

## Conclusions of Policy-Based Issue

### Cultural issues and heritage conservation for the enhancement of local identity and as a catalyst for sustainable development

**Prof. Dr. Besnik ALIAJ**

*POLIS University / Tirana, Albania*

142

In this issue, the articles and contributions focus mainly in 'Policy-Based' aspects.

The first part here is concentrated on infrastructure and facilities.

**Caterina RONDINA** – from Ferrara University deals with "Invisible Infrastructure" rethinking transboundary development by using as an example the case of Prespa Lake Region. According her, the cross border Prespa Lake, stands as an untouched oasis of nature and traditional livelihoods at the margin of the so-called infrastructure between the dividing borders of Albania, Greece and Northern Macedonia. She emphasizes the fact that critical demographic shifts, with an aging population and youth abandonment, contribute to social problems in the few remaining villages surrounding the lake. The Pan-European Corridor VIII investments are crucial, but yet a comprehensive strategy is essential, integrating both transport and social justice to safeguard the well-being of the region's inhabitants and unlock the potential of transboundary water landscapes. Transport is essential for economic activities, mobility, and social cohesion: the purpose of this paper is to explore the "invisible infrastructure," diverging from conventional narratives on traditional transportation systems. According her the cross-border landscape's strategic approach considers area sensitivity and practical interventions by identifying gaps in traditional infrastructure, emphasizing even more the need for a comprehensive strategy. The article further integrates mobility concepts including hiking trails and water-based exploration, redefining the narrative around infrastructure. Focused on Prespa Lake, the vision transcends Corridor VIII limitations, envisioning it as a hub for sustainable exploration and connectivity. Some examples of successful international governance regarding lakes initiatives must be taken in consideration from other European cross-border lakes/regions. Albania and Montenegro also are similarly cooperating such theme successfully, establishing a joint working group and information exchange protocol under the UNECE Water Convention in 2021. However

the "Transboundary Waters Assessment Program" offers also a comprehensive global assessment reference, increasing awareness and fostering cooperation. This means a starting point for the strategy of development and protection is to practically suspend the political borders in such sensitive areas, in order to reflect and maximize the real nature and landscape of such region. Her proposal practically envisions Prespa Lake beyond a geographic entity, instead as a canvas for exploration: the integration of hiking paths and water-based mobility serves as a catalyst for unlocking the region's potential.

**A second part is concentrated on environmental systems.**

**Alessandro delli PONTI** – from University of Ferrara deals with the ecosystem of Ohrid and Pustec Lakes as a playmaker region during the transition towards EU integration of the region between two non-member countries and Greece. He does that by looking into the elements for an ecological approach towards cross-border regional vision-making. Ponti points out that regional vision making and cross-border territorial strategies for European territories rely on a rich list of design explorations conducted in the experiences of the last 40 years in central and northern Europe. These efforts resulted in major infrastructural transformations, grounded in specific geopolitical orientations and supra-national agendas, using heavy infrastructure as a systematic tool to bring access and continuity among urban and productive areas. The architecture of globalization reconfigured the position of borders and portal territories, defining a new mechanics of international fluxes. In parallel with the weaving of this vast global architecture, the finer grain of local/regional territorial reconfigurations was the object of planning research, conducted in academia, as well as in actor-relational planning workshops where an intense confrontation of ideas and conflicting transformational models took place, allowing to compare alternative scenarios and destinies. He recalls the efforts to define the image of the Netherlands as an integrated mega-region (the Randstaadt), the process-oriented transformation

of the Rhur, the plethora of “Grander” city Ateliers (Paris, Geneva, Luxembourg), the more recent workshops for German post-coal future regions (Lausitz, Rheinishes), etc. These experiences in these cases produced different models to understand regional territories, and define the potential projects for their transformation. Ponti observes a progressive shift in focus, with the emergence of a dominating interest for the topics related to environmental transition. Nevertheless, this apparently consensual word – transition – is currently tackled from radically different perspectives from different actors, resulting in a potential conflict of strategic orientations. Transition agendas often are also copy-pasted a-critically on territories with a very different story, and which are not in the same phase of socio-economic development, resulting in latent controversies and missed opportunities, which are mistakes not necessary to be repeated in Prespa region. The author explores and confronts the ideas, and paradigms of “transition” as a concept that influence the efforts to define the future of the cross-border regions, including that of Pustec and Ohrid lakes. The investigation is oriented by key question: How to make regions visible? Do they constitute an archetypal regional territory? Do we have ready-made recipes, or shall we induct local models for contextual transformations? Etc. Thus the paper explores the trans-scalar and inter-disciplinary relation between: EU agendas for transition; the national/local strategic vision for the area; and puts them in a critical perspective with the findings of a foot on the ground research-by-design experience. The paper also explores the controversial relation between the inherited agendas for territorial development and the emergent notions of “playmaker territory” and “bio-region” illustrating which methods and strategic operations can help define a model for local sustainable metamorphosis.

