

INCLUSION AND DEMARCATION

The corona-pandemic as a border-/boundary marker in North Macedonia

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Abstract – The corona-pandemic has reminded us of territorial borders, i.e., national borders throughout the world. Moreover, surprisingly, these very borders have emerged as successful tools for hindering the spread of the virus. In many cases, the coronavirus “stopped” at national borders due to the massive closures targeting, especially migrants, as they were seen as potential carriers and transmission risk factors. This article concerns this context intending to expose the border-/boundary-behavior in North Macedonia. Drawing upon the pandemic, it aims to challenge the frequent statements by politicians from Germany and the US on how the virus knows no borders. By paying attention to a southeastern european region, the article intends to show how the spread of the virus/disease reveals multiple borders and boundaries in the country, and the present-day world.

Keywords: North Macedonia; Corona Pandemic; (in)visible boundaries; old and new boundaries.

1. Introduction

North Macedonia has long been known for its diversity. Long ago, this variety generated negative and positive connotations in Western Europe. It experienced a significant decline when national borders were drawn in the 19th and 20th centuries. However, dynamic labor migrations created new kinds of diversity: old regional cultures encountered new ones. These mobility waves have caused an overlap between the local, regional and national milieus, but at the same time, they have (re-)produced multiple internal borders.

The Coronavirus pandemic has effectively visualized these multiple borders in North Macedonia, much like those familiar malachite green markings expose invisible traces of biochemical activity in the body (e.g., in dentistry) or the invisible markings at crime scenes.¹ In order to combat the pandemic, politicians have often stated that the virus knows no borders.² This metaphor made another appearance in the summer holiday season of 2020.³ That is why national borders were closed in an attempt to contain the pandemic.

¹ See <https://www.pharmawiki.ch/wiki/index.php?wiki=Malachitgr%C3%BCn>.

² See The address of the German Minister of Health, Jens Spahn, to the Bundestag on 12.02.2020, entitled *Ein Virus macht an den Grenzen nicht halt* (“A virus does not stop at the borders”). In: <https://www.cducsu.de/themen/familie-frauen-arbeit-gesundheit-und-soziales/jens-spahn-ein-virus-macht-den-grenzen-nicht-halt>). Also, in the US, especially in New York as the first American hotspot, Governor Andrew Cuomo himself also used the border metaphor regarding the spread of the pandemic (in: <https://www.welt.de/vermischtes/article207266187/Update-zur-Corona-Krise-Cuomo-stellt-sich-offen-gegen-Trump.html>).

³ See The German Ministry of Health. In: <https://www.bundesgesundheitsministerium.de/coronavirus/chronik-coronavirus.html>.

The fact that borders are not static but very dynamic⁴ cannot be confirmed in this article. Rather, it is argued that these closures are the most effective way of expressing the static character of national borders, not statically in terms of immutability, but in terms of tenacious separation. But the coronavirus pandemic has also made visible other boundaries, such as regional and social separations. Musil's perspective cited here could see the pandemic as an improving economy or a renaissance of borders.⁵ "Over the course of a single week, more European borders have been closed because of Covid-19 than in the refugee crisis of 2015," writes Ivan Krastev, who sees the border closures as "a geopolitical version of social distancing." (Krastev 2020, p. 29, 31) However, this article claims that even before the pandemic, the borders were already present like phantom borders. They were not seen but felt somewhere, even if merely through their sporadic or implicit consequences, or after they received their "Coronavirus marking" (*malachite green*) and became almost visible. Therefore, the pandemic is represented by the *malachite green* metaphor.

Based on three cases, each representing a region in North Macedonia, these boundaries will be illustrated in the context of the ongoing pandemic. The regions in question are: Dibra/Debar as a state border region, Kërçova/Kičevo as a strictly isolated inland region, and Skopje as a city containing very intense and long-established multiculturalism and multiethnicity. All three regions are located in the west of the country and are multi-ethnic. The aim of this selection is to examine the important role of ethnicity in the spread of the pandemic. The study is divided into two levels, a horizontal or geographical level and a vertical or social level. Under the horizontal level, state and regional borders are discussed in relation to the pandemic, while the vertical level focuses on ethnic and migratory borders.

This article bundles the author's results from various (book) projects, indicated in the relevant places. Regarding the pandemic in the countries analyzed here, recent publications from the daily press and state institutions are referenced. Contrary to popular scientific opinion, Wikipedia is not a suitable source for scientific papers, but two Wikipedia entries are used here in relation to the chronology of the pandemic in North Macedonia and Albania, because it is the only source providing this kind of information.⁶ The link between emigration and the pandemic is based on the author's own empirical data as part of her project on "Migration and cultural transfer between Germany and the Albanian Western Balkans"⁷. Apart from that, the Coronavirus pandemic is still fresh and ongoing, and more anthropological studies are expected. However, one such publication has recently become available, namely "Is it tomorrow, yet? Paradoxes of the Pandemic" by Ivan Krastev (2020).

