

# New Europe College Yearbook 2010-2011



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Editor: Irina Vainovski-Mihai

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ISSN 1584-0298

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Scholarships and grants from: University of Bristol, University of Manchester, Central European University Budapest, University of Bucharest, Ratiu Family Foundation, Socrates-Erasmus & Phare

Presentations at conferences in Romania, Italy, Slovenia, Hungary, Germany, Czech Republic, Bulgaria, Serbia, Austria, Poland, UK, Russia, Finland

Articles and chapters on borders, space-time, state, illegality, petty cross-border trade, smuggling and contraband, border control and surveillance, migration, urban marketplaces

Participation in research grants funded by the Ministry of Education and Research (Romania), University of Bucharest, Global Development Network, Government of Bavaria, Open Society Foundation, European Commission

# DWELLING AND CROSSING THE FRONTIER: POLITICAL SUBJECTIVITIES AND MOVING LANDSCAPES ON THE ROMANIA-SERBIA BORDER<sup>1</sup>

On January 5, 1990 I met a large group of French in Severin about to go to Vârciorova to make it a locality twin to theirs. They had consistent aid to distribute to the locals, as it was the fashion those days immediately after the fall of Ceaușescu. “Are you crazy?” I told them frankly. “Vârciorova is underneath the waters of the Danube since the early 1970’s”. They went instead to Schela Noua where the former dwellers of Vârciorova were living then and talked to them. (Fieldnotes, Dr. Tr. Severin, July 2010)

“Until the dam, the Danube had no idea that the politics had changed”. (Recorded interview, Orșova , August 2010)

“The human gets used to everything: well-being, wire fences, freedom...” (Recorded interview, Orșova , July 2010)

## **Introduction**

This article explores subjective political constructions of the changing landscape at the border between Romania and Serbia. It does so by considering the building of the Iron Gates dam in the 1960’s and 1970’s and the massive relocations of population that resulted in a different landscape of the Danube, with a number of localities flooded, either completely disappeared (Ada-Kaleh, Vârciorova) or rebuilt at different places (Orșova, Eșelnița). Even if both sides were transformed, I will concentrate on the Romanian one as this has been far more affected in terms of number of people and localities that moved. Another important ethnographic reference is the massive deportations from the border to the Eastern part of Romania in the context of the Soviet nationalizing of

the private property in the 1940's and 1950's. Also, the illicit flights of so many people into Yugoslavia and further into Western Europe and North America that occurred constantly between late 1940's and late 1980's make important points in the paper.

For the specific ambitions of the article, I use two spatial metaphors - dwelling and crossing - which account for a great deal of everyday practices at the border. They form narratives through which people evaluate their lives, retrospectively and prospectively. Using the two notions, the article will illustrate the constitutive relations between subjects and the everyday politics at the border materialized in the changing landscape. It argues that present and absent landscapes, and mediating experiences of dwelling and crossing produce political subjects at the border. Most of the ethnographic fieldnotes and interviews used in this essay have been collected between early October 2009 and late August 2010 in Drobeta Turnu Severin and Orșova.

### **Building a dam on the Danube: the brief story of remaking a border**

Before the WWII, even in the absence of a built infrastructure over the river, crossing at the Romania-Serbia border has been present in different forms: village fairs on each side, tourism and kin visits, smuggling etc. Tobacco, salt, or live animals were constantly carried by boats across the Danube in a context in which the border had been almost uncontrolled. The war came with huge contraband trade and the first massive restrictions on trade and movement with Yugoslavia which was dominated by Titoist insurgents. With the escalation of even more restrictive border regimes in the early Romanian party Stalinism, crossing became very difficult. The illegal flights outwards Romania were nonetheless widespread (Armanca 2011). The border had been consistently militarized and sealed for decades. In the early post-war period, scenarios of war and other conspiracies had permanently set the border as a dangerous place due to a Stalinist propaganda fighting against the revisionist Tito. A border fence was in place for years after Stalin's death. Part of this context was the 1951 deportation of more than 40,000 people from the border localities into the far Eastern area of the country (Cernicova-Dinca 2003). Blamed as potential enemies of the communist party state and conspirers with the Yugoslav power, the deported were dispossessed and used as labor force in

the collectivization of agriculture and industrialization in the Southeastern plains (Marineasa, Vighi 1994; Bercea, Ianasi 2010; Sarafolean 2001; Milin, Stepanov 2003).

The context in which crossing became permissible to borderlanders twenty-five years later is of crucial relevance here as it prompted not only changes in the border regime of crossing, but also massive transformations in the landscape of the frontier. In the mid-1960's, as the relations between the Yugoslavian Federation and Romania cooled down, a joint economic project started at the Danube – the construction of the Iron Gates dam and hydropower cascade. The Danube was turned into a huge construction site that attracted considerable legitimacy for the Ceausescu's regime, as well as massive labor force from all over the country (Grasu 2002; Rusu no date; Roman 1980; Copcea 2002; Copcea 1985). People from a number of localities, including the old Orșova, Vârciorova etc. were relocated (Juan-Petroi 2006; Rogobete 2006) into already existing towns and villages, or newly built ones. Islands on the Danube, including the Turkish-inhabited Ada-Kaleh, were flooded as a consequence of the growing water basin. The river was widened, while a new border crossing infrastructure was built – the dam and bridge were opened in 1972. Since then, the Iron Gates worked as one of the major border posts (Armanca 2011).

No bridge over the Romania-Yugoslavia river-border existed before. After opening the bridge, a bilateral agreement that allowed borderlanders to cross was signed by the two countries. The Yugoslav citizens started to come massively to Romania, to trade in products so unavailable for the common Romanian citizens. Borderpeople from the Romanian side crossed into Yugoslavia too, but their local authorities issued cautiously and selectively cross-border passes for them. Crossing and subsequent suitcase smuggling penetrated in this way the borderlanders' lives. Cross-border trade developed massively in the 1990's when the border opened and passports were liberalized (Gornoviceanu 1991), to decline gradually to the present day.

## **Borders, landscapes, and the political**

In social sciences, borders are understood as marginal territories of the state, relatively fixed in space and continuous in time (Donnan, Wilson 1999; Wilson, Donnan 1998; Heyman 1994). Territory and sovereignty

claims are nonetheless insufficient to explain borders. In Eastern Europe, the Cold War, supposed to make hard, impenetrable frontiers, created border regimes that challenged fixity and continuity (Berdahl 1999; Green 2005). By reducing the cross-border mobility of their populations and to increase security and economic sustainability, Eastern European socialist states had actively engineered their border spaces. Interventions in the natural landscape of borders were an instrument for making subjects and border populations. An implicit argument here is that borderlanders cannot be reduced to stable cultural constructs as it abounds in the scholarly literature on borders. Another question raised is that large economic projects accompanied by transformations in border landscapes and cross-border mobility regimes had alternatively closed and opened borders, making them open-ended objects of control and surveillance, situated many times beyond the centrism of the state's security apparatuses.

This essay questions the border landscape and its transformations as both an instrument of control and a context of contestation, a space in which various subject positions to border crossing and dwelling are produced and contested. Although crossing is a critical lens through which social scientists look at borders, it has usually been seen an activity economically or culturally oriented, depending on how 'material' or 'immaterial' those borders appeared to their analysts. In addition, crossing was deterministically understood in relation to security apparatuses and border regimes. Unlike other approaches, this article considers crossing as a constitutive element of a political subjectivity which, along with dwelling, is in a constant and productive relation with the natural and built landscape. It is therefore an account on the ways in which the physical landscape fixes and substitutes border regimes, economic opportunities, creating both openings and closures.

Landscape is engaged with in the everyday practice. It is not just natural and static, but also mobile and transformable (Tilley 1994; Lefebvre 1991). By state intervention, landscape can be replaced by other landscapes and thus constitutes different practices and imaginations. Also, the landscape is not just something one looks at, but also something remade in everyday activity (De Certeau 1984; Massey 2005; Anderson 2008). Landscapes, as familiar spaces that catalyze one's existence, relations, emotions and actions continues to live in the one's own mind even if absent. This power to generate presence from absence brings the past into the present and makes landscapes as peculiar mediators between state and society, borderlanders and border regimes of dwelling and crossing.



