

## Chapter 2

# Hidden and Showcased Boundaries: A Field Approach

**Abstract** This chapter places special emphasis on demonstrating the growing number of boundaries and checkpoints throughout the Balkans over the past 20 years. The Peninsula has abandoned enclosure models inherited from the Cold War while converting itself to a seemingly open space facilitated by the expansion of the EU. Most national borderlands are no longer the repulsive spaces they used to be. However, the scheme is not that simple, as evidenced by many field experiences. Have these remote areas succeeded in becoming proper districts?

**Keywords** Border crossings • Traffic routes • Connectivity • Remoteness • Underdevelopment • Field experiences • Landscapes

Various means of transport may be used to cross boundaries: train, bus, boat, plane, and car—or, more simply, foot. I have personally experienced all these means during my travels in the Balkans. Boats and planes tend to undermine the idea of frontier, both literally and figuratively. Instead, land facilities make it much easier to keep contact with some “grounded” geography. With their dedicated equipment, custom posts are outdoor theaters dropped by distant authorities lost in the middle of *nowhere*.

Usually, people have limited contact with the surrounding landscapes. This is obvious for geographers. Hundreds of times people drive on the same routes, paying less and less attention to their environment, once stuck in a boring routine. Markings and signs invade roadsides and make drivers focus on selected targets. Putting this phenomenon into mapping would show that, during their daily trips, 95 % of all travelers practice up to 5 % of the area they theoretically “occupy.” For practical and behavioral reasons, man is a gregarious animal. Within cities and across open fields, invisible walls surround us and get rid of our exploration instincts. Have you ever compared the distances covered during mountain bike excursions, even if you practice this sport irregularly, to those covered by other daily journeys? A short off-road distance lets you discover more landscapes than ever. Frequency and variability of paths are here key concepts in understanding the effective limits of mobility.

The same restraints apply to boundaries. Most travelers gather around a limited number of checkpoints open to traffic and follow funnels peacefully. Aligned trucks and cars waiting for their transit permission are a perfect illustration of this phenomenon. Border crossings are intimate places. The extent of open spaces is limited, at least where Schengen regulations do not yet apply. Out of these, authorized boundary “practices” feed wrong feelings among anonymous travelers. Such assessment makes it necessary for geographers to distance themselves from the idealized pictures peddled in everyday conversations and the media. External perceptions are obviously biased.

## 2.1 Crossing Frontiers: *Balkan* Times and Distances

Exploring the Balkans is the best possible way of overcoming myths and achieving demystification. Practical experiences quickly demonstrate that time and space have different meanings in Eastern Europe and in the most *developed* parts of the world. To the open and frenetic global world, the Balkans oppose a territorial rootedness whose qualities are best expressed in slowness and duration.

How long would it take to travel from Salonika to Istanbul in the late 1990s? About 14 h are necessary to cover the 600 km between both cities by rail; buses would lessen the penalty to 12 h. Besides, we must not forget the waiting time at borders. When a dozen or so Turkish “microbusiness” women fill up the bus holds and corridors with large colorful handbags, negotiating customs duties turns out to be a time-consuming process (Egbert 2006). Let us add 4 h of tough bargaining. This latency leaves time to consider *another* Turkey, visiting back and forth tumbledown buildings. Did you think you would have enough time to choose a comfortable place to stay, once arrived in Istanbul? Forget it: Leaving the Macedonian city in the early morning, the trip ends in the middle of the night. No alternative remains but to jump into the bed of the first crumbling hotel or taste the seats of the bus station. Welcome to the Balkans!

What about taking a break for the weekend and spending some good time on the Black Sea coast on the occasion of another stay in the Greek Macedonian metropolis? The best solution would be to reach the Bulgarian capital, Sofia, and then to catch a connection with Burgas. The first part of the journey is easy: A special bus company is contracted to the international itinerary. This enables travelers to avoid the rival and wheezy train of the same line (300 km, 6 h). The trip is only slowed down by a 1-h pause at the Bulgarian border. Nothing to be afraid of in comparison with the 3 or 4 km of aligned trucks waiting for their permission to cross the boundary. Most passengers of the bus face complicated personal and professional situations that need to pay special attention to their visas. Once arrived in Sofia, connecting the train station is easy. Antiquated wagons offer hospitality to an already-tired traveler. Burgas should have been reached in 6 or 7 h. But this is without counting on the failure of the locomotive engine, which results in the train

being stuck in the middle of the Balkan Range for three more hours. Aren't travels supposed to shape youth?

Using personal vehicles would not reduce the inconvenience. Until recently, is public transports brought substantial benefits. They were slow but costless. The connected network was extensive, whether considering a "post-communist" bus or its "liberal" counterpart in Greece or Turkey.<sup>1</sup> The situation has changed after the early 2000s. The number of private vehicles in circulation has soared, showing all too clearly the limitations of outdated road networks. The experience is painful in summer in the tourist areas of Dalmatia, when huge crowds from northern Europe attempt to reach the astounding parks, cities, and beaches of Croatia behind the wheel of their heavy sedans. *Highway* is here an overestimated name—the same applies for *speedway*. The courtesy shown by Croatian and Slovenian custom officers, usually less nitpicking than their Albanian or Bulgarian colleagues, is a small compensation.

What about a bus trip to Tirana starting from Athens or Jannina? This stands in contrast to the traffic congestion observed in Dalmatia. Few vehicles used to travel these roads until the late 1990s. As a result of heavy European investments, the road to Kakavia (main Greek–Albanian entrance) has been improved and widened. Until recently, taxis, old buses, and *furgona* used to be standard travel means in Southern Albania, a region almost entirely abandoned because of mass emigration. Twenty-four hours were needed to cover the 800 km between Athens and Tirana. The bus route was submitted to various police controls and, in line with the customs' charge, the transit at Kakavia could be very time-consuming. During the Albanian revolt of 1997, the itinerary was no longer secure, and traffic happened to be closed—a measure whose consequences weighed on the Albanian working migrants who used these bus services.

There would be many other personal experiences to relate. Traveling in the Balkans is not that easy. Far from improving local communication systems, the growing number of boundaries has made them worse over the past two decades, especially in the Western Balkans. Not surprisingly, the fastest access roads (Table 2.1) concentrate along the lines between Zagreb–Belgrade and Sofia–Istanbul. These road sections accounted for the bulk of investment on infrastructures. In contrast, the emergence of new boundaries and the relative abandonment of a poor secondary road network have made day-to-day travels more and more problematic.

Tirana is a special case. The Albanian capital city is certainly one of the worst places to reach by car or bus from any other Balkan capital. Already deprived of long-distance train lines, the city is also affected by ill-adapted road networks. Covering the 300 km from Skopje may require 9–11 h, which is indeed a physical challenge. The Skopje–Tirana connection is made through the Radožda–Cafasan border post, far to the south of the country, next to the Ohrid Lake.

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<sup>1</sup>In terms of comfort, there was no significant difference on both sides of the Iron Curtain. Most bus fleets were made of old units manufactured in the 1970s–1980s.

**Table 2.1** Border crossing: time–distance between Balkan capital cities in 2012

Trip	Train	Bus	Car/taxi	Distance (km)	Bus time/distance
Zagreb–Belgrade	7 h 13	6 h	3 h 53	396	<b>0.91</b>
Sofia–Istanbul	12 h 55	9 h	6 h 15	563	<b>0.96</b>
Athens–Skopje	12 h	11 h 30	7 h 21	700	<b>0.99</b>
Athens–Sofia	18 h	14 h	9 h 33	791	<b>1.06</b>
Sofia–Bucharest	9 h 34	7 h	5 h 45	388	<b>1.08</b>
Skopje–Belgrade	9 h	8 h	4 h 30	429	<b>1.12</b>
Prishtina–Belgrade	–	7 h	3 h 48	352	<b>1.19</b>
Athens–Istanbul	19 h 30	22 h	11 h 54	1094	<b>1.21</b>
Sarajevo–Zagreb	9 h 27	8 h 20	5 h 22	414	<b>1.21</b>
Zagreb–Ljubljana	2 h 20	3 h	1 h 46	143	<b>1.26</b>
Prishtina–Podgorica	–	5 h 30	3 h 35	262	<b>1.26</b>
Athens–Tirana (via Ioannina)	–	17 h	11 h 21	803	<b>1.27</b>
Podgorica–Zagreb (via Dubrovnik)	–	15 h	9 h 37	694	<b>1.30</b>
Podgorica–Belgrade	8 h 40	9 h	5 h 40	416	<b>1.30</b>
Sarajevo–Belgrade	10 h 10	7 h	3 h 58	305	<b>1.38</b>
Skopje–Prishtina	3 h	2 h	1 h 09	85	<b>1.41</b>
Sofia–Skopje	9 h 47	6 h	3 h 30	220	<b>1.64</b>
Belgrade–Bucharest (via Timișoara)	13 h 17	17 h	8 h 23	615	<b>1.66</b>
Podgorica–Sarajevo	–	7 h	3 h 42	240	<b>1.75</b>
Tirana–Prishtina	–	11 h	4 h 54	347	<b>1.90</b>
Skopje–Tirana	–	11 h	4 h 08	299	<b>2.21</b>
Tirana–Podgorica	–	–	2 h 25	181	–

Time–distance between Balkan capitals (correspondences and customs time not included, traffic and road conditions idem)

Single border crossing by line. Very hypothetic and approximate timetables. Some information has passed: The Greek railway network discontinued its international service in 2011

Source Train and bus public and private agencies, *ViaMichelin* time and distance calculator

The time/distance ratio is one of the worst in Europe. The problem arises mainly from the low charge and state of the road. Along this route, “international” journeys look more like backcountry tours: Fortunately, villages and other rural landscapes are particularly worth seeing. Under these circumstances, crossing the boundary has to be somewhat “dramatized”: Modern buildings emerge from the countryside as cathedrals consecrated to national independence. No matter if unlikely shepherds are the only observers of the show. Doors have to be impressive and solemn. Here, states operate.