⁴ Musil, Robert: Die Taktzahl der Krisen und Grenzschießungen nimmt zu. <https://www.oeaw.ac.at/detail/news/die-taktzahl-der-krisen-und-grenzschiessungen-nimmt-zu/> (14.07.2020).

⁵ Musil, Robert: Die Taktzahl der Krisen und Grenzschießungen nimmt zu. <https://www.oeaw.ac.at/detail/news/die-taktzahl-der-krisen-und-grenzschiessungen-nimmt-zu/> (14.07.2020).

⁶ COVID-19-Pandemie in Nordmazedonien, July 30, 2020, 12:03. In: https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/COVID-19-Pandemie_in_Nordmazedonien; COVID-19 pandemic in Albania, August 7, 2020, 09:31. In: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/COVID-19_pandemic_in_Albania.

⁷ The project was institutionally affiliated at Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin and was funded by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research of Germany with a duration from December 2019 to November 2023. See more: <https://www.slawistik.hu-berlin.de/de/member/jusufilu/projekte>.

2. Horizontal level

North Macedonia is characterized geographically by two persistent border types, regional and state. The regional borders are of old origin and associated with very clear regional identities. This type of border will be studied using the example of the isolated inland region, Kërçova/Kičevo. In contrast, the state borders are more recent, but have led to many divergences in the affected regions. Whether they are as strictly national as politicians often claim remains to be seen, but the fact is they have now developed a strong diverging character. This type of boundary will be investigated using the example of the border region Dibra/Debar.

2.1. Regional borders

The preservation of regional identities is one of the most important consequences of the pre-national empires in general and in south-eastern Europe in particular. There were two causes, on the one hand the large territories of these empires, and on the other, the dynamic boundaries that surrounded these kingdoms. These regional identities extended beyond language and religious affiliations in the corresponding regions. The regional network was formed on a geographical and economic basis, with the city and its associated market forming the economic hub.

North Macedonia offered factors that well suited the formation of such regional units and identities. The country is characterized by mountainous landscapes, in which the valleys, often basins with an urban center, form the core. There are only two larger flat areas, or plains – Polog and Pelagonia – which contain two or three urban centers, with some cities, such as Gostivar, only being established in the 19th century. In the case of areas such as these, economic factors influenced the formation of regional units. Also, urban centers and use of the markets would have been paramount. This means that every Polog resident would know which village belongs to which region, not so much because of the current administrative units – the municipalities – but because of the old weekly market visits by the men who had to travel there on foot or on pack animals. Every market formed the economic nucleus of its surrounding rural region. It had such great significance, particularly in the mountain regions, that forbidding someone to visit the market could be imposed as a punishment, which if disregarded led to the death penalty. Urban centers in the west of North Macedonia still enjoy this sovereignty. The use of a market determines whether a particular rural region belongs to the corresponding city. In today's Albanian dialect, the phrase *shkoj n'sheer* is still widespread. It literally means 'I'm going to the city', but it actually implies that the man is going to visit the weekly market in the city on a specific day. The Albanian Turzism *sheer* (< tur *şehir*) for 'city' always refers to the city which a rural area feels it belongs to. Neighboring cities are called by name. Dialects of all the languages spoken in the areas also accompany these factors. Regional borders also represent dialect boundaries. Even today, they still represent barriers to certain human interactions. One example is marriages, where both partners were, and at times still are, expected to be from the same region. Only if a young woman had a bad reputation, would she marry someone from outside the region.

Thus, regional identities are very strong and diverse. This identity is not discarded even after generations of internal migration and emigration.⁸ Origin is always only

⁸ At this point, one may bear in mind the emigrants from Dibra. As a result of the conflicts and newly drawn boundaries, and economic crises, many Dibrans emigrated/relocated to Tirana (1913) and Skopje (after the

ascribed to this region and never to the area of current residence in which neither the person themselves, their parents (mostly the father) or the husband have their roots. The Turkish suffix *-li* (*-li*, *-lū*, *-li*) is what expresses most clearly this affiliation to birth and family genealogy. It is attached to the city or region from which the family originated. (Ersen-Rasch 2012, p. 24) There is such an ethnonym for each Macedonian region in all the relevant languages – Albanian, Macedonian and Turkish, as shown in the table below (Table 1):⁹