As part of one's life and recurrent activity, landscape is embodied in a way in which it becomes a central part of one's own subjectivity (Ingold 2000): it is both inside and outside the subject and its body (Merleau-Ponty 2002; Atkins 2005; Heidegger 1971). Subjectivation through landscape is a particular kind of making the political subject, goes the idea of this article. Yet, subjectivation is both the subject's subordination to power and empowerment and agency (Butler 1997). The argument of this paper is that the landscape of the frontier is a medium for politics both from below and from above. The changing landscape of the border is the outcome of the human intervention into nature dictated by state politics, but it is also something that continuously enacts individual positions related to dwelling and crossing. It can thus be seen as a plurality of political projects characterized by both consensus and antagonism, involving states, people and other entities. Although built landscapes can be seen as naturalizations of state power aimed to promote uniformity of feelings, ideas and actions, my article points out the plurality of politics such naturalizations effect in their subjects which in turn transforms our very ontological assumptions on borders - the nature and actors of their transformation. The Romania-Serbia (Yugoslavia) border, mediated by dwelling and crossing practices engaged with the transformations in landscape appears as a flexible construct, with contested pasts and multiple possible futures.

### **Before the dam**

This ethnographic chapter makes temporal references to the period 1947/48-1972/3, as recollected from the retrospective narratives by my respondents. The major themes played out refer to the harsh enforcement of the border in late 1940's, deportations, evacuation and displacement that preceded the dam, administrative regionalization - all in relation to various understandings of life at the border, and perceptions of place and landscape. The period discussed is not homogeneous. Quite the contrary: there are major differences between perceptions of life and nature at the border between the 1950's and 1960's. The ethnography sticks to a few border places on the Danube: Vânciorova, Orșova, the island of Ada-Kaleh, Turnu-Severin, and Balta Verde.

Ilie<sup>2</sup> is a man in his 50's living in Schela Noua, a district of Drobeta Turnu Severin. He was born in Vânciorova, a village which was flooded for the opening of the dam. His father worked at the National Railway Company,

but had also been heavily involved in agriculture and hunting. Before the dam, the landscape around their house had been a mountainous one, with forests and rocky cliffs which enabled residents to go fishing and hunting, rear animals and engage in some agricultural work. After working several years at a manufacturing shop on the Ada-Kaleh island, in the 1960's, his mother became a housewife woman caring of the four children and household. Ilie recalls with nostalgia that they had a large household with a lot of people and animals including pigs, goats, sheep, oxen. Like many others, their house and garden were very close to the Danube's shores, which made the cliff a very different landscape as compared to the one encountered today. The displacement of people in Vârciorova started in 1968. Two years before that, Ilie's parents had started to build a new house but they stopped in 1967 due to the rumours of displacement.

*'In Vârciorova we reared our own animals and were not waiting to get food from others, or from the state. We had seven or eight sew all the time and we were often slaughtering piglets. We were not waiting to rear them for one year. The sew were free to go pasture wherever they wanted in the forests. In the evening they came back home. The same for the small piglets. Milk, cheese, home bread – we had it all. We also had our own brandy, and plenty of wood. Really, it was a different life then. We lived much better in Vârciorova and everyone here from those displaced would tell you the same. But now the places we remember are just water'.*

It is important to understand that, while remembering the idyllic Vârciorova, Ilie speaks of present, future, and past altogether. In the context in which occupational prospects, interactions with the border and the opportunities it offers, and my respondents' lives, in general, are marked by dissatisfaction, the past is generally interpreted in its idyllic form.

*'Even at my age I have a special sentiment for those places. I was born in those places and I lived beautiful years at the Danube. And I loved so much those mountains and forests and the ways we were used to live'.*

Ilie has never really accommodated in Schela Noua, the district built in early 1970's for the displaced persons from Vârciorova. As he worked several years in Germany after 1989, his sentiment of longing for home was invariably linked to Vârciorova. He often goes fishing at the Danube and sits in the waterfront close to where Vârciorova was 40 years ago.

*'If I stop on the viaduct I can throw down a pebble right in my housegarden – and this is a good thing'*. If Ilie drives or stops on the viaduct he recalls his childhood. *'My childhood is there under the water and I think this is something I will think of even in my time of dying'*. The landscape was very different then, wild and beautiful, and it was something closely associated with the river in its naturalness. In contrast, Ilie told me that the Danube is very different now, a dirty industrial site, consisting of stagnant and unclear water resembling a lake. The transformation of the landscape corresponded, for Ilie and his family, to a radical change in life. Peaceful and abundant subsistence was transformed into a precarious life, as they moved into modular residences and were incorporated within the party-ruled mode of production, which excluded the previous way of life. Scarcity and centrally-organised distribution of goods and resources brought by the dam and displacement generated a particular perception regarding the border and its landscape, a feeling of dispossession which gave way to contestations of the massive building and its political patronage. Different spatio-temporalities were at work in Ilie and others' narratives in relation to the dam. In precise terms: life had been different not only before and after 1989, but also, and most importantly, before and after the construction of the dam.

Ada-Kaleh, the island that faced Vârciorova, is also a strong memory for Ilie. It was so peculiar as the Turkish inhabitants were experts in home-made or industrial products uncommon for the mainland: candies, ice-cream, marmalade and preserves, tobacco and cigarettes, clothes for the army etc. Turkish children from the island were coming to school in Vârciorova and Ilie made friends with them. Also, between Vârciorova and Ada-Kaleh there were numerous economic exchanges: islanders were in need of wood, live animals, cheese, meat, and agricultural products, while the others were interested in fruit and home-made Turkish products. Their relations were continuous and constant. As his mother worked there, Ilie paid five visits to the island. Besides these apparently peaceful relations, Ilie recalls that Ada-Kaleh was strictly defended and militarised, even more so than the mainland. Every 50 meters there were military posts.

Between the two world wars, Ada-Kaleh was renowned for its 'duty-free' transactions. Also, islanders had crossed freely to Serbia to retail their products. This history of small monopolies on various products and commodities, and their free circulation across the river had changed after the World War II. Adnan, a Turkish man in his 70's, recollected that change had been harshly imposed by a 3-meter rod fence erected to

restrict the view of the Yugoslavian river bank. The same fence had been erected along the Romanian mainland and it stayed there until mid-1950's.

Son to an important islander, Adnan and his numerous family were about to be forcibly deported into Bărăgan in 1951. However, they were well connected to the new authorities and learned that they were shortlisted for mandatory residence in Bărăgan just in time to leave the island and change their place for Caransebeş, far away from the border, where they could not pass as suspects for deportation. Half the number of families had been deported from the island. Not only rich families were forced to move into the Eastern part of the country, but also poor anglers or boatmen suspected of smuggling and connections to the other side. His father and older brother found employment in local factories in Caransebeş. In the mid-1950's, when deported persons were allowed to go back, they returned to the island. In Ada-Kaleh, Adnan opened a small restaurant, as entrepreneurial activity was allowed for a period. There were plenty of ships mooring at the island – numerous tourists and customers for the restaurant. Life on the island had been marked by two aspects. First, it was a quiet harmony that the islanders maintained even after deportations. On the other hand, even if the Romanian-Yugoslavian relations were improving, there were still controls and military all over the place.

When I asked Adnan to describe the landscape of the island, he told me that the island was *'fortress, trees, and houses.'* *'It was a different life then, on the island: we drank water from the Danube, were surrounded by waters, we all knew each other...'* In this way, Adnan's memories connected me to a construction of a good balance they had between natural and built landscape, and the apparently perfect symbiosis and lack of differentiation between human and natural. The rumours about displacement and relocations for the dam's construction came in 1964. First, they were offered the option of moving to the Şimian island that faces Turnu Severin. Yet, the locals turned this option down. Adnan, along with many others, also had the option to move to Turkey. He stayed a short period in Turkey but returned to Schela, which is also his current residence, as they could not adapt there. Other islanders moved to Turkey permanently. Many moved to Constanţa, Mangalia, Bucharest – all over the country where Turkish communities were in place. State support with the operations of moving was poor, and the compensations almost non-existent as authorities had no resources to set into motion such a large process of displacement. In effect, islanders and many other displaced from

other localities had to manage themselves. In order to build a new house in Schela on a plot of land they had to buy from the state, Adnan brought construction materials from their old place in Ada-Kaleh, transported by boat. In the long period while the island was slowly flooded, Adnan visited Ada-Kaleh regularly for his brick transports. Ironically, on a visit, he met two Turkish families who were there to flee to Yugoslavia. They succeeded. By 1973, the island was completely under water.

