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Giannena city after the opening of the Albanian borders. The effects of cross-border exchange.

Fereniki VATAVALI

Introduction

Giannena city, the biggest city in Northwest Greece, is the capital of Ioannina Prefecture and Region of Epirus. The location of the city next to Albanian borders and the historical links with the communities of South Albania had as a result the immediate transformation of the urban functions after the opening of the Albanian borders in 1990.

In Ottoman era Giannena used to be the social, economic, administrative and cultural center of a large geographical area in Southwestern Balkans. The definition of the Greek Albanian border line divided city's periphery into two parts, the Greek and the Albanian. Giannena became part of the Greek state and a big part of its periphery became part of the newly founded Albanian state.

The existing network of the social and economic relations was hurt seriously after the Second World War, when Albania adopted a policy of isolation and closed the external borders of the country. The communication between the two sides of the borders stopped suddenly, diminishing the role of Giannena. The political transformation of Albania in 1989-1990 and the opening of the borders revealed the big differences between the two sides of the Greek – Albanian borders.

The opening of the borders caused flows of people, goods and capital from one side to the other, regenerating old and creating new cross-border networks of social and economic links. These cross-border flows influenced both countries and especially the areas close to the borders, including of course Giannena city.

Today, the continuity of the geographical space is a dynamic situation for the Greek and Albanian border zone. New perspectives have emerged for Epirus region, a zone of the Greek State that until the end of '80s was completely isolated. The passing of Epirus from isolation to communication has transformed all the levels of spatial hierarchy.

Concerning Giannena city, it is hard to identify factors connected with the new character of Greek-Albanian border that have influenced urban life. Nowadays, Giannena is the most important city in Northwest Greece and the main centre of development in Region of Epirus. The recent dynamics of Giannena came up as a result of the improvement or creation of new public facilities (national road system, university, hospital, congress halls, sport facilities, shopping centers), but also because of the challenges that emerged from the opening of the Albanian borders.

This paper is based on a research that took place in 2005¹ and focuses on the transformation of Giannena city due to the opening of the Albanian borders in 1990. The questions that are posed by this paper are:

- Which sectors of urban life have been affected by the opening of the borders and how?
- How was influenced the urban development by the opening of the Albanian borders?
- How the location of the city affected the relations with Albania?

- How important is the contribution of the historical links between the two sides of the borders?
- What is the role of the local institutions?
- How important are the existing transport networks?

The transformation of Giannena city is part of the big transformations that took place the last decades in the whole world and that have different characteristics from place to place according to the local identity. The main intention of this paper is to open the discussion, through the case study of Giannena city, about the spatial effects of the global changes in economy and society, the transformation of the European space after the political changes in East Europe and Balkans and the current practices of world and cross-border exchange.

Effects on certain sectors of urban life

A big part of the transformations that have taken place recently in Giannena has been caused by abstractive actions or initiatives. These transformations are presented by each sector separately.

Population: Giannena city was and still is the place where many emigrants from Albania, especially from South Albania, arrived in order to stay for short or long time. Nowadays 7.000-10.000 Albanian citizens live in Giannena². Approximately 80-90% of them are members of the Greek minority of Albania³. The new population of the city has transformed the local labor market, has enriched the local cultural and sport life, has affected the real estate, and has changed the structure of public administration.

Trade: The significance of commercial exchange, in regards with the relation between Giannena and Albania, is very high. The needs of the Albanian society for daily goods, as well as for goods that represent the western way of life are very wide. Many local trade companies export to Albania structural materials, food, machines, but also bottled water, provisions for singing birds, coffins and spices, in cooperation with Albanian businessmen or commercial representatives. The majority of the exported goods go to Tirana and cities of South Albania⁴. Additionally, many Albanian citizens visit Giannena for shopping.

Building constructions: A big part of the male population of the Albanian emigrants work as workmen, affecting seriously the construction labour market⁵. Furthermore, engineers from Albania work in construction projects in Giannena⁶. Finally, low cost construction materials are imported from Albania.