Macedonian ¹⁰	Turkish ¹¹	Albanian ¹² <i>Old (dialectal)</i>	Albanian ¹³ <i>New (standard, official)</i>
Skopje > skopjani/-nci	Üsküp > üsküplu	Shkoup,-i > ---	Shkup,-i > shkupjan
Kumanovo > kumanovčani	Kumanova > kumanovalı	Kumanovë,-a > kumanovali	Kumanovë,-a > kumanovar
Bitola > bitolčani	Manastır > manastırlı	Manastajr,-i > ---	Manastir,-i > manstiras
Prilep > prilepčani	Pirlepe > pirlepeli	Përlepe,-ja > ---	Përlep,-i > përlepas
Tetovo > tetovčani	Tetova > tetovalı	Tetovë,-a > tetovali	Tetovë,-a > tetovar
Ohrid > ohriçani	Ohri > ohriili	Ohër,-ri > Orli	Ohër,-ri > ---
Gostivar > gostivarčani	Gostivar > gostivarlı	Gostivar,-i > gostivarli	Gostivar,-i > gostivaras
Kičevo > kičevčani	Kırçova > kırçovalı	Kërçovë,-a > kërçovali	Kërçovë,-a > kërçovar
Struga > stružani	Struga > strugalı	Strugë,-a > strugali	Strugë,-a > strugan
Debar > debarčani	Debre > debreli	Dibër,-ra > dibran	Dibër,-ra > dibran ¹⁴

Table 1
Designations of regional origin identity.

These terms were/are exonyms, i.e. foreign names, or endonyms/self-designations, if a person or group was outside the region, which was rarely the case (e.g. merchants, journeymen or soldiers). The modern day increase in internal migrations has made stays in other regions permanent and also normal for women, but this does not imply access to the regional identity of the place of residence. Expressions such as “I am Dibran” does not mean “I live in Dibra,” but rather “I have gained this identity through birth, whether I live there at the moment or not anymore.” The social borders between the regions could not and still cannot be overcome.

Second World War and after 1991). Neighborhoods of descendants of these immigrants, in Tirana, called *Mëhalla e Dibranëve* (alb for “Dibraner District”) and in Skopje *Debar Maalo* (mac for “Debar District”) are still found there today. (For *Debar Maalo*, see Dimova 2019, pp. 958–973).

⁹ The following is a list restricted to the Albanian-Macedonian regions, in the north and west of the country.

¹⁰ It could not be empirically determined whether the Turkish form was used in dialects of Macedonian, but it can be assumed in view of the Turkish character of the cities. Historically, *debrajlije* was found in the region. The Macedonian (standard-language) forms were supplied by the informant, Adem Sharofi (male, 48, Dibra, Macedonian teacher), and by Rozita Dimova (Skopje). These forms are plural forms. The singular forms can be derived by these: The feminine form by means of the suffix *-ka* and the masculine form by means of the suffix *-čanec*.

¹¹ Gratefully received from the informant, Jakup Tale (male, 55, Adapazar, Turkey, originally from Dibra).

¹² These are old dialectal forms of Albanian. The suffix *-li* stems from Turkish. These are still used today by the elderly (from 70 years). This form is the basic form, representing the masculine form. The feminine form is derived from this by means of the suffix *-e*. The plural form is identical to the singular form.

¹³ This is the basic form and it forms the masculine form. From this, the feminine form is derived by means of the suffix *-e* and the plural form by mean of the suffix *-ë*.

¹⁴ The dashes (---) indicate that no form could be raised or that none exists. The author thanks Arjeta Kërluku (Dibra) and Rozita Dimova (Skopje) for reviewing and supplementing this information.

Within the region there was another social order that differentiated greatly between city and country. And within the rural environment, a distinction was made between mountain and lowland, depending on the region. The authorities included the towns, which were mostly called *shehërlinj* (alb) or *šerlija* (mac) (both < tur *şehirli* ‘city dweller’) and were also so designated thus by the non-city dwellers. Tetovo is still known as *kasabali* (< tur *kasaba* ‘city’).¹⁵ The people of Skopje, on the other hand, retained the name of the city in *üsküplü*, because Skopje was the center of the city of Vilayet and the ‘capital cities’ wanted to distinguish themselves from the smaller towns of Tetovo (*kasabali*) and Gostivar (*shehërlinj*). The rural population was named after the village with the suffixes shown above, or in the lowland derogatively described as *katunar* (alb)/*seljak* (mac < serb) which means ‘country bumpkins’. There is no equivalent for the mountain population as in Albania, *malok* (< *malësor* ‘mountain inhabitants’, only in the singular,) or in Montenegro, *planinci* (< *planina* ‘mountains’, only in the plural). However, expressions such as the Albanian *ata t’malit* (‘those from the mountains’, only in the plural) or the Macedonian *divjaci* (‘the wild’, only in the plural) already possess a negative connotation for the designation of the mountain population.¹⁶ It was nearly impossible to overcome these social boundaries. Only in the rarest cases, were single young men from the rural surroundings allowed to become trainee craftsmen in the city and subsequently acquire *shehërlinj* rights (Ellis 2003). An entire family’s emigration did not provide them access to this right. Apart from that, it was not possible for rural families to settle in the city. In Dibra, for example, entire villages close to the city were inhabited or founded by local people, but the city gates remained closed to them. This changed after the second World War due to the massive emigration to Turkey of the city’s Muslim population and the exodus of the rural population to the city. Nevertheless, this was only a geographical crossing. The social borders remained. The pre-national world was strongly influenced by the local social order. Ethnic (linguistic and religious) affiliations, on the other hand, were very fluid in the west of North Macedonia, to such a high degree that different affiliations could also be found within a(n) (extended) family.