The “semi-independence” of Kosovo and the independence of Montenegro have clearly worsened the bilateral communications. Beyond the tensions, clashes, and

militarization processes that typically accompany the creation of new “international” boundaries, one of the first practical effects of such institution building structures is a growing impediment to all exchanges. Between Kosovo and Serbia, new “gates” have been built along local roads under the form of workmen’s huts. Installed in 2001, the custom point of Merdare has changed the way of life of many former Yugoslav citizens. Everything or everyone is now submitted to frequent inspections: Specialized officers proceed to the clearance of goods; they check working licenses and vehicles’ papers, luggage, and collect taxes. Space has shortened, and time has lengthened. This is not the least contradiction in the Balkans to watch the simultaneous settlement of new customs and the implementation of road/highway projects, as if both initiatives were just completing each other. The Morinë–Merdare highway that shall join the Albanian boundary to Serbia through Prishtinë is an example of such confusion, considering transport efficiency at a middle-scale level. The trip from Belgrade to Prishtinë would eventually take 7 h by bus: not the worst time–distance ratio indeed, despite obstructions.

In sum, the time–distance analysis reveals the discrepancy between the effects of an enhanced Balkan fragmentation and the development objectives assigned by the European Union. Fortunately, thanks to national and international funding, major road sections have supported significant improvements, such as the Tirana–Prizren connection. This journey has undergone a precious time shortening: The former 10-h drive has decreased to 4 h. Planning policies, international relations, and territorial development are closely linked, especially in these fragmented, yet contiguous Balkan districts.

From the 1990s onward, significant improvements were made to the Balkan communication system. Apart from the specific case of former Yugoslavia, the paranoid atmosphere that permeated the Cold War period now belongs to the past. Barb wires, antitank mines, military exclusion zones, and bunkers have gradually vanished from the landscapes they used to cover for half a century. In interstate relations, the remaining weaknesses of transportation facilities are insignificant when compared to this heavy past.

## **2.2 Closed Versus Open Balkans: Political Interfaces and Circulation Spaces**

Between confined and open space, the Balkan Peninsula has long been consumed. Starting in the 1940s, the region has been mired in ignorance, mistrust, and prejudice. For 50 years, with few exceptions, the centralized powers have managed to strengthen their outer influence while creating extended and underdeveloped, although secured, backcountries. Despite appearances, this forced “peaceful” period does not contravene the rules of a troubled history. This fictitious interlude has simply constrained interstate opposing forces to remain under cover.

The current shape of the Balkan political map results from two key events that have thoroughly altered local political frameworks. The first major disrupt goes

back to the Balkan Wars and WWI. In a few short years, the Ottoman and Habsburg Empires<sup>2</sup> yield in front of the allied forces. State nations impose their independence and achieve to create sovereign perimeters. The final defeat of the Empires in Vienna and Istanbul against the league of “local” forces puts an end to a century of uninterrupted political upheavals. Between 1912 and 1918, two new states came into being: Albania and the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes. Montenegro, one of the oldest provinces engaged in the fight for its independence, unexpectedly gives up its status of kingdom and joins the First Yugoslavia. Such a renouncement is exceptional. Meanwhile, Serbia, Greece, Bulgaria, and Romania achieve significant territorial gains. In the end, the Peninsula faces a complete restructuring.

The second major turnaround takes place one century later. Between 1990 and 2000, the Yugoslav Wars and communist collapse “unfreeze” the balance of forces inherited from the Cold War. The Yugoslav Federation and the Eastern Bloc resign themselves to accepting another range of profound changes. Out of former Yugoslavia, in just a few years, seven additional states (if we include Kosovo whose status is still unclear) find their way to independence. Across the region, on the Black Sea coast, two Republics return to full sovereignty: Moldavia and Ukraine—plus the Pridnestrovian Republic whose issue is also debated.

Unraveling the Ottoman and Russian legacies is thus a lengthy process. Up to now, the Balkans are in the thrall to the prejudice of an endless fragmentation. With their 11 000 and 14 000 km<sup>2</sup>, Kosovo and Montenegro hardly reach the size of English or US counties. They match two French *departements*. We will deliberately ignore Transnistria (4 000 km<sup>2</sup>) and the Bosnian *entities* that are even smaller. Between imperial mastodons and microstates, no balance point could be found.

As a consequence, boundaries proliferate. Wide-open imperial lands are gradually replaced by a spatial confinement, which in turn produces a patchwork of isolated geographic units. Referencing and mapping border crossings is a work that shall exemplify the transition from open to closed models. Few original sources enable the production of such documents.

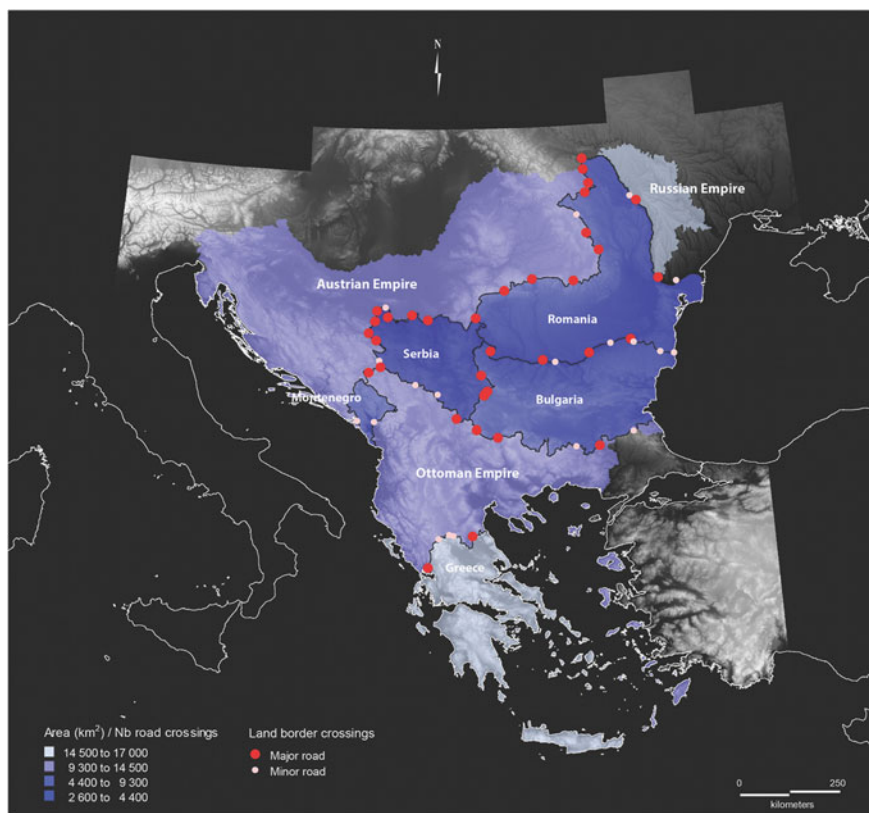
The mapping strategy applied hereunder (Figs. 2.1, 2.3 and 2.4) relies on a simple principle. A broad definition of the *Balkan area* has been adopted, which includes Moldavia and leaves Turkey aside. The survey area is set to match the present political map. Within this perimeter, the aim is to identify the existing border crossings.

In 1908, the overall number of border crossings reaches 54 units. By the end of the 1990s, the amount increases to 73—an acceptable change. In 2013, the area receives 273 road crossing points, without considering the “unofficial” posts on the external face of Kosovo and Transnistria, and leaving aside 15 other scheduled gates. Obviously, the Balkans have faced a silent revolution that has deeply altered its transportation model, leading to thorough changes of border management systems.

Several reading keys may be forwarded. The differing quality of map sources is a set parameter to exclude. Usually, the road networks pictured on old map sheets

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<sup>2</sup>A third candidate could be added to the list: the Russian Empire.



