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Navigating Dropull through liminal spaces and thresholds

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Dropull – a case of “territory in between”

The condition in Dropull as an excuse for the study of concepts such as liminality and threshold.

Located at the heart of a cross-border macro-region, between Albania and Greece, the area of Dropull represents a space of various potentials, a territory in-between, and a rural threshold, which is constantly challenged.

Dropull is a profoundly rural area, located in the threshold between Drinos River valley and the mountain chains of Nëmërçka and Bureto, thus in a very dynamic territory of various landscape features, which tie together a macro-region between Albania and Greece.

It is also located along a very important economic corridor that goes in parallel with the river, and in between Gjirokastra and Ioannina, two regional centers of a cross-border macro-region between the two countries. Over years, this very strategic positioning has conditioned a very welcoming climate for businesses and industries as well, giving Dropull yet another potential to explore and make use of, in terms of development of the economy.

Nevertheless, albeit its rural character and the potentials that are tied to it, and the welcoming atmosphere that its geographical positioning offers to businesses and industries, Dropull is part of one of the peripheral regions of the country, which over years has suffered

the lack of policies to properly address the development of local economy, consequently followed by a critical abandonment and shrinkage, due to very active out-migration flows, manifested in seasonal fluctuations as well.

Further on, represented by a total of 41 settlements of rural character (namely villages), and with no urban center, due to the Territorial Reform of 2015, Dropull changed status, from being a commune (of only rural character), to being a municipality (of mixed urban and rural areas), albeit the fact that with the new additions in its administrative area, Dropull still remains profoundly rural. Considering all these features, and for planning purposes, the General Local Plan of the Municipality of Dropull envisions Dropull to develop as a ‘rurban’ area, namely ‘a linear city’ with 5 main centers, each developed around a main bigger village, and considered as an energizer for the development of surrounding areas.

Considering these “in-between” features and its “threshold character”, in order to understand both, setbacks and potentials of the area of Dropull, it’s necessary to consider it in its bigger picture, in the cross-border macro-region, and within all the liminal processes and conditions, which rise from the “in-betweenness” of this very particular territory. Located at the threshold between two countries, and between two regional centers, Dropull has always been a transition area, from one country to another, or from one destination to another. On this framework,

various criteria, especially of locational character, consider Dropull to be a very important node within the region, yet, lack of development, in particular, lack of capacities to guide development, have often made Dropull act as a discontinues patch, albeit its potentials to enhance stronger connections and continuity within the region it belongs to.

Liminality as twofold, a process of social change and a process of spatial production

- Liminality as a conceptual tool

The use and meaning of liminality, and liminality under political and cultural changes.

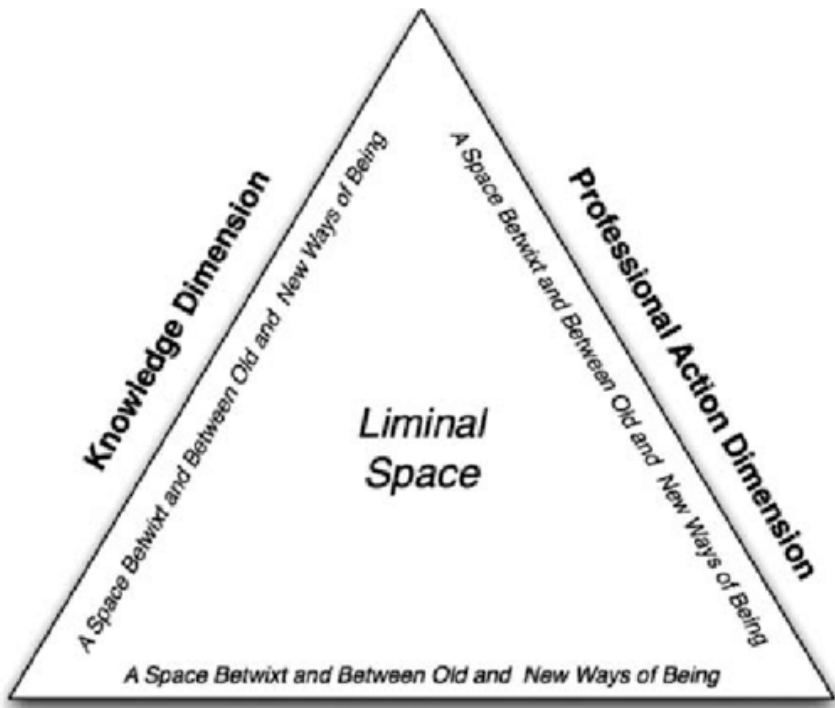
In anthropology, as of Turner, liminality (deriving from the Latin word *limen*, which means 'a threshold')¹, is the quality of ambiguity or disorientation that occurs in the middle stage of a rite of passage, when participants no longer hold their pre-ritual status but have not yet begun the transition to the status they will hold when the rite is complete (Turner, 1974). During the liminal stage of the rite, participants "stand at the threshold between their former way of structuring their identity, time, or community, and the new way, which completing the rite establishes" (Overland, et al., 2014: 194).

