Constructing a defence line: The functional transformation of Evros/Meriç river

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Abstract:

In recent years, the most dramatic episodes of the Greek-Turkish conflict have been taking place in the Aegean Sea and the Mediterranean. In addition to the maritime frontier, a tense situation has emerged along the Evros/Meriç River, which currently serves as an artificially constructed defence line. This paper seeks to understand how the defensive role has emerged and how it achieved stability through nationalist policies, bilateral conflicts, and European encouragement. The study employs the constructivist theory of international relations to unfold the question which provides a theoretical background and methodological framework for analysing historical periods and related transformations. The paper argues that the river did not originally serve as a natural border but has taken on a "borderized" nature, a highly protected defence line which undermines the development of the whole Thracian region.

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1. Introduction

In March 2020, the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, adopted the Greek military terminology and described Greece as the "shield" of Europe. Leyen did use the word Greek word of *aspida* (ασπίδα), which clearly referred to the term Fortress Europe (Karageorgiou, 2021, p. 50). This connotation is linked to the protection of Christian Europe and derives from the history of political thought of 15th and 17th centuries. At that time, the Balkan countries and the Hungarian Kingdom, as well as the territories that

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defended themselves during the Ottoman Empire expansion efforts, were labelled as the protector shields of Christianity. In this sense, the term "shield" refers to the protection of European civilization and emphasizes the Christian-Muslim opposition. Today, the concept is more associated with irregular/illegal mass migration, presented as an external threat and theorized through Buzan's securitization theory (Collyer, 2006). The announcement, delivered in the Thracian city of Kastanies, was triggered by the tense situation at the Greek-Turkish border, where thousands of migrants from Turkey have tried to enter Greece and thereby the European Union (EU). The events had several origins, which will be discussed later in more detail. The immediate catalyst was Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's decision to open the borders on 29 February 2020, which not only allowed migrants to leave Turkish territory, but also provided an organised framework for the illegal crossing of Greek borders. In the following days, a mass of around 13,000 people gathered near Edirne, and the number of illegal border crossings via the Aegean route have also risen significantly (Egeresi & Kacziba, 2020, p. 3). The EU leaders (Ursula von der Leyen, Charles Michel and David Sassoli) reacted to the increasingly tense situation between Athens and Ankara in a rather unconventional way. This time, instead of mediation and arbitration, EU leaders personally visited the crisis area, offering not only solidarity to Greek Prime Minister Kiriakos Mitsotakis, but also operational assistance to protect Greece's borders. Besides the personal engagement, the recognition and support of Greek assertiveness was also a new element. While EU leaders sharply criticized the construction of the Greek border fence in 2012 and Athens' response to the migration crisis in 2015, in 2020 there was a clear shift from the humanitarian and human rights focus towards a more security-oriented approach.

The reaction of EU leaders marked another step in the process of securitizing[3] the Thracian border between Greece and Turkey. The region has been marked by border conflicts since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. Though the NATO membership of the two countries has helped to moderate these conflicts, it has not been able to resolve the territorial and minority disputes in Thrace. From the 1970s onwards, the regional tensions were supplemented by intensifying interstate disputes caused by the Cyprus conflict and the Aegean disputes, which turned the Thracian border region into a frontline of Greek-Turkish frictions. The situation was complicated by the fact that the 'land' border between Greece and Turkey, as it is commonly referred to, is by no means situated on land: the Thracian

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3   The term securitization was disseminated through the work of Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver and Jaap de Wilde. The term reflects the phenomenon whereby a political issue is transformed into a security issue through the intervention of policy makers (Buzan et al., 1998).

border is in fact a river border, which, apart from four exceptions, follows the course of the Marica/Evros/Meriç river. The reinforcement of the border security along the 192 km long river section therefore requires a substantial mobilization of resources. The natural movement of the river, the flooding or the natural erosion are all factors that make border management more complex than in the case of land borders. Due to these natural causes and the protracted Greek-Turkish tensions, the Thracian border zone is geographically wider than the usual standard: the Greeks established an area of a military buffer zone (Ζώνη Ασφάλειας Προκάλυψης – Ζ.Α.Π.), covering a maximum width of 10 km along the river with military installations, tank traps and landmines.

