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## **“The state doesn’t exist here”: Political imaginaries in the Greek minority of Albania**

Ekaterina Zheltova

### **Abstract:**

This article explores how people from the Greek minority of Albania experience, imagine, and narrate their encounters with the sovereign power and the state in the context of competing sovereignties of the border region. Within the ways of life produced by the borderlands, particular political imaginaries appear in which statecraft and statehood are inextricably linked through discourse, and any detail of the everyday experience may become a matter of politics. In such a context, alternative sovereignty projects are produced to creatively transform the existing ideologies and symbolically resolve the discursive conflict of statecraft and statehood generated in the dichotomy of Albanian and Greek, local and national, right and left, past and present.

### **Keywords:**

Albania, borderlands, discourse, Greece, political imaginaries, sovereignty, ways of life

One day during my visit to the town of Saranda in June 2018, I was traveling with Vangelis<sup>1</sup>, a man in his sixties coming from the Greek minority of Albania, and Marina, his Albanian-speaking wife. I was driving a small rented car towards their village situated high in the mountains where the couple lived during that summer. I had met them a day before at an event where you would not ordinarily expect to meet a person from the Greek minority. It was a patriotic event organized by the rightist Albanian Party for Justice, Integration, and Unity fighting for the “Cham issue”<sup>2</sup> and for the “national cause.” At the end of the event, Vangelis approached me and asked if I could take him and his wife back to Saranda from the village where the event was held. After a short conversation in Albanian, he mentioned his origin from the Greek minority, and I told him that I knew Greek. From that moment on, we would mostly converse in Greek, from time to time switching to Albanian to include his spouse, who did not speak any Greek into the conversation. Vangelis explained that he was a writer and a journalist while his wife was a poet. They came to attend this political event because he was doing a favor to a fellow Greek journalist from Kerkira by helping her cover this event for the Greek public. However, by doing so, he was also pursuing an agenda of his own: he wanted to prove wrong some rightist media in Greece and show that “the Cham Albanians would not go towards the border to create a mess there.” From our further talk, I learned that Vangelis and Marina were going through an economically challenging time since, officially, they were both unemployed, and Vangelis’s journalistic endeavors were mainly unpaid. Besides, since Vangelis had left his apartment in the town of Saranda to his ex-wife, he and Marina had to move to his parental house in the village where they lived, making a small income of growing and selling olives and engaging in other agricultural activities. The village was situated quite close to Saranda but did not have any communication with the outer world. The only way to get there was to drive or walk, so I offered my help to take them to the village.

After having spent the evening and the following morning together in Saranda, we departed for their village. Unexpectedly for me, what they referred to as “the better” road to the village turned out a narrow roadway squeezed between the mountain wall and the picturesque

cliff and covered with massive rocks. On our way, Vangelis would joke about me being nervous and desperately trying not to damage the rented car and would comment on the situation:

You see, Katerina, how we live here? As savages, totally cut off from the world. And this will never change. The Albanian state will never make a normal road here. Do you know why? Because we are Greek! This country has no chance. Something must change here! For years I have been saying, Epirus, both the Greek and the Albanian part, should join and form a new state where all the people, the Greeks, the Albanians, and the Vlachs, would live in peace and prosperity. Or even better, the Balkan states should join and form a Balkan Federation. We could do it as they did in Bosnia, and we could elect three presidents, a Greek, an Albanian, and a Vlach, to rule the new country. This would not only solve our national issues but make us independent from the Great Powers, from the EU, and lead us to a prosperous life with no borders and conflicts! But nobody listens to me..."

I have chosen this small piece of ethnography to introduce the main questions in the focus of this article. Namely, my scope here is to explore how concerns about statecraft and the possibility of a "normal," "better," or "decent" life relate to the ideas on statehood and sovereignty in the political imaginaries of my research participants from the Greek minority of Albania. Thus, I aim to trace how people experience, imagine, and narrate their encounters with the sovereign power and the state<sup>3</sup> and reflect on the ways of life existing in this specific context of competing sovereignties of the Albanian-Greek borderlands. I argue that these ways of life rooted in the tensions between the political and the private, the sacred and the mundane, produce a peculiar culture of everyday talk. In this discursive context, the discussion of statecraft is always inevitably tied to the one of statehood and vice versa.

