

Deserted Borderland. Demographic anxieties and the politicisation of emigration in northern Greece during the early Cold War

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Abstract

As a result of the Cold War dynamics, Greece found itself bordering the Communist Bloc, namely Albania, Yugoslavia and Bulgaria. When in the early sixties a mass exodus from the underdeveloped rural areas of Northern Greece towards West Germany acquired momentum, policymakers, experts and the media created a moral panic about the depopulation of the borderland with implications to the national security. Analyzing the media discourses and the experts' publications this article has two main ambitions. From the one hand, it aims to situate this moment of mass exodus to the long durée of forced displacement and mobility in this borderland and, from the other hand it contextualizes the politicization of migration as an oxymoron between the Greek state's aspiration to reach European standards of development through migration, and its sclerosis regarding demographic anxieties without sustainable sociopolitical solutions.

Keywords: borderland; migration; demography; Greece; Cold War

Introduction

If the areas become depopulated, a zone of political vacuum, varying in width from 10 to 40 kilometers, will be created along the border of Northern Greece. The "Greekness" of this zone must be maintained even though the cost may be high [...] If the nation wishes to perpetuate its dream of political and economic stability, it must quickly remove the triad of poverty, ignorance, and conservatism which is responsible for the political and economic retardation of the Greek mountain villages.¹

¹ Vouras, Paul. 1960. Northern Greece in our times: problems and achievements. *Balkan Studies* 1(1), 39.

These were the words of Paul Vouras, a Greek geographer of conservative political leanings teaching in American universities. In 1960, he presented his nine-month fieldwork under the title *My impressions of Northern Greece* at the Institute for Balkan Studies in Thessaloniki, Greece, later published in the journal of the institute as *Northern Greece in our times: problems and achievements*. Vouras visited all the prefectures of northern Greece and offered brief case studies from different villages on the Greek borders with Turkey, Bulgaria, Yugoslavia and Albania.

In a similar vein, Régis Darques argues that, in the aftermath of the Second World War, Greece became a besieged citadel surrounded by hostile neighbours. More precisely, “for about fifty years, the Iron Curtain imposed its law on vast areas doomed to underdevelopment and placed under direct or indirect military supervision”.² This is all the more important given the fact that Greece played an important role in the region's geopolitics and security concerns despite its small size and peripheral position.³

When, in the early 1960s, a mass exodus from the underdeveloped rural regions of Northern Greece towards West Germany gathered momentum — largely driven by a bilateral guest worker recruitment agreement — policymakers, experts, and the media framed this mobility as a moral panic over the depopulation of a sensitive borderland and its implications for national security. Focusing on media discourses and expert publications, this article pursues two main aims: first, to situate this episode within the *longue durée* of forced displacement and mobility in the region; and second, to analyse the politicisation of migration as a fundamental tension between the Greek state's developmental ambitions—pursued through labour migration—and its persistent demographic anxieties, which remained largely unaccompanied by sustainable socio-political solutions. The long *durée* of migration in the area of Northern Greece was not a negligible factor for the mass exodus happening in the 1960s. The background of the Balkan Wars in 1912–1913, the refugee settlement of 1923 after the Lausanne Treaty and mainly the violent Greek Civil War of 1946–1949 upset the demographic balance of the area and created regional inequalities in the so-called “New Lands” compared with the rest of Greece.⁴ However, the significance of the population loss became increasingly politicised because of the ideological importance of Northern Greece as a bulwark of “healthy national conscience” against the communist threat from the northern borders of the country in the Cold War context. This ideological component resonates with what Rory Archer, Sara Bernard and Yannis Papadopoulos sustain, namely that “human mobility in the second half of the 20th century was not simply a matter of escape or exile, but a dynamic and contested practice that reshaped identities, affiliations, and the very meaning of belonging across and within ideological divides”.⁵

Using as my primary sources the printed media of the period and the publications of contemporaneous social scientists, I view the mass emigration from Northern Greece as both

² Darques, Régis. 2024. *Border areas and land confines: Litigations, defense, and development*, in *The geography of Greece*, edited by Darques, Régis / Sidiropoulos, George, and Kostas Kalabokidis. Cham: Springer, 81–112.

³ Papadopoulos, Alex, and Triantafyllos Petridis. 2021. *Hellenic statecraft and the geopolitics of difference*. New York: Routledge.

⁴ According to the Treaty of Bucharest in 1913, signed after the end of the Balkan Wars, the Greek state annexed Epirus, the East Aegean islands, Crete and Macedonia, the so-called ‘New Lands’ (*Nees Hores*). By 1918, the inter-allied army had taken over the administration of both West and East Thrace, and in 1920, it transferred administration to the Greek authorities. After the end of the Greco-Turkish War in 1922, Greece kept West Thrace and Turkey East Thrace, with the land border being the river Evros/Meriç. As seen in Tsitselikis, Konstantinos. 2012. *Old and new Islam in Greece: From historical minorities to immigrant newcomers*. Leiden: Brill, 47.