**Fig. 2.1** Road border crossings in 1908. *Source* Vogel, C., *Die Balkan Halbinsel*, 1908, 1/500.000, Harvard Digital Library, DTM NASA SRTM program, author's own GIS databases

have to be taken with every precaution for various reasons, including data harmonization and production process. At the same time, few documents cover the whole Peninsula until Moldavia. Finding even and reliable data that would include the independent nation-states to the list of Austrian, Ottoman, and Russian Empires is a real challenge. Fortunately, the 1908 mapping of C. Vogel is exceptional (Vogel 1908). This source thoroughly identifies railway lines and main road ways.<sup>3</sup> For later sources, the information is weighed down by a high fragmentation, but details have been cross-checked using different map providers to avoid undesirable mistakes. Which lesson should we drive from this large and recent increase in the number of border crossings?

<sup>3</sup>The location of bridges is, however, difficult to determine because no symbol indicates these artworks. Data are less reliable on this point. Ferry lines are also disregarded. They can be activated or closed quickly depending on political or economic conditions. They usually follow seasonal demand.

The last Ottoman and Austrian imperial maps present what would be considered *unauthorized view* of the Balkan area in contemporary terms. In 1908, the transportation system is already upside-down: The railway revolution has helped many places to overcome their isolation. New transport networks come along with modernized administrations. Agricultural outputs find renewed export markets, and other leading manufacturing activities develop throughout the backcountry on both (Fig. 2.2) faces of the Empires. Besides, remote mountain communities often demonstrate a high demographic vitality.

Are the 54 road checkpoints of 1908 an effective indicator of the state of international relations? Not really. In the Central Balkans, the first motorized vehicles will be abandoned by the retreat of foreign military troops at the end of WWI, with few exceptions. The road network inherited from the Ottoman administration is almost missing. The Balkan countryside is a kingdom of the mule. Few vehicles find limited intercity road circuits. At least two-thirds of the rural districts are sidelined from the transport revolution of the time. As a result, most military reports written during WWI prefer to measure distances in time. Reaching the fighting fields of the Eastern Front implies that the French and Austrian armies

**Fig. 2.2** A time-honored tradition: the *uncontrolled* fighting groups. Paramilitary militias: Albanian in Kosovo, 2001; Bulgarian Cheta (Komitadji) around Kastoria, 1902. Sources [www.lostbulgaria.com](http://www.lostbulgaria.com), [www.hoxha.at](http://www.hoxha.at)





build their own carriage ways. In terms of military control, sovereignty, traffic management, and taxation, settling international boundaries is a difficult task. Fifty-four checkpoints are insignificant compared with countless unreferenced ways unsuitable for modern vehicles. The fence model whose ultimate enforcement will take place during the Cold War finds no application here. However, endowed with full political and legal capacity, the imperial borderlands follow local rules that hardly comply with the injunctions of remote authorities such as Vienna and Istanbul. Smuggling not only plays a significant role in the local economy, but is also a way of living (Fig. 2.2).

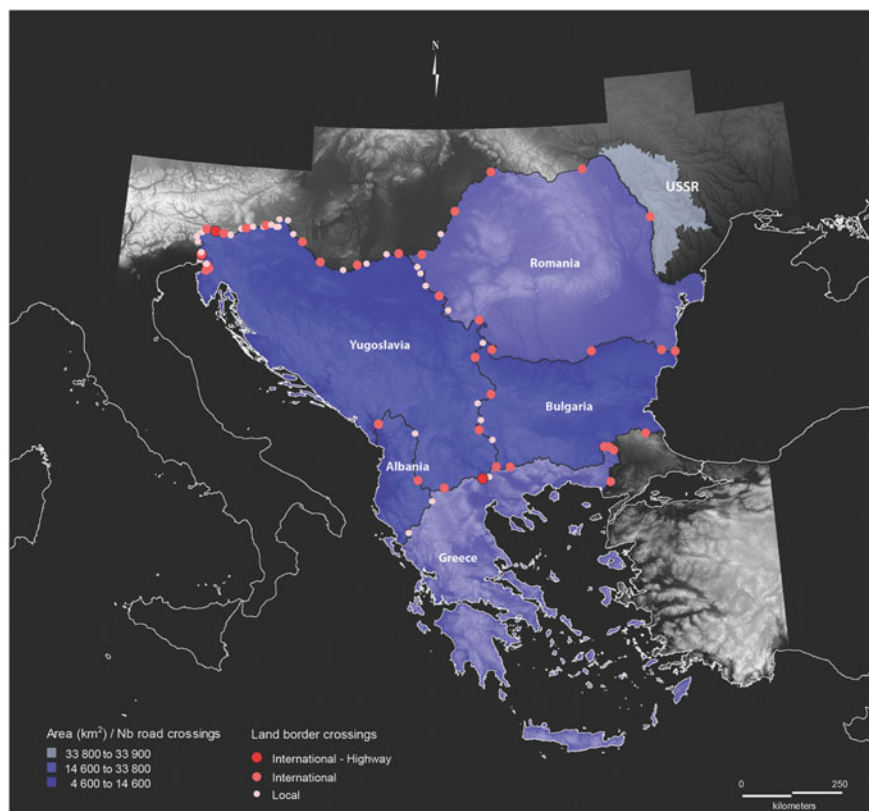
According to the 1908 map, Western Montenegro is deprived of any mappable road that might connect the country to the Austrian and Ottoman Empires. Similarly, hundreds of kilometers of watercourses are deprived of bridges, a situation that should not hinder the importance of other river crossing means, randomly controlled by the authorities. When no barbed wires hinder the mobility of people and when newly settled boundaries are supposed to divide villages linked by centuries of organic ties, official checkpoints play a fairly symbolic role.

With 17 entrance gates, Serbia is centrally located. No map could describe more efficiently the strategic place of this country on the eve of WWI than Fig. 2.1. Serbia is at that time the only landlocked state of the Peninsula. At mid-distance from Istanbul and Vienna, it pays its crossroad position by plentiful transit points. On the northern side of the Dinaric range, the kingdom controls most routes connecting the heart of both Empires. Comparatively, the total number of road gates in the remaining Ottoman Rumelia only climbs to 16 points for an area three times larger than Serbia.

Obviously, the process of expanding boundaries directly impacts the newly established nation-states whose main policy is to increase the number of checkpoints to improve their financial situation. These emerging political-territorial entities also have to maintain/enforce their relationships with the remaining parts of the Empires where many “fellow citizens” still live. This provides for the collection of necessary taxes devoted to the establishment of a fully operational public administrative system. The Empires used to live under the watchword “good fences make good neighbors.” The forthcoming nations build their independence on a reverse principle. The attitude might seem schizophrenic: Wars instigated with the intent to fix *hard* boundaries against outer competing enemies would drive afterward to an increased border porosity? Although surprising, this observation is definitely validated by the analysis.

The border model imposed after WWII (Fig. 2.3) is different. Tens of Russian military maps of the late 1970s to enable us to observe the transition from an “organized porosity” to a full confinement. Of course, these data are not readily comparable to the previous ones. The Russian topographic coverage stems from aerial photography, thereby allowing a more detailed examination. With a time lag of 60 years, almost no correlation between border crossings can be found. There has been a wholesale change.

As usual, observing the earth from the sky enables to look at it differently. All border crossings were picked up and classified according to their importance



**Fig. 2.3** Road border crossings in 1990. *Source* Michelin, Hallwag and other national travel maps, late 1980s, 1/700 000 and 1/1 000 000, DTM NASA SRTM program, author's own GIS databases, ESRI, Russian military maps, late 1970s, 1/500.000

(width, road surface, and hierarchical rank). This led us to identify about 300 points placed across roads and railway lines. The existence of such facilities does not mean that all of them were in use and proper working condition. Few of them were actually in service as a consequence of the Cold War. The old system is reversed. Most transport networks are neutralized to channel people and goods toward a limited number of custom points.

Roughly speaking, the Iron Curtain and the paranoid atmosphere attached to it find different applications that depend on local contexts. No global rule prevails. Each boundary has characteristics of its own. For instance, the Greek–Albanian border covers about 250 km and intersects two asphalted roads and four tracks closed to traffic. International trade and exchange are reduced to a minimum. In contrast, 24 connections punctuate the 300 km of borderline between Vojvodina and Romania: 6–11–7? cart tracks. Is this disparity caused by specific topographic conditions (lowlands vs. mountains)? Probably not, or as a secondary reason.

Both cases involve past imperial lands living for long in close proximity and submitted to a complex population mix. The economic policy applied to these outer spaces is a determining factor. Always denounced by travelers and scientists of the late nineteenth century, despite the Tanzimat reforms, the Ottoman Empire suffered from an acute underdevelopment in front of its Austrian competitor. The train could reach a very limited number of places in remote Ottoman districts. On the other hand, the Pannonian Plain is covered with railway stations that duplicate an already-developed road network. In addition, human densities are not even comparable. The first Yugoslav–Romanian boundary settled down at the end of WWI cuts into pieces neighboring communities distant from only few hundred meters. It sometimes divides urban districts. Roads and railways cross many times the same boundary as if mapmakers had ignored these networks when they were urged to define new state limits.

