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SCHRÖDINGER'S DUCK: POLITICAL GEOGRAPHY OBSERVED FROM NORTH MACEDONIA

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ABSTRACT

This article rethinks how the condition of political geography should be viewed: not as a single verdict but as a profile across three dimensions, institutional, intellectual and societal, observed from a specific place, in this case North Macedonia. To this end, it asks what the discipline is, how it developed as an academic subdiscipline and what condition it is in today. Its framing device is Schrödinger's thought experiment, in which the cat is replaced by the duck from Muir's question "dead duck or phoenix?": the condition of the discipline is not given in itself but depends on where and when it is observed. Drawing on Western and regional literature, the article advances three theses. First, the post-war stagnation of the discipline cannot be reduced to the stigma of German Geopolitik - the stigma fell upon a discipline with weak theoretical foundations and led to a self-imposed depoliticisation. Second, the revival did not primarily follow the quantitative route anticipated by its contemporary diagnosticians but was associated with a repoliticisation of geographical inquiry. Third, in North Macedonia political geography was institutionalised decades after Zagreb and Belgrade, although the Macedonian space has long been an object of political-geographical interest. The evidence points to the domestic institutional context rather than to the stigma shared by the entire Yugoslav space.

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Keywords: political geography; history of the discipline; institutionalisation; Geopolitik; post-Yugoslav space; North Macedonia

INTRODUCTION

Political geography is a long-established subdiscipline of human geography, yet the question of what it actually studies remain open. Painter and Jeffrey (2009, p. 16)

observe that, despite its well-developed institutional infrastructure, the discipline lacks a generally accepted definition: "Despite its journals, textbooks and courses, there is no universally accepted definition of the field of inquiry called 'Political Geography'." At the beginning of the 21st century, the question also acquired an existential tone. Herb (2008, p. 21), writing about a 2003 forum in *Political Geography* (Cox & Low, 2003), formulates it as follows: "If, as a recent academic forum showed, the political is alive and well in all of geography, does this not question the continued relevance and validity of having a separate sub-field of political geography?"

The same author (Herb, 2008, p. 21) also points to a way towards an answer: "The most fruitful response to such existential questions about academic subdisciplines is delving into the past and tracing the genesis of the subject." This article follows that path but starts from an additional premise: the definition and the history of political geography are two sides of the same problem. The history of political geography is also a history of changing attempts to define its object.

The framing of the article draws on three images. The first is the thought experiment that Erwin Schrödinger devised in 1935 as an objection to the Copenhagen interpretation of quantum mechanics (Matthias, 2026). The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* describes its essence as follows: "Schrödinger's cat argues that, in the Copenhagen interpretation, until an observer opens the box and reveals the cat's fate, the cat is both alive and dead - a state described as a 'superposition'" (Matthias, 2026). The second image is the question with which Muir (1976) opened the debate on the future of the discipline in the mid-1970s: "Dead duck or phoenix?" The third is Berry's 1969 diagnosis (as cited in Jones et al., 2004, p. 8) of political geography as a "moribund backwater" of geography, from which, according to the title of Johnston's (2001) article, the discipline subsequently emerged. In the title, Schrödinger's cat is replaced by Muir's duck, and this is more than a play on words because the history of the discipline had already supplied its own animal.

The metaphor is used here with the caution that Schrödinger himself called for: "The point, Schrödinger wrote, was that this 'ridiculous' scenario should discourage us from 'naively accepting as valid a "blurred model"' of reality" (Gershon, 2023). Superposition is therefore not treated as a finding but as a warning against judging the discipline as a whole, without time or space. The metaphor is thus used as a heuristic, not as an analogy with quantum mechanics: it does not claim that the discipline is in any physical sense indeterminate, only that a judgement about its condition remains indeterminate until the point of observation has been specified. Monte-Serrat et al. (2020) describe the moment of observation: "However, when someone looks inside the box, they see the cat 'alive or dead', not a paradox of an 'alive and dead' cat." Viewed as a whole, political geography appears simultaneously a dead duck and a phoenix; observed from a specific place and time, and in a specific dimension, its condition becomes determinate. Political geography, a discipline of place, must therefore be observed from somewhere, in this case from North Macedonia.

The article advances three theses. The first concerns the causes of the stagnation of political geography after the Second World War. The usual explanation, the

discrediting of the discipline through German *Geopolitik*, is correct but incomplete: the stigma fell upon a discipline with weak theoretical foundations and a tendency to avoid controversy, and it led to a self-imposed depoliticisation of the field, so a "political" geography that takes the state as given, without reflecting on its own politics, also loses its own object. The second thesis concerns the revival. The revival did not primarily follow the route anticipated by its contemporary diagnosticians, that of quantification, which marked only its first and limited wave, but was to a considerable extent associated with repoliticisation. These two theses are presented as a synthesis of the Anglophone literature, above all of Muir, Johnston, Herb, Jones et al. and Agnew, rather than as new claims; they serve as the baseline against which the regional case is read. The third thesis is that the condition of the discipline is not universal but depends on the place from which it is observed. In Skopje, political geography was institutionalised only in 2006, decades after Zagreb and Belgrade, even though the stigma of *Geopolitik* was shared by the entire Yugoslav space and Macedonia has been an object of political-geographical interest for more than a century. The available evidence points more strongly to the domestic institutional context than to the shared stigma.

