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"Wastelanding" Heritage on the Margins: Reflections from the Cases of the Sorbs in Lusatia and the Vlachs in the Timok Valley

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This article adopts a comparative focus on two European borderlands, that of the Sorbs in Germany and that of the Vlachs in Serbia. It identifies three dimensions of marginalization that precede the loss of ecoculturally diverse landscapes through the expansion of mining activities: linguistic difference, border proximity, and the element of a rural culture. The article argues that these are part of a discourse that aims to legitimize the processes of "wastelanding", that is the deliberate destruction of minority heritage through environmental degradation.

▪ **Keywords**: Sorbian minority in Germany, Vlach minority in Serbia, ecocultural heritage, environmental degradation, endangered languages

Članek primerja dve evropski obmejni območji, tj. območji naselitve Lužiških Srbov v Nemčiji in Vlahov v Srbiji. Opredeljuje tri razsežnosti marginalizacije, ki zaradi širjenja rudarskih dejavnosti napovedujejo izgubo ekološko in kulturno raznovrstnih (po)krajin. To so jezikovni razločki, bližina meje in podeželska kultura, ki so del diskurza, katerega cilj je legitimirati procese »pustošenja«, tj. namernega uničevanja manjšinske dediščine z degradacijo okolja.

▪ **Ključne besede**: lužiškosrbska manjšina v Nemčiji, vlaška manjšina v Srbiji, ekokulturna dediščina, degradacija okolja, ogroženi jeziki

Introduction: Context, history, and culture of Sorbian and Vlach communities

Research on the destruction of native environments of indigenous and aboriginal peoples worldwide is a topic that has attracted much attention by both scientific researchers and the media (see Scheidel et al., 2023). Yet, surprisingly, very little is known about the fate of indigenous/traditional minority groups' ecologies in Europe, with the general perception that such issues do not affect our continent.

Against this backdrop, this article emphasizes the importance of ecocultural issues taking place on the so-called margins of Europe, identified as minority and linguistic settings characterized by remoteness from central, dominant culture, and marginalized by it, where environmental histories were problematic both during communism (Kirchhof Mignon, Mc Neill, 2019) and in the transition to capitalism (Pavlínek, Pickles, 2000), and continue to have direct impact in post-communist societies. It focuses on the history of ethnic minorities (defined as social groups in a given country who are numerically smaller than the majority group, and possess specific linguistic, ethnic, or religious characteristics which are distinct from the dominant ones in their state context;

see OHCHR, 2010) that seem to have been largely excluded from the debate on environmental change. Furthermore, it addresses the practices and discourses of minorities living in proximity to border regions, which, due to linguistic differences and multilingual repertoires, contribute to questioning the supposed fixity and homogeneity of narratives about national heritage (Ledinek Lozej, Pisk, 2021: 80). With regard to the processes of heritage creation, in the construction of meanings and values in relation to specific tangible and intangible cultural elements, it is the context rather than the object of heritage itself to constitute the focus of research. Heritage is thus understood as a "present social action or process" (Fakin Bajec, 2013: 2) which, although linked to its meaning in the past, generates consequences for the present and contributes to shaping the future (Harrison et al., 2008).

Issues related to the preservation of minorities' heritage in Central and Eastern Europe, as in the rest of the world, cannot be considered in isolation from the analysis of the material/ecological environment (Edmonds, 2021) in which minority groups live and the social factors that influence their existence. In line with this, I define ecocultural[1] heritage (UNESCO, 1995) as the connection of minorities' cultural heritage with their surrounding ecological environment (Cocks, Wiersum, 2014). I interpret this term as corresponding to "a wide range of life forms and ecosystems that have been shaped and influenced by human cultural activities within specific geographical spaces" (Zhao et al., 2024), and thus encompassing traditional knowledge, cultural expressions, folklore, skills, memories and practices relating to the environment. Consequently, ecocultural heritage is considered part of the culture of minority groups who have inhabited rural areas for centuries and practiced sustainable forms of livelihood that depend on nature and its resources. In this article, I highlight the various factors that have facilitated processes of marginalization of Sorbian and Vlach minorities, interpreted as socio-political processes consisting in the "peripheralization of individuals and groups from a dominant, central majority" (Hall, 1999: 89). In particular, I focus on the treatment of ethnic minorities' culture and language as insignificant or peripheral, implying their exclusion from the centralized discourse of prestige and reflecting a dichotomist understanding of the relations between an imagined "centre" and the "peripheries". I argue that such processes enable the unfolding of processes of "wastelanding" (Brynne Voyles, 2015) of their territories in terms of ecocultural heritage destruction.

In this first introductory section, I provide brief background information on the two minority groups, their history, language, and religious affiliation. In the second section, I deal with the discrimination of these two communities in linguistic terms, while in the third section I address the issue of border proximity and the rural component of their culture. In the fourth section, I deal with the effects of environmental degradation

[1] Instead of "biocultural", see Franco, 2022. This term – ecocultural – has been used in recent years by Tomblin (2009) and others to describe the goals of indigenous restoration.

and its impact on the traditional ecocultural heritage of the communities. In the final section, I briefly summarize my findings. This article presents the preliminary results of my research project Minor Echoes, started in September 2023. I follow a multidisciplinary approach based on a qualitative analysis of local literature, media reports and local accounts (mainly selected according to the principle of giving voice to members of minority groups themselves on the matters that regard them) as well as ethnographic fieldwork. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with around a dozen community members: inhabitants of villages affected by mining as well as environmental and minority rights activists in two different phases, both in Lusatia (in March 2024 and September 2024) and in Eastern Serbia (in April 2024 and October 2024).