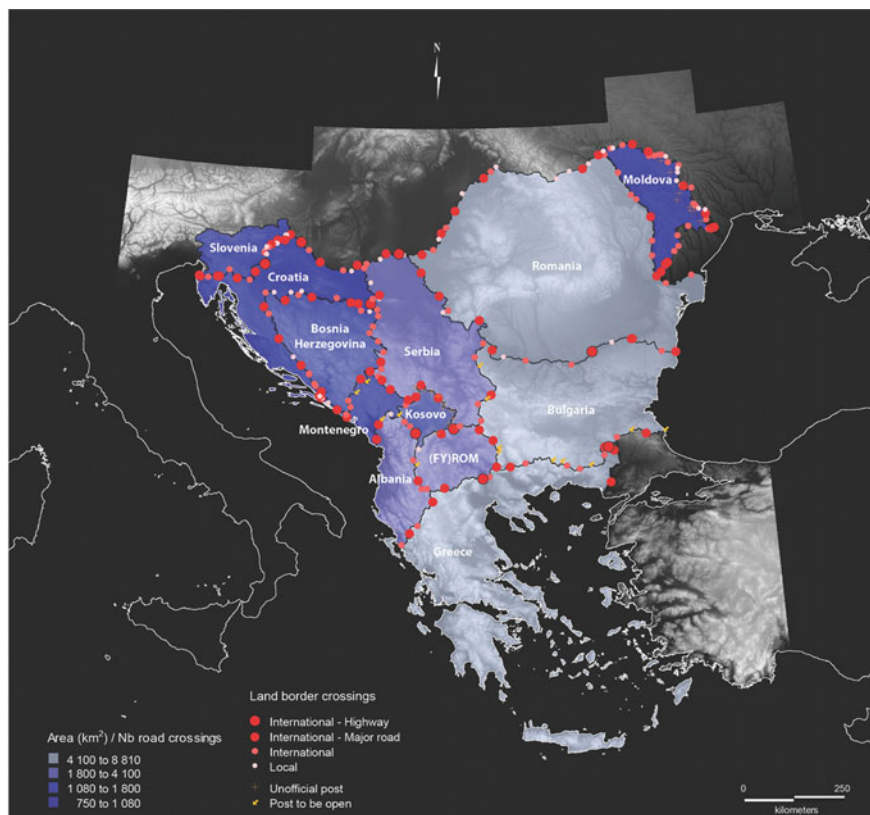
Between both cases, local and environmental contexts differ greatly. The Greek–Albanian borderlands never turned their backs on underdevelopment, whereas cross-border relations in Vojvodina kept thriving on past achievements. The picture would not be complete without mentioning two points:

- In contrast to other land sections, river boundaries suffer from a limited number of bridges. Danube, Drava, and Sava still play a dividing role they never gave up.
- The main transport lines stretch in an east-west pattern. They avoid crossing rivers and appreciate the natural corridors determined by topography.

Figure 2.3 clearly highlights the specific position of Yugoslavia. Unlike Greece, Albania, Bulgaria, Romania, and Turkey, which maintain distant relations in keeping active two or three checkpoints with each neighbor scattered among hundreds of kilometers of barbed wires, Yugoslavia shows a remarkable openness. The whole Federation appears as a transit platform between Western and Eastern Blocs. The Northern Slovenian border with Austria and Italy is very specific: Twenty official checkpoints are registered there in the late 1980s.

On the contrary, the highest fences and *coldest* frontiers lurk in the least expected places. Albania is almost a full isolate—a predictable condition indeed. Although tied to the Eastern Bloc and surrounded by military allies of the Warsaw Pact, Romania only keeps three road crossings with Moldavia and Ukraine along a 1 200-km interface. Similarly, Greece barely maintains two paths along the Evros River, despite its common membership with Turkey to NATO. Cold War fences are thus simple inputs to a complex border system. The ins and outs of this system are to be studied further on. As mentioned earlier, the existence of a checkpoint does not necessarily imply a permanent use. Mapping flows would reveal major disparities between posts. Some of them have been kept virtually closed to traffic over decades.

Once again, Fig. 2.4 shows an altered pattern. The boundaries' length increases as if submitted to inflationary pressures. The communist collapse and economic transition; the European integration of Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary, and Slovenia; the Yugoslav Wars; and Moldavian upheavals have produced cumulative effects in a few short years. These events have changed the face of the area. In contrast to previous periods, a clear setback can be seen. Until then, Serbia/Yugoslavia played



**Fig. 2.4** Road border crossings in 2013. *Source* Freytag & Berndt and other national travel maps, 2004-2005, 1/400 000 and 1/500 000, updated with Google Earth, DTM NASA SRTM program, author's own GIS databases, ESRI, Home Affairs Ministries

a key role in the area. For the first time, the most *open* countries are located on the northern edge: Moldavia, Croatia, and Slovenia are perforated with regularly spaced holes. The independence of Moldavia, for instance, has turned many former internal roads of the USSR into international highways—the increasing number of border crossings thus expresses a maintained degree of territorial integration. In Slovenia, a similar process leads to an opposite result: In 2007, Slovenia and Hungary enter the Schengen Area and withdraw their corresponding custom posts. The same would eventually happen north of Croatia. In such cases, the rising number of border crossings is a preliminary step before a “linear control” resignation.

In Bosnia, Montenegro, Kosovo, and Serbia, the set of circumstances is different. The current international (or assimilated) boundaries divide lands that used to maintain close relationships. As in Moldavia, many gates are remnants of an integrated transport network whose strings were cut off. Paradoxically, the

communication breakdown produces a growing number of paths. In response to its serious internal problems, Bosnia faces a similar *revolution*. The former Federative Republic went through the twentieth century without experiencing any border control on its edges. Even though, in 2013, the country was watched by 42 official road crossing points, without considering the inter-entity boundaries that are not classified as *international*, whose paths are not consequently mentioned on the map. Surprisingly, despite worsened relationships, Fig. 2.4 clearly emphasizes the long-term links between the Federation of Bosnia/Croatia and Republika Srpska/Serbia.

The Balkans are a particularly tricky issue. Any state independence initiates an immediate border opening that fosters a “vital breath” to the newborn country, as if political divides and military struggles did not compromise territorial versus economic neighborly relations. In 2013, the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Kosovo officially referenced thirteen standing and two temporary checkpoints on the outer face of its tiny “autonomous region.”

In the Southern Balkans, other conditions prevail. Until recently, Greece, Albania, Bulgaria, and Turkey had to advertise their desire for integration while fulfilling the European candidate countries’ criteria. Unlike what happened in former Yugoslavia, most neighboring *partners* had maintained (very) limited relationships. These confines had been deserted for long. To overcome the past monopolistic position of the military authorities, other revolutions had to occur in silence. Since the 1990s, the number of border crossings never stopped growing, thanks to European funds made available for the establishment of new offices and access facilities. Heavy foreign investments are therefore necessary, because no significant transport networks existed before.

In 1990, Greece enlisted only nine checkpoints on its northern boundaries. Half of them were almost free from any traffic. Twenty years later, six modern gates have been built in the middle of nowhere. Three extra ways are scheduled to serve Bulgaria. Between this last country and Turkey, in Eastern Thrace, three custom offices are to be created, preparing a real revolution: Traditionally, the gates of Kapitan Andreevo and Malko Trnovo concentrated the bulk of traffic. Three local connections aim to initiate renewed neighboring relationships between the divided Bulgarian and Turkish communities. The action is more symbolic than effective—for the moment.

This first approach to the Balkan complexity may end up with a rough classification of today’s borderlines:

1. The old national boundaries are currently submitted to a salutary opening. After one century of limited exchanges, they receive expensive facilities that deeply alter closed landscapes—high mountains surrounded by green *corridors*.
2. The former “internal” borders of the Federations (Yugoslavia, USSR) suffer from a painful enclosure artificially limited by the creation of many checkpoints. However, fostered by abundant road crossings, neighborly relations experience severe withdrawal symptoms.

## 2.3 A Four-Seasons' Approach to the Balkan Borderlands

Frontiers are not only places to cross, they are also districts to stay, forests to manage, perimeters to observe and control, needy villages and communities to support, or trade centers to develop. Surprisingly, the most common image associated with borderlands is that of deserts. When people think about them, they instinctively slip from dense central cities to lazy countryside until they finally imagine empty spaces far from anywhere. In this sense, curious onlookers are strange fellows who fix their attention on places that would appreciate remaining anonymous—if we could impugn motives to them. Many—not to say all—outer districts are “hurt places” by centuries of continuous conflicts. And fighting armies usually leave barren soils behind them.

