

OXFORD UNIVERSITY BALKAN SOCIETY CONFERENCE
'BORDER CROSSINGS IN THE BALKANS', 17-18 May 2003
Aspasia Papadopoulou

The OU Balkan Society, a society of postgraduate students in Oxford working on the Balkans, organised a multidisciplinary conference on Borders and Border Crossings that took place in Oxford on the 17-18th May 2003. The aim of this meeting has been to bring together academics and young researchers from the Balkans and Europe working on various aspects of the Balkans, and to provide a focus for discussion and exchange of ideas among disciplines. The conference was sponsored by the South East European Studies Programme (SEESP), the Maison Francaise Oxford, the Programme on Contemporary Turkey/St. Antony's College, the OU Clubs Committee and St. Antony's College.

The conference opened with the keynote address of Dr Jane Cowan, Senior Lecturer in Social Anthropology at the University of Sussex. Dr Cowan examined the conceptual themes of borders, boundaries and their transgression in anthropology in general, and in the anthropology of the Balkans in particular, and gave an overview of the main issues that the conference papers would address. The presentations of the first day concentrated around the points of division and unity among Balkan people. Ms Mulaj and Dr Kostovicova gave two complementary papers on Bosnia; the first analysed the origins and evolution of the Bosnian conflict and the process of state formation, focusing on issues of legitimisation, identity politics and external involvement. The second examined the local perceptions of the new territorial reality in post-Dayton Bosnia-Herzegovina, by investigating the perception of borders by Bosnian Serbs after the construction of the inter-entity line between Republika Srpska and the Federation of Bosnia-Herzegovina.

The second panel moved from the question of state border disputes to that of ethnic and cultural identities. All three speakers examined how borders – physical state borders, ethnic boundaries and perceived divisions – define the identity of the people in question. Thus, Ms Mihaylova chose the case of the Bulgarian-Greek border to analyse the types of transborder contacts and the culture and identity of the populations living in the border area, particularly Pomaks. Mr Antonov brought to light the case of a less known transborder community, the Tatars in Bulgaria, and the role of the perception of state and imaginary borders and homelands in the formation of Tatar Diaspora identity. Finally, Dr Petronoti touched upon another aspect of transgressing and challenging ethnic identities, that of intercultural relations through marriage, by focusing on the case of inter-marriages between Turkish refugees and Greek women in Greece.

The first afternoon session focused on the question of division and unity among religions in the Balkans. Using the story of a Byzantine-Ottoman debate and interaction among theologians in the 14th century, Mr Retoulas displayed an analysis of the doctrinal and geographical aspects of Byzantine-Ottoman osmosis in past and present. Mr Al-Marashi, on the other hand, brought up the issue of 'Bosnian Arabs', displaced Arabs mainly from Afghanistan settled in present-day Bosnia, and examined the aspect of the revival of Islamic schools of thought in the Balkans and their transnational connections. Finally, the last panel gave the opportunity to examine the potential and types of transgression of ethnic and political boundaries through cultural activity, but also, as recorded in cultural production. Ms Milevska used photographic material from the Vlach Manaki Brothers to display how different identities were constructed, how they mingled, and how they were represented in the photography of the Balkans at the turn of the century. Ms Kronja shed light on the case of popular music in Serbia, a means that actually managed to cross and spread in the war-torn republics of ex-Yugoslavia, during and after the ethnic conflict. The first conference day concluded with the screening of a well-known documentary depicting the origins and consequences of ethnic conflict and the interaction among different ethnic/religious groups in Bosnia: 'We are neighbours: War in a Bosnian Village', by Toni Bringa.

The presentations of the second day all shared the underlying theme of the political economy of border crossings and transborder areas. The first panel was devoted to migration and interaction between Albanians and Greeks. Dr de Rapper focused on the case of Albanian-speaking Christians in Southern Albania and analysed the forms of transborder identity, the local organisation, and the impact of ancient and recent emigrations along the Albanian-Greek border. Dr Voutira and Dr Labrianidis presented their recent research on return migration of Albanian labour migrants living in Greece and the process of migrant reintegration upon return in their homeland. Border crossings of migrants were

also discussed in the paper of Dr Icduygu, who presented the recent case of irregular migration flows from Turkey to Greece and its consequences. At the same time, the paper opened the debate of illegal border crossings and transborder activities, which led the theme of the next panel. Ms Xenakis elaborated on the issue of transnational organised criminal activity in the Balkans in relation to the question of state sovereignty. Mr Fatic, on the other hand, shed light on the aspect of corruption as a hindrance to regional cooperation among Balkan countries, and the efforts and applicability of anti-corruption policies in the Balkans and beyond.

Cross-border cooperation and regionalism were the main themes of discussion in the last panel. Dr Anastasakis gave a short presentation of the research project 'Functional Borders and Sustainable Security; Integrating the Balkans in the European Union' (IBEU) that is currently undertaken by seven partner institutes. The importance of cross-border cooperation in the Balkans, both in economic as well as confidence building terms, was highlighted in the paper of Dr Bumci, who illustrated his presentation with the example of fruitful cooperation between Albania and Montenegro. Ms Tamminen raised the issue of the engagement of cross-border cooperation in the foreign policy agenda of Balkan states in view of the EU integration perspective, and the impact of this process on local democracy. Finally, Mr Bechev addressed the notion of regionalism and how this is projected onto the Balkans/Southeast Europe, particularly in relation to recent cooperation and integration initiatives in the SEE region.

The conference concluded in the plenary with an overview of the main questions posed during the past two days and opened the floor for debate on conceptual and methodological issues. The discussion focused on the notion of borders and their transgression in the Balkans, as well as the interdisciplinary nature of the conference and the potential, effectiveness and contribution of transgressing disciplinary boundaries in research.