

Changing face of Prespa

Local and inter/national initiatives in the context of revival of trilateral Prespa region

DOI: 10.37199/o41010111

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Abstract - *The history of the Prespa Region has been long and rich, filled with various cultural, social, and, above all political changes, that largely influenced the life of the local population, which is divided between three neighboring countries: North Macedonia, Albania and Greece.*

Based on the above, Prespa region can be considered a highly sensitive area that evokes various common links between the population in the trilateral region causing significant "political" disparities in many aspects.

However, the initiatives and changes undertaken in the past few decades enabled various re/shaping of each integral part of Prespa. Yet they are based on the national policies of every distinctive country.

Through this paper, I will try to give a short overview of Prespa's "changing face" through some of the historical and contemporary events and also present some of the national, or bilateral initiatives undertaken within the framework of EU cross border cooperation and other programs.

Archival researches have been conducted to provide necessary information, and comparative analysis of some materials have been done. Much of the data presented is a result of in-depth qualitative ethnographic researches conducted especially about the Macedonian-Albania border, which provided essential and relevant data not only for the past decades and personal experiences, but also for the changes that occurred by the end of the 20th century till nowadays.

The paper also considers a few cross-border projects as case studies to elaborate on the importance of joint actions.

Keywords - *Prespa, cross-border cooperation, political changes*

Burden of the past

Regarding cultural and natural elements Prespa region as a whole can be considered as a critical area, that interlaces and embraces centuries of cultural heritage monuments. It has witnessed many victories and falls, each of which has left a significant mark on Prespa's face.

The existence of numerous archaeological findings¹ can confirm that the Macedonian part of the Prespa region was inhabited from prehistoric times² through antiquity, the Middle Ages till the present. Nevertheless, the other parts of Prespa belonging to the neighboring countries of Albania³ and Greece⁴ are also rich in archaeological findings proving the same. Concerning this we can conclude that Prespa region has been inhabited since the remote past, continuing to the present days. When we consider the archaeological findings, we can note that besides the socio-economic importance, the area also possessed religious significance. This can be confirmed by the preserved historical data, archaeological remains of various Christian religious objects and a vast range of centuries-old preserved churches.

Even though the medieval period was quite turbulent the Prespa region, large-scale changes occurred at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century.

During Ottoman rule, Prespa was considered a remote part of the Ottoman Empire, not any different from the other similar regions within it.

With the decline of the Empire, gradual changes took place in the region, making it a battlefield of various political and military influences.

By the end of the 19th century weakening off the Empire had already become notable. The signing of the Treaty of San Stefano in 1878⁵, followed by the Berlin Congress also in 1878, were merely the start of events that gradually changed the Balkan, and along with them, Prespa's history.

The Balkan wars in 1912 and 1913, fiercely divided the Macedonian territories. As the Carnegie Commission Report states, Macedonia, is no longer a tomb; it has become a hell⁶.

The Bucharest Agreement in 1913 defined the division of the Macedonian territories among the

winning countries. As per the London Agreement in 1913 the division, of the territory of Prespa region was finalized by the designation of nine villages⁷, a part of Great Prespa Lake, as well as the island of Mali Grad⁸ to the newly founded Albanian state⁹, while the rest of Prespa's territories remained divided between Greece and Serbia.

This situation remained pretty much the same during the First and Second World Wars, even though periodically the region became part of one or the other military administration¹⁰.

With the end of the Second World War the situation remained calm only for a few years, or more precisely until the beginning of the Greek Civil War. During this period the trilateral Prespa region became the fugitive's main route from Greece to Albania and Yugoslavia. These groups of refugees, mainly women and children, were then transferred to refugee reception centers. Then they were transferred to other countries mainly within the socialist/communist bloc¹¹.

For example, one of the closest refugee centres was the one in the village of Ljubojno, where the refugees, found food and shelter before continuing their route. Because of these reasons, Prespa remained the most emotional spot in the region for many of these refugees since many of them never managed to go back to their homes.

Decades later, some of these people, who never went back to their homes due to the various political reasons imposed by Greece, even bought properties in the villages near the border like Dolno Dupeni, Ljubojno, Shtrebovo etc. and build houses there to be as "close as possible to their homes"¹².