The French Folklorist Arnold Van Gennep, was indeed the first one to coin the term 'liminality' in the early 20th century, in his book *Rites de Passage*, while exploring the

rites of small-scale societies. According to Van Gennep there are two different types of rites, "those that result in a change of status for an individual or social group, and those which signify transitions in the passage of time" (Gennep, 1909: 21). According to Szokolczai such rites share a specific three-fold sequential structure, which is made-up by the following stages: "(1) pre-liminal rites, or rites of separation, which consist of leaving a former behavior, and breaking with former practices and routines; (2) liminal rites, or the transition rites which represent the passage through the threshold that marks the boundary between two phases; (3) post-liminal rites, or the rites or re-aggregation, which celebrate the successful completion and overpassing of the transition" (Szokolczai, 2009: 141).

On these terms, "'liminal periods' (hereafter also considered as 'liminal times') are considered both deconstructive and constructive, given that they represent the act of passing from one state, or position to another, through re-integration rituals" (Thomassen, 2006: 322). While leaving old, established, integrated and standardized positions, "the liminal rite is characterized by uncertainty, imprecision, lack of a defined framework, and a general absence of identity, which can often be dangerous" (Fourney, 2013: 7). Nevertheless, considering also that 'liminal thinking' is a form of the art of finding, creating and using transitions and

¹ / Oxford English Dictionary. Ed. J. A. Simpson and E. S. C. Weiner. 2nd ed. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989. OED Online Oxford 23, 2007;



Identity Dimension

Fig. 1 / The problem as a provoker of a liminal space. Source / Barrett 2008, pp.131