Esin, a 70-year man, is another Turk from Ada-Kaleh. He reminds his big surprise at the news about the prospective flooding. The flood was planned while the island was flourishing. They had recently renovated roads and a developing infrastructure for incoming tourists. The peak was between 1965 and 1968. For Esin, it was a period that resembled the good inter-war period his parents and older brothers had told him about. Just as he talked about his good life on the island, Esin mentioned that the 1950's were deeply traumatic for the whole border population. Related to the 1950's, Esin's childhood memories are linked to a permanent feeling of isolation materialised in the wire fence put all over the island's limits, and the strict ID controls which adults were exposed to every day. In the 1950's, border guards and local authorities were the real governors and absolute masters of the island, uncommon for the people of Ada-Kaleh, who were so used to be in control of their destinies in the past. After 1947, the authorities had a constant concern with illegal flights across the river, which, in spite of all restrictions, kept occurring, both on the part of the islanders and of visitors.

*'We were permanently told that the Yugoslavian border guards would shoot us from the other side. We had no real freedom of walking the streets of the island, and we were forced to go to sleep at 10 o'clock in the evening'.*

Yet, when it comes to the things Esin and his wife miss after so many years from their relocation to Orşova, it is the island itself and the peace of the landscape. Their current nostalgic recollections of the absent island contrast with the moment when they were forced to move to Orşova – a moment of hope for a better future, although very difficult. The relocation to Orşova was invested with expectations by islanders as authorities promised them modernising their lives, offering basic facilities – electricity, running water, roads etc. – that were largely absent on Ada-Kaleh. Yet, the state did not accomplish their expectations.

*'They did not give us any place to live, I had a little child, and I lived one year with my parents. And they did not keep their promises regarding the dam – free electricity and all the rest. It was very hard.'*

In addition, the beauty of the island's natural landscape had been replaced in that period by huge and chaotic construction sites. *'Imagine – everything was a site. A very ugly one.'* Above all, because of in-migrating labour force from all over the place, the population of Orșova increased dramatically, making the town rather unsafe, according to Esin. After all those rapid changes, the materiality of the island was only indicated by the water whirls on the river.

*'They did not manage to demolish everything, and, after the flood, the undemolished buildings on the island were underneath the waters but still made the water's surface curl. And we knew that was where the island was, because of the curling.'*

Although starting a new life in 'modern' conditions (in the newly built blocks of flats of new Orșova), Ada-Kaleh takes precedence in the islanders' imaginations of the border. More precisely, the island activates, or produces a nostalgia of legitimate and peaceful dwelling opposed to the border places as they were after transformations operated in landscape. Former dwellers of the places affected by floods developed strong positions and contestations against the new dwelling areas, while at the same time, they retrospectively idealised the lost ones. This dissatisfaction has been poorly compensated through other facilities provided with the building of the dam (such as crossing). In some cases, as we will see later more clearly, the immateriality (and disappearance) of the places was itself an object of contestations, Ada-Kaleh, the old Orșova and other localities taken away by water being regularly present in dreams, conscious memories, material testimonies such as books, photographs etc., and often asserted as essential to one's own life and social relations.

Interesting present evaluations of the good life in place before the dam also came from Nelu, a 70-year man born in Balta Verde, a Southern village at the Danube, to a rich peasant family. Before the World War II, there had been an intense 'contraband' trade and economic exchange between Romanians and the Serbs across the Danube – a completely uncontrolled commercial activity. Nelu's father had also been involved in it. He was buying salt and lamp petroleum from Drobeta Turnu Severin for his Serbian

Vlach customers and he was receiving golden coins in exchange. There were frequent marriages between people from different sides of the river.

*'So, there was no border then. They were coming to us by boat, and we were going to them, also by boat. We were visiting each other at weddings, they were coming with the fiddlers here. It was very beautiful.'*

According to Nelu, the existence of a conventional river-border until 1947 had no effect on the 'natural' life carried at the Danube, except during the war. Nelu points out to the invisibility of the border as remembered from his childhood, but he emphasises a lot of material practices that were carried out across the border, between Romanians and Serbian Vlachs<sup>3</sup>. In this context of invisibility - as a practical, effective delineation, the border appeared as an empowering effect in the borderlanders' lives. The advent of border guards marked a brutal enforcement of the frontier which affected directly the peaceful relations between Serbian Vlachs and Romanians. As Tito and Yugoslavia turned their back to Stalin, an aggressive anti-Titoist campaign started in 1949 on the Romanian side. The material effects were the ploughed strip at the Danube's shore to indicate a place that once had been accessible, but was now suddenly forbidden to everyone. Then, the border guards installed military units for their brigades, and they erected a high barbed-wire fence. *'From good friends, the Serbians became our worst enemies. And it was interesting that many people actually started to speak badly of the Serbs.'* The advent of a border visible for everyone was accompanied by restrictions: they were no longer allowed to angle, or to swim in the river. Local peasants were affected economically by the harsh enforcement of the border. Until 1949, the locals had hunted sheatfish with spears and had absolute freedom to bring their animals to pasture at the Danube. After the border guards arrived, the peaceful dwelling practices suddenly ended.

The presence of border guards at the Danube had been followed by a long process of collectivisation of private property, including large areas of agricultural land. In relation to this aspect and the whole situation of emergency at the border, the massive deportations came in 1951. Serbians, Macedonians, Germans, rich landlords, local administrative and political staff, smugglers, Bessarabians – all were deported as anxiety about collaboration with the regime of Tito, and counterrevolution, was growing. Nelu's family were also deported. Experience of deportation is recounted by almost everyone in terms of forced dispossession, slapping,

corporal punishment, violence carried by the military in cooperation with the local authorities. Around 40,000 people were thus transported to the far Eastern part of the country. As they were relocated, they built new settlements from nothing, on the land seized from other landlords who were forced to leave from there. The politics of mandatory residence which they had all been subjected to prohibited their travels farther than 15 kilometres from the imposed place of residence. For that reason, numerous children could not go to schools, while adults were employed in factories and farms in proximity.

The experience of the border's marking by the ploughed strip and wire fence was also a common place in the conversations I had with Petre, from Orșova. The strip of land had been all along the Danube's shore, 7-9 metres width and it replaced the old *corso*, the promenade walk at the river, making a forbidden area out of it. Border guards were brought from afar, they were junior military who, so Petre said, knew only that if they shoot or catch someone trying to flee, they would be rewarded. The border fence existed in Orșova between 1949 and 1956, and was still left in place along roads between localities long after 1956. The *corso* in old Orșova was given back to the locals in the 1960's. However, the oppressive presence of the military continued and became a constant of the everyday life at the border. Even from the beginnings of the militarisation of the border, 'groups of friends' were formed with border guards, in which propaganda representatives taught the locals how to divulge information on those who planned to flee. After 1956 excursions on the Danube were organised, and there were many people who used the opportunity to jump off boats and flee to Yugoslavia. For that reason authorities introduced high-speed ships where passengers were kept closed in a cabin. Armed border guards were always present on ships but there were still people who jumped.

Another transformation that overlapped the building of the dam was the administrative regionalisation of 1968. This materialised into a general disruption of the place, a massive numerical increase of the population, industrialisation and partial depopulation of rural areas. In the 1960's, Turnu Severin, as Nelu recollected, still was a patriarchal and conservative place. It all changed dramatically starting in 1968: from 35,000 dwellers, in a few years Severin had reached 120,000. On the building sites at the Iron Gates alone there were 12,000 workers. Regionalisation affected Orșova as well. Numerous institutions, including the Administration of the Iron Gates were moved to Turnu Severin. The old Orșova had been



perceived as a strong town before, especially because of its harbour. The dam and the new regionalisation changed the hierarchy of localities and created frustration as the development of some towns and villages was rather stagnant.

Political subjectivity emerges in interaction with the changing landscape, as well as more directly through specific actions of enforcement of the border in the post-war situation, due to particular feelings that such transformations might produce, from familiarity to non-familiarity, from attraction to repulsion, from compliance to resistance. These changes did often produce economic deprivation for the locals, deprivation that was coupled with numerous restrictions in personal liberties and rights that were largely seen as illegitimate, as they made a strong contrast with the borderlanders' lives as of the inter-war and pre-war periods. The dam that was just to get built was largely perceived as a different local landscape at the river-border, a landscape with wide and large ramifications in other processes that occurred there, such as regionalisation, industrialisation, expropriations and relocations. Also, the drowned landscapes at the Romania-Serbia border do sometimes live with the subjects and articulate various attachments to dwelling and crossing practices, with different spatiotemporal references. Evaluations of the past confronted with assessments of the present and expectations and hopes for the future offer a vast site in which political subjectivity takes form and navigates along the border itself.

### **After the dam**

This section will continue developing narratives of my informants in relation to the construction of the dam and other adjacent processes.

Getting back to Ilie from Vârciorova and his experience of displacement, it is interesting how he evaluated the dam. His assessment of the situation is common to so many people who passed through the same experience of displacement, to whom familiar and easy dwelling was refused.

