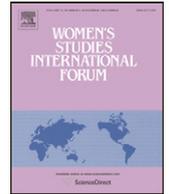


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## Between borderlines, betwixt citizenship: Gender, agency and the crisis in the Macedonia/Greece border region



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### SYNOPSIS

By following the monthly escapades of several female “border-crossers,” this paper explores their quest for budget-luxury in food, cosmetics and gambling from Greece to Macedonia. These border-crossing practices between the two countries are seemingly driven by feminine desire for beauty and luxury. At the same time, the act of crossing allows the women to feel as if they are “in charge of their lives” and able to exercise their individual agency in handling the financial crisis. My main aim in this paper is to show how precarity and vulnerability of some Greek female citizens since the beginning of the financial crisis in 2010 are being negotiated and contested due to two factors: the proximity of the border with the Republic of Macedonia and gender in which notions of femininity affect the agency of people crossing the border. “Being a real woman,” serves as a register of their “active” engagement and participation in dealing with the crisis. The effort of these women to actively participate and to be “in charge of one’s own life” extends beyond the rubric of beauty and maintaining femininity in the hair salon or the beauty parlor. This “active” engagement often embodies entertainment, but also health and medical decisions thus affecting the “right to life” where crossing the border becomes the only alternative to one’s well-being.

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### Introduction

This article examines the shifting notions of citizenship in Greece affected by the recent financial crisis by looking at the ways in which Greek citizens interact with the Macedonian border.<sup>1</sup> It seeks to understand how the austerity measures imposed by the EU, the IMF and the World Bank have affected Greek citizens’ everyday lives. On the basis of ethnographic material and from a gendered perspective, the essay especially focuses on the specific ways Greek citizens – and particularly women – manage issues of consumption and healthcare by making use of the comparative advantage provided by the proximity of the border, thus allowing different survival strategies to unfold in the face of austerity measures. In addition, the paper also addresses shifting sentiments in Greece related to the sense of belonging to a democratic state and being an EU member.

In the border region between Greece and the Republic of Macedonia (hereinafter Macedonia), the currency of citizenship until recently has been marked primarily by the unequal relationship between Greece as an EU member and Macedonia as an aspiring member whose membership depends on the conditionality principle and fulfilling a range of membership criteria.<sup>2</sup> The privileged EU citizenship unequivocally rests on freedom of movement without visas, even passports – only personal IDs. It also means a much better standard of living, higher income and better consumption power. Unlike the long-standing freedom of movement available to Greek citizens, Macedonian citizens only obtained visa free travel in 2009, when the visa liberalization for the Western Balkans allowed people the right to visa-free travel in the Schengen region (Dimova 2011).

Since 2010 and the onset of the financial crisis in Greece, there has been a significant shift in the numbers of “Greek

visitors" crossing the border. A shopkeeper in a boutique in a small border town in southern Macedonia said in an interview that "Greeks always brought in money. With their European salaries, they could afford to spend much more than most of us" (Velika, 32 years old).<sup>3</sup> But with the financial crisis and the harsh austerity measures, the usual perception of "wealthy Greeks crossing the border to have fun" has started to change.

Greek citizens have adopted a variety of responses to the crisis. Most obvious were the massive strikes all over the country that have attempted to challenge the decisions of the Greek political leadership. The protests voiced strong resentment over the way the Greek politicians were forced to accept the austerity measures and the conditions imposed by the international community. It was evident that the austerity measures would affect every layer of the Greek society, especially the middle-class, diminishing the generous welfare provisions that had existed in the country since 1981 and the PASOK (the Panhellenic Socialist Movement) victory. It was this victory in October 1981 that allowed the socialists to come into power for the first time since 1924, and Andreas Papandreu to form the first post-WW2 socialist government in Greece. Their reign introduced major changes departing from the previous repressive and anti-communist laws introduced after WW2. For instance, leftist resistance fighters were given state pensions, while political refugees of the Greek Civil War were finally given permission to return to Greece (the notable exception were people of Slavic-Macedonian origins who have been unable to claim their land and property unless they give up their Macedonian origin and claim they are "pure" Greeks). The National Health System was created, wages were boosted, an independent and multidimensional foreign policy was pursued, and many reforms in Family Law aimed to strengthen the rights of women (Clogg, 2002).