⁵ Archer, Rory / Bernard, Sara, and Yiannis Papadopoulos (eds.). 2025. *The Cold War of labor migrants: opportunities, struggles and adaptations across the Iron Curtain and beyond*. New York: Routledge, 7.

a political and a politicized phenomenon. A necessary caveat is that, as Kourvetaris and Moskos noted in 1968, “in semi-developed countries such as Greece, the bulk of sociological research will be conducted under governmental sponsorship and control”⁶. The same applied to other social sciences — including demography, geography, and anthropology, which this article draws. Accordingly, these scholarly interventions must be read against the grain, with attention to their institutional location within state structures. Their claims to objectivity were shaped by political and ideological constraints. The corpus I am using here consists of mostly commissioned reports written in English or French in collaboration with state-funded institutions such as the National Statistical Service, the Greek Social Sciences Center and the Institute of Balkan Studies. As far as the press is concerned, I am selecting newspapers with wide circulation in the studied area and representing the three main parties of the political spectrum. More precisely, for the conservative camp I am using *Ellinikos Vorras* as the major right-wing newspaper published in Thessaloniki, supporting the National Radical Union (*Ethniki Rizospastiki Enosi*, ERE) founded in 1955 by Konstantinos Karamanlis, holding power until 1963 and then again briefly in 1966–67. To echo the views of the Center I am using the newspaper *Makedonia* published in Thessaloniki and mainly supporting Center Union, the party headed by veteran politician George Papandreou who won the 1963 elections but had to resign in 1965 after a disagreement with the king. The newspaper *Avgi* published in Athens was the voice of the Left able to operate under the cover of the United Democratic Left Party (*Eniaia Dimokratiki Aristera*, EDA), supported by the Communist Party of Greece (*Kommounistiko Komma Ellados*, KKE), banned since 1947 and exiled in Bucharest.

The article is structured with a first part acting as a portrait of the borderland as a crisis region in terms of its history of forced mobility, armed conflict and destruction, leading to both economic and sociopolitical pressures on its population. The second part explores the politicization of migration at the national level, followed by a section on media frames used in the representation of the mass exodus in Epirus, Macedonia and Thrace. The last part revolves around the suggested solutions regarding the management of migration in the border areas, showing the uncertainty on the correct balance between overpopulation and depopulation. Finally, the conclusion offers an insight into the implications of migration from borderlands in the domestic political debates and the policymaking choices vested with national and international security concerns.

Northern Greece as a crisis region from the Balkan Wars to the Marshall Plan

According to the recruitment data of the German Commission in Athens, 60 % of the Greek emigrants to West Germany in the 1960s left from the primarily rural regions of Epirus, Macedonia and Thrace. Even as late as the years 1970–77, 68 % of the emigrants left from these three border regions in the North of the country.⁷ In order to understand the specificity of the area of Northern Greece, apart from looking only at the tremendous destruction during the Civil War, we should go back to the tragic consequences of the end of the Eastern Question in Greece. The Balkan Wars of 1912–1913 resulted in a significant expansion of both the population and the territory of the country. More importantly, the influx of more than a million Greek Orthodox refugees following the defeat of the Greek army in Asia Minor in 1922 profoundly disrupted existing demographic, social, and economic balances, particularly

⁶ Kourvetaris, George A., and Charles C. Moskos. 1968. A report on sociology in Greece. *The American Sociologist* 3(3), 244.

⁷ Fakiolas, Rossetos, and Russell King. 1996. Emigration, return, immigration: A review and evaluation of Greece's postwar experience of international migration. *International Journal of Population Geography* 2(2), 173–174.

in Northern Greece, where many of these refugees were resettled in regions with already fragile ethnic and political equilibria.⁸ In the Convention Concerning the Exchange of Greek and Turkish Populations signed in Lausanne in 1923, a compulsory population exchange was agreed upon. Ultimately, between 350,000 and 500,000 Muslims had to leave Greece and resettle in Turkey, and about 1.2 million Orthodox people found refuge in Greece.⁹

After the population exchange, 638,253 Greek refugees from Asia Minor, Pontos and other areas settled in Macedonia, making up 45 % of the total population of the region. In some prefectures there was a higher concentration, such as in Kilkis (72 %), Drama (70 %), Kavala, Pella, and more than 40 % in Thessaloniki and Serres.¹⁰ Both for the League of Nations and for the Greek interwar governments, the Asia Minor refugees were viewed as a human resource that could be used for the benefit of Greece's security in Hellenizing Macedonia and Western Thrace by replacing the departed Muslim and Slav minorities in crucial border areas. In order to limit potential radicalism or communism, the other great concern was the formation of a petty-bourgeois class through government-backed redistribution of land.¹¹ Greek Macedonia, a fertile "breadbasket", became the depository for East Thracian, Pontic and Asia Minor refugees. The refugees were often unwelcome, since some locals regarded them as less Greek than themselves or, worse, as total "others" who came to take away their land.¹²

While World War II was still raging in Europe and the Pacific, the onset of the Greek Civil War in December 1944 marked the beginning of the Cold War. For the people of Greece, the civil war would continue the devastation that the Italian, German, and Bulgarian occupations had initiated. The end of the Civil War found Greece almost ruined, given that 9,000 villages, 23 % of all buildings, and 65 % of industrial establishments were destroyed. The total Civil War casualties were approximately 108,000 fatalities for a population of around 7.5 million people.¹³ Following the half million dead in World War II and the Nazi occupation, the final toll of this terrible decade was indeed heavy.¹⁴

War and its aftermath have brought about in Greece a sudden change in the demographic development as well as considerable distortions, either temporary or permanent, in the geographic distribution of the population. The administrative units (Greek: *nomoi*) along Greece's northern border from Epirus to Macedonia and Thrace experienced a loss of population.¹⁵ The structural problems of Greek agriculture, namely the small and scattered lots and the outdated farming methods caused by the lack of modern equipment, were the

⁸ Barmpouti, Alexandra. 2019. *Post-war eugenics, reproductive choices and population policies in Greece, 1950s–1980s*. New York: Springer, 198.

⁹ Chenoweth, Erica, and Adria Lawrence (eds.). 2010. *Rethinking violence: States and non-state actors in conflict*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 127.