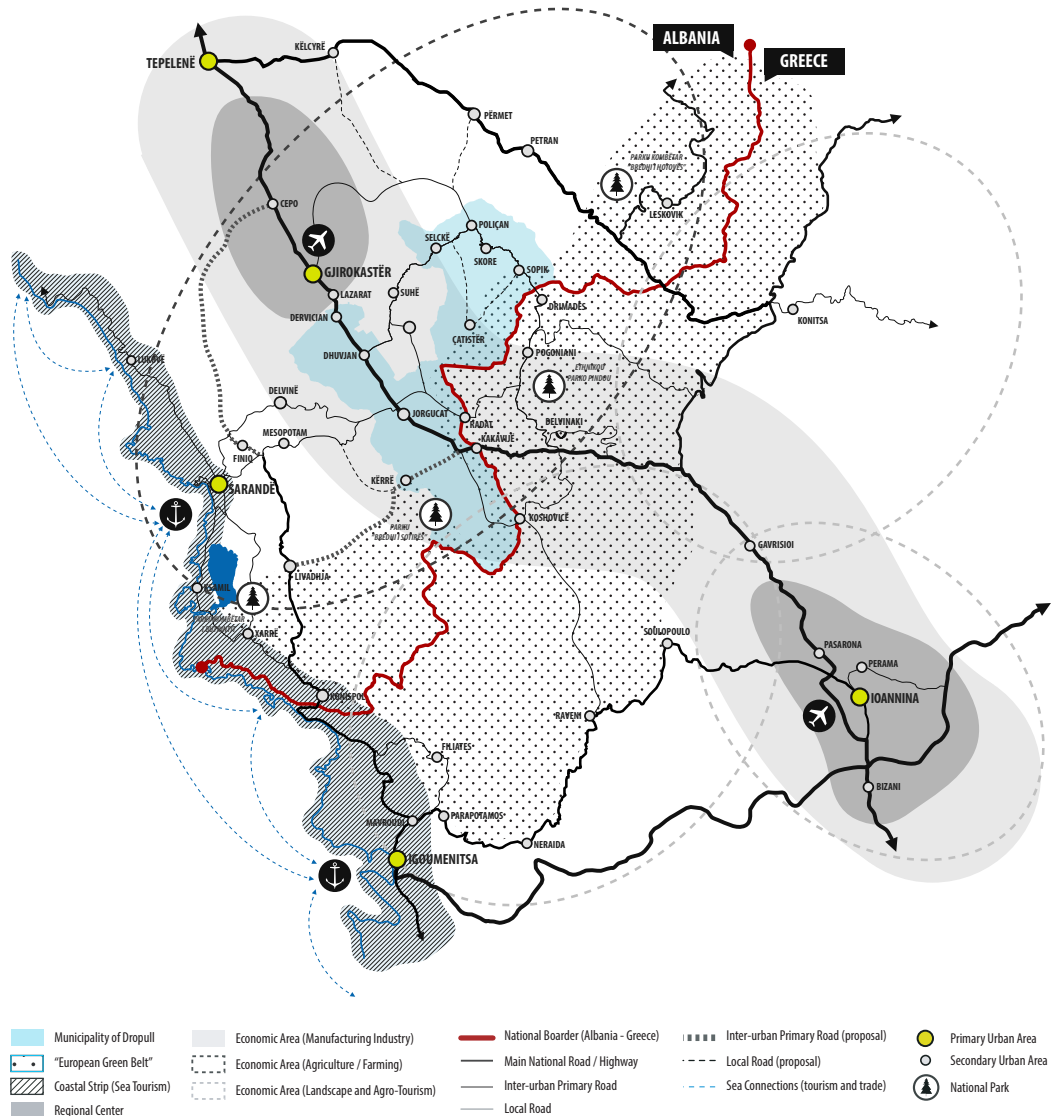


Fig. 2 / Dropull in the Cross-Border Macro-Region: Spatial Analysis and Vision. Source / POLIS University, 2019 / Janku, E.

thresholds to create change, it represents a kind of mindfulness that enables creating positive change (Gray, 2016), "in a complex interplay of power, place, and social and spatial forms" (Fourney, 2013: 12-13).

Later on, Victor Turner (2008) continued researching on the same topic of liminality, emphasizing that liminality can serve not only for identifying the importance of in-between periods, but also to understand human reactions to liminal experiences, so to say, "the way in which liminality shapes human personality, the sudden foregrounding of agency, and the sometimes-dramatic tying together of thought and experience" (Thomassen, 2009: 14). Thus, Turner was aware that liminal situations carried some aspect of imitation, emphasizing that the ritual's middle phase represented a "mimetic enactment of a crisis" (Szokolczai, 2009: 154).

Considering that many of the challenges we face within our society, either of political, economic, or environmental inheritance, usually come around two very important notions: 'transition' and 'crisis', understanding how 'liminality' not only provokes crisis and transitional situations, but also makes use of them to produce positive change, becomes quite crucial.

So, "in time 'liminality' has broadened to describe not only rites, but also political and cultural changes" (Thomassen, 2009: 51). While on liminal periods of time, it is common to experience reversed social hierarchies, altered traditions, and doubting future outcomes (Horvath et al., 2009). Consequently, "the dissolution of order during liminality creates a fluid situation, which enables new institutions and customs to become established" (Szokolczai, 2009: 141). This takes even brighter nuances when considering that, "liminality is not only cumulative over time, but also additive at the point of emergence, so situations that are liminal in more than one way (for instance the coexistence of both, individual and social liminality – major socio-political events), can produce particularly strong and lasting effects" (Szokolczai, 2009: 159). Recalling modern European politics from 1914 to 1918, although on a period considered as the century of progress, science and democracy, the world still experienced a protracted warfare of unprecedented proportions; "which soon after led to the emergence of a new type of political system: Communism, Fascism, Bolshevism, Nazism – followed by an amount and kind of suffering that was never before experienced in human

history" (Szokolczai, 2009: 164-165).

The spatial production of liminality: liminal spaces (thresholds and transitory spaces produced by the changing boundaries of fixed constants, and overlap of different uses).

In geography, a 'liminal space' is defined "as a space resulting from passage and transition, an area of uncertainty, often also a mobile border, where the concept of liminality facilitates the understanding of the dynamics between the spatial form of the border and the border function of space" (Fourney, 2013: 2). Given the complexity of 'liminality' as a phenomenon, the 'in-betweenness' it represents, and the wide fields it applies on, it's almost impossible to detach the understanding of the 'spatial production of liminality', from its anthropological interpretation.

Starting from its anthropological construction, as 'an intermediate state between otherness and norms', "a liminal space is that particular area where the relationship in a social structure is managed, and where the social status of this relationship is determined; being interpreted also as the state that facilitates managing and controlling the transformation of social statuses and ensuring compliance with social norms" (Fourney, 2013: 2-3). But departing from this very classical anthropological meaning, more recent interpretations consider as a strategic value, the capacity of 'liminality' to subvert the norms, due to the very particular relationship it shares with them. Therefore, considering 'liminality' to represent a state, which enables self-construction and the rise of new categories, through processes like hybridization and mixing, and the rejection of the imposed norms (Bhabha, 1994). On these terms "'liminality' seems to have already departed from being a mean for managing otherness at the service of the norm, being instead, a state during which a process takes place, and in this process, otherness is not placed in a relationship with a social, or political institution, but rather in the production of its own reference system" (Fourney, 2013: 3). From this point of view, the spatial production of 'liminality' can also result in spatial typologies, which within their character as 'transition spaces', are able to produce and alter particular thresholds that have a character of their own.