*'I've only seen this dam negatively. It affected us in many ways. They took our houses, they took everything, they threw us in this neighbourhood, they gave us so little to build new houses. All in all, they changed our lives. In exchange, they promised we would never have to pay electricity. And there were a few other facilities. But nothing happened. On the contrary.*

*We've been here for 45 years. Look at the way we are living now. Look at the holes in the road. You won't see that even in Breznița, up on the mountain. There, they have concrete. Our neighbourhood is forgotten by authorities. And we pay high taxes. This is the uttermost outskirts. And, we, the folks in Severin, see ourselves lower than Breznița, which is 15 km away. And Severin used to be a powerful city: we had here a factory of industrial energy supplies, a chemical plant, wagons etc. Now, there's nothing.'*

When Ilie refers to the power Severin had, he thinks of the post-1968 period, after the regionalisation, when the population of the city grew four times more in a few years. That was a period when re-industrialisation of the area and the intense crossing prompted by the Iron Gates bridge stimulated a sort of petty capitalism out of the suitcase smuggling carried out by both Serbians and Romanians. The municipality had also been receptive then to the new commercial opportunities and set up various places in the city for retail trade of goods from across the border. One such place was the so-called 'Serbian market'. Although many border crossers were industrial workers with good salaries who could afford going to Yugoslavia by car and purchasing goods from the market, there were many other opportunities open to those who were not crossing. Many people bought Yugoslavian goods to resell. Crossing stimulated a lot of 'entrepreneurial' activities in a socialist period while private room of manoeuvre had usually been very limited. *'Everybody in Severin used to love smuggling.'* Ilie recalls that there were a lot of young people who did not want to work. Rather, they tried to smuggle. There were a lot of people selling on the streets, even if they did not have something properly set up.

However, one makes sense of this satisfaction with life and the cross-border trade by contrasting it with the dissatisfaction with dislocations of population and other actions. While joy was connected to opportunities prompted by smuggling and crossing, at times deep dissatisfaction was connected to the living conditions. Dwelling was defined by my respondents as a fixed political situation at the border – a context in which people could not intervene much to improve their situations. The continuation, realisation, and 'mobilisation' of everyday politics were mediated by practices and imaginations of crossing. Crossing opened the eyes of borderlanders, and enabled contrasts and comparisons between the Romanian and Yugoslavian sides. Different generations had different concerns and lived in diverse border regimes, but the permanent

temptation of crossing the frontier cut across periods. Crossing and small trade increasingly fell beyond the party-state's control, as dissatisfaction with dwelling was directly stimulated through interactions between individuals and the coercive party-state. Subjectivity produced by practices of dwelling and crossing was a constant force of generating an everyday politics of contestation. An important spatiotemporal referent through which politics came to occupy the subject was the landscape and its transformations.

Ilie stated that he never belonged to Schela.

*'People have no work here. People live off day labour. Everybody runs off outside the country. Especially young people. Even me, before autumn comes, I'll be gone again. What can I do here?'*

When he looks at the disappointing neighbourhood, he immediately recalls, in contrast, of his good childhood and youth in his family house at the Danube, in Vârciorova. Ilie was never involved in constant crossing, neither before, nor after 1989. He tried it and found that there is a lot of jeopardy in it. Yet, Ilie made an interesting comment about crossing as it is carried out in the present.

*'People go to the border with cigarettes now, they take a chance, but it's not worth it, as far as I'm concerned. When people don't have anything to do, they need to do something.'*

This illustrates very well the place of crossing in a context with no proper job opportunities. On the other hand, crossing has clearly been stimulated by the dam, and it probably offered the only compensation for the loss of properties and the familiar in their lives. Ilie told me that the small cross-border trade was the only memorable good thing about the dam.

*'A lot of people here have led a good life (before and after 1989) just because of the small trade across the border. Some bought houses, cars etc.'*

According to Esin, Orșova is another disappointing place nowadays as many have no employment and look to leave. When it comes to thinking of the post-dam socialist period, Esin says that *'we were hopeful and in a*

way we achieved what we wanted: we got houses, flats, jobs.' But reciting the achievements soon reminds him of the lost place of Ada-Kaleh: 'If we had the island, I think it would have been full-blown by now,' that is, they would have had a much better life on the island now. The good prospects they had upon relocation were also related to the growing liveliness of the place. During the construction of the new Orșova, the town was, like Severin, inhabited by colonists, workers from all over the country. The life they knew in Orșova then, although many times disruptive and dangerous for those familiar with the old town, is completely absent now, when Orșova appears very much as an abandoned place.

*'Orșova was first abandoned by minorities, Germans in particular. They received money from Germany, so they were allowed to leave. The Hungarians also left, this happened in the 1980's. But others came after that from all over the country. Now Romanians leave the country as well. If you go around Orșova, you don't see too many young people. Everyone heads off outside the country.'*

If in socialism Esin and his wife did not go to Yugoslavia for the fashionable small commerce, they started to cross regularly after 1989. Esin's brother-in-law was a police officer and he continuously prevented him from getting a crossing pass before 1989. He was fearful and wanted to avoid any problems for his relative. This was the tendency amongst those with good authority positions in socialism – avoiding doing things openly as there could be risks for their positions. However, Esin crossed the border frequently after 1989. They used to buy cheap stuff from Orșova, go to the other side and sell it. 'As we had a few days off so we went. We made double profits.' Although there was some freedom of movement to Yugoslavia from 1972, the cross-border passes were selectively issued. It was only after 1989 when the borderlanders could take full advantage of the dam. Constantin, a 50-year man from Orșova, reminds that

*'only then we realised what low standard of life we had. We were free to move around. We realised that we kept everything bottled up inside and no one knew what we were feeling. Because we couldn't talk. We were afraid.'*

Until 1989, but even after that, though in different forms, sentiments and fantasies of permanent control and surveillance continued. Before 1989, to go to the Danube's Clisura<sup>4</sup>, north of Orșova, one needed

permission by border guards and *Securitate*. The area was known for frequent attempts to flee. Towards the end of the 1980's, the number of successful flights was around 40-50,000 every year, recorded in the various locations where refugees from Eastern Europe were concentrated temporarily (Armanca 2011). Some people succeeded to flee for good while using their cross-border passes to Yugoslavia. This was one of the reasons why papers were so selectively approved and issued. From my conversations with a former policeman who worked at the Division of passports before 1989, the first passes were issued in 1962-63, just before the start of the works at the dam. However, many more passes were issued after the opening of the bridge, in the early 1970's. Issuing a crossing pass (valid 5 years with the possibility of a 5-year extension) was a laborious job for policemen who tried to find out as many things as possible about the applicant. These included their genealogy, details about family and household etc. in order to decide whether that person can be an eligible crosser or not. Applicants who received passes quicker were those who were married, employed (especially industrial workers – peasants received passes rarely) and those with no political involvement in the family's last generations.

Let me get back to Constantin, from Orșova. He never went to Yugoslavia before 1989, but for apparently different reasons. Constantin occupied a leading position within the local party hierarchy. Although the construction of the dam and relocation to which he was subjected had subverted his loyalty to a considerable measure, he still uses a particular 'socialist' rationale against crossing. He says he has always been a real patriot so that he could not try to take advantage of small smuggling across the border. In addition, he has a lot of police and *Securitate* workers in the family. He associates the small trade with the factories being robbed and the transportation and selling of materials into Yugoslavia. As he reminds me, many border crossers have done that.

*'Those who went into this lacked character. They made a fool out of us.  
Those who knew how to make real trade ended up real bosses today.  
That's where it all started.'*

Although he did not cross the border, he says he would have done it if the context would have been safer for him. In his fantasies of crossing no money was involved, but a drive to freedom, as he explained.

*'Freedom, that was dearly missed, the freedom to cross the Danube whenever I wanted. Orșova was a very beautiful tourist city, we could have tasted civilisation much better.'*

Crossing appears here not just as an individual achievement, but a collective emancipatory aspect refused to so many. Today, there are thousands of borderlanders dealing with small cigarette smuggling facilitated through bribes to border policemen and customs officers. In border towns and within the control institutions there is apparently complete understanding for this practice of crossing.

*'People do not do it to get rich, as they no longer get rich from that. People are desperate and when they are desperate they are allowed to do everything that can sustain survival,'* as Nelu from Turnu Severin told me.