The spread of the Coronavirus pandemic clearly shows that these regions mostly still have little to do with each other. The first cases of the disease occurred in Dibra and Centar Župa, and were confirmed on March 13, 2020. One week later, the region was classified as “a widespread transmission area (WHO phase 4).” Skopje, as capital city with a quarter of the country’s total population, was at that time one level lower. Merely a month later, on April 12, the number of infections in the cities of Kumanovo and Skopje had risen high enough to catch up with Dibra. The Wikipedia entry cited here explains the large number of infections in relation to the size of the two cities.¹⁷ It has to do with their regional-cultural solidarity. The two cities are not separated by natural borders, meaning that cultural and economic connections are very strong and have existed for many years, as is the case in Dibra and Centar Župa.¹⁸ The region of Kërçova/Kičevo shows more clearly how heavily the regional composition of the country influenced the spread of the

¹⁵ The different names, *şehir* and *kasaba*, for “city” related to the size of the settlement. The separation mark lay at 20,000 inhabitants. The larger unit was called *şehir*, while the smaller one was known as *kasaba*. Tetovo was smaller than Dibra, so Tetovo was a *kasaba* and Dibra a *şehir*. After Gostivar rose in stature to become a city in the 19th century, it was still called a *şehir*, contrary to this rule, because *kasaba* was traditionally reserved for Tetovo.

¹⁶ The author would like to thank Rozita Dimova (Skopje) for the information about *seljak*, *planinci* and *divjak*.

¹⁷ COVID-19-Pandemie in Nordmazedonien, July 30, 2020, 12:03. https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/COVID-19-Pandemie_in_Nordmazedonien.

¹⁸ See in detail Jusufi 2011.

pandemic. Although Gostivar lies only 20 kilometers to the north of it and Dibra 50 kilometers to the west, the region's first cases were registered only at the beginning of July. But from then on, the numbers rose very rapidly (179 active cases and six deaths on August 7, 2020) because the virus had managed to cross the regional barriers.¹⁹ The Kërçova/Kičevo region is a valley basin surrounded by mountains on all sides, and, lacking infrastructure, it was completely isolated until the 1960s. Despite the region itself being ethnically and linguistically heterogeneous, it was very isolated and separated from the outside. By and large, this has not changed, even to this day. The only opening – a massive one – was caused by emigration abroad.²⁰ However, most of the customary annual emigrant visits had to fall away this time due to numerous measures and campaigns to combat the pandemic. What could not be controlled were the few connections with Skopje, where the virus came from (contacts by people from the region who work in Skopje and go 'home' on weekends).

The pandemic made very clear the regional heterogeneity of North Macedonia. If this anthropological perspective had been available when the measures to combat the pandemic were imposed, the nationwide lockdown from 18 March, which people have been finding increasingly challenging, might not have been imposed in this form. It would have been enough if the regions had been isolated from one other²¹ by the long-term blocking of their very distinct access roads, similar to the blocking of the state borders, and the many people from numerous regions of North Macedonia who live and work in Skopje during the week, would have been denied their weekly trips home. This could have replaced a complete lockdown, which was particularly difficult for the urban population to achieve while allowing people commute all across the country on some days.

2.2. State Borders

North Macedonia closed its national borders as early as March 17, 2020, four days after the first recorded Coronavirus case, because the number of infected people rapidly increased in this short period. That was the official reason. The unofficial reason, however, was that Dibra represents the border-region with Albania, and not only were the first cases confirmed there, but it was also the country's first hotspot.