¹⁰ Kolodny, Emile. 1981. L'émigration macédonienne vers l'Allemagne Fédérale: le cas de Néokaisaria (Pierie). *Méditerranée* 41(1), 23–24.

¹¹ Kontogiorgi, Elisabeth. 2003. *Economic consequences following refugee settlement in Greek Macedonia (1923–1932)*, in *Crossing the Aegean. An Appraisal of the 1923 Compulsory Population Exchange Between Greece and Turkey*, edited by Hirschon, Renée. New York: Berghahn, 63–64 and 69.

¹² Karakasidou, Anastasia. 2009. *Fields of wheat, hills of blood: Passages to nationhood in Greek Macedonia, 1870–1990*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 145–147.

¹³ Kalyvas, Stathis. 2006. *The logic of violence in civil war*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 248–249.

¹⁴ Stefanidis, Ioannis. 2020. *Greece from occupation and resistance to civil war, 1941–1949*, in *The Routledge handbook of Balkan and Southeast European History*, edited by Lampe, John, and Ulf Brunnbauer. London: Routledge, 417.

¹⁵ Kayser, Bernard / Thompson, Kenneth, and Roger Vaternelle. 1964. *Economic and social atlas of Greece*. Athens: Government Press.

main cause for unemployment or underemployment in rural areas.¹⁶ As a result, already in the early 1950s, an increased mobility of people was taking place. The American economic aid of the Marshall Plan was initially intended to promote industrial development. However, its distribution from the Central Bank to the large National Bank of Greece favored agriculture instead.¹⁷

In light of the result of the Greek Civil War, Greece became part of the Western Bloc and benefited from the Marshall Plan and in 1952 was rewarded with NATO membership. Greece was the only Western country, and only NATO member, to share land borders with three socialist states, i.e., Albania, Yugoslavia and Bulgaria, all of which had also in the recent past expressed aggressive stances against Greek sovereignty. The geographical formation of the borders with Bulgaria and Yugoslavia offered no advantage to Greece as the latter lacked strategic depth to develop its defending forces or even plan a counterattack.¹⁸ Between 1947 and 1949, the United States provided extensive military and economic assistance to the Greek government under the Truman Doctrine, which committed Washington to supporting governments confronting Communist insurgencies. Although the Greek Communist forces were ultimately defeated in the Civil War, the northern region of Macedonia had been one of the conflict's principal battlegrounds and was widely perceived as geopolitically vulnerable due to its proximity to socialist Yugoslavia and Bulgaria. In the context of the emerging Cold War, this legacy fostered a powerful right-wing narrative in which political dissent was cast as externally instigated. Leftist actors were frequently portrayed as "Slavs" or "Bulgarians," labels that conflated political opposition with alleged ethnic and foreign loyalties.¹⁹

The historian Carl Mauzy explored a collection of photographs taken by and for the Greek Marshall Plan. The visual narrative of the returning villagers shows how reconstruction – both material and social – was refracted through (Cold War) anti-communism as well as amnesia of the recent past, eliding the complexities of the villagers' displacement and their return.²⁰ Choosing to depict only violent acts committed during the Greek Civil War but silencing the destruction caused by the fascist Italian, Nazi, and Bulgarian Occupation troops served the ideological purposes of the right-wing victors. Paul Vouras, whose study opens this article, also treated the villages he examined as showcases of the Cold War, adopting a conservative pro-royalist stance.

His first case study was the village of Dendrochori, near the Albanian border, abandoned by its inhabitants during the Italian invasion and partly destroyed by the "guerrillas" (in Greek the term *symmorites* was used as a pejorative term for the Communist fighters). It was repopulated by the government with settlers who were previously migratory nomads and according to Vouras the main problem of Dendrochori was overpopulation. The second case study was the village of Exohi, about 2.5 kilometers from the Bulgarian border, the 500 inhabitants of which were Asia Minor refugees who engaged mainly in the production of tobacco and potatoes. Vouras continued with a celebratory presentation of the impact of the Royal Provision (*Βασιλική Πρόνοια*) led by Queen Frederica. According to Vouras, it had done:

¹⁶ Kasimati, Koula. 1984. *Migration-repatriation: The discourse on second generation*. Athens: National Center for Social Research (in Greek), 29.

¹⁷ Anastasakis, Othon. 2020. *Greece's Cold War: Exceptionalism in Southeastern Europe*, in *The Routledge handbook of Balkan and Southeast European History*, edited by Lampe, John, and Ulf Brunnbauer. London: Routledge, 499.

¹⁸ Kotoulas, Ioannis. 2021. Greece as a frontline state in the historical longue durée. *Journal of Military Studies* 10(1), 85.

¹⁹ Agnew, John. 2007. No borders, no nations: making Greece in Macedonia. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 97(2), 407.