**Anila BEJKO** – from Polis University deals with “Fostering Spatial Justice in Cross-Border Areas” by exploring tools and instruments beyond European regions, using as an illustration the case of Prespa Lake borderland. This author explores spatial justice, as an evolving paradigm in urban studies and regional planning, which encompasses equitable access to resources, services, and opportunities for diverse communities. While this concept has gained considerable attention within European regions and urban areas, this author addresses the research gap concerning its relevance and applicability in non-European cross-border settings. She investigates a range of tools and instruments designed to promote spatial justice in territories across borders and, through a comparative approach, reflecting on whether these tools can work in a specific context, which is that of the Prespa Lake borderland, spanning across three European and yet non-European countries: Greece, Albania, and North Macedonia. The author focuses on the challenges and opportunities associated with environmental resources and development potentials of the Prespa Lake borderland, aiming to contribute to a nuanced understanding of the complexities involved in fostering spatial justice in similar contexts, and especially in the Albanian part of the region which suffers most of consequences related in addition to historic discrimination and self-isolation.

**A third part is concentrated on landscapes and heritage.**

**Daniele ROMAGNOLI** – from University of Ferrara deals with the question on “What kind

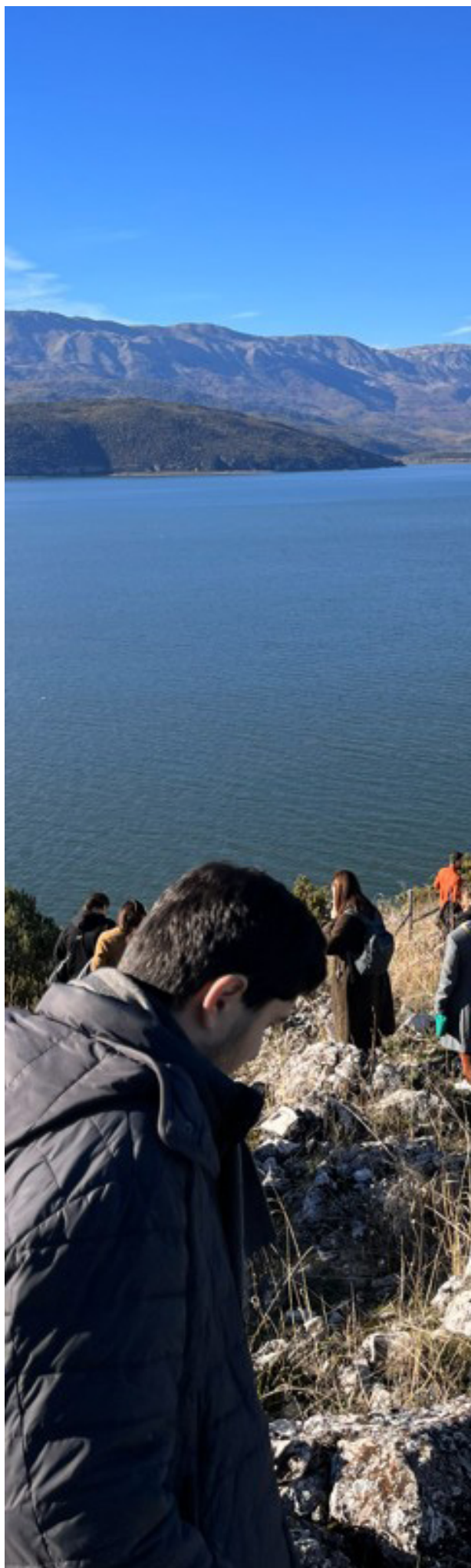
of development could be proposed for the Prespa region?”. He considers cultural issues and heritage conservation as a starting asset for the enhancement of local identity and as a catalyst for further sustainable development. Author tries to assess how to develop an area which involves a clear sense of the identity of a place, in order to prevent the economic growth from distorting the peculiarities of the site. In this sense, he recommends that a strategic project for the Prespa region, and in particular the municipality of Pustec, must be configured holistically, trying to “control” as many aspects of the development process as possible. In this sense, economic development must be assessed, and consequently guided, in relation to the impact (cost-benefit) also on the heritage of the region. To him the first critical aspect is the impact on infrastructural, touristic and social development aspects; they may have on the natural heritage. And this must be evaluated, assessing how the territory will change when a new road and urbanization works will be required, especially in relation both to the perception of natural beauty and to the environmental impact on the lake ecosystem. Secondly, the effects that may be in relation to the cultural heritage, comprising the numerous archaeological sites and Byzantine rock churches, should be assessed to ensure their preservation and fruition in sustainable terms, given also the fact that minority population live in the three bordering countries. The author suggests that what should also be examined in relation to the development of the area is the impact this could have on the material and immaterial culture of the places. The spread of alternative ways of life, of increasingly easier connections with the outside world, could lead to traditional customs being lost or forgotten. This would not only affect social aspects, but also the way of living and constructing. What is often observed in similar cases, when development suddenly accelerates in previously isolated areas, is a rapid abandonment of vernacular architecture, and its replacement by standardized/“modern” building models. So author concludes: by evaluating the sustainable development of the area, therefore, it must involve reasoning on the characteristic aspects of architecture and other heritage of Prespa region, in relation to the actual possibility of preserving and enhancing them, in order to create an identity, also for touristic purposes, of the places, respecting their ‘genius loci’.