The pre-national region of Dibra (alb)/Debar (mac) formed an internal territory of the Ottoman Balkans on the western periphery. During that time, the region had different borders, because it formed part of a complex transitional zone. In linguistic terms, the transition was Albanian-Slavic, in denominational terms, it was orthodox-catholic, in religious terms, with the intensified spread of Islam from the 18th to 19th century it was Muslim-Christian and from the 19th century, an inter-Islamic transition zone contained numerous subgroups of Islam. However, all these boundaries were fluid and could change significantly over time, because linguistic, confessional, and religious divergences could occur within a family. Migration has even helped to overcome geographical and infrastructural barriers as well as tribal boundaries. The current Albanian-Macedonian state border at Dibra was established diplomatically in 1913 and geographically in 1925. The lifeworld of Dibra was so hard hit by this border that not only did a new word for border (*granica*), borrowed from Slavic, appear in the local dialect, but also many

¹⁹ The information on the Kërçova/Kičevo region was requested personally from the municipality because it does not appear in any statistics due to the small numbers.

²⁰ See Jusufi 2016.

²¹ These measures were taken by Spain when they isolated the capital Madrid and by Italy, when they isolated northern Italy from southern Italy, both with successful results.

divergences emerged from the cultural, linguistic-dialectal and (extended) family unity that used to exist along the border.²² Especially since the Albanian-Yugoslavian conflict in 1948, the border at Dibra evolved into an insurmountable barrier – similar to the Berlin Wall. The opening of the border at the time of the political change in 1991 did not remove the differences that had developed up to that point. It only expanded them even more.²³

In North Macedonia, the pandemic began in Skopje and Dibra, but the latter soon developed into a hotspot. There was not a single case in the Albanian Dibra until the beginning of June. Currently, there are also very few cases (64 cases, which include 28 recoveries, 34 active infections and 2 deaths).²⁴ The border closure allowed the pandemic to be contained at the border. The expression often used and discussed in detail by politicians, namely that the virus does not stop at borders, could not be confirmed in this case. In Dibra, it was halted at the border – and remains thus. Not a single case spread across that border, into the corresponding part of Dibra. The cases that were reported in the Albanian Dibra originated from Tirana, the capital city of Albania. No other border closure in Europe has had this effect, because none of the other borders were as tightly closed as the one in Dibra – as it still is, to some extent.

3. Vertical Level

Nevertheless, the spread of the pandemic followed not only horizontal borders, but also vertical ones. This article deals with only two types of boundaries: The old ethnic borders, as in the case of the capital Skopje, and the very recent borders created by extensive emigration. The latter are very diverse, from ethnic, social and economic to global. This type of border will be considered at a national level.

3.1. Ethnic Boundaries

The Skopje region forms its own valley basin in the region Podvardarska, which is isolated from the surrounding regions by high mountains on all sides. Nevertheless, the Derven gorge in the west and the Lepenka river valley in the north offer geographical connections to Tetovo and Kaçanik/Kosovo. In the 17th to 19th century, Skopje was already a major Ottoman city, with its urban development having fallen victim to the “great Turkish War” (1689-1699). The arrival of Austrian troops led to the flight of one third of the city's population. The same troops deliberately set fire to and almost entirely destroyed the entire city. Skopje regained urban significance only once the Tanzimat period introduced reforms, including new transport and communication routes, such as the railway line.

The city became a reservoir of different groups of speakers and denominational groups as well as different social classes from the surrounding rural regions. The rise of nations and the creation of nation states caused the fall of Skopje's biggest competitors – Salonika, by the founding of Greece and Monastir by the founding of Serbia, causing both cities to lose their central position and economic importance. As a result, Skopje became a large city. Consequently, its multiethnic image changed once again. As part of the

²² See Jusufi (2021).

²³ This section is based on an extended project by the author on the influence of the national border in the region of Dibra, which forms the basis of the author's habilitation thesis.

²⁴ COVID-19 pandemic in Albania, August 7, 2020, 09:31. In: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/COVID-19_pandemic_in_Albania.