Residence purchase: It is estimated that 2-3% of the annual residence purchases is done by Albanian emigrants⁷. Most of the houses that are purchased by Albanians are old or low quality flats at central districts (Girokomio, Kaloutsiani, Kastro) and new single family houses at suburbs (Kardamitsia, Anatoli, Katsika, Kastritsa, Koutselio) where the cost of land is relatively low⁸.

Investments in Albania: Although businessmen from Giannena are very interested in the possibilities of investments in Albania, until now they haven't taken many

initiatives for investments. It is estimated that just 12 to 13 companies with headquarters in Giannena have invested in the neighboring country⁹. The majority of these investments are concentrated in South Albania.

Banks: In 1996-97, when the system of the Albanian bank “pyramids” collapsed, big amounts of money were transferred to bank branches in Giannena either by Albanian citizens who tried to protect their properties, or by the illegal Albanian banks¹⁰.

Circulation and transport infrastructure: Ioannina Prefecture and its capital Giannena city is the main gate from Albania to Greece¹¹. The contacts and the exchanges between Albania and Greece have increased the number of private cars, taxis and trucks at the national road that connects Giannena with Albanian borders, as well as the number of passengers at the suburban bus lines. Thus Giannena has become an important transport centre at Southwest Balkans. Works of improvement of the national road that connects Giannena with Kakavia crossing point and with Gjirokaster city in Albania have been completed recently, encouraging further contacts between the two sides.

The role of local organizations and institutions

The existence of several organizations and institutions at Giannena influenced deeply the relations between the city and Albania. The opening of the Albanian borders widened the functions of the existing and created new organizations and institutions. In several cases, more than one institution worked together for the completion of a project. As a result a large network of links has been created. In this network public and private sectors, state and civil society are in close cooperation.

The institutions that have been involved in issues that emerged from the opening of the Albanian borders can be grouped as following:

- Institutions that existed before the opening of the borders, such as authorities of Region of Epirus, Ioannina Prefecture and local municipalities, the University of Ioannina, the Regional Hospital and the Industrial and Commercial Chamber of Ioannina. These institutions have modified their structure and have taken initiatives according to governmental directions.
- Institutions that existed before the opening of the Albanian borders that focus on issues relevant to the population, the history and the civilization of Albania, especially of the Greek minority of the South Albania. The “North Epirus Association” and the “Foundation of Studies on Northern Epirus”, which belong to this category, have created links between Greece and the Greek minority of Albania.
- Institutions of the Greek state that opened branches in Giannena after the opening of the borders, in order to coordinate actions relevant to the new situation in the area. Actions followed by “Hellenic Foreign Trade Board” and “National Foundation for Reception and Rehabilitation of Greek that returned to their Native Country” reflect the governmental policy on Greek-Albanian relations.
- Non governmental organizations such as “Egnatia Epirus Foundation”, “Research and Support Centre for Victims of Maltreatment and Social” and HUMANET organization that implement development projects in third countries, especially in Albania.

The contacts between Greek and Albanian societies are achieved in several ways. Local institutions and organizations really encourage these contacts. The provision of support to Albanian institutions and to Albanian emigrants in Greece by local institutions, as well as cultural and educational exchanges, create links of communication and transfer ideas and modes of living from one side to the other.

Links between Giannena and the other side of the border line

The opening of the borders regenerated historical links. Relatives and old friends joined again. Residents of Giannena that were born in South Albania visited the land of their ancestors, supported the Greek minority of Albania, and claimed for returning their properties.

The first years after the change of the Albanian political system, the civil society of Giannena offered humanitarian aid to the Albanian society, through the local institutions. Efforts of supporting “the brothers and sisters” of South Albania were very intense.

Several exchange initiatives were based on the common roots of tradition and folk art. The common language –Greek language- and the common religion – Orthodox Christianity- of some members of the two societies made the contacts between the two sides easier.

Concerning the role of Giannena in the area, it seems that the city has regained the central position that it used to have in the past. Giannena is the nearest big city for a large area in South Albania. Albanian customers go to Giannena for shopping -as they used to do in the past- because of the shortage of goods and the preference of the Greek minority to Greek products. Apart from commercial centre, Giannena is nowadays a center that concentrates technical, educational, medical and bank services for a transnational area.