Methodologically, the article is a critical literature review with a regional case study. Sections 2-4 are based mainly on a reading of key Western/Anglophone textbooks, handbooks and review articles published between 1975 and 2009 and of key articles on the state of the discipline (Muir, 1976; Johnston, 2001). Section 5 is a comparative review of the institutionalisation of the discipline in Belgrade, Zagreb, Ljubljana and Skopje, based on the regional literature in Croatian, Serbian, Slovene and Macedonian. The "condition" of the discipline is not a single quantity. The article distinguishes three of its dimensions: institutional (departments, university courses, journals), intellectual (theoretical and research output) and societal relevance (the need for spatial analysis of political processes). A discipline can be institutionally weak, intellectually productive and socially needed at the same time, meaning that these dimensions develop unevenly, and this is the precise sense in which the condition of the discipline depends on the point of observation. In the terms of the title, opening the box means choosing a place and a dimension. Section 5 does this for four centres, and Table 1 (Section 5.4) summarises the result by uniform thresholds of institutionalisation and by the three dimensions.

WHAT IS POLITICAL GEOGRAPHY?

The shortest definition is the one that Agnew (2002, p. 1) calls the commonsense one: "The commonsense meaning of political geography is the study of how politics is informed by geography." For a long time, according to Agnew, this meant an attempt to show how the physical features of the Earth influenced the division of the world into states and empires; today geography also encompasses social and economic differences between places, while politics has expanded to questions of political identity and political movements (Agnew, 2002, p. 1). The direction of the

relationship between the two components, however, is not unambiguous. Traditional, state-centred political geography saw it as two-way (East & Prescott, 1975). Muir (1981), in the second edition of a book first published in 1975, registers a shift away from the influence of geography on politics: "Consequently modern political geography has drifted in the direction of studying politics as an agent involved in landscape change, though good studies of the reverse relationship will always be welcomed."

The definitions of political geography follow the development of wider geographical thought, from the state and territorial units, through political processes, to territory and territoriality and to an understanding of the discipline as discourse. Jones et al. (2004, p. 2) distinguish four approaches to defining the field. The first defines it through political territorial units, borders and administrative subdivisions. Its best-known example is Hartshorne's definition, about which Muir (1981) writes: "The most frequently quoted definition of political geography was provided in 1954 by Hartshorne, who described the subject as 'the study of the areal differences and similarities in political character as an interrelated part of the total complex of areal differences and similarities'." The second defines the field through political processes, in the spirit of Cohen and Rosenthal (1971, as cited in Muir, 1981): "Political geography is concerned with the spatial attributes of political process." The third defines it through key concepts, above all territory and territoriality. For Cox (2002, p. 30), territory and territoriality, which bring together space and power, form the core of the discipline. For Johnston (2001), territoriality is precisely what distinguishes political geography from the rest of human geography.

The common problem of these definitions is the attempt to establish the "essence" of the discipline. Painter and Jeffrey (2009, pp. 15–16) propose instead that political geography be understood both as an institutionalised subdiscipline and as a discourse, and Jones et al. (2004, p. 2) add: "Yet political geography as it is actually researched and taught is much messier than these essentialist definitions suggest." The fourth, open approach therefore treats political geography as a field with dynamic boundaries. Jones et al. (2004, p. 3) express this with a metaphor fitting for the discipline itself: "Political geography has frontier zones, not borders." Muir (1997) had already registered the change of climate: "If we have not yet reached a point when all can simply accept that 'political geography is what political geographers do' at least there is a far broader toleration of diversity." The regional literature describes these frontier zones from within. Zupančič (2024, p. 71) writes: "The working fields of political geography lie rather at the edge of the established idea of the 'geographical': minorities, political borders, elections and electoral behaviour, administrative organisation and the subdivision of state territories simply do not look like the subject matter of geography."

For the purposes of this article, political geography is understood as a field of research into the mutual relations between power and politics, on the one hand, and space, place and territory, on the other (Jones et al., 2004, pp. 2–3). The criterion for belonging to the field is analytical rather than thematic. Muir (1981) writes: "Studies in political geography should clearly demonstrate the spatial causes and effects of

political processes; if neither of these are apparent, the subject is not a political-geographical one." This definition is operational rather than essentialist: it delimits the scope of the analysis, not the essence of the discipline. In Section 5.6 it is applied to the political-geographical research conducted in North Macedonia outside geography.

ASCENT, STIGMA AND STAGNATION

The Era of Ascent

Histories of political geography usually follow the same scheme: an era of ascent from the late nineteenth century to the Second World War, an era of marginalisation from the 1940s to the 1970s and an era of revival from the late 1970s (Jones et al., 2004, p. 4). In what follows, this periodisation is used only as a chronological framework, since such evolutionary accounts tend to present the history of a discipline as a story of progress (Herb, 2008, p. 21). As an analytical lens, the article uses Herb's (2008, p. 22) typology, which concerns the relationship of political geographers to the state: "Historically, political geographers have engaged with the state in three ways: they have sought to facilitate the process of maximizing its power over space; to maintain and manage its territorial existence; and to actively resist and question its spatially manifested actions." The three traditions, advocacy, governance and critique, correspond largely to the right, the centre and the left of the political spectrum (Herb, 2008, p. 23).

The academic history of the subdiscipline is usually associated with Friedrich Ratzel and his *Politische Geographie* of 1897 (Agnew, 2002, p. 13). With Ratzel, the state became the central object of geography, conceived as a living organism that requires a certain living space, *Lebensraum* (Jones et al., 2004, pp. 4-7). Gallaher et al. (2009, p. 1) state: "The development of modern political geography was intimately connected with the colonial project (Peet 1985)." It is in this context that the term geopolitics appears, coined by the Swedish political scientist Rudolf Kjellén in 1899 to denote the use of geographical knowledge in the service of particular national states (Agnew, 2002, p. 15). At the same time, in Britain, Halford Mackinder published his 1904 article "The Geographical Pivot of History"; the term heartland appears in his work only in 1919, in *Democratic Ideals and Reality* (Jones et al., 2004, pp. 4-7). Herb (2008) stresses the political function of these works: "There was a clear political dimension to these works and they made the discipline indispensable for the scientific justification of territorial conquest."