The extensive securitization has had an undeniably significant impact on the rivers' ecosystem and on the lives of riparian communities. Due to the adoption of security perception, the river's role as a natural formation has been eroded and has become a dividing barrier separating East and West Thrace at a local level, Greece and Turkey at a national level, and the European Union and Asia Minor at an international level. Nevertheless, the existence of religious and ethnic minorities, common migratory challenges and a peripheral economic underdevelopment on both sides of the river would call for stronger cross-border cooperation. The EU has played a catalysing role in this process of de-escalation by supporting the implementation of cross-border cooperation through joint programmes and grants. Even so, with the aforementioned statement by Ursula von der Leyen and the promotion of security strategies, the EU's conflict resolution role may be lost, while its more aggressive border control may contribute to the conservation of border tensions.

This paper aims to examine the evolution of the river's defensive function during the 20th and 21st centuries. It identifies the political, social and economic roles associated with the river and analyses the development of security perceptions. The study evaluates the river's defensive "transformation" based on the constructivist approach. The basic premise of the paper is that the Marica/Evros/Meriç river, which in previous centuries functioned as a connecting link and a melting pot of ethnicities and religions, has become part of a complex conflict system and, in practical terms, one of the most important elements of the border's complex defense system. The situation is negatively affecting the economic and social development of the region, while border tensions pose security risks. The paper argues that, in line with the constructivist theory, the river's defensive role is not an irreversible condition: social changes and political decisions may help to revive the river's original functions.

Our findings are based on research conducted by the Water Diplomacy Research Group of the University of Pécs. Since 2019, the group has been investigating hotspots of water-related conflict, conducting desk research, field trips and empirical research. Due to the limited scope of the study, the authors concentrate in this paper on the defensive transformation of the Evros/Meriç River, which however has much wider regional implications both in political and security terms. The study employs methodology-driven research, using a descriptive analysis defined by the constructivist theory and its research methodology (Wendt, 1999). Moreover, the authors conducted deductive research that applied various theories in the field of security studies, political-ecological studies, and diplomacy.

2. Theoretical background

The constructivist interpretation of international relations rejects the materialist approach of realist and liberal arguments. According to the theory, significant parts of social and political structures are constructed phenomena, created by individuals and communities, shaped by norms and customs, and influenced by ideas and interests (Mingst, 2011, p. 85-87). The perspective argues that the constructing process is permanent, i.e. most of our social phenomena are constantly changing in space and time, continuously shaping social concepts such as identity, culture, national interest or antagonism. Although these concepts are significantly influenced by domestic forces, constructivists also recognize the impact of international factors and globalization. Martha Finnemore, for example, has empirically demonstrated the impacts of globalization on local norms, showing that, in addition to domestic influences, international factors also shape our social and political constructions (Finnemore, 1996). Although these internal and external influences and the constantly evolving social and political constructs often create conflicts of interests, the constructivist approach argues that international relations are not exclusively about competition and power maximization. In contrast to realist authors, Alexander Wendt viewed the characteristics of political processes in terms of the attributes of decision-makers, arguing that individual and group identities, experiences, norms and cultural backgrounds play significant roles in the determination of political behaviour (Wendt, 1992). This behaviour can be conflictual or cooperative, but the character of the political attitude is not predetermined.

Scientific writings emphasize that the security of natural resources almost always relies on social and economic factors, particularly because transboundary surface water bodies (rivers and lakes) are real defending factors, as they form a barrier and separate geographical regions. In such cases, water bodies alone

become a security factor due to the share of water, as endangering water flow or pollution is risky for the affected areas and the people living there (Græger, 1996). However, cross-border natural factors not only separate but also connect, as they represent a cultural link and economic cooperation, therefore they have a socio-cultural significance besides the protection function and natural resources. Rivers separating nations have traditionally appeared in academic literature as a safety factor (Turton, 2003), as water sharing, water use, and pollution risks can affect a country's economy (industry and agriculture), ecosystem or even water supply, thus posing a strategic security risk. According to Redclift (2001), political, environmental, and economic interdependencies usually build and maintain relationships even between countries that are in conflict with each other. This statement is also confirmed by Mason (2012), who argues that the lack of management and protection of common water bodies is a security factor. Tactical security also appears in the literature of border rivers. Examples in this case include lack of political coordination, ecosystem destruction, destroying of river infrastructure, demolishing of dam systems, and the possible threat of mass migration (Gleick, 2006).