However, the borders within the Prespa Region that divided three countries for most of the second half of the 20th century became completely closed. Namely, the borders after the Second World War remained open until 1948. The border between, Yugoslavia and Albania, was completely closed due to the political and ideological dispute between Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union block including other socialist/communist countries, known as the period of Informbiro. Although the dispute was eased by 1953, the border in Prespa firmly divided the two countries.

The border remained almost hermetically closed until the regime of Enver Hodja fell in Albania, and

Macedonian independence in 1991. Since then, the border has been completely open for any communication and people from two neighboring countries can freely move, nowadays, even with only an ID card.

Conversely the border with Greece, was temporarily closed after the Civil War. It was then reopened and it remained open until 1967.

At that time, people from Yugoslavia and Greece, could easily cross the border with a simple ID card or border card. People from Macedonian villages could freely go to the markets in the Greek part of Prespa, buying mostly metal plates or various household items. Still, they also maintained close ties with their relatives who lived in the surrounding villages in Greece.

Then, the border was completely closed for any type of communication. This political decision divided the families on both sides of the border which is the case with this border.

Some bilateral initiatives to reopen the border crossing in Prespa Region between Macedonia¹³ and Greece started decades ago, but they were unsuccessful due to the "Macedonian name dispute".

With the signing of the so-called Prespa Agreement¹⁴ and change of the name from the Republic of Macedonia to the Republic of North Macedonia these initiatives have sped up, and the reopening of the border crossing has been announced for 2027/2028.

The burden of all this historical, or much more political issues, has had a great impact on the local population from all three constitutive parts of Prespa region, who belong to and develop in the frameworks of all three neighboring countries.

In addition, due to countries' different political orientations, these three parts underwent distinctive processes and changes.

Ethnographic characteristics

In an ethnographic sense, and considering the verbal and nonverbal symbols of the population such as dialect, clothing, ritual practices etc., the region of Prespa can be divided in two distinctive parts: Lower and Upper Prespa. Further on the region of Lower Prespa can be divided to two subregions i.e. Big and Small Prespa¹⁵.



Fig. 1. Prespa Lake

The people of two distinctive parts of Prespa mainly interacted within their group, which means that the people from Lower Prespa will conclude marriages only within this part of Prespa, while the people from Upper Prespa will conclude marriages only within the “borders” of Upper Prespa. There are rare cases of intermarriage between two groups, only in specific cases, but we will not elaborate further due to the limited space.

To be more precise and clearer, we can say that the region of Upper Prespa which encompasses the northern part of Prespa, starting from the village of Slivnica to the Macedonian – Albanian border fully falls in the Macedonian political borders.

Lower Prespa also includes the part of Prespa that is in Albania’s political border, also known as Small Prespa. This area covers the territory of 9 villages.

The rest of Lower Prespa, also known as a subregion of Big Prespa, is located between North Macedonia and Greece’s political borders.

Considering the ethnic origin of the population we can conclude that based on the political circumstances within the countries, ethnic or minority rights have been fully, partially or not respected at all.

The majority of the population is Macedonian within the part of Prespa belonging to the political borders of North Macedonia. The most inhabited part of Prespa is the Macedonian part or the Municipality of Resen. According to the last Census from 2021 there are total of 14.373 inhabitants from different ethnic origin. The largest number falls on the Macedonian population 10.130, 1.381 Albanians, 1.457 Turks and 314 Roma people¹⁶.

As a constituent population of Yugoslavia, the Macedonian population living in the Republic of Macedonia, nowadays, according to the Prespa Agreement in North Macedonia, was a constituent and subsequently thoroughly enjoyed the ethnic rights.

The population living in nine villages located in the Albanian part of Prespa is also Macedonian. The Macedonian minority in Small Prespa, Albania, has been recognized as such since 1934 with the acceptance of the resolution of the Comintern. This population living in Small Prespa has fully enjoyed minority rights regarding the ethnic proclamation, religious orientation, education, traditional

practices, etc. They had the right to proclaim themselves as Macedonians freely, and to speak Macedonian language but only within the Prespa Region. Leaving the region meant that they will lose any minority rights over the above stated markers. This also referred to the Macedonian population in other parts of Albania, which did not have the right to proclaim or refer to its ethnic origin.