establishment of Serbia, a strong Serbianizing policy began in 1912 and lasted until 1944, with brief interruptions caused by the Bulgarian occupation. In Skopje, the Macedonianizing process then started and continued into the 2000s. During this time, entire Macedonian (orthodox) villages were formed from the regions of Kičevo, Debar, Veles and Prilep and almost the entire orthodox Albanian-speaking region of Reka that were part of a strong Slavization policy of Albanian-speaking orthodox Christians. With the Ohrid Agreement of 2001, which improved the political status of the Albanians, Skopje once again became an attraction for the Albanians, especially the educated population, who had previously only moved to Tetovo. Today Skopje is a metropolis in the country. Its city boundaries extend to the municipalities of Haračinë, the region of Derven i Poshtëm, and the gates of Kumanovo and Tetovo. Skopje is officially home to a quarter of Macedonia's total population.²⁵ The population has a strong multiethnic character, consisting of Macedonians (66.8%), Albanians (20.5%), Roma (4.6%), Serbs (2.8%), Turks (1.7%), Bosnians (1.5%), Aromunians/Walaches (0.5%) and others (1.6%).²⁶ The first three ethnic groups form majorities in different districts and municipalities of the city, the others remain a minority spread throughout the city. Macedonian residents represent the majority in the municipalities, Aerodrom, Butel, Gazi Baba, Ćorĉe Petrov, Karpoš, Kisela Voda and Centar. The Albanians live mainly in the municipalities of Saraj and Ćair and in the nearest Haračinë municipality.²⁷ Finally, the Roma make up the majority of residents in the municipality of Šuto Orizari. They are the largest Roma community in the world (Silverman 1996, pp. 63-76). Šutka – as it is sometimes derogatively referred to – is the most structurally weak municipality in the capital. Economic problems – insecure, mostly daily jobs – and the lack of schools form the focus of many of the neighborhood's problems.²⁸

These processes have been clearly reflected in the spread of the pandemic. The pandemic took hold in Kumanovo at the same time as in Skopje, as these two cities are demographically connected through the Albanians. Tetovo followed suit, though to a lesser extent, because there is less contact between Skopje and Tetovo.²⁹ Within Skopje, the pandemic spread with differing intensity. The Albanian communities of Saraj and Ćair and the Roma community of Šuto Orizari were the most affected.³⁰ Here, ethnic borders also overlap with social borders, because they are economically weak districts and, on the other hand, they are districts of ethnically homogeneous groups/minorities. Muslim religious affiliation prevails in all three quarters, which caused hotspots at the end of May due to the Ramadan festival. The intensity of the pandemic, however, remained limited to the affected quarters. This situation has been discussed increasingly in the USA with regard to colored people.³¹ A similar distribution was only recently observed in Dortmund, Germany, because the municipality published Corona maps and declared two socially and

²⁵ Republic of Macedonia. State Statistical Office (ed.) 2002: Census of Population, Households and Dwellings in the Republic of Macedonia, 2002, in: http://www.stat.gov.mk/pdf/kniga_13.pdf, p. 20.

²⁶ Republic of Macedonia. State Statistical Office (ed.) 2002: Census of Population, Households and Dwellings in the Republic of Macedonia, 2002, in: http://www.stat.gov.mk/pdf/kniga_13.pdf, p. 34.

²⁷ This section is based on the article by Jusufi (2016, p. 209–222).

²⁸ Beer, Andrea: Rundgang durch Suto Orizari. Eine erste Coronabilanz in der Romagemeinde von Skopje. 14.06.2020. In: <https://www.ard-wien.de/2020/06/14/romagemeinde-suto-orizari-in-skopje/>.

²⁹ COVID-19-Pandemie in Nordmazedonien, July 30, 2020, 12:03. https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/COVID-19-Pandemie_in_Nordmazedonien.

³⁰ The information is based on extensive monitoring of various media sources by the author.

³¹ Wimalasena, Jörg: Coronavirus: Pandemie der Ungleichheit. New York. 16.05.2020. In: <https://www.zeit.de/politik/ausland/2020-05/coronavirus-krise-usa-pandemie-soziale-ungleichheit-wirtschaft>.

economically weak districts to be hotspots.³² The explanation for this was similar to that of inside the USA. But the focus here is not on why this highly contagious virus is affecting lower classes of society more severely, but why it does not cross the boundaries between quarters. The geographical quarter boundaries seem to coincide with social and ethnic borders and are just as impenetrable. The composition of a quarter's inhabitants according to social status and ethnicity also implies isolation of this neighborhood from others with a higher social status and different ethnic identity – in Skopje, the Macedonian majority. The fact that these districts form almost independent housing estates with independent infrastructure (schools, doctors, shops, markets, and for some of them also government offices) further isolates them. And this effect can be seen globally. The larger a city is, the more isolated its individual neighborhoods are in their interaction. This also causes social and ethnic prioritization. Therefore, regardless of its local origin, the spread of the pandemic is concentrated in these neighborhoods, and was long limited to them.