According to the constructivist view, the attributes and characteristics of state-related processes are thus determined by individuals and communities through a mix of different sets of national and international norms, customs, ideas and cultures. In the post-Cold War period, the constructivist position has been tested in many areas of international studies: questions of identity, national interest or foreign policymaking have been redefined through the use of the theory. The concept has also become prominent in the field of border studies, where its approach has made it possible to explore the identities and differences of people living in the same geographical region and the consequences of artificial borders. For example, constructivism has explored the emergence of a borderless Europe and the reasons for cooperation in the context of the Schengen area, pointing out that the EU's common set of norms, values and ideals have greatly facilitated the emergence of cross-border regions and cooperation (Fábián, 2013). Wilson (2020), on the other hand, sought to explore the causes of the British-Irish border conflicts over Brexit using the constructivist approach. Her results indicate that Ireland's and the UK's membership of the EU had a positive impact on the border disputes and helped to ease centuries-old conflicts of interest. According to the author, these positive outcomes have disappeared due to Brexit, and the relationship between the two sides is now characterised by mistrust and uncertainty, with nationalist reactions and defensive measures taking precedence over cooperative activities in the border region (ibid.).

The examples above indicate that the constructivist approach can also be applied to examine the Thracian border and the effects of Greek-Turkish disputes on Evros/Meriç river. Building on the theoretical foundations of constructivism, the paper will examine the emergence of the river's defensive function, reviewing in chronological order how defensive perceptions emerged in the region and how they transformed the river's basic functions. The basic premise of the study is that the Marica/Evros/Meriç river, which in previous centuries functioned as a link and a melting pot of nationalities and religions, has become part of a complex conflict system and, in practical terms, the most important element of a border defence complex. The river's current defensive functions negatively impact the economic and social development of the region and pose security risks. The paper argues that, in line with the constructivist theory, the river can regain its original role through renewed social preferences and rational political choices, and, above all, through a conscious de-escalation of tensions.

3. Historical role and function of the river

In the previous decades, the literature has comprehensively analysed the characteristics of border regions. According to Povinelli (2019), border regions cannot be considered as fixed and one-dimensional material spaces. Borderlands are rather concepts associated with different functions, where the „border function" is only part and complementary to the territorial „ecosystem". In this ecosystem, in addition to the defensive, political and social dimensions, commercial, agricultural and environmental processes also play a part, and the potential economic and social development of the border region is largely determined by which of these dimensions are prioritised, and whether a natural balance is achieved between the components of the territorial "ecosystem" (Duncan, 2019, p. 56-57).

The spatial functions along the Marica/Evros/Meriç river, and especially their historical changes, confirm these theoretical assumptions. The 528 km long Marica/Evros/Meriç, originating in the Rila Mountains, is the largest river in the Thracian region. Its location, water base and ecosystem have had a significant impact on the historical development of the region, leaving a strong footprint on the territorial, economic, political and cultural relations of Thrace. The area was part of the Hellenic and later Byzantine cultural circles in antiquity, then it was an Ottoman territory from the mid-14th century until 1913, and after the Second Balkan War (1913) it was occupied by Bulgaria. The current situation was established by the 1919 Treaty of Neuilly and the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne, which divided the river basin and the historic area of Thrace between Bulgaria, Greece and Turkey.

Following these resolutions, the Marica/Evros/Meriç region has become a border region. Although it was not the first time when the region was given this function, it was a relatively new phenomenon after the long Ottoman centuries. Thrace spent the Ottoman centuries essentially incorporated into the empire, first as part of the Rumelia and from 1867 as part of the Edirne vilayet. Among the military, diplomatic and cultural functions of the region, its role in transport and long-distance trade was already prominent in antiquity (Singer, 2016, p. 91). Two historically important transport routes developed along the river: the delta was crossed by the Via Egnatia, connecting Asia Minor with Italy, while the route through the Marica Valley (*orta kol* – central road), connected Constantinople with Belgrade and more distant regions of the Balkans and Central Europe.