However, in the last decades just as it was a century ago¹⁷, Bulgarian propaganda started to use the same measures over the Macedonian population, trying to prove its Bulgarian origin. In this process, they do not choose the means to achieve their goals. Many articles have been written on these topics in the past¹⁸. Still, the latest event, especially related to the Census in Albania brought to light that this propaganda is even fiercer than before¹⁹. The so called “Macedonian question”²⁰ that tackled the feelings of millions of people worldwide, for specific category of people obviously has not been answered yet.

Whatever we have to say that due to various pressures, there is a certain number of people that have proclaimed themselves as Bulgarian but mainly for “economic reasons”²¹ and by declaring themselves as Bulgarians, they can be issued a Bulgarian passport, thus being able to move, work and live within the European Union²² freely.

The situation of the Macedonian population in Greece was completely different. The exonym that the Greek population used referring to the Macedonian population was a Slavophone Greeks²³. The ethnic question of these populations is multilayered and impossible to elaborate in this paper, thus enabling only the listing of the main facts.

As previously stated, the Civil War in Greece, 1946-1949, caused significant suffering to Greece’s entire population and especially to the Macedonian population. By the end of the War in 1948, this population was forced to leave the native territories and fled to the neighboring countries, thus Greece deprived them of the right to claim their properties later unless they changed their names into the Greek ones²⁴. Northern territories that were previously settled by this population remained empty so in 1953, with the Decree No. 2536 Greece enacted a law to colonise the northern territories “with new



source/ author (2024)

colonists with healthy national consciousness", considering that the previous "Slavic" population was "declared" as a state enemy to the Greek state²⁵.

Based on the above the resettlement or colonisation of the northern territories, including Prespa region, was enacted mainly with the population from other parts of Greece, such as Epirus and Thessaly²⁶.

The remaining Macedonian population that settled the Greek part of the Prespa Region was prohibited or suppressed from proclaiming itself as Macedonian. They were also forbidden to use Macedonian language in any public space, and at home.

This situation started to change only recently.

However, a large portion of the area's population still speaks Macedonian language, and nowadays even more, probably freed by the heavy burden that, to a certain extent, was felt with the signing of Prespa Agreement.

No matter how scarce the political situation between the neighboring countries was, with the political changes that took place in the last three decades, the people started to communicate once more. Old relations were renewed, old relatives rediscovered and new ties began to develop.

Nowadays, communication between North Macedonia and Albania is fully open through the cross-border check point set in Prespa region. People can freely move over the border even with ID cards. On a daily basis, many people from the Albanian part of Prespa come and work various jobs in the Macedonian part of Prespa or elsewhere.

Communication between Albania and Greece is also enabled through the border crossing near the village of Bilishta on the Albanian side.

However, the communication between North Macedonia and Greece in the Prespa Region is still impossible. As for the local population that lives only a few kilometres from each other, they have to pass about 100km to reach the border near Bitola, and through Florina go to the Prespa Region in Greece, or vice versa to go to the Prespa region in North Macedonia.

The latest news related to this matter is that the border checkpoint Markova Noga - Lemnos will open in 2027/2028.

Changing face of Prespa

It seems that in the last couple of decades Prespa has started to change gradually.

The bordering countries in Prespa have developed many new national and bilateral initiatives, in order to help develop and revive this magnificent region.

Macedonian part of Prespa

The Macedonian part of Prespa peaked after World War II sometime between the 1980s and 1990s, becoming an excellent tourist area, mainly for domestic tourists.

Many facilities, summer camps, and hotels were built and operated, providing excellent visitor's services. Many companies have their own "workers'" camps, thus enabling employees to spend their summer vacation in Prespa. However, Yugoslavia's collapse worsened some companies' economic situation and caused the closure of others, which took its toll, leaving the summer camps empty and neglected.

In addition to these, the lakeshore started to change gradually. The decrease in the water level in Prespa Lake became increasingly visible, turning the once great sandy beaches into a dry swamp.