Geopolitik and the Discrediting of the Discipline

A distinction is needed here. German *Geopolitik* was a historically specific school of the interwar period. Classical geopolitics is a broader intellectual and practical tradition that includes both Mackinder and Spykman. Critical geopolitics is a later

problematisation of both. The most serious blow to the discipline came from German *Geopolitik*. In the interwar period, a network of German geographers and nationalists around Karl Haushofer and the journal *Zeitschrift für Geopolitik* (founded in 1924) used the ideas of Ratzel and Mackinder, suggestive cartography and the concept of *Lebensraum* as a scientific weapon for the German revisionist cause (Herb, 2008; Jones et al., 2004, pp. 4–7). Although *Geopolitik* differed from National Socialist ideology in attributing decisive influence to the natural environment rather than to race, abroad it came to be viewed as synonymous with Nazi imperialism (Herb, 2008). Jones et al. (2004, p. 7) summarise the consequences: "The misadventures of *Geopolitik* inextricably associated political geography with the brutality and racism of the Nazi regime and led to its discrediting as a serious academic pursuit."

After the war, political geographers reacted with a strict demarcation, which Herb (2008) describes as a rhetorical manoeuvre: works with geo-deterministic explanations and political motives were branded as geopolitics and pushed out of academic geography, while the label political geography was kept for studies regarded as objective and neutral. Herb (2008) concludes: "Academic work in political geography shifted wholesale into the tradition of governance." The intellectual expression of this shift was Hartshorne's functional approach (Hartshorne, 1950, as cited in Jones et al., 2004, pp. 7-8), whose aim was to depoliticise the discipline: political geography was to describe the internal dynamics and external functions of the state rather than to shape political strategy (Jones et al., 2004, pp. 7-8). In this tradition, as Herb (2008, p. 22) puts it: "The state is viewed as a given and its existence is not problematized." Depoliticisation, in the sense used in this article, therefore did not mean the absence of politics but the naturalisation of the state: a position in favour of the territorial status quo, presented as neutrality.

The consequences were visible for decades, and Short (1993, pp. 1-2) gives the sharpest formulation: "Geo-politics became discredited and political geography became an ossified subdiscipline of a tired subject, often taught, never researched, a prisoner to outdated theories." When geography underwent the quantitative revolution, political geography remained on the sidelines: with the exception of elections, its subject matter offered little to the search for spatial laws (Agnew, 2002, p. 100; Short, 1993, pp. 1–2). The picture of marginalisation is completed by two frequently cited findings, which Jones et al. (2004, p. 8) present together:

> Berry (1969) famously described it as 'that moribund backwater' and by the mid-1970s Muir (1976) found that political geography was taught in only half of Britain's university geography departments, with over two-thirds of heads of geography departments considering that the development of political geography literature was unsatisfactory compared with other branches of geography.

Geopolitik: Cause or Excuse?

The standard explanation of the marginalisation lays the blame on *Geopolitik*. Muir (1976) already judged it insufficient, since in his view the difference between the two was clear to anyone familiar with both. The German geopolitician Otto Maull

himself had formulated it (as cited in Muir, 1981): "*Geopolitik* is concerned with the spatial requirements of a state while political geography examines only its spatial conditions." In Muir's view, the greatest weakness lay elsewhere (Muir, 1976): "The greatest weakness of modern political geography concerns its theoretical basis; too many notions which have become entrenched as fundamental political-geographical concepts remain ambiguous, subjective and improperly tested." He also points to a disciplinary disposition (Muir, 1976): "Geographers as a whole may be a reticent and conservative breed possessed of an affinity for the uncontroversial which may sometimes lead them away from deserving cases for study, and from political geography in particular."

In the second edition of his book, Muir (1981) goes even further: "As the years go by, the geopolitical explanation appears more as an excuse than a cause, and other fields of study have survived misapplications of their knowledge." Physics, chemistry and biology made far more serious contributions to military purposes, and yet they did not lose their legitimacy. Muir (1976, p. 200) sums up his diagnosis as follows: "The reaction against *Geopolitik* was a serious setback to the development of political geography, but the subsequent resurgence of the branch was delayed by more deeply rooted deficiencies of theory and techniques."

In the synthesis proposed here, derived from Muir, Herb, Jones et al. and Agnew, the stigma of *Geopolitik*, the deeper theoretical weaknesses and the disciplinary tendency to avoid controversy are not alternatives but parts of the same mechanism. The weight of the additional factor should not be overstated: Muir (1976) himself considers it secondary, although twenty years later he describes the then predominantly conservative disciplinary establishment as hostile to any potentially controversial expression of political views (Muir, 1997). The stigma prompted political geographers to purge the discipline of any political engagement (Herb, 2008). Jones et al. (2004, p. 8) describe the consequence: "Moreover, fear of the sub-discipline's past made political geographers wary of modelling and theorising, such that research remained essentially descriptive and empirically driven." Depoliticisation, in turn, hollowed out the object of the discipline: a "political" geography that takes the state as given and does not theorise it cannot clearly say what distinguishes it from political science. If this interpretation is correct, a way out of the crisis could hardly have come from the methodological refinement of a depoliticised discipline, but above all from its repoliticisation.

REVIVAL AND ITS PARADOXES

Repoliticisation from the Margins

In this article, repoliticisation refers to two related processes: the extension of the object of research to relations of power, political conflicts and informal political processes, and the theoretical reconsideration of the discipline's earlier claim to neutrality. Defined in this way, repoliticisation is a change in research practice, and it

must be distinguished from institutional revival (journals, university courses, the place of the discipline within geography), which is the outcome to be explained. Agnew (2002, p. 87) links the revival to the erosion of the Cold War consensus under the influence of the civil rights struggle and the Vietnam War, as well as to generational change. Jones et al. (2004, p. 8) connect it with two parallel processes, the reintroduction of theory into political geography and the political turn in geography in general, and points: "Significantly, neither resulted from developments in the established mainstream of political geography, but rather reflected innovation at the fringes of political geography, producing research clusters which eventually came to eclipse the old-style 'functional approach'."