Such portrayals obscure many aspects of spatial marginality (Green 2005). Most observers focus on what is collectively considered essential. The human mind finds easy ways to shrug off unnecessary information. Geography as a scientific approach to land understanding is thus a discipline that has to bridge knowledge gaps and investigate spatial confines and mind frontiers on a systematic basis. Representations and measured facts have to confront. The account of some personal field experiences may illustrate the wide variety of local situations beyond clichés, which allows us to discover a confined world of migrants, soldiers, traders, and tourists (Gelbman and Timothy 2011; Wachowiak 2016). Readers shall excuse the futility of recalled personal memories. These experiences gathered year after year are, however, relevant for introducing our theme. They have an irreplaceable value to our understanding of local atmospheres.

As far as I remember, I never stopped hanging around borderlands. Even when I thought I was far distant, they found ways of being in the world through crooked means. I have begun to travel the Balkans when the area was at a crossroads of its history, at the beginning of the 1990s. Each country of southeast Europe in its turn made world headlines after decades of *quiet* existence. The former communist countries were undertaking their revolutions. They revealed Europe still had neighborhoods beyond the Iron Curtain. Unfortunately, economic and political collapse allowed crawling struggles to resurface.

### 2.3.1 June–July 2000: Summer Memories of Dalmatia and Bosnia

Despite the media frenzy over the Yugoslav Wars, little information had fused out of the country about the deep geographic changes happening in the background of the fights. For a decade, unless they belonged to military forces, diplomatic corps, or humanitarian organizations, external investigators were invited to postpone their works to better times. A few reporters bravely tried to make up for the heavy military silence that would have prevailed without them. Beyond the confusion, the

internal restructuring of the area was so thorough that years would be necessary to issue a valid report on the ongoing spatial dynamics. A world was disappearing.

The end of the Kosovo War is dated June 1999. One year later, an opportunity presents itself to spend lengthy periods in Croatia and Bosnia. Seasonal tourist attractions and depressed feelings of people in the backcountry help to breed a strange atmosphere. In this hot summer of 2000, the inner Dalmatia combines the beauty and solitude of crop fields and natural spaces to the striking relics of human violence. The end of the Bosnian Wars goes back 4 years ago. Enough time has passed to let *Mother Nature* replenish, but the time frame is too short to hide the scars left on building facades and to help casualties of the fighting rest in peace. Along roads, gravestones and oratories mark places of painful losses. The Croatian authorities are obviously struggling to hide war relics.

Crossing the boundaries of Slovenia, Croatia, and Bosnia is unproblematic. Around Trieste, Slovenia—and especially Istria—appears as a close neighborhood of the European Union. Easy controls allow for a fluid transit of tourist flows to southern destinations. Entering Bosnia is made quite untroubled. At Metković, police officers carry out an ordinary inspection. They show little concern. Their colleagues are much more interested by frequent speed controls that provide hard currencies and taxes. The ticket amount is negotiable. Obviously, despite recent army fights, the former Yugoslavian states have not decided to build high fences around them. The situation is weird, as if free traffics had survived the wars, as a lasting legacy of the previous regime. To the driving traveler, few landmarks indicate the demarcation line between Bosnia and Croatia. Asphalted and dirt roads lazily linger along *undefined* borderlines.

The strange cohabitation of careless tourists and “hurt populations” reaches its acme in Sarajevo and Mostar. Everywhere warfare has left permanent traces. Apartment buildings ruined by heavy artillery still stand beside entrenched military bases. A kind of outrageous voyeurism makes shop traders sell videos of the past struggles. Although both cities stand away from the new international borderlines, land and human divisions appear here most clearly. Demobilized soldiers and roaming groups of young men pace the streets of Sarajevo. Bosnian military patrols cross the way of peacekeeping troops, showing obvious provocation. Tensions are running high enough to let anybody feel uncomfortable, years after the events. When the air can be cut with a knife, the borders trade their conceptual dimensions against a full practical meaning.

Croatian and Bosnian landscapes are rich in contrasts. Dalmatia appears under a shining sun, while the Adriatic Riviera receives hundreds of thousands of people running away from their rainy homelands. During this season, the mineral landscapes of the Adriatic coast offer coppery glints owing to red soils and crimson vegetation. Scattered along the coastal strip, charming cities standing on white walls and covered with red-tiled roofs melt with mineral environments. Everyone spontaneously understands that water supply is here a critical issue. The karst maintains a high photosynthetic activity in the internal basins until early July, then crops come to maturity and, unless being watered, all fields sink into drowsiness until the first rains of autumn.



The Plitvica Lakes are an unspoilt island made of preserved Mediterranean forest. With around one million visitors each year, this old National Park is among the most renowned resort places of Croatia, after coastal cities. The area highlights the inconsistency of post-Yugoslavian borderlands. A few kilometers west of the Bihać enclave, almost no sign of the boundary is visible at first sight. A closer look reveals the backsides of this tourist resort. Eight kilometers west of the Plitvica Lakes stands the ruined aerial base of Željava, destroyed in 1992—one of the biggest military bases of Yugoslavia. The first years of the Yugoslav Wars have determined the fate of the region. Following the downfall of the Republic of Serbian Krajina in 1995, the area has endured a complete renewal of its population with the departure/expulsion of most Serbs and the reverse installation of Croats from Bosnia. This is at least what statistics report. In fact, inland villages oppose an almost deserted face to the overcrowded Riviera. Many expatriated workers take the opportunity of few marriages to visit what remains of home and family.

The siege of Bihać has lasted almost 3 years (1992–1995) and has left extensive minefields as a legacy. At a crossroad between the Pannonian Plain to the north and the Adriatic coast to the south, surrounded by Serbian, Croatian, and Muslim Bosniaks villages, the area mixes all of the ingredients and wears the full complexity of land confines. Both Ottoman and Austrian Empires had made this region a solid demarcation area. Deep forests owe their existence to a former military status that has shaped the landscapes (Magris 1999).

### 2.3.2 *August 2006. The Pannonian Plain Around Pécs and Vukovar*

Luck would have chosen me to visit the northern Balkans in late spring and summer. Even during the hot season, the confluence zone of the Drava, Sava, Tisa, Danube, Mureş, south of the Pannonian Basin, is *another world*. Croatia is such a country that shows bipolar face. To the bare rocky soils of Dalmatia and varied mountain slopes of the Central Dinara succeeds an endless plain where each rising terrain might be considered a considerable summit. Nowadays, the area gathers most productive forces of four countries that share this piece of land. Large urban areas, industrial complexes, transport means: Everything essential finds here place to develop and participate in retaining high population densities. The Great Danubian Plain already smells like *Mittleeuropa*: endless horizons, continental climate, trees, and water competing for land mastering and, above all, dreary crop fields as far as the eye can see. To the extreme variety of the Southern Balkans, this marchland opposes the same boring landscapes over hundreds of kilometers.

Because of this contrast, time seems to follow another pace. Distances are covered much faster. Developed transportation networks ensure rapid connections and trips. Locked behind his car or train window, the observer soon finds advantages to



losing himself in a book rather than comparing the beauty of succeeding wheat and corn fields. The Habsburgs must have felt at ease around here, doubtlessly.

The overvalorization of low-lying areas (Pannonian Plain) and the reverse underdevelopment of the uplands (foothills of the Dinaric Alps) is quite a recent geographic reality. Until late—the eighteenth or nineteenth century—depending on local conditions, regularly flooded areas, countless tributary streams of uncontrolled rivers, dead meanders, and infested ponds had an extremely repellent effect on human presence and activities (Timár et al. 2008). The most repulsive swamp area—before its general improvement—is caught between Danube and Drava, north of Osijek, amidst today's Croatia, Serbia, and Hungary. Rambling rivers are everywhere, despite facilities that would stabilize streams. Water mastering is highly risky: By definition, quaternary sediments are difficult to control, especially when water tables reach ground levels. Adopting river thalwegs for defining international boundaries is obviously a venture.

Two parks preserve today the remains of an old natural paradise/human *nightmare*—the so-called Baranja. South of Mohács, the Duna-Drava Park is at the crossroad of Croatia, Hungary, and Romania. It extends over 50 000 ha. The Kopački Rit Park covers 18 000 ha a few kilometers downstream. As for the Plitvica reserve, it belonged to the Republic of Serbian Krajina and, until the signature of the Erdut Agreement in 1995, the Serbs claimed their right on it with a large strip of land that includes Vukovar.

Beyond the quietness of fauna and flora reserves peacefully paced by summer tourists in search of “authenticity”—and good wines—fierce fights have opposed the Croatian and Serbian forces in the first half of the 1990s, leading to general ethnic cleansing. Almost totally destroyed by bombings in 1991, Vukovar is a worldwide symbol of the first crimes committed in former Yugoslavia. Ruined buildings and stolen lives are common destiny in borderlands. Restored fields cleared from mines have quickly erased any sign of the turmoil. Crumbled houses take a longer time to be eliminated.