Indeed, there is a variety of geographical objects and spatial dimensions which can



Fig. 3 / Landscape and the natural ensemble in Dropull. / Source: Janku, E..

be considered as liminal spaces. Ranging from "very specific places, to bigger areas, or to entire countries and larger regions; from edges, borders and frontiers, to disputed territories, wastelands, or no-man's lands, margins, peripheries and crossroads or airports, and even other spaces on which people pass through, but don't live in" (Thomassen, 2009: 16), these 'liminal spaces' reveal a "dialectic process between already known normative categories of identification, and the recognition of a state that does not belong to any of these categories" (Fourney, 2013: 7-8).

Geopolitically, territories can be considered as the result effect of their own relationships, and epistemologically we can consider the geographical categories as norms resulting from political and planning actions (Debarbieux and Fourny, 2004). According to Fourney, looking at liminality from this perspective, and considering 'liminality' as a useful mean for examining the relationship between 'space' and 'norm', could help in perceiving it as part of the geography of mobile space, because it gives weight to the joint movement of meanings and reference systems that define places, and it considers the threshold as a space in constant change, and constantly re-defined (Fourney, 2013).

Transition features can make experiencing of liminal space, discontinuous, and can emphasize the everchanging aspect of the threshold among the series of fixed constants and distinct spaces (for instance, what we commonly accept

as urban and rural). Therefore, using 'liminality' as a conceptual tool to explore the "rurbanity" of Dropull and the territorial dynamics that are manifested within it, can help in identifying those key moments in time (liminal times), and those series of repetitive thresholds (liminal spaces) between the established urban and rural, which are indeed spatial interpretations of the transitions between these spaces, giving rise to a very particular hybrid space.

Dropull's states of liminality

Dropull as a constant state of liminality due to geographical, economic and political conditions.

As previously mentioned, the case of Dropull, delves into a series of types of liminality, which condition its urban-rural relationships, and its rurbanity. Located at the very heart of a cross-border macro-region, between Albania and Greece, and at a smaller scale between two very important regional centers, Gjirokastra and Ioannina, Dropull portrays a very dynamic space of many potentials, a territory in between, and a rural threshold, which is in constant change and continuously challenged. Recalling liminality as twofold, a process of social change (from which tackling in particular the time component), and a process of spatial production (the spatial component), it's possible to address social patterns in time, as well as the physical space, on which these social patterns get materialized. And on these terms, while the physical liminality remains a constant for Dropull, the temporal liminality oscillates depending on the jobs and the seasons.



Fig. 4 / Landscape and the natural ensemble in Dropull. / Source: Janku, E..

From a physical territorial perspective, located between two main regional centers, Gjirokastra within Albania, and Ioannina in Greece, Dropull is right in the middle of a cross-border region, of great touristic, industrial, agricultural and administrative importance, where both, Gjirokastra and Ioannina act as main hubs of all these features. The main national road coming from Tirana to Gjirokastra, continues through Dropull, towards Ioannina. Therefore, this road has been quite important in terms of its economic impact, given that twelve of the main and biggest businesses/companies of industrial character in the country are located along this road within the territory of Dropull, acting as main economic motors for the whole cross-border region, and boosting agglomeration of economic units, especially within Dropull, which despite its very rural character, rich in agricultural, farming and natural potentials, nurtures the development of industry as well, given its very strategic location and geographic features.

From a territorial governance perspective, due to the 2015 Territorial Reform Dropull changed status, from being a commune (of only rural character), to being a municipality (of mixed urban and rural areas), albeit the fact that with the new additions in its administrative area (from 2 Administrative Units: Upper Dropull and Lower Dropull, to 3 Administrative Units: Upper Dropull, Lower Dropull and Pogon, a very remote and mountainous area), Dropull still remains profoundly rural. There is no such thing as an urban center within Dropull, there are instead 41 settlements of rural

character (namely villages) dispersed in its valleys and mountainous territory, mainly spatially organized one after the other, along the main national road crossing in the middle of Lower and Upper Dropull. Making use of this very specific context and its new roles as due to the reform, the General Local Plan of the Municipality of Dropull considers the whole area as a "rurban" territory, and envisions Dropull as a 'linear city' of 41 dispersed settlement areas with 5 main centers, each developed around a main bigger village: Dervician, Sofratikë, Jorgucat, Vrisera and Poliçan. Each of these centers (namely "centralities") has the potential to act as an energizer for the development of their surrounding territories, specializing in specific economic activities and offering key administrative services.

From a social perspective, being a cross-border area has made Dropull experience a constant crisis, especially regarding its population number. For years, the area has been rather modest in terms of scale of development and typology of economic sectors, despite the great potentials that it can unlock. The vicinity with the other neighboring Greek territory as well has always played a major role, especially regarding migration of population and employment. While part of the population has permanently left the country, a major part of migrants comes back during the three months of summer.