Among the numerous small smugglers in cigarettes I met during my fieldwork there was a poor woman, Ana, living with her old mother in Turnu Severin. Her only income was from cigarettes. She got fined by the local police two times in 2010 because of her 'illegal' job. Many packs of cigarettes were also seized from her by the police. She had no cash to pay the fines and even if she would have had the money, she said, she would not have paid it. For five years now, small smuggling is her only stable occupation. Another woman, Mariana, a bar tender in Severin, sells cigarettes while she is at work. Her son, Marius, an unregistered unemployed young man, manages to get her cartons of cigarettes according to orders she receives from the bar's customers. Her business is for subsistence only, as she sells largely on credit and there are a lot of debts around her. Mili, owner of a bar where a similar small smuggler comes regularly to retail cigarettes, told me that the only motive of police and patrols' high visibility in town is the contraband cigarettes. The picture is much larger though – as there is a complicated relation between those who pass the cigarettes through customs, those who sell them in the city, in bars or other public spaces, border workers who let the cigarettes pass through the border checkpoint and local policemen who hunt petty traders dealing with the cigarettes in the city. Mili is right asking: *'Why on earth do they let the cigarettes come into town? What happens in the customs?'* Mili considers that only seizing cigarettes in the border post could make the work of patrols in town effective. Otherwise, the whole issue seems to be created and maintained by those who should stop it. However, in

the recent period, cigarette smuggling seems to decrease as the Schengen accession and austerity measures taken by the state as response to the debt and public expenses crisis dispossesses people gradually of their jobs and external controls become harsher with petty smugglers.

Let us return to Constantin and his self-assessed honest dwelling without crossing. His rejection of crossing is apparently explained by the theft and suspect morality involved in cross border trading. Yet, the dam was deemed as an additional referent in this, which, on the other hand, did not prevent him from fantasising about 'freedom'. In relation to the dam, Constantin has also some open complaints.

*'When electricity in our flats was shut down, it was the most awful time of my life. After so much suffering with the power plant and the dam, after we were promised free and permanent electricity... And power was cut in the factories as well. It was a paradox. They said we would have it all. Nothing. Lies. Betrayal. And they used to take us for voluntary agricultural work. They promised us stuff but they did not deliver anything.'*

Similar evaluations come from Petre, also from Orșova.

*'From 1980 to 1989 I did not sense the dam. Ironically, on the Romanian side of the border, the powerplant itself was cut from electricity [specifically meaning that it was not supplied with electricity during the night]. While driving along the river, there was complete darkness during the night. We had no facilities as they promised; the power was shut down every day.'*

This statement is of crucial importance as it comes from a person who had been actively involved in the propaganda for the dam. In addition, Petre and his family were subject to relocation, forced to leave their house in old Orșova for a smaller flat in the new town. In spite of these events that could affect his relation to the party state, Petre became one of the important local people of the apparatus – responsible for organising cultural activities supportive of the party. During the construction of the dam, and even before, Petre had been one of the key persons in town, whose task was to educate population for the coming of the dam through conferences aimed at explaining the advantages of electricity, radios, fridges, TVs etc. Constantin and Petre from Orșova are illustrative for the deep transformations of subjectivity. Their ideological convictions have been subverted and even turned upside down in the context in which

they evaluated their harsher conditions of dwelling that contradicted the promises that accompanied the controversial construction of the dam and plans for displacement. Their statements can be supplemented by many others coming from some border guards, for example, who, in the mid-1980's, when external debts caused serious shortages in Romania, were slightly more permissive with regard to attempts to illegal crossings. In their retrospective narratives, all these persons set themselves in contrasting positions: defenders of the system and victims of their own design, in different periods until 1989. Whilst favourable to the party and its actions in some matters, which were sometimes related to the official criminalisation of crossing and trade across the border, these people remained ardent critics of their everyday dwelling marked by deep consumer shortages and the presence of the dam, especially in the 1980's. However, the state is not necessarily perceived as responsible for the borderlanders' disillusionment with dwelling. The dam, its construction and direct consequences in the everyday life is somewhat dissociated from the party state. Many respondents did literally refer to the dam as a centre of intentionality and action that significantly affected their lives.

An interesting case of subverted and transformed political subjectivity came from a former and actual border guard from Turnu Severin, Ciprian, who told me about an interesting encounter he had before 1989 with a person he caught when trying to cross the Danube. The intriguing aspect about the encounter was the reflexivity into which Ciprian was forced. During the investigation, the 'offender,' a medical practitioner from Sibiu, did not answer properly, but only asked questions. The officer realised that, as a representative of the state, he should have been able to answer the man's questions. Actually, he realised that he himself had a lot of questions and contestations to address. Many of the contestations were similar to those of the illegal crosser he managed to catch. *'When were you last time in a hospital to see the conditions there? What did you see then?'* *'When were you last time at a play? Do you remember, really?'* *'Have you ever listened to Europa Liberă? What did you learn then?'* *'Is there any book you managed to buy from a bookshop recently?'* These were counterquestions the offender posed in order to make the border guard realise the motives for his decision to leave the country that way. *'There was a spiritual connection between us, on the limit of betrayal'*, Ciprian told me. A strange communion was established between the two: the man of control/border guard and the 'illegal' border-crosser. Ciprian tried to help 'the illegal' crosser to avoid imprisonment. In practical terms,



he advised him to write his declaration this way: *'when I approached the Danube, I saw the water's turmoil and width and I decided not to flee, so I changed my mind'*. Ciprian's case of symbolic betrayal is not isolated. Luca, a border guard in his 50's, has also reported me that towards the end of 1980's he became increasingly aware that the 'frontierists' were right to plan their escapes.

The examples above show cases of antagonism and difference within the state apparatus itself. The anti-dam and shortage-related narratives produce repositioning of subjects and threaten the stability of the border as an intended clear-cut entity.

### **Dwelling and crossing**

An important aspect that needs to be mentioned here in relation to the dam is that, until 1989, it politicised the everyday life at the border to a degree precedented only by deportations and the coming of border guards in the late 1940's, and it accentuated the negative effects of the 1980's consumer shortage as people were promised all sorts of facilities associated with the dam which were in fact not delivered. One medium of this politicisation was the landscape. The landscape people perceived changed dramatically in interaction with building sites, large numbers of colonists, and demolished, abandoned, or rebuilt parts of the river, towns and villages. This politicisation through multiplying the spaces for social relations was well illustrated in an account by Nelu from Turnu Severin.

The dam was presented as a grandiose feat, and a whole journalistic and literary movement started to promote the dam and the new world to emerge through it (Copcea 1985, 2002; Grasu 2002; Roman 1980; Rusu no date). Nelu was part of that movement, as a journalist for an important party's gazette. He wrote about the dam in terms of a *'citadel of light,'* a *'bridge of light'* – a great accomplishment by the state, socialist economy and society. This was not just a reproduction of the official creed but, as he suggested, it was also his sincere expectation for the future.

*'We were happy because the gigantic construction was being built. A cult of work was flourishing here, construction workers were highly respected at some point. I was bewildered by the transformations that were happening around me.'*

The multitude of construction sites was astonishing and dynamic. Every day brought something new, everything was transforming quickly. Every day new equipment would show up, and something went missing – maybe a hill, maybe a mountain. The Danube itself was drained and the shores of the river were quickly changing.

*'At some point I got lost on the construction site even though I was there from the beginning. It was a hundred hectares long, including the living spaces. It was like seeing the genesis of another world, the genesis of light, as the water was turning into light. An earthly tectonic controlled by man who could have seen himself as a demiurge.'*

The Iron Gates site was an immense conglomerate, as there were many construction sites, actually – an entire universe. People used to work 10-12 hours a day. Also, there were people who died there in work accidents. For example, when they were drilling a mountain to build a tunnel, 30 people died as they were working underneath the rocks and a huge cliff fell on top of them. But, as Nelu, continued,

*'nothing can last without sacrifice. And, as you asked me about Ada-Kaleh, the island with the backward Turks living there was a necessary sacrifice too.'*

Though not easily representable, the new world came up as a deep antagonist force against the backward and simple life to which people were used at the border.

*'A while back, fishermen used to fish among the weeds, on the water, but then we saw the 24-tone turbines with hundreds of pieces being assembled.'*

In addition to this techno scientific spectacle of transformation of nature, the party set into motion a large plan of employment for the rural labour force. They offered well-paid work to thousands of people from villages. A common worker at the dam made roughly three times the wage of a high-school teacher. The administration of the Iron Gates used to send recruiters in villages. The recruited were unskilled workers who received quick training on jobs. *'They were coming to the site wearing only a few clothes, they didn't even know what it meant to shower,'* Nelu made me aware. In addition, they received benefits such as clothes,

houses, bonuses etc. For Nelu, the construction of the dam was *'a huge step towards civilisation: from their straw mattress back home to a real bed and modern furniture.'* In this context, Turnu Severin grew fast and most of the people stayed.

