mental construction: unsatisfactory economic conditions, which cause one to migrate, which would lead to a better social and economic status.

At the state borders, identities proved to be particularly permeable to the "cross – pressures" (Agnew 2008). Identities are being drawn both inward-toward the state, and outward-across borders by, sometimes relevant in their power, social, political and economic ties (such as citizenship, state nationalism, even familial ties) (Wilson, Donnan 1998: 13). Similarly, Anzaldúa (1999) conceptualizes a specific border identity at the US-Mexico frontier – the "new mestiza" – often composed of *competing narratives* and thus acting pluralistically, creating multicultural "border crossing identities", operating at an "in-between" space – the border. In the region researched we can see two cases of such pluralistic identities developed, following Foucault (1986), in a type of heterotopic reality. On one hand, the minority at the border is living in a constructed "own" space, belonging neither to Serbia, nor to Bulgaria, creates mutable and fluid identities inhabiting the vague spaces "in-between" national and ethnic identities, state borders, internal and external "others". On the other hand, all the processes described in Kriva Palanka create a different heterotopia – of youth at the edge of Balkan states that live both here and now, but also elsewhere – in an imaginary future and place – "the West" – a "promised land", which will remedy them from the disappointments of their reality.

This is what I called a *placebo identity*[21] – a hybrid compensatory identity, created by a signifier ("Bulgarians", passports, even the application procedure itself, by detachment from the state and distinction between national and ethnic identity), which somehow equates the *act of search* for solution to the unsatisfactory conditions to the *solution* itself. By acting on migration intent (through the Bulgarian/EU citizenship) my respondents were already detached from the current reality and psychologically remote from their de-valued society. Becoming part of the "European inside" means they have symbolically achieved a membership in a prestigious community, which they so far were able to observe only from the margins. The opportunities it provides are now open to them to benefit at any given moment. This leads to what I call *standby migration*, characterized by their positive migratory attitude and the possibility of leaving immediately if circumstances become (more) discouraging. This standby status marks the inactive status of the community – a pending decision whether to stay or leave (to find jobs, to study, etc.). The placebo identity at that point is mimetic, caused by societal and national identity crisis, and marks the liminal status between "here" and "there" – a "remedy" (for the time being) for the unsatisfactory reality. It thus encompasses and inhabits the margins between the ethnic and civic, and compensates and masks the "shame" of the inconsistence between them and the life choices they provoke.

[21] A beneficial effect produced by a placebo drug or treatment, which cannot be attributed to the properties of the placebo itself, and must therefore, be due to the patient's belief in that treatment. Available at: **https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/placebo_effect** [Accessed: 15.01.2017]

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