At this point, the cultural heritage and abundantly beautiful nature were not completely considered attractive tourist points leading to a significant decay of many important monuments. Various factors influenced that situation which will be considered on another occasion. Even though multiple steps for the protection of cultural heritage were undertaken they were insufficient to contribute to the preservation of all the important monuments and sites.

Albanian part of Prespa

At the same time the Albanian part of Prespa lakeshore, was completely underdeveloped. Even though nature was abundant with beauty, there were no facilities for tourist. The country's complete closure and its general external and internal politics, disabled any development in this sense.

The cultural heritage as well as the natural potentials, were not used at all. On the contrary, due to the poor conditions in the country, as well as the communist regime that was in force, especially religious cultural heritage, was left to be destroyed. In this sense, a large number of churches were



Fig. 2. Prespa Lake

converted into warehouses, and the icons were left behind. With the individual efforts of certain people, some of whom were professionals in their field, some of these monuments, as icons, in the 80s, were allocated in the premises of the newly established Museum of Medieval Art in Korche, which enabled their preservation.

The fall of Enver Hodja's regime, and the country's opening at the beginning of the 90s, allowed the local population to personally witness "what is on the other side of the border". The picture that they saw was much different from what they expected. Even though in this period the tourist capacities and socio-economic situation of the people in the Macedonian part of Prespa started to decline, the situation was much better than in Albania.

The poor socio-economic condition of the population in the Albanian part of Prespa Region led many families to seek their fortune in Macedonia once the border was opened. Many of these families settled in the Macedonian part of Prespa. As hardworking people, they sought jobs as masters/builders, or they worked various jobs in the fields, creating conditions for a better life for them and their families. Many of these families managed to buy properties and build their own houses.

Greek part of Prespa

After the end of the Civil War in Greece, the Prespa area became empty. Many of the people fled from this region either across the border or elsewhere within Greece.

By the end of the 50s and the beginning of the 60s the region started to stabilize. The economy although poor enabled the local people to sustain their existence.

With the previously undertaken land redistribution²⁷ and agricultural reforms, the Greek part of Prespa, once an isolated, remote area, begun to change and develop step by step sometime after the mid-80s. Livestock breeding as well as fishery played a great role in the region's socio-economic development.

Joining the European Union enabled Greece to increase the available funds for various project activities, contributing step by step to the development of the Prespa region.

Cross-border cooperation programs

One of the largest-scale cooperation programs between three neighboring countries has been developed within the framework of Prespa Park, the first protected trilateral park in the Balkans.

The Park comprises four entities. The National Park "Galicica", established in 1958²⁸, and the "Ezerani" Nature Park, established in 1996 as a strict reserve – IUCN category I, reproclaimed in 2012, under the IUCN category (IV)²⁹, comprise the Macedonian Part of Prespa Park. This part of the region has also been included within the Ohrid-Prespa transboundary reserve³⁰ at the UNESCO's Man and the Biosphere (MAB) programme³¹.

National Prespa Park in Albania was established in 2013. It encompasses parts of Big and Small Prespa Lake as well as the island of Mali Grad that lies in the waters of Big Prespa Lake. The National Park is managed by the National Agency for Protected Areas³².

Prespa National Park was established in 2009³³. Two bodies have governed it: the Management Body for Prespa National Park which is the Management Unit of Prespes National Park and Protected Areas of Western Macedonia, Greece. Prespa National Park incorporates two Natura 2000 sites i.e. the Prespa National Forest and the Varnous Mountains. Even though natural habitats have been greatly endangered due to the decrease in water level among the other factors, Greece took a step further by inscribing this region to UNESCO's tentative list as a mixed natural and cultural site³⁴.

Regarding other cross-border programs and initiatives we have to point out that all three countries have established long-term partnership in the past period, regardless of any political issues that have concerned the implementation of various projects.

However, further on, the accent will be set on the cross-border cooperation projects of North Macedonia with Albania and Greece.

Cross-border cooperation programs³⁵ are one of the main elements that foster the neighboring countries in the process of EU accession and they support sustainable development in the bordering regions. Both North Macedonia and Albania are eligible for the IPA II program which has been known as an instrument for pre-accession assistance to



the candidate countries to promote sustainable socio-economic development and to address joint challenges that the neighboring countries share.