The Sorbs of Lusatia in Germany

The Sorbs are considered the smallest Slavic people to have lived on the territory of present-day Germany since around 600 AD. The Sorbs, also known as "Wends", historically settled mainly in what is now Lusatia, the eastern part of Germany, as well as in areas corresponding to what is now western Poland and the northern part of the Czech Republic. Today, the German region of Lusatia is divided between the federal states of Brandenburg and Saxony. At the end of the 19th century, almost the entire population of the villages in this region was Sorbian (Hose, Keller, 2002: 60), and until the mid-1950s, Sorbian in its two variants was the common means of communication (Norberg, 1996: 120). The material and immaterial heritage of the Lusatian Sorbs is diverse and includes the Lusatian log construction as a form of folk architecture (Hose, Keller, 2002: 61), the typical half-timbered house, the bird wedding, Easter riding and a highly refined tradition of Easter egg painting. Before the expansion of the mining industry in the 1950s, the Sorbian economy was primarily based on agriculture and handicrafts. The language, traditional costumes, and religious beliefs differ in the two regions. In Upper Lusatia, some Sorbian settlements have maintained a strong Catholic identity, while in Lower Lusatia Protestantism is more widespread. The Sorbian languages in their two varieties, Lower and Upper Sorbian, are endangered (Eberhard et al., 2024). Since ethnic statistics are prohibited in Germany, there are no exact data on the number of Sorbs or Sorbian speakers today, but it is estimated that the number of speakers has fallen from a total of around 111,000 (German Census 1910, cited in Mercator, 2022) to 7,000 speakers of Lower Sorbian and 25,000 of Upper Sorbian in the last years (Brežan, Nowak, 2016: 11).

The Vlachs of the Timok Valley in Eastern Serbia

The Vlach minority in Serbia lives in the Timok Valley in the eastern part of the country near the Romanian and Bulgarian borders. The Vlachs have been present there since the 18th century (Ćirković, 2007), with some claiming "indigenous" status, while others identify as Romanians (OCSE, 2008: 25; Sorescu-Marinković, Huțanu, 2023: 29).

The Vlachs were traditionally a rural population that can be divided into the Țarani, the lowlanders (mainly farmers), and the Ungureni, the highlanders (mainly shepherds). The Vlachs are Orthodox Christians and speak varieties of Daco-Romanian, consisting of archaic Oltenian and Banat dialects. This language variety is now considered endangered (Sorescu-Marinković et al., 2021: 75). Census data show that the number of Vlachs whose mother tongue was Vlach has decreased by a factor of four in just 60 years: in 1961 there were 106,656, in 2022 only 23,216 (Serbian Census, 2022).

Vlach culture, associated with traditional economic activities such as agriculture, beekeeping, viticulture, sheep and cattle breeding, but also fold panning, milling, weaving and sewing (Sorescu-Marinković, Huțanu, 2023: 148), still lives on today in the use of musical instruments, in Vlach dances and in folk costumes. The influence of the natural environment on Vlach culture is traceable for example in folk songs, whose formulas preserve phytonyms that reflect part of the traditional ecological knowledge of the past (Sikimić, 2021). The traditional magic and rituals of the Vlachs are also important elements of their cultural heritage which relates to nature.

Discrimination, marginalization, and assimilation patterns towards minority language speakers

In the 20th century, the cultural heritage of national, ethnic and religious minorities in Central and Eastern Europe was subject to various processes of exclusion and in various cases treated as peripheral, insignificant, unimportant or "dissonant" (Kisić, 2016). This led to forms of "assimilation, persecution, and even oblivion" (Kocój, 2015). In some cases, minorities' heritage was destroyed or "sacrificed" in order to supposedly benefit the majority group. As for the Sorbs and the Vlachs, the patterns of marginalization and degradation of their ecocultural heritage show some striking similarities.

Lignite mining operations in Lusatia, which began in 1924, have brought social and demographic changes with lasting ethnic effects. It has resulted in the demolition of 137 villages (Archiv Verschwundener Orte, 2010), with around 29,000 people (Berkner, 2022: 35) affected by development, displacement and resettlement processes (Terminski, 2012). The process reached its peak during the German Democratic Republic (GDR) period between 1970 and 1990, when the mines were owned by the public company VEB Glückauf Knappenrode (Jacobs, 2021: 213). Nevertheless, even after the democratic change in Germany, further villages such as Horno and Lakoma (Koch, 2020) were destroyed by the Swedish multinational Vattenfall in the early 2000. The resettlement of the population undermined the vitality of Sorbian culture (Barker, 2009; Barthold, 2021), brought new assimilation dynamics into play, and fragmented the basis of the ecocultural heritage. However, Lusatia was not the only region of the GDR impacted by lignite mining; towns in central Germany were also affected (Berkner, 2022).