That a battle took place in Eastern Slavonia is a small wonder. So many fights between the Ottoman and Austrian troops had happened here. The early and late Byzantine Emperors had already made the Danube River and its surroundings a contact zone to manage cautiously. The interdiction applied to any farming activity was a way to secure frontiers from external attacks. Such politics have produced large unpeopled areas along the Lower Danube and remarkably forested zones upstream (Power and Standen 1999; Panzac 1999; Fuchs et al. 2015). Nowadays, after centuries of Ottoman–Austrian “cross-Danubian” troubled relationships, natural parks seem to be the modern expression of an old function. An appropriate protection provides new purposes to repellent districts. Centuries of struggles, riots, army fights, and mutual plunder have facilitated the process of overall depopulation better than any surreptitious and devastating flood.

The region was in 2006 at a turning point in its history. Hungary had joined the EU in 2004. Many former communist countries of Eastern and Central Europe had

finally found a successful conclusion to their European application. Romania would enter a year later. Hungary would also join the Schengenland in 2007. A European flag flapping in the wind at a checkpoint in Mohács was a true revolution. People easily forget the obstructions this region had faced during the Cold War, when contacts between neighboring lands and human beings were strictly limited (Schubert 2011). The event brings us back a century ago. The last time Baranja had enjoyed such freedom goes up to the 1910s, in the last years of the Austrian Empire.

For now, both national parks “freeze” a contested *tri-border* between Croatia, Serbia, and Hungary. West of Bezdan, as the legacy of an undetermined past, the boundary rambles east and west of the Danube course, playing a hide-and-seek game never to find a coincidence with the actual mainstream. “To bargain: hundreds of hectares of wild animals, preserved pieces of forest, dozens of water ponds for leisure fishing. Don’t forget your favorite mosquito lotion (if you are lucky, an unexpected water pollution would replace it for a while). Please make an offer.” Why make things easy when they can be complicated? River mainstreams and borderlines do not match accurately. More to the east, Szeged and its other trigon show an absolute discordance between boundary and thalwegs.

### 2.3.3 1998–2006: *December in Epirus and Southern Albania*

Most people discover the Balkans during summer holidays. Memories usually associate sunny islands and sandy beaches with other blue lagoons where multilingual crowds casually gather. On the contrary, as a researcher and land rover, avoiding summer rushes has always been essential for me to carry out my work in good conditions. Borrowing in early July an overcrowded KTEL bus in Greece may be a painful experience. It often happened to me to take such buses during 7 or 8 hours, breathing thick clouds of cigar smoke without air-conditioning, by around 40 °C. Exhausted by the drive, travelers quickly learn to program their trips off-season. The Balkan mainland produces different overall impressions in late fall and winter.

Epirus and Southern Albania are places where I have spent months between 1998 and 2006. The late 1990s were a tough period of economic collapse in all post-communist countries. Albania, (FY)ROM, and Bulgaria were at a low ebb. The debate about (FY)ROM’s use of the name *Macedonia* and the *Sun of Vergina* fixed on its flag had led to an economic embargo applied by Greece to the former Yugoslav Republic. Albania and Bulgaria were managing some industrial reconstruction and vast land reforms. The *transition* revealed the existence of exhausted administrative systems. The emergence of new political parties and leaders had been long delayed. Renewed opposition forces were developing powerful positions—including mafias. Year after year, people had to leave their countries en masse toward Italy, Greece, or other European destinations hoping to enter a promising

labor market. Those unable or unwilling to quit homelands—many elderly people among them—were facing hard living conditions. Change was not a short-term *evil* but a program meant to last.

In 1997, Albania experienced global troubles that have made much an impact on people's thinking. The *Pyramid crisis* had caused massive unrest, mainly in the south of the country. It revealed the corruption degree of an entire political class and the economic potential of mafias. The population had been brought on a course of suffering and despair for having placed its confidence into financial “devices,” in the hope of restoring some purchasing capacity. The speculation fever had adopted a rough primary *East European* form, not so far from the unrest that would catch later the entire continent and lead to the great depression of 2008.

*Chaos* is the appropriate term to use as the designation for Albania's condition after the pyramids' fall. *Civil War* is an exaggerated word, considering the limited number of human casualties. However, entire cities had fallen. Hunger strikes, destruction of public buildings, state emergency, SHIK troops fighting against students, evacuation of foreign citizens, military barracks plundered by rebels: For a time, the situation had escaped any control. In a few weeks, a weakened but quiet country had slipped into anarchy. Even Tirana was touched. Its population keeps in mind the raids few armed groups used to organize on the capital as a challenge against incapable government authorities. Foreign officials did not leave Tirana without armored vehicles. A few months later, the same did not understand how an unknown *Frenchie* could cross Albania as anyone else by taxi, bus, or *furgon*.

Against such confusion, the neighboring countries had to take protective decisions and close their boundaries in order to avoid any contagion and secure outer districts. The great crisis of 1997 demonstrates the power of armed gangs able to run entire regions in full view of legal authorities. Thousands of weapons had vanished into the air that would be used later in Kosovo and (FY)ROM. The revival of local gang leaders who managed to impose their own law in the streets and, behind the threat, to rake ever-greater profits from illegal trafficking is not far from bringing us back one century ago, just before the fall of the Ottoman Empire. When states totter, other pre-existing and discrete powers take the advantage.

The Iron Curtain had survived its own ashes for 10 years. The political instability of Albania and the semi-anarchy of its southern regions, sanctioned by a terrible human and economic decay (Darques 2004), had made the northern Greek borderlands sensitive areas to survey. Few intrusions of Greek paramilitary units claiming the *liberation* of Northern Epirus have been reported in southern Albania. Cross-border incidents never completely ceased between both countries after the Balkan Wars. Tens of thousands of Albanian migrants left their homeland each year hoping to reach Greece and enter its job market, keen on using cheap and regardless workers (Sintès 2010). The flow had to be mastered *a minima*. Regularly, for political reasons, policemen used to carry out mass arrests within the Hellenic cities and in the countryside and chartered buses with illegal residents. As soon as

expelled at Kakavia, the latter immediately tried their luck in crossing back the boundary.

March 1998. From Jannina, I plan to visit the small town of Konitsa, 8 km away from the Albanian boundary. The Balkan spring is late. A clouded sky makes me seek shelters to run in at the next rainfall. The KTEL bus brings few pensioners to their homes, with packages brought from the main city of Epirus. Heading a flat plain surrounded by forested mountains, Konitsa is a motionless village, trapped in time. The Ottoman place is still here, although heavily damaged by the elements. Ruined houses, bathes, and mosques left by Muslim Ottomans and/or Albanians scatter the upper city. The buildings are quite bulky, outward signs of some past wealth. Obviously, the *Athenian miracle* (Burgel 2002) has not reached these confines. Low fields stretching downwards let us imagine the past fertile *çiftlik*s of the Ottoman dignitaries and the host of landless workers placed under their jurisdiction. From this past world, few things have survived. The main winner of this century-long experience is undoubtedly the forest. The *kafenion* itself is not delightful. I discuss with an old peasant woman who brings back home large faggots for firewood. I had better go back to Jannina before the night.

I did not think the return would be so colorful. KTEL buses stop at every station, even in the countryside. Dribs and drabs, people continue getting on the bus—mostly young men without luggage. All but a handful of empty seats of the outward journey are now occupied, until two consecutive police controls restore the balance. Between seat ranges, everybody stays calm. Those who cannot produce official papers are invited to get off by a head movement. The policeman puts one only question: “Where are you from?” When he reaches my seat, he asks me to show three different ID papers. Unbelievable! A French citizen in Konitsa during March. To avoid deploying too many forces, the officers observe any movement along the main road axes. People who cross the border on foot shall in the end meet these roads hoping to reach their final destination. Once leaving mobile controls behind them and entering the “heartland,” their trips will be safer. Weariness is on all faces: Ceaselessly dodging around and trying to outwit each other are exhausting tasks, on both sides.

December 2001. A seizing coldness gains the capital of Epirus where I am staying for weeks. Athens knows urban chaos because of sudden snowfalls. In Jannina, these are not unexpected. The Pamvotida Lake is half frozen and heavy snowflakes hide the Clock Tower. Higher up Pindus, Metsovo is covered by one-meter-high white coat. To avoid traveling under dangerous conditions, I prefer to make a pause during the weekend and visit few places along Thesprotia. Some friends encourage me to plan a trip. The heating system of my old car can hardly warm up the passenger cell. But the day is bright. Waiting for the western part of the *Nea Egnatia* highway to be completed, I proceed on the old national road which leads to Igoumenitsa, roughly following the Kalamas River. Epirus is one of those mountain regions that have supported large rural depopulation after WWII. The Civil War did great damages, insofar that most villages never fully recovered from

the loss. The general downfall made cultivated fields and pasturelands come back to wild forest over a few years. Those who succeeded in surviving fights and famine and managed not to run away had come to settle in Jannina. Present Epirus thus inherits the overwhelming weight of its regional metropolis (around 60 000 inhabitants), beside an almost deserted countryside.