²⁰ Mauzy, Carl. 2026. Rural returns–Marshall Plan photography and the visualization of a postwar Greek community. *Journal of Contemporary History* 61(1), 76.

a very good job in helping to ameliorate the living conditions in the destitute villages under her care. It represents the "Ethnos" (nation in Greek) in the often-neglected Greek mountain villages. When the peasants see the Queen's Fund jeep heading toward their villages, they get the feeling that someone in far-away Athens is really interested in their grave (but to some, trivial) problems.²¹

The village of Dikaia, his third case study, was situated midway along the portion of the river Evros, which forms the boundary between Greece and Bulgaria. For Vouras, it was "courageously trying to fulfill its role as the shop window of Greek democracy and freedom, despite the existence of irritating deterrents to its economic and social progress".²² Why so? The Bulgarian lands were not at all far from this border village, and the communist Bulgaria of the time invested much in modernizing the rural areas through mechanization of agriculture, electrification, etc. As Vouras argued:

obviously, the communists of Bulgaria are trying to demonstrate to the inhabitants of the Greek border villages that communism has the interests of the people at heart. [...] The insistence of the communist countries on turning their border areas into a showcase for communism compels Greece to invest money in improving its relatively unproductive border areas, even though that money is admittedly desperately needed for the rational development of its productive regions.²³

The politicisation of migration at the national level

In March 1960, Greek and West German governments signed a bilateral labor recruitment agreement. In practice, that meant that West German companies with an interest in hiring foreigners addressed the Federal Labor Office (*Bundesanstalt für Arbeit*), and the recruitment center based in the sending country selected the appropriate candidates.²⁴ Successful applicants were offered a working contract and a yearly residence permit, while their journey was organised and paid for. After the end of the agreed working duration, the migrant workers either could extend their work and residence permit if their working contract was renewed as well, or they had to leave the country.²⁵

Bernard Kayser in the *Economic and Social Atlas of Greece* underlined that migration rates showed that administrative departments with emigration rates of over 10 % formed an almost continuous chain from Corfu and western Epirus to the river Evros, at the tip of Thrace. West Germany exerted the most exclusive attraction among migrants, given that 70.5 % of the migration from Thrace, 77.8 % from Macedonia, and 84.7 % from Epirus had as its destination the Federal Republic of Germany.²⁶ The government tried to discourage departures from these regions, fearful that a great wave of emigration would negatively impact fertility rates. If the youth left these regions, the birth rates would fall and the population would age and decline, a concern all the more valid due to the regions' position at the borders.²⁷ As Kayser emphasized, the problem of emigration was felt by Greek public opinion, given that "in this sparsely populated country, the mass of departures, added to

²¹ Vouras, Paul. 1960. Northern Greece in our times: Problems and achievements. *Balkan Studies* 1(1), 37.

²² Vouras, *Northern Greece in our times*, 37.

²³ Vouras, *Northern Greece in our times*, 38.

²⁴ De Bock, Jozefien. 2018. Of employers, uncles and interpreters: The diverse trajectories of guest workers to the Belgian city of Ghent, 1960–1975. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 44(7), 1237.

²⁵ Berlinghoff, Marcel. 2014. 'Faux touristes'? Tourism in European migration regimes in the long sixties. *Comparativ Zeitschrift für Globalgeschichte und vergleichende Gesellschaftsforschung* 24(2), 97–98.

²⁶ Kayser, Bernard / Thompson, Kenneth, and Roger Vaternelle. 1964. *Economic and social atlas of Greece*. Athens: Government Press, 217.

²⁷ Kayser, Bernard. 1964. Nouvelles données sur l'émigration grecque. *Population* 19(4), 719.

internal migrations, had rapidly created in recent years, in the rural world at least, a serious imbalance, rather than the simple decongestion desired by certain ‘planners’”.²⁸ What Kayser means here is that the massive character of emigration, instead of just alleviating the pressures of unemployment and overpopulation in the rural provinces, created a population gap in the most active age groups.

In the mainstream right-wing discourse, emigration was a necessary evil. However, according to the Greek–German recruitment agreement requirements, only candidates with civic-mindedness certificates would be eligible to migrate through the official procedure.²⁹ Indeed, the right-wing ERE was quick to exploit the advantage of controlling the state mechanism via the certificates, using the employment opportunities provided by the migration agreements to cater to its own electorate, as argued by the historian Lina Venturas.³⁰ Despite the short-term political gains, such a prioritization of right-wing voters towards migration would mean that the border regions would be left without a ‘nationally sane’ population. Such a risk was avoided, though, thanks to the available alternatives to official recruitment, namely recruitment through invitation by relatives already employed in the Federal Republic or the use of a tourist visa with employment prospects opened the way to other social groups that would normally be blocked at the filtering of the selection. Both Greek and West German authorities turned a blind eye to those parallel channels – at least initially – in order to accommodate their needs to export surplus manpower and to absorb it, respectively.

In late March 1960, the conservative *Ellinikos Vorras* wondered if migration was a solution to the social problems of the country and introduced the theme of “hemorrhage”, in which blood was transferred from the Greek national body to reinforce other nations.³¹ Demographic anxieties dominated the discourse about migration, comparing it to the spread of an epidemic. All of northern Greece was affected by the contagion of that fever to leave, which threatened to annihilate the dynamic part of the population. The newspaper urged the government to offer employment opportunities to correct the “crime” and “error” of letting them go.³² The majority of the remaining working hands in the villages were made up of children and the elderly, since the youth fled to escape misery. Alarmed, the reporter urged the Parliament to “beware of the village!”³³ From its side, the Left described emigration as a “slave trade” which deprived Greece of its most productive resources. Along similar lines, George Papandreou, the leader of the Center Union party, employed dramatic tones: “emigration on the scale it is happening is a tragic hemorrhage for the country. It is desertion of the countryside, vagabondism in the cities, expatriation of the youth. This is the dramatic image of the Hellas of the economic miracle.”³⁴

Apart from its significance for domestic policymaking, it soon became clear that the management of migration had an impact on the image of the country abroad. For instance, a

²⁸ Kayser, *Nouvelles données*, 726.