I have adopted the analytical distinction between statecraft and statehood from anthropologist Stef Jansen. Ironically, his book *Yearnings in the Meantime: "Normal Lives" and the State in a Sarajevo Apartment Complex* has been dedicated precisely to Bosnia and Herzegovina, the country Vangelis chose as an iconic example of a polity with a multi-ethnic division of power. Presenting the notion of statehood, "what the state is, claims to be, and should be," and the one of statecraft, "what the state does, claims to do, and should do," Stef Jansen argues for the importance of resisting the tendency "to automatically slip from discussions of statecraft straight into discussions of statehood" (Jansen 2015: 14). Indeed, the political trend to cover up the uncomfortable questions of statecraft by the affectively charged questions of statehood is very common for various political contexts in the Balkans and beyond, and to deconstruct such manipulations is essential for social sciences. However, "slipping from the discussions of statecraft straight into the discussions of statehood" (Jansen 2015: 14) seems what my research participants do all the time. Therefore, while acknowledging the importance of the analytical shift pointed out by Jansen, in this article, I deal with concerns of my research participants about both statecraft and statehood and acknowledge their perspective on such, focusing precisely on the relationship between the two in the personal narrated experiences and political imaginaries.

To productively explore the entanglement of statecraft, statehood, and "normal life," I need to contextualize these concepts within the broader discussion on sovereignty. Such a theoretical scope is relevant for this article in at least two ways. Firstly, the Greek minority and

its place in the Albanian state have always been an issue of sovereignty from both the Albanian and Greek states' perspectives (see Clayer 2007, 2012, 2014). Secondly, the concerns about what sovereignty is and how the dynamics of sovereign powers in the region should be, play a key role in the everyday talks of my research participants and, thus, are ethnographically relevant.

Philosopher Giorgio Agamben in his theory of sovereignty introduced the opposition of "bare life" and "ways of life." He also offered the notion of Homo Sacer, the human being whose bare life is captured within the sovereign sphere and, therefore, is included in politics in the form of exception (Agamben 1998). Anthropologist Caroline Humphrey (2007) further develops the line of thought offered by Agamben, as she defines a blind spot in his work and notes that he does not elaborate on the "ways of life" in his work. In contrast with the concept of "bare life," which he deeply analyses, the "ways of life" are left with little commentary as if this concept was almost self-explanatory. Humphrey suggests that it is anthropologists' job to "draw attention to the actualities of relations within the ways of life that exist under conditions of sovereignty" and to offer a "thicker" understanding of the "ways of life" (Humphrey 2007: 420). She also claims that the "ways of life" have a temporal dimension and operate from specific modes of governmentality (Foucault 1980, cited in Humphrey 2007), and they can "interpose a solid existence of their own that operates collaterally or against the menace of sovereignty" (Humphrey 2007: 420). This brings her to the idea of "localized forms of sovereignty" included in the higher sovereignties but capable of creating a domain "within which control over life and death is operational." Such domains "may be exclusions in terms of central state" but are capable of constructing "the quasi-juridical terms in which exclusions can be made from their own body" (Humphrey 2007: 420).

The ways of life that exist under conditions of localized or state forms of sovereignties are deeply rooted in the society's pre-existing but ever evolving and transforming sets of ideas, experiences of the past, and discourses that together constitute political imaginaries. My use of political imagination/political imaginaries here is partly inspired by another work of Caroline Humphrey in which she defines it as a "swirling diversity of open, multi-sited and creative opinions and ideas produced by all sorts of people" (Humphrey 2002: 259) that, nevertheless, coexist with more or less stable discourses of national and regional political leaders. Throughout this article, I will try to show the work of political imagination of the people confined in the specific ways of life of the borderlands (Humphrey 2002: 261; on political imagination, sovereignty, and subjectivity see also Navarro-Yashin 2005).

Further on, adopting the psychological anthropology's perspective and following Claudia Strauss' critical remarks on how the concepts of the imaginary/imagination are used in anthropological studies, I keep the focus on the complex relationship between the individual psychology and public culture and try to rely upon "person-centered ethnographic methods to study real rather than abstract cultural subjects" (Strauss 2006: 337).

Taking into consideration the ideas mentioned above, this article brings together the discussions on statehood, statecraft, sovereignty, and political imaginaries and instrumentalizes these concepts to better understand the everyday experiences of the people living in the borderland region. In the following sections of the article, I will bring ethnographic examples coming from my field trips to the region from 2014 till 2018, during which I engaged in everyday life situations and talks in several locations of the borderlands. Each of these examples

reveals a distinctive aspect of my research participants' relationship with the sovereign power and the "state."