Where exactly the impulses came from remains contested. Blacksell (2006, p. 8) and Jones et al. (2004, pp. 8–10) argue that economic, social and urban geographers were the first to bring political conflict into their explanations, whereas Johnston (2001) argues that the take-off of political geography from the late 1970s was largely independent of trends in economic and social geography. The two views agree on a negative conclusion, which is more secure than any causal one: the revival did not come from established, functional political geography. Agnew (2002, p. 88) structures it in three intellectual waves: spatial analysis, then radical political economy in the 1970s and 1980s, and postmodern approaches from the late 1980s. The quantitative approach, associated above all with electoral geography, was thus part of the revival, but only as its first and limited wave (Agnew, 2002, p. 102; Jones et al., 2004, pp. 8-10). Institutional consolidation followed intellectual transformation: in 1982 the journal *Political Geography Quarterly* (later *Political Geography*) began publication, and in the 1990s it was joined by *Geopolitics* and *Space and Polity* (Short, 1993, pp. 1–2; Sidaway, 2008, p. 42).

Forecast and Outcome

The history of the revival can also be read through the forecasts of its contemporary diagnosticians. Berry's remark about the moribund backwater was made in a review of a quantitative study of international relations, and his goal was to draw political geography into the quantitative revolution (Johnston, 2001). Muir (1981) similarly sought the solution in borrowing from political science and in quantification, and predicted: "Present indications are that the rehabilitation and revitalisation of political geography will take place during the next ten years or so, mainly through the judicious adoption and creation of more accurate techniques of measurement and analysis." Sixteen years later, the same author notes that the forecast had come true as regards timing, but not as regards mechanism, and implicitly revises his earlier position (Muir, 1997): "Now, however, and in keeping with most current practice, I have felt no obligation to impose a quantitative dimension: this book is very largely a positivist desert; an equation-free zone." Johnston (2001) generalises the same finding: "Political geography did soon emerge from the moribund backwater to which Berry consigned it, especially from the mid-1970s onwards, but undoubtedly not in the form he anticipated."

The subsequent trajectory suggests that the rehabilitation of political geography depended less on the methodological refinement of a depoliticised discipline than on a broader repoliticisation of geographical inquiry: political economy, critical geopolitics, feminism and cultural politics. This is consistent with the first thesis: if stagnation was associated with depoliticisation, the way out was associated with its opposite. Muir (1997) registers precisely this change:

> Gone then are the days when it was assumed if unstated that geographical writing should be politically neutral and preferably apolitical - the discipline's (largely conservative) establishment being hostile to any potentially disruptive or controversial expression of political outlooks or moral beliefs: human sentiment should not intrude upon the study of humanity. During the last two or three decades these unrealistic constraints have largely been abandoned.

The Paradox of Success

The revival brought a new problem. Contemporary political geography has expanded both its scales of analysis, from the local to the supranational, and its very notion of the political (Gallaher et al., 2009, p. 1; Jones et al., 2004, p. 14). Jones et al. (2004, pp. 14-16) formulate the danger: "However, the danger of this transformation is that 'political geography' may become devalued by its very ubiquity - if everything is 'political' then it could follow that all geography is 'political geography'." Much political-geographical research today is conducted by cultural, social, economic and historical geographers, political scientists, sociologists and scholars of international relations (Jones et al., 2004, p. 16). This is the paradox formulated by Flint (2003, as cited in Jones et al., 2004, p. 16): political geography is institutionally healthy but lacks coherence and a clear direction. Of the three paths opened by the debate of the early 2000s, concentration, expansion and engagement, the third includes links with the political geographies produced outside the Anglo-American setting (Jones et al., 2004, p. 16).

This raises a question that is underrepresented in the canonical Anglophone histories of the discipline examined here: the discipline's own geography. Sidaway (2008, p. 42) recalls the criticism voiced by Perry in the late 1980s: "Writing a few years after the establishment of the journal Political Geography, Perry (1987: 6) claimed that 'Anglo-American political geography poses and pursues a limited and impoverished version of the discipline, largely ignoring the political concerns of four fifths of humankind'." Herb (2008, p. 34) suggests that, having broken out of an excessively state-centred view, the discipline now needs to transcend the barriers of language and ideology. For smaller, non-Anglophone academic communities, access to the discipline passes through the English language, and their contribution depends on whether local political-geographical questions are articulated in a way that is intelligible and relevant beyond the local setting. The next section applies this perspective to the (post)Yugoslav and Macedonian space.

STARLIGHT: POLITICAL GEOGRAPHY IN THE (POST)YUGOSLAV AND MACEDONIAN SPACE

A Light delayed

Every look at the stars is a look into the past. Light from the Sun takes about 8.3 minutes to reach the Earth, and light from the nearest star after the Sun about 4.3 years (NASA Space Place, n.d.). In astronomy this interval is called lookback time: the time that light from a distant object needs to reach the Earth (Oxford Reference, n.d.). The image we see is simultaneously present and past: we see it now, but it shows a state that has since changed.