²⁹ Under Greek law 516/1948, a “civic-mindedness certificate” (*pistopoiitiko koinonikon fronimaton*) was necessary in order to take up state employment or a professional permit, a passport, a driver’s license, or even a scholarship or university education. The certificates were based upon police surveillance records, and they were documented in paper dossiers (*fakeloi*). For more details, see Samatas, Minas. 2004. *Surveillance in Greece: from anticommunist to consumer surveillance*. New York: Pella, Siani-Davies, Peter, and Stefanos Katsikas. 2009. National reconciliation after Civil War: The case of Greece. *Journal of Peace Research* 46(4), 559–575.

³⁰ Venturas, Lina. 2001. Gouvernements grecs et partis politiques: lutte pour le contrôle de l’émigration (1950–1974). *Revue Européenne Des Migrations Internationales* 17(3), 52.

³¹ Dossas, Gerasimos. 1960. Migration: blood from Greece to strengthen other peoples, *Ellinikos Vorras*, 22 March 1960.

³² Ellinikos Vorras. 1961. Stop the hemorrhage! *Ellinikos Vorras*, 30 January and 8 February 1961.

³³ Ellinikos Vorras. 1961. Beware of the village. *Ellinikos Vorras*, 28 February and 1 March 1961.

³⁴ Eleutheria. 1962. *Eleutheria*, 22 May 1962, 7.

five-minute-long documentary of the Bavarian Radio about rural areas in Northern Greece, enraged the Greek right-wing government. In early 1963, the Greek minister of Foreign Affairs, Evangelos Averoff, sent a 'teletyped cryptograph' to the Greek embassy in Bonn complaining that the show:

did not align with the friendly relations between the two countries. Moreover, the negative depiction of the living standards, mainly in the area of Macedonia could be the matter of exploitation from the part of 'elements' leading systematically an anti-hellenic propaganda, [and certainly, such a] one-sided depiction of the living standards of the Greek people is not promoting the Greek interests.³⁵

The Press Directorate of the Greek embassy in Bonn offered more details on the show, specifying that some scenes depicted the tobacco villages of Macedonia where "poverty presides", comparing a 7-member Greek family's yearly income to an average German family's income of two months. Thus, "many young people have only one goal: Germany, where they hope to find good revenue and stable employment. The villages, though, are threatened by the danger of desertification and decline [...] even the village's mayor wants to leave for Germany. The living standards are such that in his village there won't be in a while but women and old men".³⁶

When the government passed to the control of the Center in 1963, the Left attacked the government for its passivity against the increasing migration rates, suggesting that it was not enough to halt migration but to create decent employment conditions so that people stay.³⁷ The same attitude was adopted by the right-wing opposition. In April 1964, the conservative newspaper *Ellinikos Vorras* lamented that in only a couple of days 1200 migrants left the country, naming the destination as "Papandreou factories", alluding to the fact that these promised factories in Greece never materialized and thus the surplus labor had to migrate.³⁸ And if everyone leaves the country, "who will trumpet the motto 'Greeks in Greece for Greece'", the reporter was wondering a few days later.³⁹

Humor and sarcasm were predominant in the journalist and caricaturists' toolkit, as one article creatively parallelised West Germany as a Minotaur who was eating the young victims sent from Greece (note to the reader: in ancient Greek mythology the Minotaur was eating young men and women sent from Athens to Creta as a yearly toll).⁴⁰ Finally, George Papandreou was known with the nickname "Old Man of Democracy", and that was something that inspired an illustration showing the map of Greece as the figure of an old man with a walking stick with the caption "Greece became an old men's country because of the migration of youth".⁴¹

Media frames of the mass exodus in Northern Greece

³⁵ Ministry of Presidency to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, document 86γ72-9, folder 1966/3/8, Athens, 12 January 1963.

³⁶ Press Office of the Greek embassy in Bonn to the Ministry of Presidency, document 430, folder 1966/3/8, Bonn, 21 December 1962.

³⁷ Avgi. 1964. The salary increases act as a barrier to migration. *Avgi*, 19 February 1964.

³⁸ Mertzos, Nikos. Thousands of young people migrate every month from Northern Greece, *Ellinikos Vorras*, 9 April 1964.

³⁹ *Ellinikos Vorras*. 1964. One more train left. *Ellinikos Vorras*, 19 April 1964.

⁴⁰ *Ellinikos Vorras*. 1964. The Minotaur was full. *Ellinikos Vorras*, 30 May 1964, 3.

⁴¹ Raptis, I. 1965. Greece became an old men's country because of the migration of youth. *Ellinikos Vorras*, 19 March 1965, 1. [caricature]

Against the backdrop of broader debates on migration at the level of public and political discourse, we now turn to the situation on the ground in order to examine how these dynamics unfolded locally. To this end, we will draw first on press coverage from Epirus, followed by Macedonia, and finally Thrace.

Epirus was heavily impacted by the Greek Civil War, fought vehemently in its mountains, like Mount Grammos. To get an idea about numbers, in Dimitris Papadopoulos' study about the border region of Prespa, we are informed that while the 1940 census recorded over 10,000 people in 22 Prespa villages, in 1951 the population dropped to less than 3,000. By the 1950s, most of these deserted villages were accessible only by boat, due to the authorities' indifference in reconstructing the damaged road network.⁴² The Greek government selected Epirus for the first regional development plan. According to the plan, which ran from 1959–1969 and was subdivided into two five-year plans, the regional product was expected to more than double by the end of the period. An “Experimental and Demonstration Zone” was also to be set up in Epirus in 1957, supported by specialized OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) services. Moreover, the French sociologist Henri Mendras (1927–2003) and his team were commissioned by the United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) in 1961 to investigate six villages in Epirus, looking specifically at problems of socioeconomic development. Their focus was the Konitsa region, at the extreme northern point of Epirus, with the survey sample comprising three mountain villages and three located in the plains. In 1963, the papers given at the Mediterranean Sociological Conference held in Athens presented data relating to the Mediterranean area. The six parts of the paper addressed social values, village structure, markets, internal and external migration, social change and social prerequisites for economic development.⁴³