***"Are the states made by goats?"***

The town of Himara is situated in the coastal part of Albania, known as the "Albanian Riviera," and is the administrative center of the Himara municipality. A significant number of the town's residents associate themselves with the Greek minority of Albania and present themselves as the "locals" as opposed to the "Albanians" who came to the town due to the labor resettlement processes during communist times. However, not being recognized as a place of residence for the Greek minority and not being included in the so-called "Greek minority zone," the town was not covered by the state system of minority schooling, and from 1946 until the opening of the privately-run school in 2006, there had been no education in Greek there (see Clayer 2007, 2012; Nitsiakos 2010; Tsitselikis, Christopoulos 2003).

Himara region is also known for its particularly complicated situation with the so-called "property issue." In the 1990-s, after the end of the communist regime, Albania went through transitional processes, including the restitution of private property. According to the laws, to claim rights for a property, one has to provide documents proving that the property used to belong to them or their family before 1945. However, in practice, such regulations frequently do not work the way they are expected to, and the "property issue" is far from being resolved. The situation is especially dramatic in the "Albanian Riviera" because the contested land is highly desirable for tourism development (Triantis 2018).

It was an ordinary evening in late February, and the town was empty as usual in this time of the year, when a significant part of the people, especially the young ones, spend their time in Greece, waiting to come to their hometown in summer and work at the tourist premises of their relatives. The ones who stay say it is the calmest time of the year. Those who own hotels, restaurants, cafeterias, and bars enjoy the seasonal rest and from time to time visit each other in the empty cafés which in summer get overcrowded with tourists, mainly coming from various parts of Albania.

That evening we were four, me, Ilias, Zosimas, and Panagiotis. Zosimas, who, when we first met, had introduced himself to me as a Greek nationalist, was expressing his views on the troubles of the Greek minority and said that the Albanians to whom he mostly referred to as "Turks" are the reason for the sufferings of the Greek minority: "The communists took away the property that my grandfather earned with hard work. In Himara, we never voted for Hoxha. Only the one who doesn't want to work can support the communists. This is all the Albanians' fault!" Panagiotis disagreed, saying, "All folks have the good ones and the bad ones. The bad things are done by the state, not by the people." Zosimas answered, "So are the states made by goats? No! The people are the ones who make the states. The Albanian state was made by bad people."

During the conversation, my interlocutors encouraged me to express my own opinions and react to their ideas. I tried balancing between being open and not disclosing too much about my beliefs, some of which could have been unnecessary disappointing for my companions. I said that I supported the ideas regarding economic justice and respect for private property, but I could not agree with Zosimas's radical beliefs about Albanians. Zosimas got a little upset and concluded, "Ah... so you are leftist..." And then he added, "You cannot be somewhere in the

middle, you always have to choose what club you are in. You are young and are still searching for your beliefs. But when you get older, get a job and some property, you inevitably become rightist.”

In this conversation, Zosimas perceives the (Albanian) state as something alien and hostile, first of all, because it is someone else’s state. In his logic, the statecraft is poor and works against the individual because the statehood is inherently wrong: the state does not work as it should because it is an “Albanian” state. Interestingly, while Zosimas draws the link between statecraft and statehood when talking about the past, when talking about the future and hope for a better life of the Greek minority in Albania, he leaves questions of statecraft beyond his concern. In contrast, his “leftist” friend is quite specific in his view on how statecraft should evolve. When I asked my interlocutors what they would see as a positive change in the policies of Albania towards the minority, Panagiotis, quite critical of the far-right ideas expressed by Zosimas, answered, “I want them to build normal roads, open decent schools and hospitals in this area!” Zosimas, in turn, skeptically noted, “I don’t care about all that. The most important thing for me is not to be called ‘Turk,’ to be recognized as a Greek person”.

When I came to Ilias's bar a year later, during my next visit to Himara, I found Zosimas and Panagiotis hanging out in their favorite place as usual but sitting at different tables. As I learned from Ilias, they had not talked to each other for quite a while “because of politics.”