In Eastern Serbia, mining activities, which began in 1903 in the town of Bor (Stojmenović, 2023), contributed to the degradation of the natural environment, a fact which had negative consequences for the Vlach communities living in the area. Of historical relevance is the fact that the so-called Vlaška Buna ("Vlach Revolt") against the then French-owned mines (Stojmenović, 2024) took place in Bor in 1935, which is considered the first environmental uprising in Europe. The rapid expansion of operations since 2018 (as will be explained in more detail) with the takeover of the formerly state-owned mine by the Chinese multinational Zijin seriously threatens the remaining elements of the traditional way of life in the region, and the abandonment of the affected area by the villagers is eroding the cohesion of the Vlach community and its chances of surviving as a distinct socio-cultural entity. For both the Sorbs and the Vlachs, the destruction of their natural and material environment was preceded by a long history of marginalization, attempts at assimilation, and the neglect of their cultural heritage, especially their language.

The Sorbian minority: Germanization and assimilation attempts

In the German context, the relationship with the Sorbian population began to deteriorate in the 19th century, in parallel to the emergence of a romanticized notion of the German nation, through which the Sorbs became "the others" (Hagemann, 2022: 13). During the Bismarck Empire, the Sorbian minority was oppressed and repeatedly discriminated against. The low prestige of this language (Norberg, 1996) and the Germanization processes in church, state, school and society led to Sorbian being replaced by German as the spoken language in large parts of Lusatia (Bott-Bodenhausen, 1997). During the National Socialist era, the Lusatian Sorbian Association Domowina, founded in Hoyerswerda in 1912, was banned and Sorbian place names in 16 villages in the same district were Germanized in 1936/1937 (Laschewski et al., 2021: 27). In addition, Sorbian children at school who spoke Sorbian were forced to write 100 times: "I am not allowed to speak Wendish" (Walde, 2014). This process of exclusion was reinforced by industrialization and social modernization processes, but also by the influx of German refugees after the Second World War (Kurpiel, 2020), and further became a linguistic marginalization (Jacobs, 2021: 206). In addition to these factors, the expansion of opencast lignite mines (where many members of this minority were employed) in the Sorbian areas and the resettlement of the rural population contributed to the erosion of the cultural substance in many villages and towns (Jacobs, 2021; Laschewski et al., 2021: 27), which also affected the German population. In the GDR, the Sorbs were recognized as a national minority in the constitution and officially enjoyed the status of an exemplary and state-supported community (Kurpiel, 2020). They were granted special rights, such as education in the Sorbian language and the opportunity to resume the activities of their institutions (such as the Domowina), their publishing house (Domowina Verlag, founded in 1958), and their own newspaper. The authorities

promoted Sorbian culture, albeit in a rather folkloristic way (more on this in the next chapter). The adaptation of the Sorbs to the German culture and language was promoted and also served as a link in a system of further marginalization of the Sorbian language, which was referred to as "silent Germanization" (Dippman, 1973).

After reunification, the Sorbian communities in Germany were given more cultural rights. A protocol note to the German Unification Treaty and the laws of the states of Brandenburg and Saxony explicitly protect the Sorbs and recognize their right to their homeland (Jacobs, 2021: 217). Nevertheless, it was already too late for the Sorbian language. It was noted that "in the parts of the Sorbian/Wendish settlement area that have been shaped and reshaped by opencast lignite mining in recent decades, the foundations of the Sorbian/Wendish language and culture appear to have been eroded to such an extent that one should speak not only of a reversal, but of a (partial) reconstruction or, in terms of landscape design, of a 'recultivation'" (Laschewski et al., 2021: 9). Apart from a few villages in Upper Lusatia, there are no longer any communities in which Sorbian is spoken by the majority. Indeed, the majority of Sorbs do not speak Sorbian (Jacobs, Nowak, 2020). The differences in language use between the Upper Sorbian and Lower Sorbian communities reflect the resettlement processes resulting from lignite mining: in Upper Lusatia, the settlement structure is more compact, whereas in Lower Lusatia it is more dispersed. As a result, "language use has retreated to a few islands such as family, neighbourhood, church, Sorbian institutions; language skills in everyday life have declined drastically" (Laschewski, et al., 2021: 15).

The Vlachs in Serbia: Linguistic discrimination and low prestige

The Vlach minority in the Timok Valley in eastern Serbia has been subject to attempts at assimilation since the middle of the 19th century. This was evident, for example, in the Serbianization of names, which continued into the first half of the 20th century by adding the Serbian-Slavic suffix *-ić* (Sorescu-Marinković, Huțanu, 2023: 222), as well as in the exclusion of the Vlach and Romanian languages in the ecclesiastical sphere until 2004 (Kahl, Pascaru, 2020). During the Partisan uprisings in the Second World War, the Vlachs began to use their language in writing for the first time (Sorescu-Marinković, Huțanu, 2023: 121). One example of this is the Partisan songbook published in Zaječar in 1946, a collection of poems by Janko Simeonović. The role of the newspaper *Vorba Noastră*, the first newspaper in the Vlach language published between 1945 and 1949, was also very important (Gacović, 2019: 357; Sorescu-Marinković, Huțanu, 2023: 119). However, this was only a short period of time during which the Vlachs had the illusion that they would enjoy greater minority rights. After this newspaper was discontinued, the Vlach language, in particular written, became a private matter again. The intensive phase of industrialization that began after the establishment of socialist Yugoslavia had a devastating effect on the traditional way of life (especially sheep farming) of this minority and dealt a severe blow to the traditional culture and language of the Vlachs,