**A third part is concentrated on settlements, public spaces, and dwelling.**

**Dejvi DAUTI** – from Polis University deals with a unique historic almost romantic aspect of “the Heremit”, while in search for a new local utopias. The author underlines that the architect is a kind of “sailor on a drifting boat”, searching for the missing architectural form in an incomplete manifesto that is placed in front of him at the beginning of his research. Sailing, alone like a hermit (an ancient tradition of the local priests), makes architect continually searching for a “white whale”, drawing fictitious shapes on long white sheets, as if to imitate the object of desire, trying to imagine and recreate his shapes sometimes in an obsessed way. On the bow of the boat the scholar refines his vision day after day, he leans out over an empty ‘ocean’, every silenced and in denser colors, in search of a new horizon, a limit to overcome. The “Homeric journey” that the architect undertakes, along the lines of that undertaken by “Ulysses in the Odyssey”, in search of

the perfect form is described by blocks of notes, and hidden images of “mental maps” to search for the north of the tables. In both stories author sees the search for a home or a version of it that profusions keep in their memory, moving from a physical to an imaginary conception of it. Thresholds, borders and states are crossed to recreate or imagine the possible transformations that occurred in the place of origin. Author says; while “Ulysses finds Ithaca” in its own way, the architect imagines the changes that can occur in a place. The “mental image” and theories that architects can find in their drawings during a journey are an undisputed source for the imagination, creating possibilities through the hybridisation of what we observe and what we have in memory. The Pustec region gives us the challenge of imagining an “utopian reality”, of narrating a dreamlike journey through three states and a body of water that unites them, but it all must be translated pragmatically in guidelines and projects to local authorities and communities in need.

**Julian BEQIRI** – from Polis University deals with the “open city” prospective for cross-border landscapes, looking into it from confined settlements to ambiguous edges in the case of Prespa Region. Author underlines the fact that while government policies are also intended for cross-border landscapes, across the Balkan countries they in contrary aim at maintaining a national equilibrium. So, their individualistic over-determination has broadly nourished a self-centered model of development. Where cooperation and coordination is often very limited. In the case of Prespa Region, also state-commissioned strategic plans in three countries, regularly elaborate on the basis of promoting the countries’ own interests but perpetually fail to comprehend the collective regional concerns. Collages of multinational design inventory unceasingly overlay the natural landscape producing innumerable solutions frequently incoherent and ephemeral. The author discusses the historical trajectory of the architectural presence in the region, its non-linear form of development and its ability to combine elements of chance mutation. As confined settlements separated by political decisions, Pustec and other Albanian villages have been enjoying the attributes of a closed system, but, however, the contemporary challenges put forward by the rapid globalization are questioning these settlements’ ability to adapt and economically sustain themselves. In order to reevaluate the region’s possibility for international accessibility and exchange, while acknowledging its dichotomy as a cultural archipelago spanning on three different countries. Author tests in the conditions of Prespa the Richard Sennett thesis on ambiguous edges. Rather than entirely refusing the political borders in favor of creating a borderless society, a speculative answer for the region as a whole develops by him on the basis of Niklas Luhmann hypothesis of autopoiesis, suggesting an open-ended form of coexistence which maintains itself by promoting its own parts.