### *Longing for a state, doing without the state*

The village of Dervitsani lies on the road that connects the town of Gjirokaster with the Kakavia border crossing point just a few kilometers away from the town (see Dalakoglou 2010 for an ethnography of the motorway). The village is part of the officially recognized “Greek minority zone,” and most of the residents associate themselves with the “Northern Epirotes” (the “Greek” name for the Greek-speaking and/or Orthodox people living in the Albanian part of Epirus; see; Clayer 2007, 2012; Nitsiakos 2010; Tsitselikis, Christopoulos 2003; according to my observations, this term is more popular among the local Greek-speakers in Dervitsani and the Dropull region that it is in Himara). Dervitsani is the central village (*kefalochori*) of the Dropull region, and it is considered quite economically developed. It is perceived, both by most of its residents and by other “Northern Epirotes,” as an important center of Greek culture in the region and an outstanding example of patriotic attitude towards “Hellenism.” The village is usually claimed to be entirely Greek-speaking, and many of its residents say that they experience difficulties when having to deal with Albanian (for example, when having to study in Albanian in high school<sup>4</sup>).

During my visits to the village, a local young man, Grigoris, helped me in my research. Grigoris studied at a university in Greece and is considered an intellectual and a patriot in the local community. He lives together with his parents, younger siblings in a small house hidden in a beautiful garden full of flowers, home-grown vegetables, and resting in the summer heat cats and dog. When I was visiting their home in summer 2018, Grigoris and his parents told me that for quite a while they had been having problems with their neighbor. According to their story, the neighbor used to be an “agent of the system” during communism (and he probably still is one!), and he is used to spying on his fellow Greek villagers. Now he is giving Grigoris and his family a tough time, having faked the documents and claimed rights for a small piece of land that is now a part of their garden. The family tried to find justice appealing to the local

authorities in the nearest town of Gjirokaster, but their efforts were in vain. The neighbor “had good connections” and was immune to the law, so they did not have much hope for a fair resolution of this property dispute. Grigoris concluded his story with a note of bitterness: “We would like to find protection from the state, but the state cannot do anything, the state doesn't exist here....”

In comparison with the story from the previous section where the conflict was between the individual and the state, in this case, the conflict is between individuals within the community. However, the antagonist (the neighbor) is an “agent of the state” – he used to “work for the Albanian state” and spy on his fellow Greek villagers. Grigoris and his family turn to the “Albanian” state searching for justice and therefore acknowledge its authority, but the state is corrupt and cannot cope with its job of establishing the rule of law, which provokes anxiety of “statelessness”<sup>5</sup> and makes one long for a state.

Interestingly, although this feeling of statelessness is associated with anxiety and sadness in the story told by Grigoris, it can play a different role if put in a different discursive context to be found in many other narratives told in the village, including those also coming from Grigoris. When talking about the village with a stranger, people often mention the well-developed sense of responsibility and outstanding love “for our place” (*gia ton topo mas*) among the local people, especially the village’s youth. These commentaries usually go hand in hand with the complaints about statelessness and the state not being able to do its job, this time regarding the development of the public space in the village. However, in this context, the statelessness does not appear to be an entirely bad thing since it is precisely the responsibility that the state does not take for the place that leaves space for the local youth to “do without the state” and, thus, show their patriotism and create a kind of localized form of sovereignty. The local youth organization, in cooperation with the associations of the fellow-villagers (*sylogi*) in the Greek cities (mainly Ioannina and Athens), organize a yearly celebration of the Assumption of Virgin Mary on the 15<sup>th</sup> of August, in Greek shortly referred to as *Dekapentavgusto* or the *Panagia* (see a further section of this article for more details on the celebration). During the feast, the volunteers fundraise money by selling food and drinks and sometimes attracting donations from the rich co-villagers living abroad and the local businessmen and politicians (which, according to some, try to win extra votes this way). Later, with this money and some volunteer labor, they conduct the most needed works towards improving the public space. For example, several years ago, the village’s main square was reconstructed, and during my visit in 2018, everybody would proudly show me the new playground built near the school (see Figures 1 – 2). Thus, the perceived statelessness may result in longing for a state when it comes to the private property issues but may as well be most naturally embedded in the local identity narrative in the form of the ability to “do without the state,” which is often manifested as something that makes the village more “Greek” and less “Albanian.”

Figure 1: Dervitsani. Main square. Photo from the author’s personal archive.

Figure 2: Dervitsani. New playground. Photo from the author’s personal archive.