When entering Thesprotia, watchful eyes may observe singular landscapes. More than half of all villages are ruined. Few people, especially tourists, imagine crossing a wounded countryside. Vegetation has enwrapped the demolished buildings for long. Almost all Albanian-speaking and Muslim Greek citizens of the region have been forced to leave home in 1944. Thus, Chameria had broken up with a famous ethnic-confessional intermixing (Hart 1999). One rural–urban migration later, most former arable lands are still left on their own. No land reform has occurred in the meantime, and no official cadastre has ever been implemented. The only places resisting decay are populated by return migration Greeks that spend their savings in German or neohellenic-style private houses. Generous benefactors from Australia or America take special pride at financing public monuments. Despite this, hundreds of remote hamlets deprived of any electrical connection or decent road access have disappeared.

Its market place has avoided a slump to Filiates. The old Ottoman town is more active than other *kaza* centers transformed into head cities of *eparhies*. Igoumenitsa has stolen its leading position to Filiates, thanks to its port facilities and access to Corfu. Albania is not far away. As a reminder of some past competition across the Iron Curtain, Albanian radios easily reach the Hellenic coast and conversely. A few years ago, listening to subversive Western music on a basic HF radio could be heavily punished on the other side of the boundary. Times have changed. For now, Filiates is asleep, but as soon as nature recovers its rights in spring, the Albanian migrants will return to their jobs in farming and tourism.

One week later, under equivalent weather, I come back to visit the village of Tsamanda, north of Filiates, in direct contact with the Albanian boundary. On the narrow road to this *end of the world*, surrounded by wild vegetation, Tsamanda tries to survive with little means. It welcomes an ethnographic museum that relates rural life as it used to be “before.” Conversations in the local *kafenio* are going well. Tsamanda counted three hundred houses in old times. It lives today with only thirty to fifty permanent residents. The endless Civil War has blocked the course of development more tangibly than any boundary. However, border paths closed by years of military rule have left bitter memories. Despondent people think to the closest “Albanian” village, Lesinita-Leshnicë, within a 1-h walk. They have provided the museum of Tsamanda with curiosities and objects of rural life. People proudly say that Leshnicë was the true head-village of the region, and that Filiates was almost a no-place before. Who remembers today the mountain slopes and valley bottoms covered by fruit farming and wheat fields, the fat sheep flocks grazing the upper summits? Everybody has left a long time ago. Only two buses climb every week to keep ageless people in contact with modernity.

Night is coming soon in winter. Back to Jannina, I am once more stopped by police officers. Papers are useless this time. Questions come from all sides to unsettle. "Where are you from? What are you doing here? Why do you speak Greek? Where do you go?" My car is submitted to a close search. "Didn't you cross the Kalamas Bridge this afternoon?" Obviously, my trip had been watched. Even during the cold season, or because of my unexpected presence, border controls are tough. Other stays shall see me accidentally take part to man hunting operations in the nearby forests.

Winter in Gjirokastër is also worth living. In 2004, coming back from a stay in Tirana, I decide to take a break and spend a few days in the second largest city of the former Ottoman *Vilayet* of Jannina. An exhausting bus trip leaves me with a single idea in mind: Finding a bed and getting some sleep. As usual, my decisions are not programmed. No booking was made; all hotels appear to be closed. I have to make my choice quickly. At five o'clock in the afternoon, the sun falls below the horizon and coldness settles down. Fortunately, a sign placed in the upper corner of an anonymous building brings me some hope. I will eventually stay in military barracks. A few leks handed out to a young soldier, and tomorrow will be another day.

The night was eventful. After preparing myself a bed, I realized the common room appointed to me did not have heating. Albania made a routine out of it. People are accustomed to being subject to power cuts. In particular vulnerable to low incomes, people have learned to live in unheated houses. In the middle of the night, a group of young men joins the dormitory. I will get some sleep another night.

The morning sunlight finally delivers the city from its darkness and brings the hope of a comforting thaw. The place awakes with the muezzin's call to pray and bell rings of the clock tower. Colorful traditional houses appear. A small shop offers me a good breakfast and a delicious "cappuccino" with cinnamon. A walk in the upper town helps me to get warm. Gjirokastër and its surrounding settlements are asleep. A few years ago, the Greek consulate just down the castle was besieged every day by emigration candidates and those who did not manage to get legal permission forced the boundaries on foot to escape Albania at all costs. The result is now obvious. Gjirokastër is a quiet city. Compared with its countryside, it keeps minimal activity, thanks to its museum-place status and a few inherited administrative responsibilities. Maybe some lost tourists still end up here? All remains of the former regime are down: industrial plants, collective farms, middle-scale workshops, and almost all public facilities are so heavily damaged that no traces of this communist past will stand visible for long.

The entire Drino Valley fights the elements alone. The river and its tributary streams bring high amounts of sediments that overwhelm low fields almost everywhere. For a long time now, nobody matters with this. Maybe reacting to the desertion of the valley and to the disastrous consequences of land reforms, Gjirokastër firmly hangs over its rocky slopes. A new district is under construction, north of the city. Private houses and tiny apartment buildings emerge from a chaos

of concrete, in the middle of open-air waste fields and cratered roads. The market is not too far, where people gather on this Sunday morning.

Back to Jannina, a few days later. Unlike its Albanian equivalent, the city of Ali Pasha is surrounded by commercial areas that stretch over kilometers: gas stations, supermarkets, taverns, construction materials, farm machinery, and other miscellaneous shops spread out as far as the eye can see. Fortunately, the place enjoys a shimmering lake, the island of Nisi, and a lovely fortified castle. Jannina is not on the UNESCO world heritage list, but it is worth visiting. The citadel was almost destroyed in the early 1820s, as a punishment inflicted by the Ottoman troops sent by the Sultan to defeat Ali of Tepelen.

I have spent enough time in Jannina. I could walk along its streets with blindfolded eyes. My old car is still waiting for me to end my usual inquiries among the Greek administrations. To breathe fresh air, I plan to visit the southern suburbs of the metropolis. Anonymous neohellenic villages scatter around the lake, absorbed by farming and residential functions. Koloniati is a settlement located on top of a rock. It gathers twenty families. Not worth lingering here.

Unexpectedly, this winter afternoon would bequeath to me lasting memories. Driving downhill, I slow down to avoid an old man wrapped up warmly in a thick coat, walking along the way a wood stick in his hand. Hearing my arrival, all of a sudden, the man turns back and steps sideways until the middle of the road, arms wide open to stop me. "People are crazy around here," I say. Dumbstruck, I lower the car window. Hidden behind a wool hood, I do not see his face. I simply notice his large stunning white mustache, poking out of the cloth.

"Where are you going?", he asks.

I did not remember where I was exactly. How should I know? Almost accidentally—it was the last name I saw on a road sign—I answer:

"Bafra"

"So do I!"

Without any invitation, the old man climbs into the car.

"Good evening first," he says, removing his hood with politeness. "Did you visit the church?"

"Yes, I did."

While showing me the way, a kind conversation begins.

"Where do you come from?"

"I'm French, from Marseille"

A French citizen who speaks Greek seems natural to him. Usually people respond by a kind "ah, ah, Massalia, the little Greek village on the seaside!" He doesn't.

“Do you see this. It’s my plot,” he says proudly. “There, you have a source at the bottom of the plane-tree.” “Stop here. I’m going to show you the old church they are digging.”

I had found the perfect guide, the one who knows the region like the back of his hand.

A few minutes and many back roads later, we reach our final destination: the *kafenio* of Bafra, where my new friend seems to be a regular. The old man, keen eye, sits down near a cautiously chosen table and invites me to join him. Immediately, he offers me a *hellenico* (Greek coffee).

“Look, I have a French identity card.” He pulls out of his pocket a folded paper where his name is written. Panayiotis L., born in 1915. “You see, I’m a war veteran, a partisan, that’s why it’s written in French.”

From his 87 years old, the *youngster* shows remarkable simplicity.

“Do you have any children?” I ask.

“Four. Two boys and two girls. The first one lives in Koloniati, the second one is a teacher at Katsika,<sup>4</sup> the others are not far away.”

“None of them moved away?”

“Oh, on the farm, with two hundred sheep and three hundred pigs there was work for everyone. If only you had listened to that! Real music.”

“And you, where are you from?”

Few surrounding villages were peopled by refugees after the *Great Catastrophe* of 1923.

“Of course I’m from here, of Greek descent.”

“Did you know Jannina before. What was it like, a little city?”

“Very little. It has considerably changed. Before, there was much water in the *kambos*. Now they have dug many channels.”

“And your parents?” I dare ask. Questioning an old man about his parents brings us back to the *Turcocratia*, when this part of Greece was held by the Ottomans...

“My father was a shepherd. At that time, life was hard. The entire *kambos* was in the hands of two or three owners—the *çiflik*s. With Venizelos in 1923, they distributed all fields in divisions, one plot here, one plot there. My family bought a few sheep heads to improve its condition. I was young when I left them to join the army.”