Additionally, Giannena links Albanian society with western world, because:

- It is the first stop to the West for thousands of emigrants that have left or will leave Albania. Actually Giannena is the place where Albanian emigrants come in contact with a relatively mature capitalistic society for first time.
- It concentrates the required administrative and economical mechanisms that can support the capitalistic development of Albania.
- It is the place where the new consumption desires of Albanian society can be satisfied.
- It connects Albania with Greek state and European Union, through programs and formal meetings.
- It is the main transport centre at the area.

Aspects of local development: inequalities and dynamics

Any reference to the inequalities between Greek and Albanian society should focus on the specific characteristics of each society. These characteristics create a unique framework for the relations between the two societies. The uniqueness of the

current relations between Giannena and South Albania is based on the historical links, as well as on the local identity and the development trends of each side.

The level of development of the two sides is very different, but there are also many contact points between them. Albania is one of the less developed countries in Europe, but it has a wide network of infrastructures and public facilities. On the other side, Greek society is capitalistic, but less developed than the traditional capitalistic countries of Europe. It means that, despite the inequalities, none of the existing theoretical models (centre-periphery or developed-undeveloped world) fits to the relation between the two countries and further to the relation between Giannena and South Albania.

Giannena has always been a poor place. When the Albanian borders opened, the city was the “right” time at the “right” place and had the “right” characteristics for occupying a central post in Southwestern Balkans, especially with regards to Albania. After the opening of the borders one of the poorest regions of the European Union became central, while South Albania became its periphery. It means that several hierarchies between different places exist. These hierarchies form several levels of uneven exchange and spatial differentiation.

Definitely the vitality that characterizes Giannena today is connected in a way with the exchanges between the two sides of the borders. The opening of the borders influenced positively Giannena city, with the exception of some criminal incidents. Regarding South Albania -the less developed side- it is assumed that contacts with Greece have influenced life both positively and negatively, although it is not sure what is good and what is bad for the Albanian society. The different level of development at the two sides of the borders has put in function mechanisms of exchanges, which somehow preserve and recycle inequalities. At the same time, opportunities for restraining these inequalities are offered. In many cases inequalities have been reduced due to sentimental or historical factors.

The relation between Giannena and Albania is an example that shows the variety of existing exchange practices in global level. The contacts between the two sides of the borders are wide and are affected by several factors. Thus, the adaptation of this case study in theoretical schemes doesn't seem to be easy. The complexity of current contacts reflects the instability that characterizes global relations, letting open questions about global exchanges and current procedures of development.

¹ The research was made in the framework of my thesis on MSc Urban and Regional Planning, National Technical University of Athens, Athens – October 2005. Supervisor: Prof. Maria Mantouvalou.

² Region of Epirus, 2005.

³ Information was provided by the Directive of Urban Situation, Foreigners and Emigrants of Region of Epirus and by Faik Dishnica, General Secretary of the Albanian Consulate at Giannena.

⁴ Data on exports is based on telephonic questionnaire (7/5/2005 to 15/7/2005) to representatives of all the export companies of the Ioannina Prefecture.

⁵ National Census 2001, National Statistic Agency of Greece. “Study on the social and working condition of the population from North Epirus and working perspectives in Ioannina Prefecture”, Epirus S.A.. Interview with Faik Dishnica, General Secretary of the Albanian Consulate at Giannena, 17/3/2005.

⁶ Information about the engineers from Albania that work in Giannena were provided by Maria Theoharopoulou, branch officer of TEE- Epirus.

⁷ Interview with George and Elias Egoumenidis, building constructors, 6/5/2005

⁸ Interview with Engell Shabani, resident of Giannena with Albanian citizenship, 17/3/2005.

⁹ Interview with Dant Gumeni, General Consul of Albania in Giannena, 3/5/2005.

¹⁰ Interview with Antonis Gousis, Regional Director of North-west Greece of Piraeus Bank, 3/5/2005.

¹¹ In 2002 and 2003 more than 600.000 Albanians crossed the borders from Kakavia crossing point annually. It means that more than 50% of the Albanians who enter Greece, pass the borders from Kakavia crossing point.