in particular the lexicon. During communist rule, the state administration systematically promoted the process of linguistic assimilation through schools that did not include the minority's mother tongue in the curriculum. The Vlachs and their language, which had always had a very low prestige both within the ingroup and within the Serbian outgroup (Sorescu-Marinković, Huțanu, 2023: 34), were a taboo in school education (Durlić, 2011). Even in their own environment, the Vlachs in Serbia felt like second-class citizens and tried to preserve their ethnic identity only in the safety of their homes (Durlić, 2011: 21). Unsurprisingly, such conditions discouraged Vlach parents from passing the language onto their children, as they assumed that knowing and using the Vlach language was an expression of backwardness (Gacović, 2019: 354–355). After the collapse of Yugoslavia, it took many years for this minority to find a form of state protection. In 2002, the Vlachs were elevated from the previous category of "ethnic group" to the status of a national minority. In the same year, the Law on the Protection of the Rights and Freedoms of National Minorities was passed. However, it was not until the 2014/2015 school year that the Vlach language was introduced as an elective subject at some schools in eastern Serbia. In 2022, it became the official language of the country, although this language variety is still not sufficiently protected in the public sphere, including the media, school education, public administration, etc.

Border proximity, prejudices, and propaganda

The question of the peripheral location and proximity to the border, which characterizes both Lusatia and the Timok Valley, is an important aspect that influenced the fate of the Sorbian and Vlach minorities. Geographically speaking, the border regions of a state are often categorized with a pejorative connotation as "the outskirts, the frontier", being referred to different domains of social life (Korenik, Żurakowski, 2018: 30). Border regions can also be seen as "threshold areas" (Schuchardt, 2023: 178) or "contact zones" (ibid.). These transcultural spaces prove the vulnerability of the category of a supposedly homogeneous nation and at the same time provoke processes of resistance against these very categories (Selvelli, 2024). Interestingly, both Lusatia and the Timok Valley embody "triple" border regions. Lusatia borders both Poland and the Czech Republic, which also gave rise to mistrust due to the potential cross-border communication of the Sorbian minority. The same applies to the Vlachs in the Timok Valley, a region bordering Romania and Bulgaria, with the former playing an important role in national Serbian propaganda. The fact that their mother tongue belongs to a different language family than the main language of their country, coupled with their proximity to the border with a country that speaks a similar language to them, has made the Vlachs a "suspicious" element. In order to preserve the complexity of the meaning of border proximity, it is necessary to understand border regions as places positioned in a specific

time and space (anthropologist Agnieszka Pasieka quoted in Kurpiel, 2020), because "only such a standpoint allows us to take into account the socio-political context, the influence of politics, and the reaction of the inhabitants of these regions to it; and also to address the issue of inequality, discrimination, and marginalisation" (Kurpiel, 2020: 48). Border areas are also associated with the problem of distance from the prestigious centre of power and culture of the respective state, which contributes to the process of marginalization and "devaluation" of minority culture (Selvelli, 2024). Both the Sorbian heritage in Lusatia and the Vlach heritage in the Timok Valley are historically shaped by their ties to a rural landscape and culture and have been (and continue to be) severely affected by industrialization and mining. The diversity in the border regions is "accompanied by a deeply internalized awareness of which of the groups is the dominant and norm-setting one" (Kurpiel, 2020: 49). In the case of German-Sorbian and Serbian-Vlach relations, there is no doubt that the Sorbs and the Vlachs were the dependent minorities for centuries.

The Lusatian frontier: Cross-border contacts and rural identities

Lusatia is often referred to as a border region, with the Sorbs representing a national minority living close to the border. In accordance with the different positions and interests, this region has been constructed in contemporary historiographical debates over the last two centuries as a "periphery, intermediate region, border region, Slavic island, and Slavic bridgehead" (Pollack, 2016: 314, cited in Hagemann, 2023: 72). In this context, the case of Lower Lusatia, the part of the region most affected by opencast mining, can be described as a periphery of the periphery, which is now considered a marginal area within the Brandenburg settlement area of the Sorbs due to the social and demographic changes caused by environmental degradation and population resettlement (Laschewski et al., 2021). The proximity to two other Slavic-speaking countries led to cross-border cultural contacts and to an interest in the Sorbian minority in the historiography of Polish- and Czech-speaking authors (Hagemann, 2023: 77).

West Slavic intellectuals certainly developed a greater interest in the Sorbs and Lusatia than German-speaking educated elites, who tended to be rather indifferent to Sorbian culture or had a negative attitude towards it. The special geographical location also enabled the Sorbs to express their ideas in other areas beyond the border (Petr, 1987). In 1908, for example, the Sorbian intellectual Miklaws Andricki published a famous report on the Sorbian situation in Czech in the Prague journal *Slovansky Pfehled* (Lorenc, 1999) under the title 'Our Difficult Situation'. In this text, he lamented the neglect of knowledge about the Sorbs by German society, which either knew nothing about them or referred to them only as "an ethnographic peculiarity, a dying branch, a dying offshoot" (ibid.: 417). The proximity of the border was also an issue in the period after the Second World War, from 1945 to 1948, when the Sorbs tried to demand autonomy and at the same time maintain close relations with the Slavic-speaking population in

Czechoslovakia (Dippman, 1973). Indeed, after 1945, the Sorbian umbrella organization Domowina attempted to join the CSSR or Poland as an independent organization, a project that failed, as did the attempt to form an independent Sorbian party. More recently, the element of "marginality" has taken on a new transnational significance (Schuchardt, 2023: 175): for the Sorbian minority and its heritage, as in the case of the protests against the expansion of lignite mining at the expense of Sorbian villages, in which Polish activists were also involved (ibid.).