“When was it?”

“In 1936. I got married in 1942. I completed my duty in 1951. Fifteen years! Somebody told us “go right,” we went right, “turn left,” we turned left. I even went to Tepelen.<sup>5</sup> We had to fight against the Italians. The mountains were covered with snow, everywhere.”

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<sup>4</sup>A suburb of Jannina.

<sup>5</sup>Present Albania, north of Gjirokastër.



Panayiotis reminisces about his armed fights.

"Many of my army buddies died. The others are friends. It's important to have friends in this life. But young people today don't know that. When someone goes through hard times, he knows what a friend is."

Frontiers are not only geographic lines. They are people who fix them and afterwards deal with them every day.

"If you seek for me, you'll find me here each evening. We have the same mind, both of us, I think."

### ***2.3.4 1993–2006: Winter and Spring Between (FY)ROM, Greece, and Bulgaria***

Bulgaria narrowly missed a global crisis in 1996–1997. The situation never got out of hand as it did in Albania, but all necessary conditions were in place. By the end of 1996, a fall of the financial pyramids resulted in a food shortage arousing popular riots. The transition to market-based economy had taken place in a general confusion, as in most CEI countries. A predatory finance developed in the early 1990s, between private sector, state activities, and informal economy. Over the ashes of an already-corrupted communist system, almost all public enterprise assets had come to be plundered. Capital outflows reached alarming levels, and organized mafias gained enough power even to threaten state authorities. All specialists agree in speaking of "unachieved or unmastered transition." In the everyday life, the Bulgarians got used to a mean annual monetary inflation of around 100 % in the 1990s. In 1997, the rate even climbed to 1 000 %. The Bulgarian lev was not already worth buying. In 1996, the GDP falls by 10 %. Even purchasing bread had become problematic (Cellarius 2000). In these difficult and dire circumstances, emigration was envisioned as an obvious solution by most able-bodied workers. Seasonal farm jobs and tourist undeclared services developed into large-scale exercise for most expatriated citizens. Simultaneously, the Western countries grew accustomed to recruiting a skilled workforce at low costs.

As a consequence, Bulgaria was coping with a dramatic decay. Its economic misery was a striking evidence of structural collapse. *Poor* and *old* had become synonymous epithets when speaking about seniors. Without any subsidies, people had acquired the habit of sowing few acres of distributed land in city suburbs. The old "Balkan garden" image associated with Bulgaria over the late Ottoman period erupted once again through the back door. Subsistence farming allowed hundreds of thousands of people to go through bad times. They dug, hoed, and watered plantations by hand: This was surprising in the eyes of foreign observers used to watch big tractors engaged in fieldwork rather than bending human backs. Beside this,

land infrastructures, public transport means, and industrial facilities were down. Ruined roads, ageless buses and trains, decaying private houses, devastated collective blocks, and plundered industrial buildings stretched their dreary landscapes everywhere.

I discovered Bulgaria during long stays in Salonika. In the early 1990s, traveling to (FY)ROM was quite risky for a researcher who intended to fulfill his work in Greece. Northern Yugoslavia was won by fire, steel, and tears. Bulgaria was a close and charming destination and, regularly spending months in the Greek Macedonian metropolis, I sometimes needed a change. It gave me the opportunity to put into practice the Bulgarian I was studying at the university. In 1994–1995, visas were still in use. As my trips were decided in a last-minute rush, the entrance permission had to be obtained at the French Consulate in Salonika.

Entering Kulata's gate was an outlandish experience. All cars had to support sanitary disinfection. They went through a basin filled with a disgusting gray liquid, the same juice being thrown simultaneously by hosepipes over windows—the opposite of a car wash, in short. The process had a symbolic force. Later, the border guards checked IDs and attached a paper card to any passport. This document was to be presented to each hotel or residence during the stay. If choosing to use homestay accommodations, local police stations had to stamp the card. The paper was collected back when leaving the country. All foreigners were watched—relics of the old *Balkantourist* system.

Traveling through Bulgaria by bus with a backpack was not difficult in the early 1990s. After arriving at his destination, wherever it was, a challenge awaited the guest: finding suitable accommodation. Nowadays, many private hotels have grown everywhere. At that time of limited human flows, the task was not easy. Cities with 20–50 000 inhabitants often counted no more than one or two hotels. One of them was invariably the old state building. Such venerable institutions applied dual pricing, distinguishing foreign visitors from Bulgarian fellow citizens. The price for a room could reach hundred dollars the night, heating excluded. When possible, I preferred adopting local B&B solutions. It gave me the opportunity to meet chatty old ladies.

Eating was not that easy either. I remember wandering in many streets of small cities in search of a meal. Restaurants existed and kept open doors. But once placed around a table, a long menu in hand, the unexpected client could ask anything. The answer was always the same: “niama”—there isn't. After fierce negotiations, the “cooker” dug up a tomato, a cucumber, and sometimes an onion and named this dish “shopska salata.”

On both sides of the Greek–Bulgarian boundary, traffic controls were managed by police forces. Traveling along the borderline was quite difficult. Good maps were unavailable for public use. In Bulgaria, as well as in Greece, low-scale road maps were kept next to high-scale city plans in bookshops. Between both documents, there was hardly anything. Following pathways in remote districts always

brought surprises. Many mapped ways did not exist and, on the other hand, many existing roads happened to remain unmapped. All drivers had to plan trips instinctively. Sometimes it worked, sometimes not, and deviations were frequent. Military barracks, observation posts, bunkers, barbed wires, and other defense devices punctuated all roads and spread out in the countryside. The Nestos/Mesta gorges, south of Kulata, were outstanding corridor placed under close surveillance. Shopping in the area was limited to the border point of Kulata itself. The few Greek travelers who dared to cross the boundary were leading to Sofia for business. Buying duty-free cigarettes was their obsession. Across the borderline, Bulgarian shops looked much more appealing to me. Regularly disposed on dusty stalls, "local Bulgarian" products attracted the attention: Sellers offered a great choice of canned food, chocolate, yogurt, famous wines from Melnik, and pieces of pottery at rock-bottom prices.

Things have much changed. How did Bulgaria manage to accomplish such an internal revolution after ten years, celebrating its European integration as soon as 2007? The challenge seemed almost impossible to meet. Athens was doubtlessly the heartland of a Greek *miracle* during the 1950s–1960s. Could Sofia expect to be the primary place of the first Balkan *miracle* of the new century—together with Bucharest?

Between 2005 and 2006, a coordinated research program gives me the opportunity to visit places I had known 10 years before and to discover other pleasant settlements with good fellowship (Darques and Deslondes 2008). Spring instills a breezing atmosphere in the whole countryside. Floodlit landscapes replace rain, snow, and fog. Impressive changes have occurred. The frontier still impulses its rules, albeit with softened effects. North of Drama, a new checkpoint has come into being. Effective normalized relationships now benefit both Bulgarian and Greek people.

Kulata has become the first road entrance to Greece, in front of Gevgelija. Its marketplace is gone. Petrich and Sandanski, two head cities of Pirin Macedonia, have diverted tourist flows. Busloads of Greek travelers are no longer afraid of crossing the boundary to do shopping out of the Euro zone and take advantage of low prices. Chinese goods invade the stalls of open-air markets, beside cheap clothes produced in the surrounding factories. Spas and other *related services* attract many visitors. Enticed by low wages, financial advantages, and other European/national incentives, many foreign assets find here favorable investment conditions. A large number of clothing factories now cover the lower Mesta Basin. The countryside breathes again. One-half of farmlands are still uncultivated and left to wild nature. The majority of young women and men live abroad, and no one knows whether they will return one day, but the European integration undoubtedly brings hope.

Though, past ghosts remain visible here and there. Next to the Iron Curtain, formerly "frozen" settlements are now accessible. They receive modernity reluctantly (Fig. 2.5). Crossed by the fence and its endless barbed wires, the village of Ilinden seems untouched since the Ottoman era (Darques and Deslondes 2008). Ruined Turkish style farmhouses spread everywhere. The most recent public

**Fig. 2.5** Traditional farm houses, Openitsa in 1913 (present Macedonia) and Kato Nevrokopi in 2005 (Greece).

Sources [www.lostbulgaria.com](http://www.lostbulgaria.com), R. Darques, 2005



facilities date back to the 1960s. The mean population age is around seventy, presumably. Somehow through this misery, a handful of people struggle to survive. There is almost no car traffic, just mules wandering through the streets. People around here went through WWII. They remember the first conquering communist period and survived the collapse of the regime. In their eyes, still standing barriers are visible signs of an unfinished war. Are borderlands doomed to remain badlands?

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<http://www.springer.com/978-3-319-40924-5>

Mapping Versatile Boundaries

Understanding the Balkans

Darques, R.

2017, XXIV, 322 p. 139 illus., 123 illus. in color.,

Hardcover

ISBN: 978-3-319-40924-5