### ***Private property, public space, and “aesthetic sovereignty”***

It is the middle of June 2018, and I am sitting on a restaurant’s terrace on the seaside promenade in Himara. The sun is already high in the sky, and although you can still feel the

light marine freshness of the morning, the hot summer day is already here and is claiming its rights for the joyful and busy town. From the terrace of the restaurant owned by a local family, I can see the serene gulf of Himara, the aquamarine sky merging with the alluring waters, and, of course, the people, primarily tourists, strolling along the promenade to finally grab a spot on one of the beaches of the “Albanian Riviera” paradise.

Since the first time I came to Himara in 2014, I have heard people here complaining, same as they do in Dervitsani, about the state “not doing anything.” Like my favorite *souvlaki* place in a small passage between the two main streets or the bumpy roads where cars and pedestrians struggle to negotiate their ways, many things have stayed the same. However, the state has finally “done something,” and this “facade” part of the town has changed drastically due to a public development plan introduced by the central government, which the locals often refer to as “the so-called development.”

The coastal road with heavy and chaotic traffic has been replaced by a pedestrian zone decorated with young miniature pine trees, and instead of the concrete pier with small steep stairs leading to the strap of the beach, a large pedestrian zone, also concrete but showing a touch of urban design, gradually reaches towards the sea line to merge with the sandy beach. Here and there, between the pine trees, one can see benches with old gentlemen reading newspapers and mothers chatting while their children run and play around. At some point, I find myself thinking how much better this place looks now than it used to, and, I must admit, that even though concrete is probably not the best choice here, I find this attempt to create a piece of modern urbanism quite successful, especially the pine trees which, in my opinion, go perfectly well with the peaceful serenity of this place (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: Himara promenade. Photo from the author’s personal archive.

This morning, I am meeting Alexandros, the “father” of the family owning the restaurant together with a small room-to-let business in Himara. Although Alexandros is now in his 80-s, he is strong, full of energy, and has a beautiful sense of humor. After sharing with me a fascinating story of his family, he looks at the pine trees lining up in front of the sparkling sea and says bitterly, “Yes, it looks nice... But pine tree has never grown here near the sea, and it will die eventually. They would have known it if they had asked the locals.” This comment at once reminds me of the conversation I had the day before with Alexandros’s younger kin which may help clarify this meaning-making process in which a pine tree is never just a pine tree.

Our discussion with Kosmas and Spiros the day before started from a story that sounded very familiar. They told me that recently there had been a conflict between two locals because one of them had faked documents and taken ownership over a land property that used to belong to the family of the other. Kosmas commented on this, saying that although it was too bad that he faked the documents and won the property in such an unfair way, it was still much better than what some other locals do: they sell their property to the strangers “from the north,” so that “Albanians who have never seen the sea before come here and become property owners.” At this point, Spiros interfered, suddenly switching from Greek to Albanian: “You know Albanian, Katerina? Do you know what the word *pushues* (tourist) means? We say here, in Himara does not come a *pushues* (tourist), here comes a *pushtues* (conqueror)!” (*Ne Himarë nuk vjen pushues, vjen pushtues*).

As many conversations in Himara do, this conversation turned to the “so-called development,” and Kosmas expressed his opinion, saying, “I have recently spoken to an



architect about this. It is better than before, but why did they take away the sand from the people? Why did they have to cover this part with concrete? In winter, the sand returns and covers all the space here, and they clean it only in May. Why wouldn't they let the sand take its natural place?" Then he continued with his even more critical opinion on the second part of the development plan, which, to the moment, had been paused because of the intense protests it provoked in the town, and said,

You know the vineyard that you can see on your left if you go to the place you are staying at, near the school? Those are our vineyards! Now the mayor comes and tells us that they want to take away this land to make a public park. People need a park, he says. You know all these apartment blocks there? They were built during communism on the land that belonged to our family. They were built for those Albanians that came to the town from the Albanian villages. They took them from the state for 100 dollars, and now they cost 40000. So first, they come here to take our land, and now the mayor is saying we must build a beautiful park for them! And what about us? Where will we go? The people here do not mean to say they should not do this plan. Everybody wants this place to become better, the roads to be built, and so forth, but they have to respect the owner!"