Geographical conditions and transport opportunities also determined the composition of nationalities living along the river. The Greek-speaking ethnic majority, which was indigenous in antiquity, was supplemented by a sizeable minority of Turks and Armenians after the conquest of Edirne in 1362, and by Jews from the Iberian Peninsula and the Kingdom of Hungary in the 15th and 16th centuries. Southern Slavic groups, mainly Bulgarians, also began to settle in the region from the early 19th century (Türk, 2012, p. 439-440). Given the area's commercial function, multi-ethnic diversity was a constant phenomenon: soldiers, merchants, clerks, tax collectors or agricultural workers of various nationalities, ethnicities, languages, cultures and religions lived in the area for longer or shorter periods. According to censuses, this had a significant impact on the demographic composition of the area. In the Edirne vilayet, which covered a large part of historical Thrace, Turks, Greeks, Bulgarians, Armenians, Jews, Pomaks, Vlachs and Albanians, among others, lived side by side along the river at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries (Demeter et al., 2015). The peaceful coexistence of the multi-ethnic population over the centuries was greatly facilitated by the prosperity of the region: the proximity of Istanbul and the trade routes, the wealthy merchant and clerical elite living in the area, and the multi-ethnic educational system of Edirne provided relative economic and social prosperity compared to the peripheries of the empire (Türk, 2012, p. 443).

The period of prosperity and peaceful coexistence ended with the decline of the Ottoman Empire. The literature dates the beginning of this process from the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-1878 (ibid., p. 440). As a result of the Ottoman defeat in the war, the ethnic landscape of the region began to change, with Muslim refugees fleeing to Thrace and Christians leaving the area, thus altering the ethnic balance of the region. Border revisions and the formation of new states at the beginning of the 20th century led to the homogenization of multi-ethnic populations. The process

was reinforced by wars (e.g. the First Balkan War of 1912), population exchanges (e.g. the 1919 Bulgarian-Greek or the 1923 Greek-Turkish population exchanges) and state-led assimilation efforts (Filippidou, 2020). Although minorities did not disappear completely, the multi-ethnic demographic composition that had previously characterised the region had vanished by the second half of the 20th century. Focusing on the countries and regions concerned by this study, the Muslim (Turkish, Pomak, Gypsy) population, which was still predominant in Western Thrace before 1923, had fallen to around 30% by 2011, while in Eastern Thrace, the proportion of Christian population (Greek, Bulgarian, Armenian) largely disappeared as a result of the Lausanne Treaty, with a remaining minority falling by 65% between 1927 and 1965 to less than 500 (Özgen, 2010).

Ethnic homogenisation following the First World War was driven not only by centrally initiated nationalist policies but also by the emergence of the region's border function. Seeing the territorial exchanges and claims of the previous years and decades, both Athens and Ankara viewed the creation of an ethnically homogeneous border area as a key for preserving the territorial status quo. One consequence of the concerns about the ethnic homogeneity of the border region was that the territorial disputes did not disappear with the signing of the Lausanne Peace Accords, but rather became more persistent. Although the peace treaty abolished the annexation of Eastern Thrace by Greece promised under the provisions of the Treaty of Sevres (1920), it left many questions unresolved regarding the precise delimitation of the frontier. The issue of the problematic Thracian frontier was eventually addressed in 1926 by an international commission led by the Dutch. The commission identified the delimitation line along the median of the river's course, applying this quite vague methodology in both the Bulgarian-Greek and the Greek-Turkish cases. As a result of the regulation, the Marica/Evros functions as a Greek-Bulgarian border for a 12 km distance, while in the Greek-Turkish case the Evros/Meriç forms a 192 km long border, the course of which is only shifted to the mainland at short sections near the settlements of Karaağaç, Vrissoula and Poros (Skias & Kallioras, 2007, p. 119). Within a few decades, weaknesses of the 1926 regulation had led to serious tensions in Greek-Turkish relations. One of the main reasons for these conflicts is that the riverbed has changed its location several times since 1926, transforming the original landscape in some places by erosion and in others by sedimentation. Initially, the original route was marked by concrete pyramid markers, though the solution soon became irrelevant due to fluvial movements of the river and generated further disputes. Similarly problematic was the attempt to mark the median with pylons introduced in 1965. Though the markers provided a short-term agreement, consensus lasted only for few weeks, until the pylons were washed away by the strong stream of the river (Duncan & Levidis, 2020).

