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Contested Borders

Territorialization, National Identity and
"Imagined Geographies" in Albania

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Preface

[...] and it strikes her, as she walks, that borders, like hatred, are exaggerated precisely because otherwise they would cease to exist altogether.

— COLUM MCCANN, *Zoli*

This book first started as an academic project for completion of my doctoral dissertation at Central European University in Budapest, Hungary. My initial interest was in the question of irredentism and my first book, *Sources of Irredentism in Foreign Policy: Understanding Kin Policies in the Aftermath of Communism in Serbia and Albania*, sought to provide an answer as to why Serbia became increasingly irredentist in the aftermath of communism, while Albania refrained from following suit. The novelty was in focusing on the role of intermediate societal ideas, interests and institutions in fomenting irredentist policies. Afterwards, I became increasingly interested in the difference between real and virtual borders and how competing political projects can lead to different perceptions of the national map. At the same time, the political elite is usually constrained by external actors and shifting geopolitics, which are especially important factors in determining domestic developments in small countries and weak states.

The primary research question that this book addresses is: *Why do national borders change and why are they perceived differently inside versus outside of the state? What motivates such changes? What are the primary actors and factors that lead groups to form a certain mapping perception and when do virtual shifts occur?* This broad and general question is broken down into two empirical and specific questions: (1) how the understanding of the Albanian nation takes on different geographical borders over time, with some periods associated with the Albanian nation mapping onto Albania's state borders and other periods understanding the Albanian nation as expanding on the broader concept of "Greater Albania", and

(2) why different Albanian communities, in Albania in the one hand and Macedonia and Kosovo on the other, have often imagined the borders of the Albanian nation differently at the same point in time.

The book builds on the argument that power struggles between “internal” and “external” (diasporic) elites play the primary role in building political agendas that create national borders. I construct here a theoretical model that captures the dynamics of domestic versus international constraints on elite choices and how these lead to (re)construction of borders. It builds on the logic that the elites engineer and manipulate national symbols to create the necessary environment for personal political gain, which is mainly the getting and retaining of political power. In other words, these competing elites use expansionist versus contractionist versions of “virtual” borders that may or may not be congruent with internationally recognized ones. In embracing one or the other map project, these elites, through cost-benefit calculations, are usually constrained by external pressures, which conditionalize domestic discourse and place limits on their actions and on how these influence map weaving.

Although the primary case is the Albanian case, studied comparatively in both its spatial and temporal dimensions by investigating both parallels and differences in mass and elite discourse and actions, the book also refers to empirical evidence from a multitude of other cases. Thus, the findings have general applications both analytically and at policy level, because concurrent maps exist across states and societies. In addition, elite clashes are often largely dependent on geopolitical limits, while policy relevance extends to include the degree and scale of map materialization. Shrewd elites are often keen to instrumentalize ethnic, national and cultural bonds or divides in order to maximize their goal of obtaining or retaining power when windows of opportunity open up. Such actions may provoke geopolitical changes and affect inter-state border relations.