3.2. *Undefinable Limits: The Emigrants*

There is general debate about whether a country could be called an immigration country, because the concept also includes the rights of immigrants. In south-eastern Europe, however, the debate concerns countries being considered emigration countries, because this entails losing voters. Even today, all countries in the south-east of Europe are still struggling to manage their statistics and tally the number of inhabitants actually living in the country and the number that have emigrated. There are many reasons for this lack of statistics, including from ethnic group downsizing in ethnically mixed areas to the loss of votes. North Macedonia has been heavily affected by emigration since the start of the agreement on labor migration (*migrant workers*) between Germany and Yugoslavia in the 1960s. The Albanians in North Macedonia have been affected the worst by emigration, which is why many Macedonian emigrant stereotypes are targeted at the Albanians.³³ Why Stereotypes? Because, despite their emigration, emigrants have a close relationship with both the local as well as their countries of origin. The relationship is very polarized because both the country of origin and the local country are heavily dependent on emigration on an economical and political level, but they strongly discriminate against and antagonize the emigrants, socially as well as politically.³⁴

The pandemic pushed into the background all ideological efforts of symbolic inclusion of emigration in North Macedonia. As the sugar festival (*Bajram*) drew near at the end of May, the locals became more fearful of the possibility of emigrants importing the virus from western Europe. All over the world, the trend is to consider the virus as an “imported commodity.”³⁵ Pleas by politicians, on various media platforms, for migrants to stay “at home” were surprisingly loud and surprisingly different. Previously, there had only been loud pleas when the locals needed the emigrants “at home” for elections or to finance special projects, or – for the loudest plea to date – to fund the armed conflict of

³² Thiel, Thomas: Warum die Stadt Dortmund über vier Monate für eine Corona-Karte brauchte. Dortmund. 19.07.2020. In: <https://www.ruhrnachrichten.de/dortmund/warum-die-stadt-dortmund-ueber-vier-monate-fuer-eine-corona-karte-brauchte-plus-1538899.html>.

³³ See Jusufi, Lumniçe: The relationship between the locals and the immigrants in the Western Balkans. In: Aspen Institute Germany. (2021).

³⁴ These are the authors' theses in some articles within the framework of a larger project by the author at HU Berlin, funded by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research.

³⁵ This is exemplified by the US President Donald Trump, who described the Coronavirus as a “Chinese virus”. At the beginning of the pandemic, however, this view was also observed in Italy, where the Chinese immigrants were blamed for the “Wuhan virus” (see Krastev 2020, p. 31).

2001. However, the recent use of the term “home” caused exactly the opposite response, especially among older migrants, who wanted to “go home” quickly, before the border was closed.³⁶ Their fear of an “unworthy”³⁷ death in a “strange country” was greater than that of infection. For migrants, the term “home” is a different, much more emotional³⁸ term than politicians, predictably, could perceive. Ivan Krastev also links this with the mother tongue.³⁹ And consequently, exactly what was meant to be prevented did take place when an elderly couple from Italy “imported” the virus to their “home”, Centar Župa. That was what triggered the hotspot in Dibra. The mood was volatile. From then on, the emigrants were seen as the evil spreaders of the virus and unofficially they received even more hostile verbal abuse.⁴⁰ In addition to the existing swearword, *gastarbajter* (< germ *Gastarbeiter* ‘guest worker’), and *stranca* (slav *strani* ‘foreign’) was employed, and because the emigrants were mostly Albanians, they found this specifically borrowed Slavic word very offensive.⁴¹ There was no official comment on the “origin” of the virus, as is usually also the case with other discrepancies between the locals and emigrants, because the interdependency between these both groups is too great.⁴² Many of the *stranca* remained in their western European homes, but only because North Macedonia kept its borders closed, although infections in the first hotspot, Dibra, had subsided by the end of May. The ongoing border closure no longer had anything to do with the neighboring countries, such as Germany, but concerned the emigrants. The West did not perceive this dimension at all, but the emigrants did and were faced with an additional fear – exclusion from their “home country”. North Macedonia opened its borders before the elections, hoping to bring many emigrants to the polls as usual, because it cannot or will not allow elections emigrants to vote from abroad. Yet this time, even among the emigrants, their fear of infection outweighed their patriotism. Hardly anyone went to North Macedonia to vote. The borders remained open because in the summer months – usually filled with weddings of emigrants in their countries of origin – emigrants were still welcomed as an economic force “at home”. But this time too, the large numbers stayed away. Complaints from among the emigrants applying for the nationality of their country of residence were not uncommon during this time, because North Macedonia did not offer any additional means of providing foreign documents, adapted to the pandemic. The locals feel paralyzed because, in addition to the ever-increasing number of infections, as a consequence of this immigrant-free summer a further economic crisis is imminent. The virus has made very clear to both sides not only this reciprocal dependence, but also the fragility of the particular relationship.

³⁶ Similar observations are made by Krastev in Bulgaria (see Krastev 2020, p. 32).

³⁷ Krastev describes this very impressively, see Krastev 2020, p. 14).