The way Kosmas, with some help from Spiros, is building his argument, reveals a fundamental discursive pattern: for the Himariotes, the question of private property regulations has been bounded so profoundly with the other questions of statecraft, like public space and urban development, as well as with the question of their place in the model of the Albanian national statehood, that it has become impossible to separate one from the other. Thus, the project of public space development is discursively interpreted as both disrespect towards the rights of the "old owners" for their private property and attempt to "take away" the very public space, symbolically "owned" by the local Greek community, which is interpreted as a physical and symbolical threat to this piece of "Greekness" in Albania.

This brings my interlocutors to drawing a conclusion about the state of the state in Albania and the possibility of a "better life": "If you look at the Albanian parliament, you will see that those in the Socialist Party are all children of those who ruled Albania during communism. It is the same with the Democratic party. They simply changed the brand," Kosmas notes. Spiros agrees with him and philosophically summarizes the argument, simultaneously boasting his competence in English, "Same shit, different name." Kosmas goes on, saying, "Democracy does not exist here. Why? Look, they say something about the '*ish-pronaret*' (ex-owners in Albanian), '*teos idioktites*' (same in Greek). How can this make any sense at all? This is like an ex-prime minister, meaning he used to be prime minister, and he is not anymore. And we are the 'ex-owners,' we used to be owners, but they took away our land... If you can say something like 'ex-owner,' how can you even expect this country to progress?"

Kosmas's wife calls him from the kitchen to deal with some preparations for a busy day and night at the restaurant, and he leaves. However, in several minutes he comes back and says:

Here is one more thing I wanted to say. You know the big red building nearby, don't you? It was a humiliation for us, the Himariotes. Those who live there are not from here. They came from other places. Since they know that we, the locals, have a different point of view, believe differently, they have painted the house

red on purpose, to annoy us! And in the meanwhile, there was another project, which suggested painting it blue. This would have been so much more beautiful! You see, red looks ugly here, as it does not go with the sea! (see Figure 4)

How Kosmas and his father, Alexandros, assign meanings to the pine trees and the color of the apartment complex makes me think about Giorgio Agamben's discussion on sovereignty, in which he wondered, adopting the Aristotelian language, how it was possible to "politicize the natural sweetness of mere living" (Agamben 1998: 11). Himara seems a perfect place to be wondering about that, as here, indeed, every trivial detail of everyday life may be politicized, integrated into the local political discourse, and contribute to the symbolic construction of a localized form of "aesthetic sovereignty".

Figure 4: Himara. The red building. Photo from the author's personal archive.

### *Performing sovereignty*

We are in the village of Dervitsani again, and it is one of the most important days of the year. Today the village is celebrating *Dekapentavgusto*, the 15<sup>th</sup> of August. The Assumption of the Virgin Mary is an important day in the Orthodox (and Catholic) calendar. In Greece, it is celebrated on a grand scale. The celebration, or the *panigiri*, is a gathering on the village's main square, which usually includes an enormous amount of meat grilled and sold to the guests, wine, beer, and *raki* consumed and, of course, the traditional music played, and traditional dances danced. At the most "authentic" celebrations, the key dancers are the old and respected members of the community who dance all night long in their "normal" (everyday) clothes and set up an example for the younger generations. However, at some celebrations, one can see a dance collective, usually young people. On this important day, they perform well-staged and well-rehearsed dances wearing beautiful traditional costumes. These celebrations have a very important function in the lives of the villages. After the urbanization boom in Greece, depopulation became a great problem for the Greek rural societies, and many villages were left with very few residents, mainly the elders. In this context, the celebrations, like the one of the 15<sup>th</sup> of August, among their other meanings, play the key role of supporting the local social networks and keeping the village societies alive, bringing together the current residents and their relatives and friends from various Greek cities and from all over the world.

Since my first visit to Dervitsani, almost every person I talked to when speaking about the village would proudly tell me about the deep respect that the locals have towards the "Greek tradition." In this context, they would usually mention the spectacular celebration on the 15<sup>th</sup> of August in Dervitsani and how it was essential for me to witness the celebration with my own eyes to understand what Dervitsani "really" was. When I finally managed to attend the event in August 2018, I was accompanied by Grigoris, whom I have already mentioned throughout this article. We took place at one of the many long tables installed all around the local school's sports ground. It was, indeed, an impressive *panigiri*, with all the attributes of a proper celebration – crowds of people from all over the world, dancers in the traditional costumes, music band with professional *panigiri* singers, food prepared by the volunteers from the local youth, and, of course, drinks. However, there was one detail that you do not normally find at other villages' *panigiria*. A huge Greek flag was located at the most visible spot on the sports ground, which happened to be a basketball ring (see Figures 5-6).