Political geography in North Macedonia can be read according to the same logic. When the course first appeared at the Institute of Geography in Skopje in 2006, the discipline had already passed through its own history worldwide: it had been declared a moribund backwater and had revived again (Johnston, 2001). In the neighbourhood it had been institutionalised earlier: in Zagreb and Belgrade by decades, in Ljubljana by about a decade. Here, however, the metaphor has a limit, and precisely this limit is instructive. Light carries an image of the past, whereas knowledge about the discipline arrives almost in real time, through the literature. What arrives late is not knowledge but the institution. The delay therefore tells us when political geography arrived, not what it is like: in Macedonia it appears after the revival of the discipline and can start from its contemporary condition. The delay has also been noted by the Macedonian geographical community. One year before the course was introduced, Mijalov (2005, p. 491) wrote: "Towards the end of the 1970s, political geography as an independent discipline went through a period of new ascent. On the other hand, political geography in the Republic of Macedonia is a forgotten geographical discipline, and the reasons for this are more subjective than objective."

In the regional context, the third thesis breaks down into three propositions. First, the stigma of German *Geopolitik*, shared by the entire Yugoslav space, cannot by itself explain the Macedonian delay, since it prevented neither the institutionalisation of the discipline in Belgrade and Zagreb nor political-geographical research in Ljubljana. Second, the delay is ironic, since Macedonia has been an object of political-geographical interest for more than a century. Third, the delay of the discipline does not mean a delay in research: political-geographical questions in Macedonia are investigated by other disciplines.

The Shared Legacy

The stigma of *Geopolitik* also weighed on the Yugoslav space. Zorko (2014) documents the post-war situation through the testimony of Radovan Pavić (1965b, as cited in Zorko, 2014), according to whom, in the years after the liberation, political geography and geopolitics were understood too one-sidedly, exclusively as a tool of the German policy of conquest, so that their discredited subject matter and outlook did not find a place in university curricula. The first, somewhat broader foundations

of political-geographical views were presented in the courses in anthropogeography at the Department of Geography of the University of Zagreb. Two decades later, Pavić (1987, p. 46) still explains the aversion to the discipline by the inherited odium of Nazi geopolitics.

The Macedonian literature shares this diagnosis and extends it with an ideological factor. According to Talevski and Mileski (2005), for fifty years geopolitics was not included in the multidisciplinary study of the Balkans, which allowed idealistic views to prevail, according to which diplomacy, politics, the economy and military strategy based on ideological premises could take the place of geopolitics and largely refute it; the disintegration of Yugoslavia and the armed conflicts that followed showed these views to be unfounded. These factors were common to the entire Yugoslav space and therefore cannot by themselves explain the difference between the republics. The stigma weighed on the discipline in both Zagreb and Belgrade, and there it was institutionalised decades before Skopje. In the Macedonian case, Muir's (1981) argument that the geopolitical explanation is more an excuse than a cause carries additional weight: the stigma was the same, but the outcome was different.

Three Centres, Two Paths

Institutionalisation followed different paths: in Belgrade and Ljubljana through geography, and in Zagreb through political science. Zupančič (2024, p. 71) offers a general explanation for such differences, which should not be read as a restatement of the third thesis of this article but as a different mechanism, the usefulness of the field to a particular state setting, and is treated in Section 5.4 as a third hypothesis: "Political geography differs considerably from country to country, which is explained as a reflection of efforts to make the branch useful and, at the same time, of its attachment to the political and historical experiences of managing space in a particular state setting." The comparison is limited to these three centres, for which the regional literature provides the most complete record, and it should be read with one caveat: the available sources record different thresholds of institutionalisation, from lectures and single courses to academic disciplines at faculty level. Table 1 in Section 5.4 therefore compares the centres by uniform thresholds, leaving open the cells for which the available sources provide no record.

The Belgrade tradition has the deepest roots. According to Grčić (2000, p. 71), Jovan Cvijić included lessons in political geography in his lectures on anthropogeography shortly after the appearance of Ratzel's *Politische Geographie*; his lectures of 1901, published in 1966 as *Opšta geografija - Antropogeografija* [General Geography - Anthropogeography], contain the chapter "Države - politička geografija" [States - Political Geography]. Cvijić is also a regional example of the tradition of advocating state power. Grčić (2000, p. 71) writes:

> From the beginning of his scholarly career he had in mind national unification and the restoration of the Serbian state, and he prepared himself for the tasks associated with it. […] In the works "Promatranja o etnografiji Makedonije"

> [Observations on the Ethnography of Macedonia] (1903) and "Geografske osnove makedonskog pitanja" [The Geographical Foundations of the Macedonian Question] (1916), he offered an original view of the Macedonian question and stressed the importance of the Morava–Vardar valley for the Serbian people and state.

Cvijić's treatment of the Macedonian question has been the subject of criticism in Macedonian scholarship, but what matters here is that Macedonia is present from the very beginning of regional political geography, but as its object rather than its subject. Academic institutionalisation in Belgrade, however, came late: political geography has existed as an academic discipline at the Faculty of Geography in Belgrade since the 1978/79 academic year (Grčić, 2000, p. 71).

In Zagreb, the beginnings lie in the courses in anthropogeography at the Department of Geography, but the permanent institutional home of the discipline became the Faculty of Political Science. Zupanc (2020, p. 98) writes: "He spent his working life at the Faculty of Political Science in Zagreb, where he taught political geography and geopolitics (1963-1993)." Klemenčić (2020), who extends Pavić's activity over four decades, until the end of the century, begins his tribute with the sentence: "Radovan Pavić was the founder of political geography in Croatia." The faculty also publishes the journal *Politička misao*, through which Zorko (2014) traces the development of political geography, geopolitics and geostrategy from 1964 to 2013. A similar model exists in Trieste, where political geography is cultivated within political science (Gosar, 2001).