In the GDR, the Sorbian heritage, which was rooted in rural, peripheral, and non-urban contexts, was threatened by major social, ideological, and economic changes. During the industrialization that accompanied the expansion of lignite mining and created thousands of jobs, the workers who moved to Lusatia knew nothing about the culture in the region, while the local German population regarded Sorbian as a rural, pre-modern remnant culture (Hose, Keller, 2002: 67). In relation to Sorbian culture, the fracture between "modern/traditional or industrial/rural or high/folk culture is framed negatively, resulting in the Sorbian/Wendish language and culture being characterized as non-progressive and outdated" (Laschewski et al., 2021: 14). In Lusatia, the Sorbs were originally mainly farmers and craftsmen. The GDR changed this by expanding the mining industry and directly involving the Sorbian workers in the socialist development of Lusatia as a coal and energy centre. By turning them into "well-educated socialist Sorbian personalities" (Dippman, 1973: 529), there was a shift in the social status of the Sorbs. In this context, elements of Sorbian heritage such as folk art were seen as particularly worthy of promotion in the GDR, as they stood out from bourgeois intellectual art. They were thus used for the ideological project of consolidating socialism in this minority. From the late 1950s onwards, traditional folk art increasingly lost importance (Keller, Jacobs, 2023) and was replaced by the more progressive understanding of "artistic folk art" (Heiner, Häfner, 2020: 11), which was intended to help "break the backward habits and traditions" (ibid.). This also included the neutralization of elements of cultural difference in Sorbian folk culture: for example, the Christian and pagan meanings of the symbols on Easter eggs were often obscured. The House for Sorbian Folk Art in Bautzen (1956–1995) and other institutions such as the Sorbian Folklore Centres founded in 1977 in the districts of Dresden and Cottbus promoted the development and use of cultural heritage (especially folk dances, folk art) within the framework of socialist cultural policy (Keller, Jacobs, 2023). In this way, minority culture was combined with the utilitarian goal of supporting socialism in Lusatia. Sorbian authors who deviated from the official cultural policy doctrine were publicly denounced and excluded from the Sorbian public sphere. These measures were accompanied by a gradual erosion of Sorbian self-identification. While 81,000 people still described themselves as Sorbs in 1956, this figure had fallen to 48,000 by 1990 (Meškank, 2014). Today, the estimated number of Sorbs is around 60,000; 40,000 of whom live in Upper Lusatia and 20,000 in Lower Lusatia (Brežan, Nowak,

2016: 11). Despite the progress made after the democratic transition, the Serbski Sejm (Sorbian Parliament), a new political actor founded in 2018, denounces the fact that on German media "misinterpretations and distortions characterise most coverage about the Sorbs. The Sorbian view on things remains mostly excluded. The Sorbian [sic!] is mostly folklorised and hence marginalised, presented as a contrast to the German living environment" (Serbski Sejm, 2021: 42).

The Romanian factor and the prejudices against the Vlachs

In the Timok Valley, as in Lusatia, the proximity to the border(s) was (and still is) an element that influences the life of the Vlach minority. In the second half of the 19th century, the Vlachs were the largest minority in Serbia: 7.8 % of the total population in 1884 (Kolerovic, 2014: 18). Due to their geographical location, the Serbian authorities saw the Vlachs as a threat to national security (ibid.: 19). This was because the Vlachs lived not only in the immediate vicinity of the newly established Romanian state (whose population was considered by the Serbian authorities to be identical to the Vlachs), but also near the north-western region of Bulgaria, which had a significant Vlach community. However, it was only after the German invasion of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia in April 1941 that the Romanian authorities officially intervened and submitted a memorandum to the Germans in which they raised the issue of autonomy for this minority group (Kolerovic, 2014: 186).

After the war, a 1948 report by the OZNA (the Yugoslav State Security Service) dealt with the situation of the Vlachs in eastern Serbia and discussed Romania's efforts to appropriate this region (Sorescu-Marinković, Huțanu, 2023: 114). The aforementioned newspaper in the Vlach language, *Vorba Noastră*, which was founded in 1945, was discontinued in 1949 because it was presumably thought that it would lead the Vlachs towards Romania (Sorescu-Marinković, Huțanu, 2023: 119). Serbian political, social and cultural propaganda in the Timok Valley attempted to weaken the Romanian and Vlach ethnic element through linguistic and ethno-cultural assimilation (Lozovanu, 2013: 405). During socialist Yugoslavia, the creation of a negative image of Romanians with pejorative implications, such as an identity that was less prestigious than Serbian or Yugoslav, was also linked to the country's better socio-economic development compared to Romania. In the early 2000s, new Vlach political formations were greeted in the press with accusations of a possible secession of the region and its annexation to the "Romanian motherland" (Durlić, 2011: 25; Gacović, 2019: 17–18). This prejudice persisted in the years that followed. The concession of the Bor and Majdanpek mines to the Chinese multinational company Zijin in 2018 triggered a new dynamic. For example, the Vlachs from the Timok Valley affected by mining in the Bor region launched a protest in the Romanian city of Craiova in the winter of 2024, demanding support from the Romanian authorities, Serbia, and the European Union (Profit, 2024).