Figure 5: Dervitsani. *Panigiri*. Photo from the author's personal archive.

While we were sitting at the table waiting for our *souvlakia* and beer, Grigoris would now and then run somewhere to catch a remarkable moment of the celebration on his phone camera. As he explained, he was live streaming the event on Facebook to “let everybody see how they celebrate in Dervitsani.” After that, he would sit nearby, reading the comments to his video on the social media, sharing with me the ones he liked most, and from time to time saying happily, “Someone I don’t know has just commented on my video and asked where in Greece this was! Can you imagine? When seeing this, people understand at once that this can only happen in Greece!” Finally, one of the young volunteers delivered our food and drinks. The beer he brought was “Virginia” produced in Greece. We all opened our beers and drank to the happy occasion, and Grigoris commented: “This is an excellent beer. We always bring beer from Greece for the celebration, although it is quite challenging to transport such an amount of beer. But it is worth it since Albanian beer is not that good, you might feel sick in the morning after having drunk it. After this one, in contrast, you will feel fresh.”

Finally, having attended this celebration, it was clear to me why it played such a central role in the narratives of Dervitsiotes. Indeed, same as for many villages in Greece, such events are crucial for maintaining the local networks and the local identity. However, in Dervitsani, the sense of locality is difficult to experience and to understand separately from the idea of national belonging. Much needed localized sovereignty within the Albanian state’s sovereignty domain is only possible if embedded in the competing sovereignty project of the Greek state just a few kilometers away. The local narrative, at least its mainstream version, is permanently embedded in the national narrative, as they are constructed from the same elements, feed on the same symbolic sources, and, thus, can only be studied together. The celebration of the 15<sup>th</sup> of August always has to do with performance, and, most importantly, with performing local identity. In Dervitsani, however, it becomes a performative manifestation of a localized form of sovereignty. Furthermore, as was also the case in the previous example, in this context, it is the small details belonging to the realm of everyday life that become a bright manifestation of the clash between statehood and statecraft, everyday experience and nationalism. A basketball ring is easily transformed into a flagstaff, life-streaming into a transnational political campaign, and drinking beer into a patriotic act.

### ***Alternative sovereignty projects***

In the above sections, I have demonstrated some aspects of the ways of life that exist in the context of the Albanian-Greek borderlands. In this section, I need to go back to the episode I started this article with to re-connect the ways of life described here and the political imagination of the people experiencing these ways of life. On our way to his home village, which due to the infrastructural issues, now and then, could have turned into a real adventure, Vangelis suggested that the quality of life in the region could only improve with a radical political change. Interestingly, his utopian view of a better state where everybody would live in prosperity with no borders and conflicts did not belong to any of the established national narratives and macro-scale political projects. For this reason, I offer the term “alternative sovereignty projects” to refer to such ideas. Although they are not a part of an established political narrative, and thus, using Caroline Humphrey’s terminology (Humphrey 2002), they can hardly be called ideologies, they offer an excellent example of how political imagination

works. However, as is usually the case with imagination, they do not come out of nowhere, and it is possible to trace their discourse-historical sources (Wodak & Meyer 2009).

The idea about a united and autonomous Epirus is rooted in the short-lived Autonomous Republic of Northern Epirus project proclaimed in 1914 by the pro-Greek forces in the region. While showing resemblance with this quite recognizable historical discourse, the political imagination of Vangelis goes far beyond the normative pro-Greek interpretation, which often uses this historical precedent to question the current state of things and make nationally biased political claims. In his utopia, Autonomous Epirus is neither divided into Southern and Northern nor tied to a specific ethnonational identity denying the legitimacy of the others. This way, he does not merely question the location of the border to the south or to the north but doubts its very existential necessity and legitimacy. In this imagined state, the ways of life that the nation-state is incapable of including obtain their sovereignty and legitimacy, which in turn is expected to result in “normal roads” and “normal lives.”