The construction of the dam and the river's new landscape were glossed through stories of those who worked there – particularised as heroes of socialist construction. The dam lived very much through the people who worked at it, who had a unique opportunity to become founding characters of an impressive creation. They were often referred to as *'creators of landscape,' 'artists of nature's transformation.'* *'They entered the mountain's entrails,'* as Nelu imagined them. The newspapers often made famous people out of apparently common workers. For example, this was the case of a blacksmith who worked on the entire metal structure of new Orșova. In turn, as Nelu recalls, people were proud that they did important work for the dam.

In contrast to this picture, there is a different subject position which still antagonises the transformations. The relations of the former dwellers of Ada-Kaleh with the island in the wake of the dam are illustrative. Adnan told me that:

*'I always dream of it. When you know something disappears before your eyes, something you cannot see anymore, it is very tragic. Only people who went through this know the feeling. Some men wept because they knew they were never going to see the place again.'*

The dream of such people is to materialise their place, their familiar landscape. The desire to see the island, or other lost places, including old Orșova or Vârciorova, was expressed by many. When Adnan worked at a coffee house in Turnu Severin, after the opening of the dam, he often passed by with his car and he always looked for the island, but he could only see the plain waters of the river. He confessed that at times he imagines that the level of Danube will decrease and that he would thus be able to see the island. The island is 40 meters below the waters now. Adnan continues saying that *'the island was like my wife and child, or it was a parent to me, nothing can ever replace it.'* The same feeling is recounted by Esin. *'When I'm on the road, near the island, I always try to find it.'* It is not just his personal effort to rematerialise the island – media people often come and ask him questions for radio or TV reports.

*'I'm a rarity, many have died, I am the only one left. On one of these reportages I went to the place where the island once was, on the water, to tell the story. The reporter phoned me on the same day my mother died years ago – she laid buried on the Şimian island. And she is still there as the cemetery was not based in Schela yet.'*

Esin considers that his sentiment about the island is a painful intimacy, and he told me he frequently declines participation in media reports.

*'For a year, everything I dreamt of was myself on the island. I often dream of old friends from there. Situations in which I worked. For example, the minaret for which I did renovation work and they destroyed it with dynamite. They used a lot of dynamite to put it down. It was so strong. A lot of my friends died and I often dream of these persons.'*

In his intimate relationship with the island, we find something that refuses representations from the outside, official images of the island and its former dwellers. To a certain degree, the lost materiality of the island leaves its former dwellers with certain memories and representations of the island, but also with a large non-representable material. In relation to this, we need to mention that there are different practices of recollecting the island. For example, Adnan prefers to communicate rather official images and discourses about the island, including history, folklore, everyday life issues, all described in a romantic version transmitted through pictures, books, letters from his personal large collection. He does a form of dissemination with apparently little emotional investment. In contrast, Esin is not interested in these forms of communication. In addition, although both Esin and Adnan reactivate Ada-Kaleh through dreaming, Esin seems to take this issue more seriously. Dreaming the island is a way of remembering and reinventing the island in one's own, subjective terms, as much as it is used as a claim of an intimate relationship that is only fragmentally shared with the others. Esin ironically told me about an Austrian student who visited him. Technically speaking, the student wanted to learn more about the island, but he actually knew more details about it, as compared to Esin. It all culminated when the student showed Esin some photos from archives. In one of the photos there was Esin with his grandmother! – a picture that Esin did not have in his personal collection. Interestingly, he even told me that *'I am a quasi-illiterate about the island.'* There are many things about Ada-Kaleh which Esin asserts no interest in. Yet, his

attachment to the lost place is dramatically intense. Engaging with different forms of testimony, Adnan reinvents the island as a form of preponderant technical knowledge that provides easy visual representations of the lost landscape for him and others. On the other hand, Esin, in its reinvention of the lost place does primarily produce a non-representational form of knowledge about Ada-Kaleh. Much more than seeing it, Esin feels the island in the absence of material testimonies.

It is not just the island that is missed and fantasised about so much, but also the Danube itself – the river as a space of dwelling and crossing. The Danube is no longer the same river after the construction of the dam.

*'The Danube was very clean before – I used to drink from it. Now it's a mess because of the dam. The river has grown wider and the water is rising. The Danube was more beautiful back then. The Danube was a flowing stream back then. Now, it is a dirty lake of accumulation, growing and flooding everything around, year by year, as it has not been cleared for more than 20 years.'*

From the friendly natural and built landscape as they knew it, the Danube is now seen as a threatening and uncontrollable presence. Esin is very nostalgic about that lost dwelling. *'I would have loved to keep on living where I was born. If the island wouldn't have been under water, I would have surely been living there today.'*

The same nostalgia exists with regard to another border place – the old Orşova. Constantin recollects that:

*'It took us 5 years to move, and moving was a sort of collectivisation. They asked you if you wanted to move, but in fact they were forcing it on you. You had no choice. 'Get out of Orşova, at 12 o'clock everything will be flooded!' – they were screaming through megaphones. This was around 1971. And all my childhood got flooded, everything was under water in an hour tops. I simply couldn't believe it.'*

Constantin saw the water coming towards the town. He still remembers a church being flooded, the very same church he was baptised in as a child. Reflecting on the issue, Petre told me that nostalgia for the old town still lingers in all people living in Orşova except those who did not live there before the flooding. It is, however, a big puzzle and curiosity to the younger inhabitants.

*'People of old Orșova never dreamt of themselves in the new town. I often dreamt of myself in the old city, finding my old friends, old places, or seeing the water swell. I've been living in the new town over 40 years, but I still dream of the old one.'*

Petre suggested me that his dreams would have probably had a different object if living conditions had been different.

*'It was decent until the 1980's. Then – the decade when we did not have electricity in our flats, when we had no food, although we were told we had one of the most productive companies in Europe near our town.'*

It is again important to note here that my respondents speak to this ethnography retrospectively. Their present accounts on past emotions, actions, intentions are mediated by numerous external forces, but also by subjective engagements with their everyday life, past and present, including memory's selectivity and levels of distress. In some cases, dissatisfaction with the present (being unemployed, or about to get laid off, or being unhealthy) or accentuated emotional states such as nostalgia for friends and kin, lost places, social relations, leisure activities, or occupational opportunities influence their discourse on the past engineering into the border landscape, or other issues. In a way, articulating narratives in the present about past events do work as compensating and 'justice'-making opportunities for my respondents. Yet, this possible instrumentality of narratives does not preclude the validity of constructed discourses. On the contrary, it reveals that narratives provide different evaluations, intriguing articulations of political subjectivity and descriptions of processes from which they were generated.

From the stories about the construction of the dam, crossing and dwelling appear as different, yet related modes of subjectivation. They form a productive context of political self-becoming, a way to create border spaces and temporalities in the form of events and narratives on events that turn out to be evaluations of my respondents' own lives. Many accounts above refer explicitly to the border space once materialised as a familiar landscape, and then radically changed. Landscape has been complied with or resisted against by people, and formed both the conditions and outcome of border remaking. As my ethnography shows, this outcome is yet imprecise, contested and lived in different forms. Imagined rematerialisations of the old border landscape and the refusal

of representations from 'outside' (like in Esin's case of engaging with the lost island) are proofs that the border is an object of contested knowledge. Resulting diversity, multiplicity, lack of consensus and a significant deal of dissatisfaction and political contestation lead us to conclude the impossibility of constitution of the border into a clear-cut, stable entity.

The diversity of spatiotemporal referentialities internalized and used by my informants in their assessment of their relations and situations is intriguing. Forces that backed transformations, including the landscape and the interventions regarding it, often remained outside the control of my informants, and in this way became metaphors for the indeterminacy of life itself. Deep antagonisms in relation to the isolation and brutal defence of the border, deportations, dam construction, floods and relocations, regionalisation, produced a site of ongoing transformation and a productive context for everyday and official party politics. As this section shows, the ethnographic examination of narratives of lives at the border is crucial in understanding the border entity's complex dynamics and its incongruence with 'official' representations and discourses within the frames of strict territoriality, sovereignty, or fuzzy concepts such as 'culture'.

The formation of political subjectivities is paradoxical and fragmented though. As revealed in the ethnography, my respondents may refer and evaluate objects of their everyday life differently, according to the spatiotemporal context of relations. Esin mentions the enthusiasm he initially manifested in the perspective of their relocation from Ada-Kaleh. Life on the island had been tough, rudimentary, while relocations opened new perspectives and promises for a better life. Yet, his position in the present is completely different about the island – he wants it back, he would live there if possible, the dam construction had produced a long-term sentiment of disown, which was not compensated by the opening of the border and its intensive crossing, especially after 1989. The various spacetimes of his relations and life cannot be put together, their reconstitution seems impossible for Esin. His crossing and dwelling practices remain sequences of shifting subject positions that elaborate either manifest or quiet everyday politics.