Similar to the Sorbs in Lusatia, the Vlachs in the Timok Valley in Serbia were a predominantly rural population. The natural environment shaped the traditional folklore repertoire of this minority, which can be seen in the local folk songs and traditional musical instruments such as the *bušen* (or *rikalo*), a trumpet made by shepherds from linden bark or willow trees to make it easier to call from one hill to another as they drove their flocks to pasture (Perić, 2020). The original folk music lived for centuries in meadows, pastures and rural villages and embodied a form of ecocultural heritage. Since the 1960s/1970s, however, newly composed Vlach folk music has been promoted in Yugoslavia (Gacović, 2019: 61). The increasing commercialization processes in music had a "degenerative impact on the ethnic heterogeneity of Yugoslav music" (Vidić Rasmussen, 1995: 241) and to a certain extent attempted to neutralize the rural element through an urban conception of culture (ibid.: 242). Similar processes took place with traditional Vlach dances, which were popularized by the majority population as an element of entertainment, without this signifying any real interest in Vlach culture. The Vlach traditions associated with superstition and magic (Sikimić, 2002) and their non-Slavic language have contributed to the fact that the members of this community, as elsewhere in the Balkans, are seen as "the others" par excellence, if one excludes the Turks (Jezernik, 2010). As has already been said: "Vlach was and remains the closest foreigner and the most foreign neighbour" (Botica, 2007: 67). The term *vlaj*, a variation of *vlah*, has been used as a pejorative term, synonymous with "ignorant", "culturally inferior" (ibid.: 65), and the Vlach ethnic identity is often associated with that of a "shepherd", "peasant", i.e. more or less explicitly backward. As evidenced from recent facts[2] this negative attitude has remained to this day, sometimes hidden, sometimes quite open, as for example in the texts of the tabloid media (Euronews Srbija, 2024). It is therefore not surprising that many Vlachs still do not declare themselves as such in the official census (personal interviews with local villagers in Oštrelj).

Motives for ecocultural heritage destruction: Wastelanding

For the Sorbian minority in Lusatia and the Vlach minority in the Timok Valley, mining (lignite and copper respectively) is synonymous with extreme consequences, albeit to different degrees, in the form of environmental degradation and pollution that threaten the local way of life. The erosion of ecocultural landscapes, composed of elements related to both the natural and cultural environment, affects the survival of the intangible heritage of these ethnolinguistic communities who, like indigenous peoples worldwide, are highly exposed to environmental change (Ford et al., 2020). Nevertheless, while the

[2] The case of the denigrative comments of the Head of the Criminal Police Directorate in Belgrade towards the Vlachs in the media in spring 2024, with reference to the disappearance of little Danka.

conceptualization of indigenous peoples' rights is based on a material understanding of culture that sees a close relationship between indigenous culture and territory, including specific forms of natural resource use (Laschewski, Häfner, 2013), minority rights in the EU are instead based on a more abstract understanding of culture. The latter tends to marginalize the importance of the natural environment, probably due to the notion that minorities in Europe are different from indigenous groups in the rest of the world. Thus, "attachment to a settlement area is historically determined, but the relationship between natural conditions and culture is relatively loose" (Laschewski, 2013: 25).

For vulnerable minorities living in close contact with the natural environment, there are communicative links that bind people to their environment and to other social units, which has been defined as "sentient ecology" (Anderson, 2002: 116). It follows that strategies for the safeguarding of ecocultural heritage should "combine traditional biodiversity conservation – such as species preservation and ecological management – with the protection of cultural heritages, including traditional knowledge, customs and historical artefacts" (Zhao et al., 2024: 2). Therefore, in order to contribute to the "de-marginalization" (Merkle, 2022) of cultural heritage from a minority perspective, it is essential to shed light on the relationality and interconnectedness of environmental (Ingold, 2000) and socio-cultural phenomena that affect its preservation and transmission. In our case, the marginalization of the Sorbian and Vlach minorities due to their linguistic differences, their proximity to the border, and their rural culture is significantly linked to the concept of "wastelanding". This was used by Traci Brynne Voyles (2015) to define the process by which the land inhabited by indigenous minorities is presented as worthless and without any value. Following this view, the wasteland is "the 'other' through which modern industrialism is established" and it is no coincidence that environmental inequalities are disproportionately borne by racially and economically marginalized communities (Brynne Voyles, 2015: 6). Mining is a form of "slow violence" (Nixon, 2013), and the landscapes in which it takes place embody a "realm of oblivion" (Brynne Voyles, 2015: 10) made up of "foreign tangible and intangible objects about which we do not care, which do not matter to us, and which we do not want to pass on to our heirs" (Kocój, 2015: 138). To wasteland, thus also means to erase the "worldviews, epistemology, history, and cultural and religious practices" of minorities (Brynne Voyles, 2015: 11). These are made "pollutable, marginal, unimportant" by discourses based on cultural hegemony and construct these lands as "peripheral, distant, marginal" (ibid.: 20). In particular, rural areas in border regions are seen as "barren places predisposed to 'deterritorialization'" (Brynne Voyles, 2015: 20), defined as "the loss of commitment by nation-states […] to particular lands or regions" (Valerie Kuletz cited in Brynne Voyles, 2015: 231), including their inhabitants and respective cultures.