Some others return at their homes for the weekend, and for those inhabitants living in the villages located exactly by the cross border, daily employment is located in the

nearby Greek villages and towns, while at night they return at their homes in Dropull. These very dynamic changes of population have made different processes, either for statistical, or planning purposes, very challenging. Hence, there is a gap of nearly 20,000 inhabitants between the numbers that both, the Census of Population and Housing by INSTAT (3,301 inhabitants), and the Local Registry of Population (23,131 inhabitants), provide².

This uncertainty becomes then an issue, especially when it comes down to transference of funding and finances from the national government, to the lower tie of the municipality.

From a landscape perspective, located at the threshold between Drinos river valley, and the mountain ranges of Nëmërçka and Bureto, Dropull is part of a greater natural ensemble, with similar features and landscapes throughout the macro-area, from Tepelena, Gjirokastra, Libohova, Përmet, Këlcyra, and Memaliaj, to the region of Ioannina, across the Greek border. Drinos river valley, the series of nationally protected areas (e.g., the Natural Monument of 'Bredhi i Sotirës' in Dropull, the Pindous National Park in the region of Ioannina), and part of the European Green Belt that crosses throughout the Albanian cross-border from North-East to East and South-East, emphasize even more Dropull's strategic location and its importance as a nodal rural and natural

area, in connecting all these environments together.

Agriculture on the other hand, covers nearly 18% of the territory of Dropull, located mainly along the Drinos river valley, but contributes only a total of 22% of local employment. Especially as a consequence of massive migration from the area, agriculture, which has historically been an economic activity of local inhabitants, has been massively abandoned, and most of the productive agricultural land is not in use today. High production costs and lack of incentives for supporting local farmers, has also made local produce be vulnerable in the competition against less expensive imported products, which have expansively penetrated local and regional markets.

Criteria and conditions that produce liminality and thresholds – “thresholds have thickness and reside between different conditions throughout various scales”

The various states of liminality within Dropull, can easily guide us to identify liminal spaces, limits between different conditions and types of spaces, and thresholds rising by the clash of different uses and conditions. The longitudinal system can be read in parallel lines composed by natural elements such as rivers, mountain chains, valleys etc., and as thick lines, rich with biodiversity, if we

² / For planning purposes, the team working on the GLP for the Municipality of Dropull developed a series of analyses to understand the real number of inhabitants in the area (including organizing a dedicated Census of Population and Housing for the territory of the Municipality). Therefore, considering various sources of information, and through cross-cut analysis, local population of the area was estimated with a total of 7,128 inhabitants. See table attached on text for further information.