In spite of the deep dissatisfaction with dwelling and dispossessions, controls and surveillance of all kinds, there were people who engaged actively in supporting the authorities and the border guards in identifying potential flights to Serbia. One of my respondents who had connections with such people is Petre. *'There were many informers. Even I myself was constantly visited by a man from Securitate who was asking me to report on*

*friends and acquaintances.*' Petre also recalls that the informers were part of the local population. Some were people subjected to many restrictions; some were 'friends with border guards.' In particular, as Petre told me, there was a young man from Orșova, a mentally disabled person, who thought himself a border guard. The soldiers fed and clothed him. Their service meant a lot to him and he offered a lot of information on suspects.

Another good example of how persons became paradoxical (acting and reacting) subjects in relation to the frontier is Nelu. His family, as mentioned above, were deported to Bărăgan in 1951, where they spent four years and six months. They came back, but their houses in Balta Verde, their village of origin were occupied by the local collective farm, as a result of the local collectivisation of agricultural properties. So they moved to Turnu Severin, where Nelu went to high-school. If he had ever mentioned that he had mandatory residence in Bărăgan, he would never have gotten into high school, as selection was very politically oriented. But his father was a good worker at his new job and occupied a mechanic's vacancy at the local public transportation company. Therefore, Nelu had a good and credible certificate. Still, his application to university in Timișoara was rejected, even though he handled the written examination quite well. By mistake, he filled in his autobiography with real details, including the experience of deportation. By disguising his past, he managed to get into an institute for primary school teachers in Craiova. Then, he was assigned as a primary school teacher in a village, Jidoștița. Years later, he entered university in Bucharest. Because there were not many literarily talented people around, they made him a local party member and hired him at *Viitorul*, in Turnu Severin, a powerful newspaper run by the party. *'If I would have written bad things about some director, I could have removed that person from his good post in three days. It was a great power assigned to me.'* At some point, he was kicked out of the party organisation, on the allegation of immorality when he divorced and remarried an engineer. A friend helped him return to his old teacher's job.

*'That's where the Revolution caught me. After 1989 they made me a high school teacher, then I was a member of the county's council, for 5 commissions at the time, under the Ecological Party and the Social Democrat Party. I, who was deported, hung around Iliescu, a bolshevik (laughing).'*



The above stories reveal a politicised border in which crossing and dwelling give different meanings to one's own life. Dwelling has generally been understood as peaceful grounding of one's existence, an autonomous and depoliticised category of subjectivity (Heidegger 1971; Ingold 2000). My case explores a different kind of dwelling though – one that does not elude struggle and contestation – a process of making a political subject. Dwelling, in this understanding, is not necessarily part of the individual spatiotemporal choices. Ilie, Nelu, Petre, Constantin, Adnan, Esin and all the others are persons who were transported in various spatiotemporal relational contexts to which they developed various narratives and counternarratives, resistance and compliance with powerful actors that aimed to transform their lives. In their dwelling at the Romania-Yugoslavia border they were accompanied by sentiments of insecurity. For some of them, crossing appears as a practice that did not necessarily compensate the bitter sense of dwelling. Further fantasising has then been produced, especially in the context in which crossing, as a practice or imagination, offered them an opportunity to critically consider 'concepts' of 'place' and 'dwelling' in relation to their personal situations.

As revealed in the narratives of my informants, there were processes that altered the sense of dwelling at the border. Among these, the border enforcements of the last decades, including harsh border regimes with selective crossing authorised at some point, or deportations linked to nationalisation of property in the 1940's and 1950's, and forced displacements and changes in landscapes were of primary influence. Illegal flights of people trying to escape into the West across the border, massive labour migration to Western Europe after 1989 and general urban abandonment in the area came to complement those processes and indicated the uneasy relations that individuals developed with the place. In addition, the Romania-Yugoslavia border has constantly been marked by unemployment and poor industrialisation, marginality and poverty of local populations, mainly involved in angling on the Danube. Dwelling has further been dramatised through the long history of crossing and relations between the Romanian and Serbian border populations that produced an antagonistic and anxious sense of living with the place. Therefore, dwelling is for many a hopeless condition of being left there, with no opportunity and little expectation for the future.

An aspect that struck me during fieldwork was this dissatisfaction with current lives. One of the few things that made many people happy were the 'escapes' to the Serbian town of Kladovo that faces Turnu Severin

from the other side. They went there with friends and family and spent afternoons at pubs and terraces, or on the local sand beach. These trips to Serbia were enjoyable, but also accentuated the bitter taste of dwelling in their town because of their perceptions of differences and asymmetries between Romania and Serbia since the opening of the dam in socialism. Their Serbian neighbours not only smuggled Western goods to them in times of shortage, but opened the horizons of their reflexivity. Until 1989, meeting Serbians at the marketplace in Severin, or going to Kladovo or Negotin, on the Serbian side, were occasions for reflection upon their own condition of subjects of an increasingly intrusive and aggressive state apparatus of control and surveillance. Through contrasts, they were offered opportunities to appreciate and envy the liberties and wealth of the Yugoslavian citizens authorised to travel and work in Western Europe since the 1950's.

Although this internalized asymmetry strengthened the sense of a disappointing dwelling, while spending time with petty cigarettes smugglers during my fieldwork, I noticed that those people did not complain much about their life in this place. Although involved in a risky activity which does not necessarily bring them considerable cash, under permanent attempts of regulation and surveillance in the border post as well as in the city, they seemed to be rather content with their mobile condition. Moreover, many of those who did not smuggle, would very much like to, having a fantasy of a better life through smuggling.

In sum, dwelling at the border is a mode of non-belonging and placelessness (Seamon, Sowers 2008) compensated through crossing and various contestations which make and politicise the subject and the border as a topographical and imagined space-time. The urban reconstruction of border towns and cities since socialism is also a practice that stimulates further (critical) reflexivity upon dwelling and subjectivation. For example, Sorin worked in the urban planning office at the municipality of Turnu Severin before 1989. He told me that the Danube was only selectively accessible for the common dwellers of the city. This was not only due to the guards who were permanently present at the river, but also due to the organisation of urban space. *'You do not feel the Danube in this town. I've been in Hârșova and I could feel it there, it was much closer to me. But it was not a border, as it is here.'* He told me about the inappropriateness of the civic center in Severin, about how its building created lack of access to the natural landscape and its entertaining potential. *'A city builds itself and this was not the case with our civic center.'* The civic center

had been reconstructed in a way that moved attention away from the river walk as a site for leisure to a place closer to the main road far away from the Danube. This distancing of the river from the senses and locals' leisure practices went along with the heavy industrialising of the place. In practical terms, long kilometers of the river walk were, after the war, occupied through setting up or extending industrial estates, including a navy building factory, a rail car factory, a military unit etc. The Danube, its landscape and enjoyments were thus transformed into a place refused to people, populated instead with factories and institutions of control, an ideological and material site of discipline and surveillance. The civic center rerouted the locals' walks of promenade, departing them from the river.

### **Crossing, in practice and fantasy**

Cristi, one of my local friends, and I were in a bar in Turnu Severin, talking and waiting for a football match screened on TV. Cristi is a long-term unemployed young man and he started to challenge me with his disappointing views in relation to the local job market. He then told me about an offer he received recently – to be a lumberjack, a very demanding and low paid job. He told me he declined the job. In his personal style, he then shared with me a strong fantasy of what he would be doing in the near future. He told me about a job he was expecting as a worker at a local factory of tyre covers.

*'I will get 1,000 lei plus vouchers every month. In addition, I will start going to Serbia again, for cigarettes. And I will make 5-600 lei every month from cigarettes and alcohol.'*

He added that he would not frequent bars anymore, because he would become a busy businessman. Moreover, in five years he would have saved a lot of money, more than he would ever expect, which he would buy an expensive car with, a Benz, to go abroad, settle there and work as a taxi driver. *'And I will never ever return to Severin.'*

Crossing appears here as a category of the border space-time, and a direct product of the disappointment with dwelling. Crossing enables the articulation of different subject positions in relation to life on the move, opposed to the boredom and hopelessness of dwelling in towns and villages with few occupational opportunities. Even if not always

an available practice, crossing lives intensely in fantasy and occupies the aspirations of many borderlanders. It existed in this way even more intensely during socialism, or immediately after World War II, in the time of absolute restrictions. The active fantasising about themselves involved in various forms of smuggling, quick enrichment, better life conditions, as well as perceptions of past, present, and future cross-border asymmetries between localities, people, living standards, ways to control the border, indicate their desire to become proper actors across the border and to refuse solace with the poor conditions of dwelling.