The erosion of traditional Sorbian ecosystems

In Lusatia, the most important energy supply region of the former GDR, the expansion of brown coal in the last century has led to the physical destruction of 137 villages. Communication routes, houses, monuments, forests, gardens, churches, cemeteries: every aspect of material life has been affected. As already mentioned, some 29,000 people were forced to leave their homes. Elements of Sorbian heritage such as the language and traditional ways of life disappeared inexorably from people's everyday lives as the villages were dredged up. When the village of Horno was relocated to the town of Forst as part of the opencast mining activities in Jänschwalde from 2003, the state government attempted to ensure a kind of protection for minorities, in contrast to the GDR practice of breaking up communities. However, this new "socially acceptable" (Hagemann, 2022: 19) practice continued to interpret the social component of communities as independent of specific feelings and practices of attachment to place. In addition, the Sorbs were portrayed as existing in "the sphere of culture, free of an environmental-material dimension" (Lippert, 2020: 5). The obligation of today's opencast mine operators (LEAG) to compensate for negative consequences for the Sorbian minority in the event of resettlement within their ancestral territories also ignores the massive interventions that have already taken place in the minority culture (Laschewski et al., 2021: 9). Even "socially acceptable" resettlements always mean a loss of home and cultural security for those affected (Jacobs, 2021), which leaves wounds of varying depth in each individual. In the village of Kausch, for example, it was found that the resettled residents only kept Sorbian customs such as Zampern (groups that go from house to house with masks and costumes and play music), Easter egg painting and the maypole (a decorated tall tree trunk used to celebrate the beginning of spring) until the time of resettlement, but no longer after that (Hagemann, 2023: 151).

Today, the area in which the Sorbian minority lives is largely characterized by mining and coal-fired power plants and is threatened by soil erosion, pollution of surface waters and groundwater as well as air pollution by microparticles and heavy metals (EU Parliament, 2018: 2). In the parish settlement of Schleife, which only hosts a maximum of 30 speakers of the specific *Schleifer/Slěpjański* dialect variant (data obtained by interviews), the destruction of the heath forest (over 97 hectares), including the Weißwasser primeval forest completed in 2015 for the expansion of the Nochten opencast mine, has dealt a severe blow to the survival of traditional ecological knowledge. This concerned, for example, the medicinal use of plants, fruits (rare old pear trees, centuries-old oaks), berries and mushrooms (data obtained by interviews). The vanishing of noteworthy plant species (many of which are threatened with extinction), implied the fact that the use of their names in the Sorbian language also disappeared (data obtained by interviews). The destroyed forests close to the villages were also the places where specific Sorbian rituals were performed, such as collecting water from a spring on Easter Sunday, called "Easter Water" (data obtained by interviews).

In addition, this also meant the destruction of traditional forms of land use such as forestry and agriculture (Jacobs, 2021: 212). The experience of dismantling originally Sorbian villages and cultural landscapes for lignite mining has left deep traces in Sorbian culture, including among writers such as Jurij Koch (1992, 2020). Indeed, "cutting down the forests destroys the home of fairy tales; without forests, what is there to burn? Coal can be burned, opencast mining destroys the fields. Without fields of flowers, the lovers produced no songs" (Lippert, 2020: 3).

The growing toxicity of Vlach environments

In eastern Serbia, mining, which began in Bor in 1903, had a strong impact on the socio-cultural life of the local residents who started being employed in the mines, as well as on the environment. As early as 1935, the inhabitants of the villages of Krivelj, Slatina, and Bor demanded financial compensation from the mining company for the annual harvests destroyed by the smoke and the environmental pollution, which led to the so-called Vlach Revolt (Vlaška Buna), which brought the company's operations to a standstill for almost a month (Stojmenović, 2024: 35). The further development of mining activities in the Vlach villages took place during the Yugoslav period, after the Bor copper mine was nationalized in 1950. Neither Yugoslavia nor Serbia ever took systematic measures to solve the problem of the expansion of mining into populated areas and the need to expropriate agricultural land and farms. Some of the inhabitants of Krivelj had to be relocated to the newly created "Swedish settlement" of Banjice from the early 1980s after the expansion of the mine (Stojmenović, 2024: 22), a process which took over 20 years.

Copper production has quadrupled since Zijin acquired a majority stake in the previously state-owned Serbian mines (RTB, Rudarsko-Topioničarski Basen Bor, "Mining and Smelting Combine Bor") in 2018, making it one of the largest in Europe. The scenes that take place here are "reminiscent of western films about the Wild West of the 18th and 19th centuries" (Vlaška narodna stranka, 2024) and are a clear expression of the wastelanding will of the state authorities. The local population is under pressure from the Chinese company, which is trying to persuade them to sell their land and is left without answers from the local and state authorities. This is not surprising: minority landscapes affected by mining and pollution are often referred to as marginal lands that are "excluded or ignored from the regulatory protection of the state" (Brynne Voyles, 2015: 9). Due to the level of pollution and the threat of destruction, villagers find themselves in a situation where they can no longer physically live on their land to cultivate it for agricultural purposes (data obtained by interviews). Many have voluntarily left the areas and settled in villages and towns that are also very far away from their places of origin (data obtained by interviews). The heritage of the Vlachs, including their language, is increasingly under threat (data obtained by interviews). The remaining inhabitants are trying to prevent the dispersion of their communities

by individual families moving away (data obtained by interviews). They are fighting for the inhabitants of the villages to stay together and be resettled compactly to a new location. Among the many elements of the familiar landscape to be sacrificed was the much-loved Kriveljski Kamen hill, home to rare endemic plant species (data obtained by interviews) and where an ancient necropolis was located (Kapuran et al., 2013). The land grabbing of agricultural and forest land by Zijin seriously threatens the remaining elements of traditional livelihoods in the region. Beekeeping, for example, is no longer sustainable in some parts of the region. The villagers of Krivelj and Oštrelj interviewed for this research unanimously stated that there is no future for the Vlach culture or the Vlach language as their environment is disappearing.