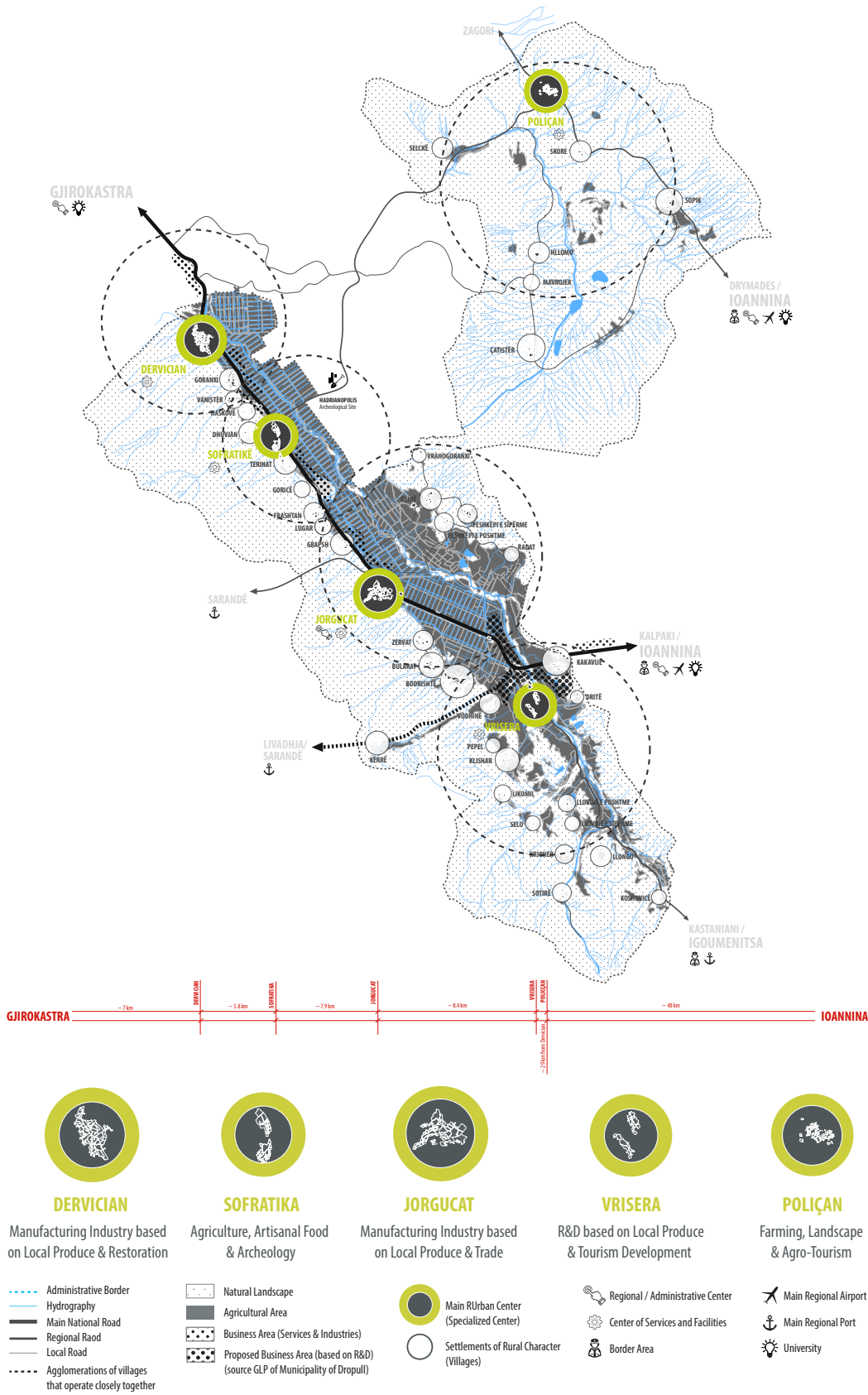


Fig. 5 / The three-fold system of linearities: the continuous system of villages and the 5 RUrban centers, the economic areas along the main national road, and, the agricultural strip along the river valley, all connecting Dropull with the rest of the cross-border macro-region / Source: Janku, E.

look at the threshold between different conditions, where there are more than linear systems. This is an exercise, which can be applied throughout various scales. What appears as a macro condition in the border between two countries, revealing overall economic and political dynamics, can further reveal micro dynamics if we

look at it closely through a zooming sub-exercise. In the overall, the potentialities that characterize the area of Dropull, build and can build even further on its rural features, in order for it to thrive in the macro-regional context, part of which it is. While the natural habitat, morphology of the area, road

infrastructure system, and agglomeration of non-agricultural economic activities, make evident that Dropull is indeed a quite integrated area in the macro-region, emphasizing its strategic role in providing additional space, services and functions that the nearby dense urban centers can't host, the analysis over other topics like local economy and agriculture, social services, and enhancement of natural potentials, show that the area is rather lagging behind, and represents a disruption on the continuity of the macro-regional urban-rural interconnections and interdependences, a topic much relevant for the whole macro-region.

Critically evaluating Dropull's states of liminality, among the main criteria that determine functional urban-rural relationships, thus giving rise to liminal spaces and thresholds among different uses and conditions, include:

- **The geographic terrain**, which is one of the main determinants of how sprawling, isolation, or diffusion of development, has taken place. Typically, where the terrain is flat and open, sprawling and leapfrogging of settlements and economic areas has been produced (along the main national road and the river valley), and where more remotely and wilder landscapes and terrains, development has been rather concentrated on key areas, or has been sparsely dispersed on a series of locations, which form more complex units that work together as one (the highlands of Dropull).

- **Road Infrastructure**, plays a major role in guiding and agglomerating either

settlements, or economic activities. This typically spatially takes place in the hinterland of two main cities (for instance between Gjirokastra and Ioannina, over Dropull's territory), populating the in-between territory that is permeated through a main national road, and other local roads branching out.

- **High fragmentation of agricultural land**, has boosted the formation of dispersed models, causing territorial diffusion of settlements and economic areas throughout the territory, especially over natural and agricultural land. Land owners have independently either urbanized plots of productive land, or have over time further fragmented their land into smaller plots, encouraging the process of urbanization of productive land, to the point where whole agricultural areas have been replaced with urbanization (commonly those areas nearby the biggest villages and close to the main national road). Following the channels of the irrigation system, agricultural plots on the process of being urbanized, have produced mainly regular cardo-decumanus patterns (typically found on flat areas), or more organic patterns, which follow the morphology of the terrain apart from the irrigation system.