The leftist press often employed the Marxist view of humans as commodities in capitalism in order to describe how migrants were not much different than animals sold in a market. For instance, in a March 1961 article, the reporter claimed that “in Epirus, in the village of Moushousti in Arta, where the horse market was taking place, people are now sold for nothing”.⁴⁴ Browsing the newspaper for titles relevant to migration from Northern Greece, we find an ominous image of the Greek countryside full of poverty, debts and abandonment. In more detail, in early 1961 the title says, “here is the prosperity that the servants of oligarchy advertise: hunger, debts, migration is the tragic triptych in Epirus,”⁴⁵ and an interview with villagers in Sinopi concludes with their aphorism that they were ready to go even to hell if it was to find a job and bread.⁴⁶

Epirus was termed by *Avgi* as an “endless bazaar of misery”. While the ERE government was advertising its renaissance, Epirus was dying, given that all its youth was leaving it and all the traditional artisan know-how was dying out, as well. For the Left only intense industrialisation would save Epirus from decay.⁴⁷ In another article, it is repeated that “nothing changed in the zone of misery” and Epirus is termed as ruined with empty schools and villages left only with the elderly. In late 1962, the article claimed that 90,000 young

⁴² Papadopoulos, Dimitris. 2016. Ecologies of ruin: (re)bordering, ruination, and internal colonialism in Greek Macedonia, 1913–2013. *International Journal of Historical Archaeology* 20(3), 634

⁴³ Peristiany, John George. 1968. *Contributions to Mediterranean Sociology. Mediterranean rural communities and social change*. Paris: Mouton.

⁴⁴ Georgiou, A. Here are the provinces: misery befalls upon Epirus, *Avgi*, 2 March 1961, 1.

⁴⁵ Georgiou, A. Hunger, debts, migration: the tragic triptych of Epirus, *Avgi*, 19 February 1961, 1.

⁴⁶ Georgiou, A. *Hunger, debts, migration*, 1.

⁴⁷ Theodorakis, Yannis. Epirus is dying. *Avgi*, 11 August 1963, 3.

people migrated in a year, congratulating the ERE government for building a Greece without Greeks!⁴⁸

Despite supporting the right-wing government in the early sixties, the conservative *Ellinkos Vorras* was also voicing concerns about the disdain of the central administration and their ignorance of the local conditions. For example, in early 1960, *Ellinikos Vorras* sent its reporter to Kozani, in Western Macedonia. As the reporter noted:

when the generous Greek authorities remember the youth of Kozani, those poor Greeks will come again for one or two days even without food to get registered. I talked today with some youth from the faraway villages of Kozani and Grevena, the Mauranaious, Spilaio and Ziaka. In the reporter's question they say: what do you want us to do? How are we going to live, nobody sees us, nobody cares for us.⁴⁹

The frontpage title of late January 1960 "the whole Northern Greece is contaminated by the epidemic of emigration" encapsulates the atmosphere of urgency the rural exodus created. The news was spreading from village to village and the young people got mobilised. For instance, the town of Polygyros was flooded by thousands of young people who came to get registered on the emigration lists for Germany. The hotels were fully booked, so the rest of the young men spent the night in coffeehouses and restaurants.⁵⁰ In early April, in Katerini, because of the financial crisis and mainly the low prices for tobacco, hundreds of young people were squeezed daily in the migration offices, in order to prepare their passports and leave for foreign countries for employment.⁵¹

Whole villages were applying collectively, like in the case of Strumonochori, where 60 young people, among them whole families, took their passports and left for West Germany and 100 more young villagers intended to follow their example.⁵² In just six months, from January until July, the Prefecture of Serres issued 1,400 passports. Many of the migrants were high school graduates who failed to find a job, together with young farmers who quit their villages because their fathers' fields were completely insufficient. For them, it was a journey with no return.⁵³

Eastern Macedonia was also affected, given that an "emigration fever took over the population of the Drama prefecture because of the depression-in a form of uprising lately". For the six months until the end of August of 1960, 3,100 passports were issued. What is remarkable is that only 350 people applied from the city of Drama and 3,000 from the surrounding villages. No wonder, though, because as the reporter explained: "poverty and isolation are unbearable. The flow took the form of an uprising, and the applications were sent massively from certain regions".⁵⁴ The reporter of the leftist *Avgi*, taking inspiration from an ancient text (most probably from Strabo) saying "Macedonia is a rich region," argued that the contradiction this time was that the area is rich but its people were poor and

⁴⁸ *Avgi*. 1962. The best are leaving!, *Avgi*, 30 December 1962, 3.

⁴⁹ *Ellinikos Vorras*. 1960. Constantly growing stream of fleeing abroad. *Ellinikos Vorras*, 29 January 1960.

⁵⁰ *Ellinikos Vorras*. 1960. All Northern Greece is blown by the epidemic of migration, *Ellinikos Vorras*, 31 January 1960, 1.

⁵¹ *Makedonia*. 1960. The youth abandons Katerini to find work abroad, *Makedonia*, 7 April 1960, 1.

⁵² *Makedonia*. 1960. Sixty young men migrated from a village near Serres in one week. *Makedonia*, 3 July 1960, 5.

⁵³ *Makedonia*. 1960. 1300 passports were issued in Serres. *Makedonia*, 22 July 1960, 3.