In Ljubljana, the discipline's institutional home is the Department of Geography. There, however, political topics entered geography by a distinctive route. Zupančič (2024, p. 68) writes: "Distinctly political topics entered the Slovene geographical community through a social-geographical filter." Although Randall (1955, as cited in Zupančič, 2024) had already applied the term "political geography" to the Carinthian plebiscite, the term itself entered Slovene academic usage only in the late 1980s. The field was prepared by Klemenčič's social-geographical research on minorities and borders, was introduced into the geography curriculum in the 1990s and in 2001 acquired a textbook (Zupančič, 2024, pp. 67-70). Within the geographical path there are two variants: in Belgrade, an anthropogeographical and state-centred one; in Ljubljana, a social-geographical one, centred on minorities and borders. In Slovenia, the institutional rise of the discipline followed events more than theory. Zupančič (2024, pp. 69-70) describes the fast development of political geography there as above all an echo of the field's fast rise at a time of great geopolitical change, and adds: "Political topics entered the geographical context of thinking faster than theoretical thought about this branch matured." In 1993, Ljubljana hosted the annual conference of the IGU Commission on Population Geography, devoted to "Geography and Ethnicity" (Zupančič, 2024, p. 70). In 1996, the Commission on the World Political Map of the International Geographical Union (IGU) entrusted it with its conference for 2000, held in May 2000 in Gorizia and Portorož and organised together with the University of Trieste (Gosar, 2001). The state of the discipline is illustrated by a sentence from the preface to the proceedings (Gosar, 2001): "Around

30 students of the University of Ljubljana, for whom Political Geography is their field of study, took part in the meeting." The absence is also telling. Among the twenty countries from which the 86 scholars registered for the conference came, Macedonia is missing (Gosar, 2001), even though the programme explicitly included the Balkans (Gosar, 2001).

Macedonia: A Belated Discipline

The Institute of Geography at the Faculty of Natural Sciences and Mathematics in Skopje introduced Political geography in 2006, with the adoption of the Bologna Process and the European Credit Transfer System, as an elective course in the first cycle of studies [source: study programmes of the Institute of Geography]. The course was introduced, and taught until the 2021 academic year, by Professor Risto Mijalov, the author of numerous studies in political geography. With the accreditation of the Demography study programme in 2010, political geography acquired compulsory status for the first time at the Institute of Geography. It was later also introduced as an elective course in the second and third cycles of studies. Political geography is also part of the curricula of the Faculty of Philosophy, where Professor Toni Mileski works on the subject in teaching and research.

Table 1 places the Skopje case alongside the three neighbouring centres, using uniform thresholds of institutionalisation and the three dimensions of the discipline's condition distinguished in Section 1. Cells with a dash denote thresholds for which the available sources provide no record; they indicate where further research is needed, not that the threshold is absent. Even in this incomplete form, the table shows that the centres differ not only in the date of the first course but in the order in which the three dimensions developed: in Ljubljana the intellectual dimension preceded the institutional one, whereas in Skopje the societal relevance of political-geographical questions long ran ahead of both.

Table 1. Political geography in four centres: uniform thresholds of institutionalisation and three dimensions of the discipline's condition

Threshold / dimension	Belgrade	Zagreb	Ljubljana	Skopje
First lectures with political-geographical content	1901: Cvijić's lectures on anthropogeography (Grčić, 2000)	After 1945: courses in anthropogeography, Department of Geography (Zorko, 2014)	–	–
First dedicated course	1978/79: Faculty of Geography (Grčić, 2000)	1963: Faculty of Political Science (Zupanc, 2020)	1990s: Department of Geography (Zupančič, 2024)	2006: Institute of Geography, elective
Compulsory course	–	–	–	2010: Demography

				study programme
Textbook	Grčić (2000)	–	2001 (Zupančič, 2024)	–
Dedicated teaching staff	–	R. Pavić, 1963–1993 (Zupanc, 2020)	–	R. Mijalov, 2006–2021
Journal or regular publication venue	–	Politička misao, from 1964 (Zorko, 2014)	–	–
International events	–	–	IGU Commission on Population Geography annual conference "Geography and Ethnicity", 1993; IGU Commission on the World Political Map conference, 2000 (Gosar, 2001; Zupančič, 2024)	Not represented at the 2000 IGU conference (Zupančič, 2001)
Institutional dimension	Within geography; faculty-level discipline since 1978/79	Within political science since 1963	Within geography; course from the 1990s, textbook 2001	Within geography; elective from 2006, first compulsory in the Demography programme in 2010
Intellectual dimension	Anthropogeographical and state-centred; state territory as the basic object (Grčić, 2000)	The state as the fundamental subject; geopolitics as doctrine (Pavić, 1987)	Social-geographical research on minorities and borders, preceding the course (Zupančič, 2024)	Studies by Mijalov within geography; research conducted largely in political and security studies (Section 5.6)
Societal relevance	Renewal of geopolitics in the 1990s tied to the dissolution of Yugoslavia and national questions (Grčić, 2000)	Discipline tied to conflict resolution (Zorko, 2014)	Applied aims concerning minorities and borders (Zupančič, 2024)	Continuous geopolitical exposure since 1991 (Section 5.5)

Compared with the neighbouring centres, the delay amounts to almost three decades relative to Belgrade, more than four to Zagreb, and more than a century relative to Cvijić's lectures. Relative to Ljubljana, where political geography entered the geography curriculum only in the 1990s (Zupančič, 2024, p. 70), the institutional delay is about a decade. The more important difference lies in the intellectual dimension: in Ljubljana the course was preceded by several decades of political-geographical research on minorities and borders within social geography, so that the institution followed an existing research practice. If the stigma is not a sufficient explanation, the causes most probably need to be sought in the domestic context, as also suggested by Mijalov's assessment that they are above all subjective. Within the Institute of Geography, the long-standing dominance of physical geography may have been an additional domestic obstacle. One aspect is evident: the delay affects the whole range of disciplines that take politics as their object. Political studies in Macedonia were established only in the early 1990s, within the Faculty of Law (Škarić, 2026, p. 236); research on social, political and legal phenomena, however, had been institutionalised earlier, in the Institute for Sociological, Political and Juridical Research of the University in Skopje, founded in 1965 (Institute for Sociological, Political and Juridical Research [ISPJR], n.d.).