- **Vicinity to economic areas**, conditions sprawling and agglomeration of development as well. Typically, having both, households and economic areas close to one another, has been a two-direction process. When the main occupation has been of rural character,

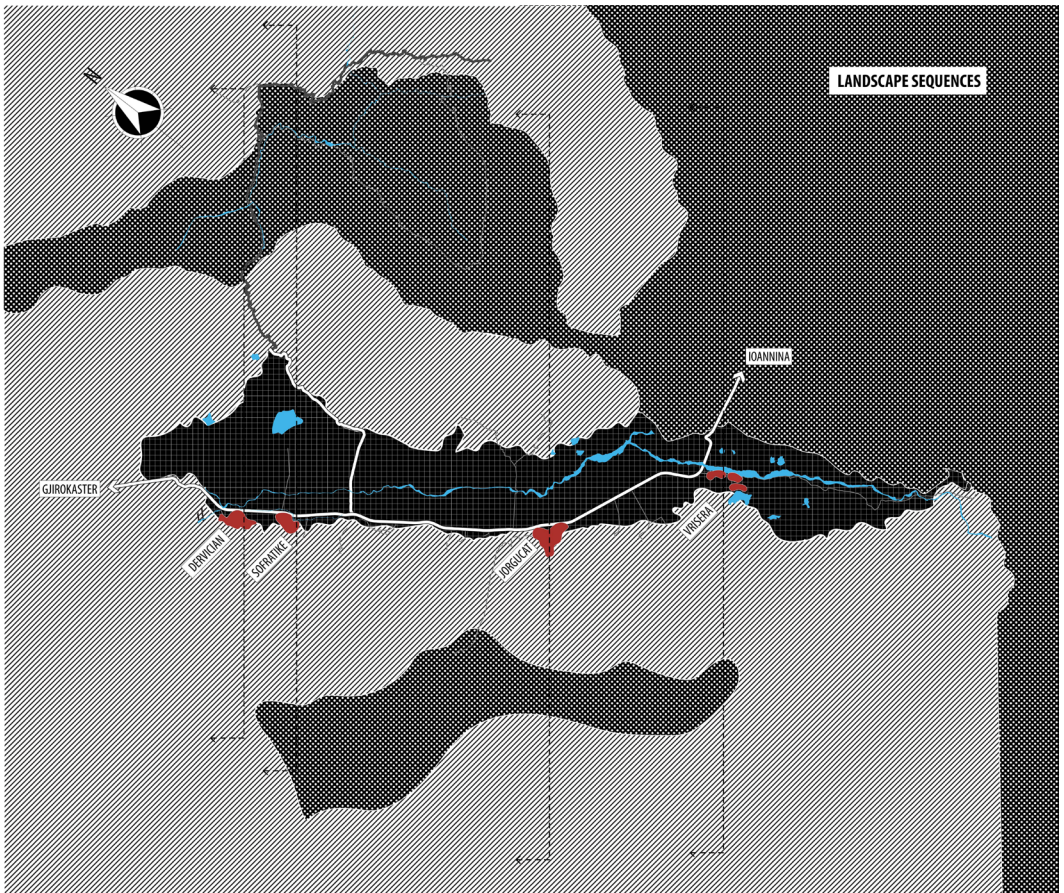


Fig. 6 / Identification of liminal spaces in the form of landscape sequences, produced over the territory of Dropull (municipal scale). Source / Pedata, L.

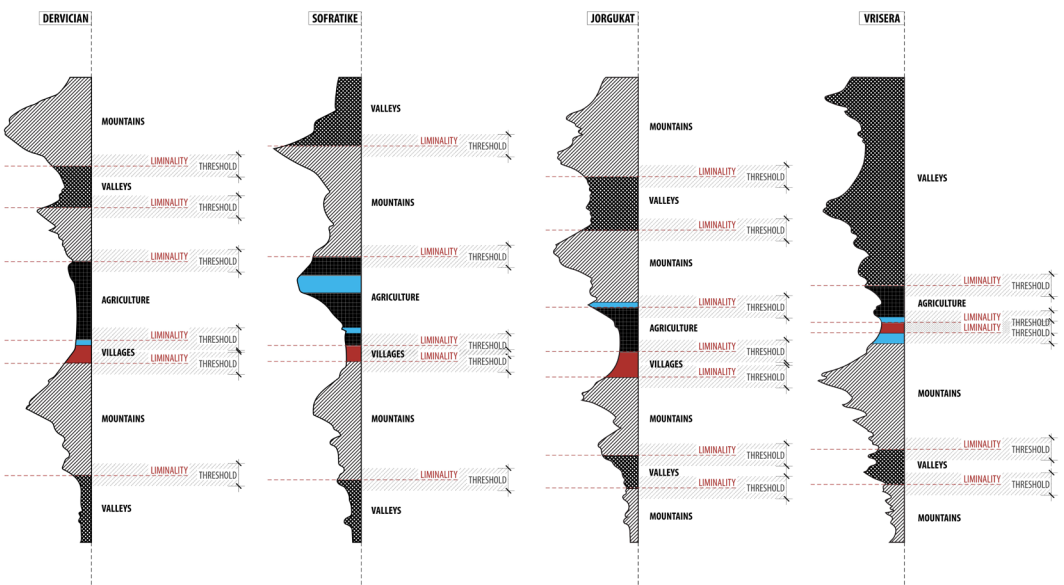


Fig. 7 / An analysis of liminal spaces: identifying thresholds produced at local level by the overlap and clash of different uses and various types of landscapes, along each of the centralities of Dropull / Source: Pedata, L.