4. Emergence of the defensive function

Bilateral negotiations to settle disputes over the river began in the 1930s. The positive relations that characterised the period were based on the consolidationist ideas of Elefterios Venizelos and Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. Both prioritised domestic stabilization and thus marginalising the grievance-based approach to foreign policy. As a result of the negotiations, the two countries signed a water treaty in 1934 followed by an agreement in 1956 to drain the swamps of the delta, thus creating productive agricultural land (Mylopoulos, et al., 2008, p. 292-293). Territorial disputes related to the river were also addressed by joint planning of river regulation and flood protection, with negotiations on the issues taking place in 1936, 1953, 1969 and 1971 (Duncan, 2019, p. 107). Even so, none of these negotiations had produced any significant progress, with talks generally stalling already at the planning stage. Frequent talks finally ceased in the early 1970s, after which the conflict in Cyprus and the Aegean conflict escalated tensions in the Thrace region as well.

The peaceful coexistence of the previous centuries and the careful rapprochement of the 1930s were replaced by distrust, hostility and then by the rise of defence and military perceptions. The deteriorating Greek-Turkish relations have also changed attitudes towards the border zone. Tensions led both the Greek and Turkish sides to increase their defence capabilities concentrated in the region. It is no coincidence that the most effective army unit in Greece became the IV Corps, based in Western Thrace. The unit established a series of defensive installations along the Evros. These installations had dual functions: the embankments, trenches, ditches, ramparts and concrete fortifications were not only intended to protect against flooding but also to repel a possible Turkish attack. As a result, the Greek military began to play a central role in river-related matters, in addition to the original role of defence against external enemies.

Similar processes were taking place on the other side of the border. In this case, the strengthening of the region's defence capabilities was motivated by the deterioration of Greek-Turkish relations, the protection of Turkish minorities living on the other side of the border, the security of Edirne, and the proximity of Istanbul. Consequently, the Greek-Turkish and Bulgarian-Turkish borders are controlled by the First Army of the Republic of Turkey, which, with a force of around 120,000, is also responsible for the defence of the sea straits and Istanbul. Although the literature is rather vague on the exact proportions of the Turkish military presence and defence infrastructure, it can be stated without a doubt that the region has been one of the most militarised border areas in Europe since the mid-1970s (Zogaris et al., 2015, p. 269). The consequent security threats led to an

incident in the area of Feres in 1986, when a clash between border guards resulted in the deaths of 1 Greek and 2 Turkish soldiers. Although the event was classified as a 'local incident' due to US mediation, the security risks and possibilities of more serious escalations remained. It should be noted that the clash was preceded by a dramatic increase in the number of illegal border crossers: mainly Iranian and Iraqi political refugees had been trying to cross the Evros borders during mid-1980s. The growing migration influx, the Turkish role in the illegal border crossings, and the inflexibility of Greek border guards led to several exchanges of fire, and eventually to the incident at Feres.

The regional and bilateral conflicts were thus supplemented with the source of tensions arising from illegal migration. The new element was not merely geographic: Greece's role was enhanced by its accession to the European Communities in 1981, becoming the first European destination from the east. With the accession, the Evros/Meriç region became a supranational border area, adding new elements to the previous bilateral tensions and making Athens the first to face the challenges of the EU's external borders (Tselepi et al., 2016, p. 55). In addition to drug and arms trafficking and smuggling, illegal migration has become one of the most prominent challenges. The fact that the migratory route reached Greece in a military zone, in an area classified as a conflict zone, is highly significant. On the one hand, the fragile Greek-Turkish military status quo and the established order of relations were occasionally disturbed by civilians who, not knowing the area, put themselves and the border guards in a position of danger. A more serious problem was that the direct or indirect role of the Turkish authorities in the movement of refugees was clear and proved in most cases. Since the 1980s, this has created a perception on the Greek side that migration is an issue linked to Turkey, and that illegal border crossers reach the Evros border area through the help and assistance of Ankara. For this reason, the measures taken in Greece in relation to migration have not been characterised by a humanitarian and civilian approach, but by a system of rules and procedures developed by the armed forces. According to Duncan's field research, this has not only affected the fate of illegal border crossers but has also securitized and militarized the mindset of local civilians on migration (Duncan, 2020).