Three further factors, which this article can only formulate as hypotheses, deserve separate research. The first is the hierarchy of the Yugoslav university system: the University in Skopje, founded in 1949, was younger and smaller than those in Belgrade, Zagreb and Ljubljana, and new disciplines may have spread from the larger centres to the smaller ones with a delay. The second is the political sensitivity of the Macedonian question: if political-geographical questions concerning Macedonia were politically charged and largely left to historiography, the status of Macedonia as an object of other people's political geography may itself have contributed to the delay. The Slovene comparison sharpens this hypothesis. There, too, the minority and border question was long left above all to historiography, until Klemenčič's social-geographical research turned it into a geographical object with explicitly applied aims (Zupančič, 2024, pp. 67–69). If the hypothesis holds, the question is why no comparable geographical turn occurred in Skopje. The third factor offers a possible answer. It follows from Zupančič's (2024, p. 71) explanation cited in Section 5.3, which points to a mechanism different from the institutional one: political geography develops where it is useful to a particular state setting and draws on that setting's experience of managing space. In Ljubljana, the minority and border question gave the field such a use. The Macedonian analogue, the position of Macedonians in the neighbouring states, did not, on the available evidence, become a comparable object of geographical research in Skopje. If this hypothesis holds, the delay reflects the absence of a demand that geography was expected, or permitted, to meet, rather than only the absence of an institutional home; it is closely related to the second hypothesis, since such a demand would have touched precisely the politically sensitive questions. All three hypotheses are consistent with Mijalov's assessment, but they require more detailed research into the institutional history of Macedonian geography and political science, based on study programmes, faculty decisions and the recollections of those involved.

The Irony of the Object

The delay is ironic. Macedonia is a space that has itself been an object of political geography of European significance ever since Cvijić. Talevski and Mileski (2005) describe the Balkans as a laboratory: "The Balkan Peninsula, with all its characteristics and historical challenges, is a veritable laboratory for the study of all the elements of geopolitics." Over the past three and a half decades, Macedonia has been almost continuously under the geopolitical spotlight: its peaceful independence in 1991, at the time of the Yugoslav wars, for which it was called an "oasis of peace"; the 2001 conflict and the Ohrid Framework Agreement; the name dispute with Greece, closed by the Prespa Agreement and the change of the country's name in 2019; the identity issues with Greece, Bulgaria and, in part, Serbia, which have still not been fully resolved; and the Euro-Atlantic path, on which the country long led the region but which has still not been completed. This trajectory is what the author terms EUthaNATOsion. The term denotes the condition, and the process leading to it, in which a state that has made membership of the European Union and NATO its overriding strategic goal accepts successive concessions, including concessions that holds its name, identity and constitution, until it is so transformed by them that it has no alternative but to continue pursuing the goal, even when the goal appears unattainable or obsolete. The word blends euthanasia (Greek εὐθανασία, from εὖ, 'well', and θάνατος, 'death') with the acronyms EU and NATO, while its ending evokes erosion. The metaphor is precise in three respects. What dies is not the state but its alternatives: each concession raises the cost of turning back. The process is gentle and consensual: it unfolds through negotiations, agreements and parliamentary votes rather than through force. And it is administered from outside: the conditions are set by other actors, including neighbouring states with a veto. North Macedonia is the paradigmatic case. A candidate for EU membership since 2005, when it was among the front-runners of the region, it was denied an invitation to NATO at the Bucharest summit in 2008 because of the name dispute with Greece, changed its constitutional name under the Prespa Agreement and joined NATO only in 2020. EU accession negotiations, blocked first by France and then by Bulgaria, were launched in 2022 on the condition of a further constitutional amendment, which has not been adopted; by 2026 no negotiating cluster had been opened, while Albania, from which the country was decoupled in 2024, had opened all six (Nowinowski, 2026). EUthaNATOsion is thus conceived both as an ideal type and as a cautionary case for other candidates from which membership demands comparable sacrifices. A concept coined in Skopje for the Macedonian experience is itself a small step from object to subject, the question with which this article concludes.

The editor of the proceedings of the 2000 conference notes that the dissolution of Yugoslavia called into question the very concept of the nation-state (Gosar, 2001), while Ljubljana and Trieste use the region as a research terrain. Macedonia, which lies at its centre, long remained an object of other people's political geography before acquiring its own.

Political Geography without Political Geographers?

The delay of the discipline does not mean that political-geographical questions are not studied in Macedonia. In the twenty-first century they are addressed above all in political and security studies, each from its own angle. The security approach is characteristic. Talevski and Mileski (2005) write: "The need to analyse and to recognise in a timely manner geopolitically based political actions and decisions is a very important component in the achievement of national security." Measured by the criterion adopted in Section 2, such research is political-geographical to the extent that it demonstrates the spatial causes or effects of political processes, whether or not it calls itself political geography. This is a sharpened variant of the paradox discussed in Section 4.3: in the Anglophone setting, political-geographical research is also conducted by non-political geographers because of the success of the discipline, whereas in Macedonia this is due to its long absence. The problem, therefore, is not the absence of political-geographical knowledge but the absence of an institutionally constituted field that recognises this knowledge as political geography.