In Turnu Severin, as long as there were opportunities across the border and regulations relaxed, perceptions of the city and living standards were different from Cristi's and other respondents'. This was the case with the boom of incoming Serbians for shopping and marketing in the city, in the 1970's and 1980's, as well as with the embargo gas smuggling and massive flows of work and trade into Yugoslavia in the 1990's. Gigi, another respondent, told me that when Severin was invaded by Serbians, Albanians, Moldavians, the pleasure of life was much higher. *'It was real life, it was good then.'*

On one of our meetings, Petre from Orșova told me about a special moment which announced the building of the dam and the promise of crossing to borderlanders on both sides of the Danube. This moment had been used as a crossing opportunity – the first major one in two decades – by thousands of Yugoslavian citizens into Romania. In September 1964 the Romanian president Gheorghiu Dej visited the future site of the hydroelectric power plant and passed on a bridge of ships into Yugoslavia, where president Tito was waiting him with anthems and cannons. The whole convoy then passed into Romania, across this bridge. Romanians could not cross into Yugoslavia as they were not yet allowed then. Petre recalls that the Serbians coming to the Romanian side in large numbers were very enthusiastic, and they kept saying things like: *'we want to go to Romania, because we have brothers, friends there. We're going with you, Tito!'*.

*'The Serbian legions came flooding, after almost 20 years of oppression. Some were coming from agricultural work, barefoot, everybody came how they could.'*

In the evening they were supposed to go back. Their return took actually three days. As the bridge of ships was dismantled, they were going to harbour in Turnu Severin saying:

*'Hey, I'm Serbian and I've come here with Tito.' 'Yes, but Tito returned a week ago'. So many Serbians came then. Romanians were not allowed to go to Yugoslavia then.'*

Petre's crossings to Yugoslavia are also very relevant episodes.

*'When I first went into Serbia, something very emotional happened. My grandma told me to go find a woman in Kladovo, somebody she knew from her youth. I passed with a little bag of food, but I noticed that other people were passing with lots of things – smuggling had already begun. So I went there and found that woman. I visited the Kladovo fortress, I met some young people who were on their way to Sweden to study and I also met a pretty young but shy girl. I went to meet my colleagues at the museum there. On other trips I wanted to sell and buy like the others, but it wasn't my main purpose. Once I was on the bus with my mother. Besides me there was a Gypsy guy with two full buckets. He told me: 'Hey boy, aren't you carrying anything? No? Well you're kind of strange then'. He gave me a bucket to take across, so I wouldn't go empty-handed. Some people were specialists in small cross-border trade. I felt some sort of freedom doing these trips, something special. This small trade degenerated soon into pure smuggling. In the 90's it was already a mass phenomenon.'*

All these stories indicate a very intense experience and enthusiasm with crossing the border, even in persons who were not strongly committed to make a permanent life style of that. Petre, Constantin and other respondents had little personal commitment to smuggling, but they were very attached, in different periods of their lives, to the imagination of crossing the border. Sorin, the former urban planner from Turnu Severin, also provides a case in point. He is a typical example of disappointed dweller, basically a non-crosser. *"Although I lived at the frontier for most of the time, I have never had an experience of crossing it"*. He told me that he would have been able to clandestinely make it to Yugoslavia at some point, but he could not explain why he had no temptation of this kind, neither before 1989, nor after.

Daniel, a 50-year old man from Breznița, a village just outside Turnu Severin, recounted to me the intense presence of the border guards since his childhood. They were coming almost daily into Breznița to ask about suspects who want to cross the Danube clandestinely. They were also permanently inquiring about fellow villagers with crossing passes who carried merchandise into Yugoslavia, what they were carrying there, how

long and where they stayed. He could not remember a period in his life without controls and checks, in town, in his village, in local factories in which he worked etc. Beyond this permanent surveillance and control, he crossed the border many times to buy and resell various goods at marketplaces around, all coming from Serbia, Hungary or Bulgaria. His wife had always been even more involved in this itinerant business. As he worked at the rail car factory in Turnu Severin, he carried pieces produced there to Serbia, selling them for good cash. For regular border-crossers like Daniel and his wife, dwelling was accomplished as a joyful experience through crossing. This would have not been possible without the intense relatedness established with the border guards and customs officers. Before 1989 he had a job at the car service shop in Gura Văii, just next to the Iron Gates dam. That was an ideal location to relate to the persons of control. He is still very proud of his pre-1989 relationships with the customs 'bosses.' He repaired their cars and that was the beginning of their friendship for purposes of crossing with all the necessary items without checks and harsh treatment. He also worked a period at Hidroconstruct<sup>5</sup> where he often had visits to Serbian partners across the Danube – another occasion to get to know customs officers and border guards. Funnily enough, there was a time when the customs officers were begging him insistently to order a cross-border pass for himself.

The direct experience with the control and its people, through mutual knowledge outside their workplace and negotiation of mutual benefits was a major source of subjectivation, personally invested with positive or negative meaning, impacting individuals, households and their economic strategies, life styles, joys with crossing and dwelling in general. At some point, due to his close ongoing friendship to key border guards and customs officers, Daniel gained the impression that the border did not exist. *'As far as I went there so easily, for every need or purpose, in my mind there was no border.'* This invisibility of the border is, again, a peculiar frontier effect (Donnan, Wilson 2010) connected to crossing practices, an effect which appears now in the absence of constraining factors, but in the presence of facilitating actors.

Similar to dwelling, crossing accounts for a great deal of imaginations and practices in my respondents' narratives. However, it appears in different forms. For some, such as Daniel, it constitutes a resource they constantly exploited at the border. This approach to crossing produces the illusion that the border does not exist as delineation, as regular border crossers develop strong relations to the state workers at the border in order

to facilitate their trips and make their business predictable in long term. For others, crossing is a lost resource. This is the case of so many people that made cash of contraband trade in the exceptional context of the embargoes upon Yugoslavia in the 1990's. As this practice ended more than 12 years ago, some of them continued to make profit from cigarette smuggling, although it was not that profitable as before. Others stayed at home and experienced the disillusionment of life at the border, as regular non-crossers. Still for others, crossing was never a practice to engage with. This is the Constantin's case, for example. For these people, crossing has always been invested with either fantasy and desire, or fear and anxiety in relation to control and persecution (especially before 1989). Cristi is an interesting case of romantic fantasising and hope about crossing. Occasional border crossers were also usual among my respondents. Petre is one of them. He tried small smuggling as well, but it did not work for him, as he had interests in different other things. Other forms of crossing which I regularly encountered during fieldwork were the illegal flights before 1989, or the regular seasonal labour in Serbia, which is still a way to subsist for many poor rural families at the border today.

As we see, there are several different approaches to crossing strongly connected to the ways in which these people experienced dwelling, including landscape and its transformations, in various periods at the border. It is interesting to see that crossing is generally a source of hope and excitement, and enables political subjectivities of contestation of the border object. Crossing, as a practice, creates innovation and new actors, sets of social relations and spatiotemporal connections across the border. It sets the border as a flexible, becoming entity.

## **Conclusion**

This article showed that transforming landscapes are important processes that contribute to a flexible making of the border. As the ethnography shows, landscape offers premises for antagonistic options for borderlanders in areas of crossing and dwelling. From a material viewpoint, the changing landscape of the border is the outcome of the human intervention into nature, dictated by political and economic rationale, thus facilitating or constraining dwelling and crossing practices. The dam, as an all-present force behind the landscape transformation, does many times stand for the border itself, as an effect of constant shifting.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> This research paper is the outcome of a NECSOC Fellowship granted by New Europe College within the project DOCSOC, *Excellency, Innovation and Interdisciplinarity in doctoral and postdoctoral studies in sociology* (contract POSDRU /21/1.5/G/27059), a project co-financed by the European Social Fund through the Operational Sectorial Program for the Development of Human Resources 2007 – 2013.
- <sup>2</sup> All the names of my respondents have been changed.
- <sup>3</sup> Romanian speaking population living on the Serbian side of the Danube, as well as other inland areas of Serbia. When my respondents referred to the Serbians, they largely spoke about Vlachs, with whom they always had excellent connections in all areas of life.
- <sup>4</sup> Narrow, montaineous sector of the Danube's flow between Orșova and Moldova Nouă.
- <sup>5</sup> Company responsible with the construction and maintenance of the Iron Gates hydropower plant.



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