5. The stabilization of security functions

After the difficulties of the 1980s and 1990s, the first decade of the 2000s has produced a more cooperative era. The more peaceful atmosphere in this period was facilitated by Turkey's (and Bulgaria's) ambitions for EU membership, which, while not erasing the differences between Athens and Ankara, created a

more active dialogue than before. During the decade, the European Union has initiated a number of activities to promote cross-border cooperation: Turkey has been included in programmes such as Intereg III, the Crossborder Cooperation Programme, Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA) and Natura 2000. The main objective of the projects was to finance economic, labour market, cultural and environmental projects, thus contributing to the strengthening of the territorial cohesion of the Thracian border region (Özerdem, 2011, p. 81). Although Turkish participation in these programmes has been problematic, the involvement of the European Union and Ankara's membership aspirations have had a positive impact on the relations between the river basin communities. The atmosphere and EU projects have also had a positive impact on other political, corporate and civil initiatives. The period witnessed the spread of town-twinning programmes (e.g. the twinning of Edirne and Alexandropoulos), the formation of joint economic, trade and cultural committees, the emergence of tourism cooperation, the popularity of Turkish TV programmes in Greece and the rise of Greek pop culture in Turkey (Karakatsanis, 2014, p. 212-216). Although the period failed to settle the disputes over the river, it did express the desire to reduce tensions in political, military and water-related terms. The willingness of both the political and military sides was reflected in the increased number of official visits and negotiations during the period. In this context, both sides acknowledged that the increasingly frequent and destructive floods of the period (2003, 2005, 2006) could be made more manageable by enhancing the floodplain and withdrawing military infrastructures (ibid.; Skias & Kallioras, 2007).

The positive climate of the early 2000s was followed in the 2010s by a period of renewed tensions. The changes were triggered by domestic and international developments. On the Greek side, the economic crisis that unfolded in the early 2010s reshaped the traditional political palette, amplifying populist rhetoric based on historical grievances and diverting economic resources away from the foreign policy and external economic activities. In Turkey, after a series of corruption scandals and the 2013 Gezi Park protests, the AKP government's authoritarian shift has prevented the resolution of the Thracian disputes, and after the 2016 coup attempt and subsequent purges, both Turkish-EU and Greek-Turkish relations have deteriorated. The negative shift has led to a resurgence of the Aegean disputes and a renewed focus on the Thracian controversies. At the same time, the traditional differences that had been revived along the river (minority issues, territorial disputes) were supplemented by renewed migration challenges, which became an integral part of the Greek-Turkish conflicts.

Table 1: Number of immigrants arriving in Greece (2014-2020)

Year	Number of immigrants arriving by land	Number of immigrants arriving by sea	Number of fatalities
2014	2280	41038	405
2015	4907	856723	799
2016	3784	173450	441
2017	6592	29718	59
2018	18014	32494	174
2019	14887	59726	71
2020	5982	9714	102

Source: UNHCR (2021): Operational Data Portal, Mediterranean Situation, Greece, https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/mediterranean/location/5179 (last accessed 19 08 2021).