The recent austerity measures set to meet targets determined by the EU, the IMF and the World Bank representatives therefore have been threatening the social welfare system established since 1981. Public health has been especially impacted by the measures, causing cuts of 40% according to a recent study (Stuckler & Basu, 2013). Given the fact that these cuts have been decided not by doctors and healthcare professionals, but by economists and financial managers whose primary aim is to cut health spending down to 6% of Greece's GDP, a number much smaller than the UK, and Germany, and even less than the US, the consequences for patients and public health in Greece will be grave.<sup>4</sup>

The changes taking place in Greece since 2010 and in the border area have also been interfering with how citizens view and define their relationship to the state.<sup>5</sup> My ethnographic research<sup>6</sup> reveals an obvious departure from the model of citizenship as defined by the liberal democratic tradition, namely being a bundle of rights protected by the state. The rhetoric used by my interlocutors bears more resemblance with the model of citizenship where citizens are expected to take over and deal with issues previously taken care by the state. This model (in the literature on citizenship, this is also known as the republican model) presumes withdrawal of the state from the social and welfare domains relying on "active", "responsible" or "interactive" engagement of the people themselves (Harper & Zubida, 2010).

In her book *Territory, Authority, Rights*, Saskia Sassen (2006) examines precisely this shift in the role the nation-state plays

in the life of its citizens. She argues that there is a redefinition of the meaning of "national," a domain that is the interface between citizens and the state. This domain, according to Sassen, has been shrinking significantly, affecting the levels of welfare provided to the citizens and this tendency has been occurring in many countries around the world. Although Greece is not an exception as a country in which the financial crisis affects the notion of citizenship or the relationship between the state and its citizens, the recent events in Greece illustrate redefinition of access to rights primarily on economic grounds, in which austerity measures imposed by transnational political-economic authorities define "the right to life."

My primary task in this essay, thus, is to show how the precarity and vulnerability of some Greek citizens since the beginning of the financial crisis in 2010, are being negotiated, contested, even challenged due to two factors: the proximity of the border with Macedonia, and the gendered dimension of citizenship in which notions of femininity affect the agency of people crossing the border. "Being a real woman," serves as registers for the women I worked with during my fieldwork to rely on their "active" engagement and participation to deal with the crisis. The effort of the women I worked with to actively participate and be "in charge of one's own life" extends beyond the rubric of beauty and maintaining femininity in the hair salon or the beauty parlor. While reproducing normative definitions of femininity, beauty and healthcare rituals are used as a way to reaffirm agency against austerity measures, my research has revealed that "active" engagement more and more embodies health and medical decisions thus affecting the "right to life", when crossing the border becomes the best alternative to care for one's well-being. The subsequent ethnographic section demonstrates how the proximity of the border enables individuals to deal with the economic crisis and the shifting role of the state in people's lives.

### **Beauty practices across the border: an ethnographic snapshot**

This part of my paper draws on the story told to me by Sofia from Thessaloniki who once a month goes on a one-day journey across the border in the town of Gevgelija in southern Macedonia. Sofia is a brisk 45-year-old state employee, working in an electricity company in Thessaloniki. My initial impression was that the wrinkles on her face show she is both a fighter and a person who likes to laugh. The long blond hair and the carefully trimmed eyebrows, along with her conspicuous make up finished with precise eyeliner, lipstick and blusher, reveal her desire to look good and take care of herself. She is in charge of planning the household budget. With a son and a daughter who are still minors and living with her and with her husband, Sofia has been the only one with a reliable salary. The private company of her self-employed husband has not been doing well and minimal income comes from that side. She proudly recounts her micro-entrepreneurial skills to stretch the 200 Euro budget across the farmer's market, at the hair stylist, inside the beauty parlor, and, finally, on the premises of the flashy casino. The journey that begins early Saturday morning from a neighborhood in Thessaloniki is driven, in her words, by necessity — the rise in prices in Greece and the significantly

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