³⁸ On the concept of *home* and emigration see Tsuda 2003; Levy, Weingold 2005.

³⁹ See Krastev 2020, p. 32.

⁴⁰ A survey in all southeastern European countries (May to June 2020) showed precisely this fact, that emigrants were considered importers of the virus by the locals, while this was only true for very few actual cases.

⁴¹ This development was also possible in Bulgaria. Krastev describes this behavior as “stay-at-home nationalism,” which differs from ethnic nationalism. It is not ethnicity that is the decisive factor here, but residence (first vs. second home) (Krastev 2020, pp. 32).

⁴² Recently, emigrants were held responsible for the spread of the Coronavirus pandemic in almost all countries of south-eastern Europe, in Serbia publicly and personally by President Vučić (See Dedović, Dragoslav: Vučićev menadžment straha. Deutsche Welle, 24.03.2020, <https://www.dw.com/bs/vu%C4%8Di%C4%87ev-menad%C5%BEment-straha/a-52898973>).

4. Conclusion

Viruses are contagious, which means that we can only be infected after contact with an infected person. That is why the pandemic maps the contact and behavior of each individual, as well as that of entire groups or societies. North Macedonia reached a balance after five months of the pandemic having reached it. In summer, no region was with no cases.⁴³ It is a pandemic, after all. But up to this point, the spread of the pandemic has followed the country's old, diverse borders. The old regional borders contributed to the rapid isolation of the first hotspots. The newer state borders prevented the virus from spreading from there into neighboring countries. For a long time, the ethnic borders within Skopje, also more recent, limited the occurrence of the virus to specific quarters, those of minority and socially vulnerable groups. And the very recent vertical borders with the emigrants have not become clear, but have been shown to be all the more painful in many ways. The country will have to cope with the consequences until next summer, provided that the virus is brought under control and the emigrants can "go home" again. The ill-considered use of the term "home" has far-reaching consequences for both sides – locals and emigrants alike – and has not even gained attention to this day, which is why no one can be held legally responsible for this "mistake". A different approach is being taken in northern Italy, where local politicians have to answer in court for the mistakes made during the first phase of the pandemic. In North Macedonia, the Coronavirus has indeed marked all these diverse borders, as if with the previously mentioned *malachite green* markings.

The book "Ethnography of Macedonia" was conceived by the well-known German Balkan scientist, Gustav Weigand (1924) under the authority of the German government of the time, for its political, mostly colonial purposes (Langer 2019, p. 117). A similar "ethnography", aimed at combating a pandemic, would have been much more helpful and humane today – a kind of ethnography of invisible or phantom borders – because borders continue to exist even if their political formations have disappeared. The Coronavirus pandemic has revived them.

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⁴³ See The government site explicitly created for the pandemic at <https://koronavirus.gov.mk/stat>.

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Empirical data

1. Intensive monitoring of media in North Macedonia, Albania and Kosovo since the outbreak of the pandemic until the end of July 2020.
2. Selected interviews on specific topics specified in the text:
Adem Sharofi, male, 48, Dibra, Macedonian teacher, on 5 August, 2020.
Jakup Tale, male, 55, Adapazar, Turkey, originally from Dibra, on August 5, 2020.
Prof. Dr. Rozita Dimova, female, 51, Skopje, on August 7, 2020.
3. Quantitative interviews (as part of a larger survey regarding for the author's publications at Südosteuropa-Mitteilungen (2020) and Aspen Institute Germany (2021))
 - a. Test version, languages of the interviews: Albanian, English, German and Macedonian, May-June 5th, 2020, via mail and telephone, interviewees known to the author but kept anonymous here, interviews total=20 (female=14, male=6, age: 27-54), immigrants 10 (Germany=8, Italy=1, Netherlands=1), locals=10 (Albania=4, Bosnia-Herzegovina=4, Kosovo=0, Montenegro=0, *North Macedonia*=2 (*only from Macedonia*), Serbia=8 and Croatia=2).
 - b. Final Version, language of the interviews: Albanian, English, German, Croatian and Macedonian, June 5 - July 12th, 2020, online questionnaire, completely anonymous, interviews total=121 (female=85, male=36, age: 16-70, mostly: 20-50), emigrants=67 (USA=10, Germany=9, Italy=5, United Arab Emirates=3, Great Britain=2, Ireland=1, Luxembourg=1, Netherlands=1, Spain=1, Sweden=1), locals=60 (Albania=22, Bosnia-Herzegovina=5, Kosovo=22, Montenegro=4, *North Macedonia*=46 (*Albanians*=23, *Macedonians*=23), Serbia=1 and Croatia=20).