Although migration and associated border incidents are not new phenomena in the region, the number of refugees in Turkey has significantly risen in the 2010s, putting increasing pressure on Greece's external borders. The data in Table 1 show that the number of people arriving by land (i.e. Evros) routes increased significantly during the period, but was lower than the number crossing the sea border. The primary reason for this was the further militarisation of the Thracian border. Athens, faced with increasing migratory pressures, decided to construct a border fence in 2012, which closed the only land exclave on Turkish territory for 10.3 km between the villages of Kastanies and Nea Vissa (Grigoriadis & Dilek, 2018, p. 6). The Death at Borders Database data outlines corresponding figures: while 847 people lost their lives illegally crossing Greek borders between 1990 and 2013, 2,051 people died between 2014 and 2020. According to Duncan and Levidis, the increase in the number of victims is not simply due to a quantitative increase in the number of migrants, but to the fact that the border fence at the Karaağaçi exclave has closed the only area considered safe, diverting migrants to more dangerous routes. It is important to underline that the EU's response in 2012 was based on patterns of the previous era, criticising the construction of the Greek border fence mainly on humanitarian basis. Although this attitude did not change the decision of the Greek authorities, it did (at the time) prevent European recognition of the further militarisation of the region.

As we noted in the introduction, the critical European attitude towards securitization had disappeared by 2020. The quoted statement by Ursula von Leyen no longer condemned the Greek military and defence approach to migration. On the contrary, she promised EU support for further militarisation of the region. The shift in policy is explained by the events of February-March 2020, during which the Turkish authorities allowed thousands of migrants to cross the Thracian

border. The move, used as a means of exerting political pressure, was preceded by the failure of the 2016 EU-Turkey migration agreement (Egeresi, 2017; Pénzváltó, 2020). Although the fragile agreement reduced the migratory pressure on Greece until the last quarter of 2019, the aforementioned coup attempt in Turkey (2016) and the subsequent domestic political changes deepened the gap between the EU and Ankara. The deterioration of Turkish-EU relations was compounded by the downturn in Greek-Turkish relations by October 2019, Turkey's intervention in Libya, and Ankara's involvement in Syria, which was accompanied by a renewed increase in the number of Syrian refugees (Glied, 2020, p. 39).

The EU's U-turn has intensified and anchored the defensive attitudes along the Evros/Meriç. This time, both Greece and the EU reacted strongly to Turkish pressure on migration, turning the already militarised area into a hermetically sealed security zone. During the crisis, the Greek army carried out troop concentrations in Western Thrace, hundreds of police officers were deployed, paramilitary organisations appeared along the border, and supporters of Greek and European far-right organisations started "hunting" "illegal immigrants" (Duncan & Levidis, 2020). By early March, news reports of live gunfire, forced repatriations, the use of sound and smoke grenades, and fatalities were already circulating (Egeresi & Kacziba, 2020, p. 8). In the latter context, some sources indicated that on 10 March Bulgaria opened the Ivaylovgrad reservoir on the Marica tributary (Ardas) and substantially raised the water level of the river, making it more difficult to cross (Duncan, 2020). In the following weeks and months, the promised European assistance also arrived. The Frontex force was increased to 660, an automated surveillance technology was set up along the entire Greek-Turkish border, while long-range cameras with thermal imaging optics, drones and sonic cannons were also deployed (Gatopoulos & Kantouris, 2021). In addition to deterrence, the latter were mainly aimed at increasing detection capabilities, with technological improvements enabling Greek border guards to locate illegal border crossers deep inside Turkish territory. The EU's change of direction is also demonstrated by the approach towards the 27 km long and 5 m high border fence in the Feres area (FRA, 2020, p. 13). While in 2012 the EU strongly condemned the construction of the Greek border fence, in 2020 it assisted the implementation of the security measures and provided €700 million in funding for their construction. The EU's involvement thus not only legitimised the militarisation of the Evros/Meriç region, but also consolidated it.

6. Discussion

The study attempted to explore how the natural role of the Evros/Meriç river has been transformed into a defensive function. The paper used the constructivist theory and methodology to prove that the river's dividing role was not a natural function, but rather evolved through conflictual processes during the 20th and 21st centuries. Apart from proving this argument, the study also highlighted several other important findings. Above all, the historical accounts show that the Marica/Evros/Meriç basin indeed served as a spatial „ecosystem" that incorporated a variety of social, economic, political and defensive roles (Povinelly, 2019). These roles were in relative balance during the Ottoman period, helping to maintain development, stability and security, which are interdependent and interrelated processes. It is important to note that the region has been portrayed in the historical literature as a multi-ethnic area, therefore the current situation is clearly not the result of a Christian-Muslim antagonism. On the contrary, our results indicate that it is not the local (or regional), but the national level that has exacerbated the conflicts in the Thrace region. Although the disruption of ethnic and religious balance within late 19th and early 20th centuries upset the frameworks of centuries old multi-ethnic coexistence, the securitisation of the border zone was associated with national antagonism rather than ethnic division at the local or regional level. This and other examples from the Balkan conflicts reflect that the state level has greater impact on social constructions than the local levels, despite the constructivist view that tend to neglect the distinction between individual, national and international levels (Mingst, 2011).