The idea of a Balkan Federation, also dating back to the time of the Balkan Wars, remained influential among the left political movements in the Balkans during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and appeared here and there supporting different local political goals but maintaining the mission of establishing peace in the region (Stavrianos 1942; Galitzi 2012). Being rather marginal for the mainstream political narratives, it re-actualizes in Vangelis’s political imagination and manifests as an alternative future project for the contested region. In terms of resolving the never-ending “national issues,” its function is very similar to the one of the “Autonomous Epirus” project. In this sense, the idea of micro-autonomy and macro-federation are almost synonymous. However, the latter features an interesting functional element which the “Autonomous Epirus” project lacks: it is perceived as a source of sovereignty from the “Great Powers,” which in this context is the EU. Such a perception of the EU is, at least to some extent, a reaction to the EU policies towards the non-member Balkan states, resulting in the sense of political frustration in the Balkan societies (other research participants expressed similar ideas, and some mentioned a “Balkan Union” instead of the “Balkan Federation”).

I assume that these ideas discursively resolve the conflict of statehood and statecraft generated in the dichotomy of the Albanian and Greek, local and national, right and left, past and present. People seek to imagine a project of hope for “normal life” in which their economic rights would be protected, and roads built, but according to the tendency pointed out by Stef Jansen, they “automatically slip from discussions of statecraft straight into discussions of statehood” (Jansen 2015: 14) and get stuck in the nationalist discourses with their mythologies. In this context, the political projects of old times become relevant again and, creatively transformed, they re-appear in the political imaginary as a means to neutralize the discursive conflict between statecraft and statehood.

### *Conclusions*

In this article, I focused on how concerns about statecraft and the possibility of a “normal” or “decent” life interconnect with ideas on statehood and sovereignty in the political imaginaries of my research participants from the Greek minority of Albania. As I hope to have demonstrated, people from the Greek minority are confined within ways of life, in which it is, indeed, possible to “politicize the natural sweetness of mere living” (Agamben 1998:11;

Humphrey 2007:420). In this context, they imagine statecraft and statehood as inextricably linked but often conflicting and come up with alternative sovereignty projects to overcome those semiotic conflicts and imagine a world in which such “normal” or, at least, “better” life could happen.

While it is, indeed, necessary to shift the discussion on the Balkans and borderlands from the traditional “identitarianism,” it is essential to acknowledge the emic perspective, which, in this case, makes it impossible to separate the questions of statecraft from the questions of statehood. A deeper look into how individuals make sense of the ways of life they experience, how they draw the links between statehood and statecraft, and how these connections and meanings are essentialized through the everyday language use may help better understand how these ways of life are created and maintained. Besides, it might unveil important aspects of the macro-political processes behind these ways of life that remain otherwise concealed.

### *Notes*

<sup>1</sup> Here and further on in this article, the names and some biographical details of the research participants have been changed to anonymize and protect their personal data. All the observations and interviews have been conducted with their informed consent.

<sup>2</sup> Chams are a group of Albanian speaking, partly Muslim, partly Orthodox people who lived in the region of Chameria. Chameria (except for its small part around the town of Konispol nowadays lying on the Albanian side very close to the border) became a part of the Greek state in 1912, almost at the same time when Albania claimed its Independence. Thus, the so-called “Cham issue” together with the “Northern Epirote issue” (regarding the Greek minority of Albania) came to be key topics in the agenda of both states. In the end of the Second World War, many Chams were killed in armed conflicts, and the majority of those who survived were deported to Albania (e.g., Baltiotis 2011; Kretsi 2002; Manta 2009; Sintes 2015).

<sup>3</sup> In this article, I use the concept of “state” as an emic term and follow my research participants’ understanding of it. Depending on the context, in their speech in Greek, it may appear as either *to kratos* (state) or *to systema* (system). The latter often (although not exclusively) refers to the communist Albanian state and almost always has a negative connotation. The former can refer to nowadays’ Albanian and Greek states or the abstract idea of the sovereign power and can be mentioned both positively and negatively.

<sup>4</sup> There is a system of state minority schools that runs in the Greek minority zone. While, in elementary school, the classes are mostly held in Greek, and, in middle school, the education is bilingual, in high school, the courses are almost exclusively taught in Albanian (see Kotsira, Zheltova et al. 2016; Tsitsilikis, Christopoulos 2003; about the history of the schooling system and its role in Albanian state-building see Clayer 2007, 2012).

<sup>5</sup> My understanding of “statelessness” here is close to the one offered in Kivland 2012.

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