The regional literature also qualifies the second thesis. The renewal of geopolitics in the 1990s is linked above all to the changed power relations in the Balkans, the dissolution of Yugoslavia and national questions (Grčić, 2000, p. 71; Talevski & Mileski, 2005). The definitions remain predominantly state-centred. For Grčić (2000), the basic object of political geography is state territory. For Pavić (1987), the state is the fundamental subject of political geography, and geopolitics is a doctrine. For Talevski and Mileski (2005), geopolitics is a component of national security. The same literature also contains self-critical voices: Grčić problematises the ideological function of geopolitics, and Zorko (2014) criticises Pavić for repeating the error of the classical geopoliticians by tying the discipline to conflict resolution. Zupančič (2024, p. 71) goes further and turns the critique towards the discipline as a whole, describing its rapid expansion in the 1990s as an uncritical popularisation: "The appeal to the 'political' had and still has, like 'sustainable' or 'ecological', a positive public echo; it is attractive and is therefore used more often than would be appropriate." In his view, this fostered an ideologisation around the idea of a "borderless Europe", while critical approaches, critical geopolitics among them, hindered rather than helped the field. This is more than a regional counterpart to the paradox discussed in Section 4.3. It is a direct challenge to the second thesis: the repoliticisation that this article treats as the way out of post-war stagnation is precisely what Zupančič regards as the problem. Politicisation in the region thus takes place predominantly within a state-centred framework, though not without internal critique, which is a different form from the critique of state power in the Anglophone discipline.

The article's position is that the challenge can be met by specifying what depoliticisation meant. As argued in Section 3.2, the post-war discipline was not apolitical: its depoliticisation consisted in the naturalisation of the state, a position in favour of the territorial status quo presented as neutrality. If this is correct, depoliticisation and repoliticisation are both political positions, and the difference

between them is not whether the discipline has a politics but whether it reflects on its own. Repoliticisation in the sense defined in Section 4.1 includes precisely this reflection, the theoretical reconsideration of the discipline's claim to neutrality. Ideologisation, in Zupančič's sense, is then not a consequence of repoliticisation as such but of politicisation without reflexivity, the replacement of one naturalised assumption, the given state, by another, such as a "borderless Europe". On this reading, Zupančič's warning is accepted, but his verdict on critical approaches is not: critical geopolitics is, in principle, an instrument of such reflexivity, even if its popularised uses can serve the opposite purpose.

The starlight metaphor also has another side: light that arrives late is nevertheless light in real time. The delay is a historical fact, not a measure of the quality of present-day research. Political geography in Macedonia appears after the revival of the discipline and can start directly from its contemporary, repoliticised condition. Institutional delay, however, also raises a separate question that this article cannot resolve: whether the late constitution of the discipline has affected the capacity of the domestic academic community to pose and conceptualise political-geographical questions about its own space independently. Delay is a chronological category, whereas dependence would be an epistemological one. The second does not automatically follow from the first, and the answer requires separate research.

CONCLUSION

The article started from Herb's (2008) question whether a separate subdiscipline of political geography is still justified if the political is present throughout geography. The answer cannot be sought in the essence of the discipline. Muir's (1981) analytical criterion, together with the metaphor of frontier zones rather than borders (Jones et al., 2004), makes it possible to preserve the identity of the field without closing it off.

The synthesis of the Anglophone literature supported the first two theses. The stagnation of political geography after 1945 was not merely a consequence of the stigma of *Geopolitik*: the stigma fell upon a discipline with weak theoretical foundations (Muir, 1976) and a tendency to avoid controversy, and together they produced a self-imposed depoliticisation that hollowed out the object of the discipline. The revival did not mainly follow the path of quantification anticipated by the diagnosticians of the time, Berry and Muir, which remained confined to part of the field (Johnston, 2001), it was to a considerable extent associated with repoliticisation. The most convincing evidence of this is the change in Muir's own attitude towards quantification between 1981 and 1997. The regional literature poses a direct challenge to this thesis: for Zupančič (2024), the politicisation of the field turned into ideologisation. The article's answer is that post-war depoliticisation was never neutral: by taking the state for granted, it was already a political position. The question, then, is not whether the discipline is political, but whether it reflects on its own politics.

The third thesis emerges from opening the box outside the Anglophone discipline. The Macedonian delay cannot be explained solely by the stigma of *Geopolitik*, which was shared by the entire Yugoslav space. The evidence points more strongly to the domestic institutional context, in which the discipline long lacked an institutional home in either geography or political science. The hierarchy of the Yugoslav university system, the political sensitivity of the Macedonian question, the absence of a demand that would have made the field useful (Zupančič, 2024) and the long-standing dominance of physical geography within the Institute of Geography are plausible additional factors that require further research. The delay is ironic for a space that, from Cvijić to the Prespa Agreement, has been an object of political-geographical interest of European significance, and whose political-geographical questions are investigated above all by other disciplines.

The three dimensions of the discipline's condition do not develop in step. In Macedonia there is political-geographical knowledge without a strong institutional field. In Ljubljana, political-geographical research within geography preceded the institution by several decades and paved the way for it (Zupančič, 2024), whereas in Macedonia such knowledge has developed largely outside geography. In the geopolitical present, marked by Russia's aggression against Ukraine, the war with Iran and the American rhetoric about Greenland, the need for political-geographical analysis is growing, but this alone does not guarantee the ascent of the discipline; this question is addressed in a separate article. The existence of a political-geographical object does not in itself ensure the existence or development of political geography as a distinct academic discipline. The answer to Muir's question, therefore, depends not only on place and time but also on which dimension of the discipline is observed: the institutional, the intellectual or its societal relevance.

Schrödinger's duck, then, is neither alive nor dead in itself. Observed from a specific place, at a specific time and in a specific dimension, its condition becomes determinate: in the Anglophone discipline the duck left the moribund backwater long ago. In Macedonia it arrived late, but it did arrive. What remains open is whether the Macedonian space, so far above all an object of political geography, will also become its (main) subject.

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