⁵⁴ *Kastrinos, A.* Migration fever took over the population of Drama prefecture due to the current misery. *Makedonia*, 13 November 1960, 7.

miserable, the villages deserted, and the only transport option was not cars or buses but mules.⁵⁵

In the region of Thrace, from the Prefecture of Evros on the border with Turkey and Bulgaria, from the 1st of January until the end of July 1960, in total 1,700 passports were issued. Most of the villages and the island of Samothrace were deserted.⁵⁶ In 1963, an article in the leftist *Avgi* set the alarm with the headline “Thrace, SOS!”. Absurdity reigned, and everything looked like an oxymoron, namely wheat producers without wheat, animals without land, tobacco without price.⁵⁷ An example was the region of Xanthi in Thrace, where there was an unprecedented desertification due to migration with perch fields, closed manufactures, and farmers’ depravity due to a population decrease from 40,000 pre-war to 25,000 people in 1966.⁵⁸ The centrist press could not openly attack its own party in power, but once Papandreou was forced to resign in July 1965 and puppet governments took over until April 1967, it resumed its mission of showcasing the impact of migration to the rural borderlands. For example, in January 1967, we read the sequel of a reportage in Prosotsani, a town on the Greek–Turkish border. The reporter noticed a label for an open-air cinema, which was not working anymore, because both the technician and the audience were all in Germany!⁵⁹

Demographic anxieties without concrete solutions

Negreponti-Delivanis, one of the few women active in the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki and the Institute of Balkan Studies in the 1960s, wrote a review of Bernard Kayser’s milestone work on the human geography of Greece. Regarding the income inequality between the capital and the rest of the country, in 1961 the average annual income per head in the capital region was 13,422 drachmas as against 9,932 in Greece as a whole. As Negreponti-Delivanis continues echoing Kayser’s conclusions:

the attraction of the capital for the provincials is all the more dangerous when it concerns the inhabitants of the regions of Macedonia and Thrace, regions which, for reasons that are not only economic but also and above all political, must remain sufficiently populated.⁶⁰

Negreponti-Delivanis shared the same right-wing ideals with Paul Vouras, whose work opened this article. They were both viewing the northern borderlands of the country as bulwarks against communist anti-Hellenic propaganda in a junction of the post-civil war landscape in Greece and the Cold War general framework.

Bernard Kayser in the *Economic and Social Atlas of Greece*, argued that “Greece is experiencing what could be called a reformation. It is, however, reformed on an unequal basis from one region to the other, with some of them not quite managing to reconstitute themselves completely.”⁶¹ The rates of migration from 19 nomes exceeded the average account for more than half (54,65 %) of the emigrants even though their combined population represented only slightly more than a quarter (27,34 %) of the total Greek population. The

⁵⁵ Efstathiadis, Mpampis. Macedonia is a rich land, *Avgi*, 9 November 1963.

⁵⁶ For a study on migration from Samothrace to Stuttgart, see Kolodny, Emile. 1982. *Samothrace sur Neckar : des migrants grecs dans l’agglomération de Stuttgart*. Institut de recherches méditerranéennes, Centre d’études de géographie méditerranéenne: Diffusion, Méditerranée.

⁵⁷ Theodorakis, Yannis. Thrace SOS!, *Avgi*, 5 October 1963, 3.

⁵⁸ *Avgi*. 1966. Prefecture of Xanthi: unseen desertification due to migration. *Avgi*, 26 February 1966.

⁵⁹ Makedonia. 1967. Three migrants returned out of the 1400 that left from Prosotsani. *Makedonia*, 12 January 1967, 3.

⁶⁰ Negreponti-Delivanis, Maria. 1964. Review of Bernard Kayser, Géographie humaine de la Grèce. *Balkan Studies* 5(2) (in French), 395–396.

⁶¹ Kayser, et al. *Economic and social atlas of Greece*, 218.

towering domination of frontier nomes in the geographic distribution of emigration translated in numbers meant that Evros, Kozani and Drama lost over 4,000 people in 1962. The arrival of internal migrants at a certain locality did not inhibit the departure of emigrants from the same locality. The main question that was raised, given the quasi-unstoppable exodus, was whether migration had to be halted. According to Kayser:

some authoritarian measures taken in this direction could, no doubt, only appear to those concerned as intolerable bullying, at the very moment when the free movement of men within the Common Market, with which Greece is associated, is on the agenda. But should we then allow the nation's lifeblood to flow abroad unchecked?⁶²

Not necessarily. For Kayser, a balanced approach would be the best solution. A comprehensive policy encouraging co-operatives and mechanization in agriculture alongside the employment of returning migrants who have acquired qualifications abroad in industry could gradually overcome that worrying contradiction. Kayser, instead of seeing Northern Greece as an inherently problematic region, argued that it could restore the balance that was lacking in the Greek economic area. Northern Greece made up 32.4% of the country's surface area and 26.8% of the national population. Through the migration of working hands, the regional agricultural product was reduced. Thus, Kayser wondered whether this loss of income could be considered temporary or whether the considerable capital accumulated by emigrants abroad could be invested in regional agriculture in order to improve it. Despite his general optimism, Kayser admitted that from the various investigations carried out on this point, "we cannot draw an optimistic conclusion."⁶³

Xenophon Zolotas, a very well-read economist, director of the Bank of Greece and one of the four wise men who reformed OEEC (Organization for European Economic Cooperation) into OECD⁶⁴, also warned in 1966 that there was a strict interdependence between economic development and demographic expansion. According to Zolotas, demographic problems connected to overpopulation were not extremely different from those of underpopulation, creating inactive social groups of children and old people. Population stagnation and even decline were direct consequences of mass emigration, combined with a low birth rate, creating an effect of a "backlash" on the socio-economic structure of developing countries, while the opposite effect was desired when policymakers had promoted migration. In such a prediction, uncontrolled labor migration would assume quite rapidly proportions that would lead to the creation of ghost towns and villages, and the devitalization of nations. In other words:

a very sharp decline in population growth – especially when it comes to the active population – could become a major obstacle to economic progress [...] is already a painful reality in certain European countries in the process of development, and particularly in Greece, where the mass exodus of labor has already

⁶² Kayser, Bernard. 1964. Nouvelles données sur l'émigration grecque. *Population* 19(4), 726 (my translation from the original French).