The same argument is confirmed by the influence of the international level. In the 1990s and early 2000s, the EU's cooperative attitude has clearly benefited the Thracian border region and reduced tensions. However, the EU has only been able to maintain this de-securitisation role until its actions were driven by the principles of the European ethos. This ethos has contributed to improved cross-border cooperation and a better bilateral atmosphere, as it did for instance in the Franco-German relations few decades earlier. Nevertheless, changes in the international context and the emergence of new security factors (e.g. migration) have pressured the EU to abandon ideological notions and adopt political and security perceptions. These perceptions have not only undermined the achievements of the previous period but have in fact Europeanised the region's securitisation. The river has thus become a border not only between Western and Eastern Thrace, and Greece and Turkey, but also between the EU and the „rest".

The constructivist approach also demonstrated that securitisation had local implications, and that the defensive policies indeed reframed local

perceptions. The permanent military presence played an active role in the trans-formation of the local mindset, establishing an atmosphere where the constant presence of soldiers, patrols and landmines generated a feeling of insecurity. The fact that an EU leader with extensive experience in defence[4] has declared logistical assistance for a region that is fundamentally dominated by military considera-tions has also intensified the level of securitization. In other words, the excessive dominance of military focus has been exacerbated by the recent securitization of EU foreign policy (Baker-Beall, 2019; Barbé & Morillas, 2019). Although the Turkish behaviour in 2020 left little room for flexibility, the change in the EU's attitude has further legitimised the militarization of the Thrace and complemented it with reinforced Frontex units.

7. Conclusions

The study has attempted to explore the emergence and consolidation of the defensive role of the Evros/Meriç river through the lense of the constructivist theory. Historical stages presented here have supported the theoretical premise, proving that the river's function of promoting regional connectivity has almost disappeared as a result of nationalist domestic and foreign policies, bilateral conflicts and international disputes. The historical function has been replaced by military approaches and defensive perceptions, transforming the river, which used to function as a connecting link, into a line of defence. Wilson's (2020) observations on the Irish-British border have thus also been applied to the Greek-Turkish border: as the EU's de-escalation role has been withdrawn, distrust and insecurity in the region has increased, while cooperative activities in the Greek-Turkish border region have been replaced by nationalist reactions and defensive measures. In line with the constructivist view, the changing role of the river thus reflected the social and political structures of the era: the function of the river shifted according to the norms, interests, ideas and cultural embeddedness of involved actors.

Finally, the Evros/Meriç example has also shown that the conversion of the border region into a security zone has negatively affected the economic, cultural and environmental conditions of the Thrace. While during the Ottoman period the proximity of Istanbul, Thessaloniki, the trade routes and seaports allowed the accumulation of relative wealth, the emergence of Greek-Turkish border disputes and minority tensions eroded these advantages. Current border disputes hinder conflict resolution efforts, limit economic cooperation, cripple joint environmental

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4   Ursula von der Leyen served as Minister of Defence in Germany between 2013-2019.

efforts and flood control measures. It is therefore clear from the historical overview that the region has become a periphery at the same time as the military approach has become consolidated, and its economic problems, social difficulties and environmental challenges are clearly linked to the emergence of border tensions and the military infrastructure established there. However, the results of the study have shown that this condition, and the socially constructed roles that produced it, are far from irreversible. With changes in the attitudes, interests and norms of the actors involved, the balance of the spatial ecosystem of the river basin (Povinelli, 2019) may be restored over time, and the Evros/Meriç may once again be a catalyst for the development of the region.

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