Conclusions

When analyzing the decline of the Sorbian and Vlach language and culture in the areas affected by mining, it should be noted that the intensification of environmental degradation both in Lusatia and in the Timok Valley and the associated displacements and resettlements did not directly lead to the loss of linguistic and cultural elements, but rather intensified and accelerated these processes. It is therefore no coincidence that, for example, the decline in living Sorbian culture and the use of the Sorbian language is more pronounced in those parts of the traditional Sorbian settlement area where opencast lignite mining has changed the landscape than in those parts that have been spared such interventions (Laschewski et al., 2021: 9).

The impact of mining on the lives of the Sorbian and Vlach minorities has existed since 1924 and 1903 respectively. While 137 villages were destroyed on a large scale in Lusatia, with Mühlrose being the last village affected, the impact on the Vlach villages in the Serbian region of Bor was relatively limited in the past, but this has been changing rapidly since the mining company was taken over by the multinational Zijin. Both the experiences of the Vlachs and the Sorbs show that "environmental privilege arises from the discursive process of rendering a space marginal, worthless, unimportantly inhabited and thus pollutable" (Brynne Voyles, 2015: 9). Minority landscapes become "sacrifice zones" (Bullard, 1990), marked by scars which allow industrial modernity to continue to grow and contribute to the erasure of paradigms of ecocultural diversity (Franco, 2022).

It is no coincidence that many extractive activities take place in areas inhabited by indigenous groups and located on the "margins" (border areas, etc.). The specific and strong cultural connection that many minority groups have with their land makes its physical destruction potentially more damaging to the preservation of their heritage than is often the case for other groups. For minorities in Europe, as elsewhere, cultural heritage is an essential tool for preserving and strengthening their identity (Xanthaki, 2019: 270).

However, the environmental and material components and context of heritage are often not considered in official policies and there is a serious gap in minority protection. According to Xanthaki (2019), "the intangible cultural heritage of minorities, although very recently recognized at the international level, is at the EU level better protected than other kinds of cultural heritage. In contrast, the tangible cultural heritage of minorities is left in the total control of the particular member state" (ibid.: 271). Indeed the EU's legal framework is lacking with regards to the safeguarding of the rights of minorities to their cultural heritage, and the European Convention on Human Rights has not yet included the direct protection of minorities' tangible heritage in its scope (ibid.: 278).

Such premises are problematic because viewing culture as something purely abstract, not rooted in context or environment (Chakrabarty, 2009), implies the possibility of neglecting the material and environmental factor in the preservation of minority heritage. This is another potential level of marginalization that needs to be prevented by a more relational conception of heritage that includes a non-dualistic interpretation of nature and culture reflecting a truly ecological view (see Topole, Pipan, 2023). As affirmed in relation to Lusatia, recognizing the importance of Sorbian culture in the region means that the link between culture and nature is established (Jacobs, 2021: 222). The same applies to the Vlachs in eastern Serbia. The fates of the Sorbs and the Vlachs are paradigmatic in this sense, but there are also other minorities on other "margins" of Europe, such as the Sámi (and many others), from whose stories we can gain important insights into the indissolubility of nature and culture in relation to heritage.

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»Pustošenje« dediščine na obrobjih: premisleki na primeru Lužiških Srbov in timoških Vlahov

V članku obravnavam vpliv rudarskih dejavnosti na ekokulturno dediščino lužiškosrbske in vlaške manjšine v dveh vzhodnoevropskih obmejnih regijah v različnih obdobjih prejšnjega stoletja. Pri analizi uničevanja naravnega in kulturnega okolja obeh manjšin se sklicujem na koncept »pustošenja« (ang. *wastelanding*), ki ga je razvila Brynne Voyles (2015) in po katerem se uničevanje okolja dogaja predvsem v okoliščinah, ko domorodno znanje o pokrajinah in njihovi vrednosti postane »onesnaževalno, marginalno, nepomembno«. Proces marginalizacije lužiškosrbskih in vlaških skupnosti se je začel že pred rudarjenjem, in sicer z diskriminacijo in predsodki do njihovega jezika, pa tudi do njihove podeželske kulture in bližine meje. Izzivi družbeno-kulturnih sprememb izvirajo iz izginjanja ekokulturno raznovrstnih (po)krajin, ki veljajo za osrednji element, ki vzdržuje zapletena razmerja v kolektivnih izkušnjah teh manjšinskih skupnosti. Rudarske dejavnosti vplivajo tako na ohranjanje ekološkega znanja kot na kulturne in jezikovne posebnosti ranljivih manjšin, pri čemer je poudarjena vez med kulturno dediščino in obdajajočim materialnim kontekstom.