⁶³ Kayser, Bernard. *Nouvelles données sur l'émigration grecque*, 59 and 65.

⁶⁴ The forerunner of the OECD was the Organisation for European Economic Co-operation (OEEC), which was formed to administer American and Canadian aid under the Marshall Plan for the reconstruction of Europe after the Second World War. The Convention transforming the OEEC into the OECD was signed in Paris on 14 December 1960 and entered into force on 30 September 1961. The "Four Wise Men" were Bernard Clappier, Randolph Burgess, Xenophon Zolotas and Paul Gore-Booth. For more details see Griffiths, R.T. 1997. *Exploration in OEEC history*. Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.

generated a movement of opposition to the continuation of migration on such a large scale.⁶⁵

The 1966 Greek National Statistical Service Survey offered the least optimistic picture, naming the problem of migration ‘enormous’ and the ‘worst of our contemporary history’. If migration was an isolated phenomenon, it could be resolved more easily with targeted measures. However, the difficulty lay in the fact that it was combined with the per-region observed demographic and economic stunting (*καχεξία*). The author made a rather pessimistic prediction, stating that the situation was “shaking the foundations of our future evolution and forecasts demographic and socio-economic withering (*μαρασμός*) of our population.”⁶⁶ Thus, the need to rapidly exit this vicious circle was obvious, as were the needed measures towards the advancement of the healthcare and living standards of the suffering areas. Otherwise, as the author warned:

until the care of the state appears, expressed with actions and with determination, towards the eradication of the regional adverse living conditions, in order to stop the population hemorrhage caused by migration and premature deaths, every positive prospect for the demographic and civilising evolution of our country is *de facto* difficult – or better – unreachable.⁶⁷

Conclusion

The governance of migration and the designation of certain areas as “crisis regions” are inherently political processes, both historically and in the present. In some territories, narratives of crisis display a diachronic quality: they reappear in shifting forms, shaped by changing political contexts. To understand how a region already marked by war, border shifts, and population movements was further transformed by a new wave of emigration, it is necessary to situate this episode of emigration within its broader historical trajectory.

The northern borderlands were a fertile area for propaganda, showcasing the interest or, conversely, the abandonment of the rural populations from the side of the state. The fact that the ‘fittest part of the nation’ was quitting these regions was indicative of the state’s indifference and, according to contemporary observers, a serious negligence of the importance of keeping the border population robust. Despite political instability in Greece during this period, media representations of migration were remarkably consistent, repeatedly dramatizing it as a crisis and employing medical metaphors such as ‘hemorrhage’ or ‘epidemic.’ What this article aimed to show was that Northern Greece became a crisis region not only because of the concrete reality of the mass departure of people. What mattered more was its ideological significance as a borderland in need of a robust, nationally sane population, translated as non- and anti-communist in Cold War terms. When this prerogative became endangered due to mass migration in the early sixties connected with the Gastarbeiter scheme in West Germany, it alerted all interested parties to the deep, unresolved territorial inequalities in Greece. The political parties in power and in opposition used migration as a lever for their political gains, either justifying it as necessary and undermining its importance or emphasizing its magnitude and dramatizing its impact on the borderland’s demographic balance and the nation’s vitality. It was not the migrants’ fate per se that sensitivised policymakers, but rather the political pressure they felt from public

⁶⁵ Zolotas, Xenophon. 1967. La migration internationale des travailleurs et le développement économique. *Économie appliquée* 20(4), 446, 458 and 463.

⁶⁶ National Statistical Service of Greece. 1966. *Demographic trends and population projections of Greece 1960–1985*. Athens: National Statistical Service of Greece, 66–67.

⁶⁷ National Statistical Service of Greece. *Demographic trends and population projections of Greece*, 66–67.

opinion and the media to recognize it as a problem and brainstorm about the management of migration. Experts, in their turn, provided their insights based on fieldwork and statistical data, but they also found themselves entangled in the charged political realities that did not enable scientific knowledge to transform into tangible and applicable measures.

What stands out in this case study is that *de facto* the mass exodus from these border regions was connected to internal migration to an equal degree as to external migration; the Gastarbeiter who left temporarily for West Germany would also return in the next decade, with a great majority turning their back on their native villages, opting for resettlement in the modern urban centers. Beyond mere practical considerations, external migration, seen as a wound to the national body, acquired an affective impact and alerted public opinion. Themes and frames dramatizing emigration as hemorrhage or slavery reworked older fears ingrained in a borderland that suffered population loss, violence, and destruction. A deserted borderland would be a void, empty space that the enemy would invade and conquer both metaphorically through propaganda and literally in an armed expedition, in the framework of a lingering fear of conflict in the early years of the Cold War. In the early 1940s, the fascist Italian, Nazi, and Bulgarian troops broke the resistance of the Greek army and penetrated the Greek national territory exactly through these border areas. Thus, adding to this recent experience, the Red Scare and the long past of instability in the borderland diverted attention from sustainable management of migration and regional development towards a moral panic with short-term political gains.

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