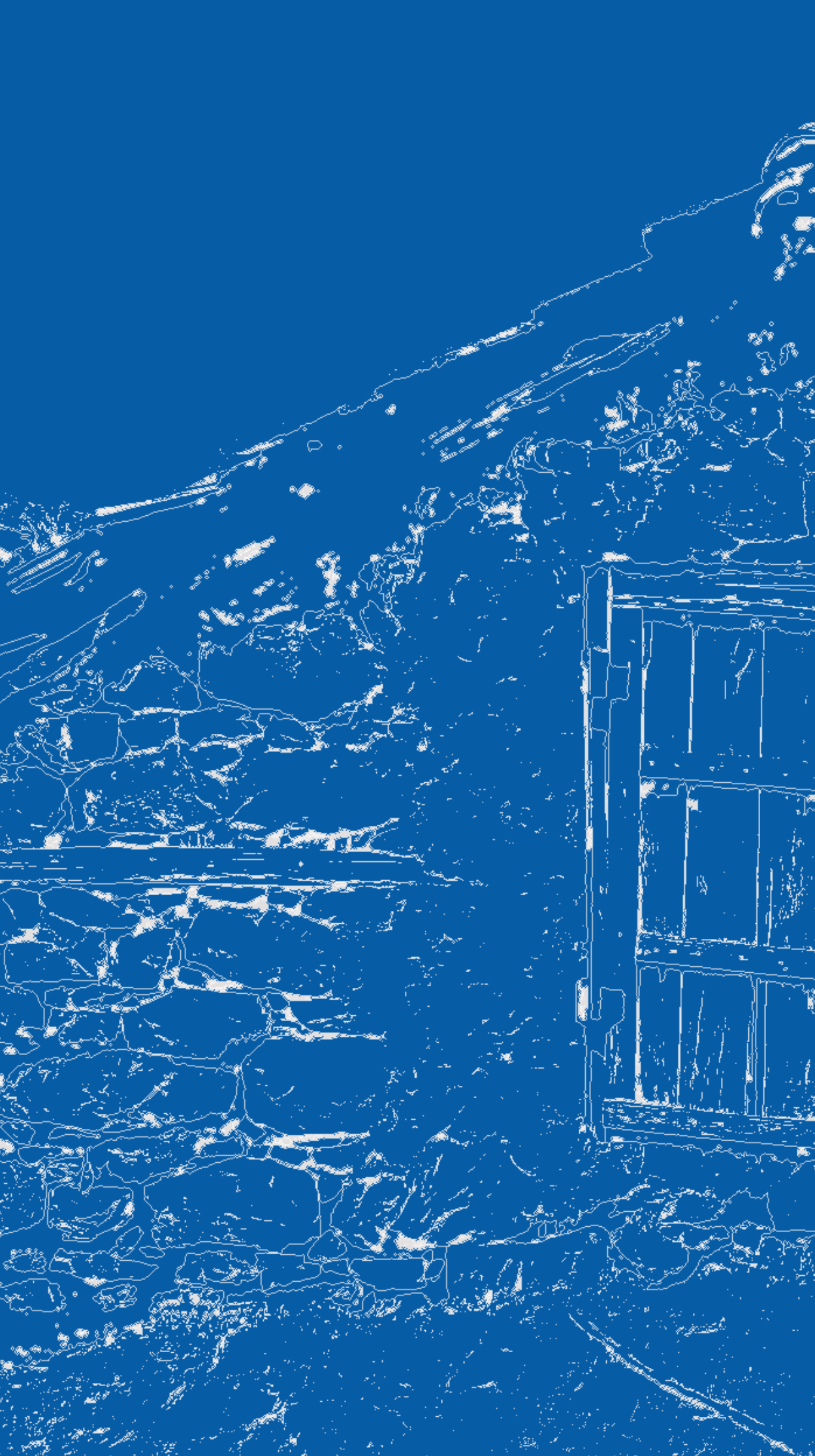




*Fig. 1/ Photo taken from  
the site visit during the PhD  
workshop*

*source/ author (2023)*









#1

WORKSHOP  
DAY



TEAM



# BRAINSTORM





#2

SITE VISIT



# CONTEXT



## Observation



#2

SITE VISIT





# CONTEXT



## Observation

# FINAL PRESENTATION

## #1





# Stakeholders