On the other side Greece as a member state, mainly uses INTERREG funds to support regional cooperation and economic growth.

Many projects have been implemented within the above-mentioned programs, each giving an added value to the region.

The developed idea especially when it comes to the long-term partnerships among the project partners, show an increase of the quality of the actions and enables better sustainability of the result.

For example, the conservation of the church of St. Elijah in Grncari village, North Macedonia enabled complete protection of the architecture and subsequently to the wall painting, while the 3D photorealistic augmented reality models developed for the St. Achilleus Basilica and Rebels' Hospital in Greek part of Prespa enabled insight of the "original" appearance of the monuments. These activities and many more were part of the HOLY WATER³⁶ project that was successfully implemented among five project partners from both countries, i.e. Municipality of Prespes, Municipality of Resen, The Society for the Protection of Prespa, The Ephorate of Antiquities of Florina and the NI Institute and Museum Bitola.

On the other hand, the IPA cross-border programs between North Macedonia and Albania have made a notable impact in the wider region, especially through the implementation of SMART-CULTOUR³⁷ and SMART4YOU2³⁸ projects. These projects were developed and implemented in the same partnership i.e. Municipality of Bitola, Municipality of Pustec, NI "Institute and museum" – Bitola, Directorate for protection of cultural heritage – Korce, and Youth cultural center-Bitola.

Some of the most notable activities were conservation of the old school building in Globochani village and establishment of the Sterjo Spase museum. Sterjo Spase is a prominent Albanian writer of Macedonian ethnic origin, who had a significant impact on Albanian literature in the second half of the 20th century. This museum became a must-see tourist spot in the region and many domestic and foreign visitors had the opportunity to enjoy the

remarkable life story of this author.

Besides these activities, the infrastructural improvements of the archaeological site of Heraclea in Bitola and the interventions that enabled accessibility for disabled people to the site have made a significant impact.

The second project enabled the continuation of improvements that had already started within the cultural heritage protection sector. Its main activities are the conservation of the church of Mother Mary on the island of Mali Grad, and interventions within the permanent hall of the museum exhibition space. In this case we have to point out that certain delays occurred due to the political situation in each of the partner countries, and each of the institutions.

This is a great example that the people are the only relevant factor that can influence the final project result and define the success of a certain project.

In addition to these major programs enabling all three countries to implement projects aligned with the projected goals, a new EU for Prespa program³⁹ was launched last year. This program includes projects mainly implemented in the Macedonian part of the Prespa region by local institutions and organisations in order to develop their capacities. Still, it is also recommended that partners from the other two countries, Albania and Greece, be included.

Based on the previous experience, needs, and long-term cooperation among various stakeholders and partners, the ACT4PRESPA⁴⁰ project has been developed. The project aims to protect and promote the cultural heritage in various aspects, and it will involve professionals, young researchers, and students in different activities that will enable them to gain professional skills through diverse actions.

One more important aspect of this project is the constant communication of the local population, which will influence a positive increase in consciousness regarding the preservation and transmission of knowledge and skills for the protection and promotion of cultural heritage.

Even though the project is still in its first year of implementation, the results arising from the research are quite positive and rewarding.

The upcoming period and the upcoming activities shall bring more information about the development

of the activities, but more importantly, about the development of further relations among the partners and, above all among the students that are being involved in the activities.

By empowering younger generations and professionals in the field, we are contributing towards better socio-economic growth that will enable further sustainability of the resources and development of the region itself.

Conclusion

Based on the above presented I tried to give a short overview of Prespa Region as a whole, spin of historical and political events that contributed towards constant changes of the region, and contributed to the separation and disparities of this trilateral region.

The historical events presented are only elaborated to better understand the region itself and to understand and the burden that the local population bears at every point of their life.

Contemporary initiatives have been used to serve as an example that this trilateral region can function and exist as one only if the border does not exist in the sense of physical but also as mental barrier, and if the people are not burdened by the weight of the past.

The cross-border cooperation programs provided, gives us a short insight into the type of activities implemented in the past couple of years, mainly tackling cultural heritage and its protection.

The question of the long-term success of these and other projects will remain open, giving us the possibility of further researches and conclusion on the matter concerned.

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