agriculture or farming, economic activities that are based on the production of these two main sources, has slowly emerged in their vicinity, either closer to local roads for faster access, or creating economic areas, typically for trading purposes, which then later have attracted further agglomeration of similar activities. On the other hand, extracting and manufacturing industries, following locations that are nearby their main resources, have given rise to economic areas, which over time

have attracted agglomeration of other economic units and households as well.

- **Provision of day to day services and commuting patterns** condition the high frequency of urban to rural, and vice versa mobility patterns. Typically, main administrative services are located on main urban centers (like Gjirokastra and Ioannina), therefore agglomeration of people and mobility trajectories become denser from more distinct rural areas,

towards urban centers. Over time, larger product and service-based industries, have been migrating towards the rural realm of Dropull (because of the need for more space, and then after due to agglomeration purposes), typically located along the main national road, or nearby main natural potentials (water sources, forests, agricultural sites, etc.). This not only has produced denser commuting patterns, from cities to rural areas, but has also slowly transformed the rural character of parts of Dropull, into small industrialized areas that build on the natural potentials of the local rural Dropull.

- Change of cultural traits and social patterns, concerns the fact that due to all these dynamic exchanges and transformations (liminal periods of time and liminal conditions), the rural population, of Dropull has been constantly experiencing and exposed to a slow change of cultural traits, through migration of information and technologies, and education. This is then reflected back on a myriad of physical features as well, among which diversification and change of patterns of the local economy, and change of ways of building households, either through diversifying local materials, or introducing new implanted housing styles.

All these criteria have given rise to a series of liminal spaces, which are manifested throughout various scales, in the form of sequential thresholds that reside between different conditions. The thickness of each of these thresholds then, defines the number of uses and types of landscape overlapping, in order to make a liminal space functional in all its spatiality. Through a zooming sub-exercise, a series of thresholds have been identified, considering all the overlaps and liminal spaces produced around 4 out of the 5 main centralities of Dropull: Dervician, Sofratike, Jorgucat, and Vrisera.

Conclusions

Dropull represents a case of many liminal situations clashing over the same territory. By considering its rural and natural character, acknowledging the attempts for creating some main urban features as well, and making use of the potential that the two macro-regional centers of Gjirokastra and Ioannina offer, Dropull's states of liminality and rurbanity, develop along a three-fold system of linearities: the main national road, Drinos river valley and the agricultural strip along this valley; as well as through a series of transversals, which integrate different types of landscapes and territorial morphologies

throughout the territory of Dropull. Within each of these liminal spaces, thresholds are constantly produced by the clash and overlap of different uses and conditions.

The level to which each threshold produced, is identified and further addressed, can unlock the potential to make room for an integrated territorial development, where (1) both urban and rural features are manifested, without undermining one another, and where (2) the overlap of various types of landscapes preserves the characteristics of each, allowing their co-existence.

Translating these into actual outcomes from the case of Dropull, putting to use its local rural features (natural resources, agriculture and farming potentials) Dropull would play an important integrative role in the region, by (1) providing space not only for production (development of agriculture and farming), but also for (2) processing of local produce (support and expansion of services-and-industry-based economic areas that make use of local produce and contribute to the circular economy), (3) trade and promotion of local produce in the region and abroad (improvement of infrastructure, facilities, and development of a regional market, connected to 5 smaller markets, each on one of the 5 main centers of Dropull – Dervician, Sofratika, Jorgucat, Vrisera and Pogon), (4) development of R&D area of cross-border importance (which would provide quality assessment services, product based research, experimentation with new innovative products, professional courses fit for the local economy etc.).

Activating all these potentials and the capacity that Dropull has, would then provide arguments for it to host back the migrated population, but even host new population in the area. This would make possible to (1) equilibrate the sprawling and expansion of other neighboring urban areas in the region, into natural and agricultural realms, in order to contribute to a more balanced territorial performance on all, social, economic and environmental terms; (2) manage Dropull's state of rurbanity and the many states of liminality by which it is characterized, (3) as well as manage and regulate the production of thresholds within this rurban territory, preserving main natural and landscape features.

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