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# PART III

# 8. The Shifting Geopolitical Ecologies of Wild Nature Conservation in Romania

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## Wilderness as Political Ecology

Recent debates about biodiversity conservation and habitat protection in Europe—from state governments and Brussels—favour a turn towards strict protection, wilderness frontiers and untouched nature narratives. These raise serious concerns about social and environmental justice. Although there is no clear consensus on defining wilderness for policy-making, many initiatives converge around this aim. Many of these proposals have found fertile ground for experimentation and development in eastern Europe. This chapter explores how newly discovered appreciation for wilderness is set to transform nature conservation in this region by reaffirming older forms of economic dependency and unequal environmental exchange. While zooming in and out on such transformations happening in Romania, the state/conservation nexus is used as a lens to understand the creation of 'Eastern Europe' as a green internal periphery. This chapter will scrutinise the 'Eastern European wilderness momentum' by fleshing out the ongoing creation of a private wilderness protected area in the Southern Carpathian Mountains.

Over the last decade, various MEPs and officials from the European Commission have worked together to advance the protection of wilderness in the Union, issuing soft laws such as the Guidelines for the Natura 2000 protected areas (European Commission, 2013)

and a dedicated resolution (European Parliament, 2009). In parallel, prominent environmental NGOs initiated concrete actions to identify the last areas of 'unspoiled' nature, to lobby for their strict protection as part of domestic legislation and to turn wilderness conservation into a profitable business through its commodification within ecotourism operations and as part of climate change mitigation strategies. A new re-valuation of old-growth forests and other intact eastern European landscapes have made the region a prime focus for new financial mechanisms for carbon sequestration, biodiversity conservation strategies and new economic growth models (European Commission, 2020).

These new developments target large areas of the eastern EU member states. However, surprisingly, 'wilderness' is not mentioned in any of the national legal frameworks in the region. Rewilding Europe, the Endangered Landscape Programme, EuroNatur and other important civil society conservation actors have concentrated much of their efforts around supporting local initiatives celebrating 'wild' nature, or have started top-down wilderness conservation projects. At the political level, some states have championed this approach to conservation from its infancy (e.g. the Czech Republic as discussed in Petrova, 2013), while others have been somewhat reluctant to value their natural heritage as 'untouched nature' (e.g. Poland as discussed in Blavascunas and Konczal, 2019; and Gzeszczak and Karolewski, 2017). As civic campaigns and high-end political negotiations around wilderness protection turn the issue into a recurrent topic on the public agenda, the geopolitical nature of this conservation approach becomes more critical in redefining the ways borders and peripheries are understood and acted upon in the region (Wild Europe, 2019). Although very heterogeneous, all these projects and initiatives share a few standard features: they come as a response to degradation narratives or land abandonment, and propose wilderness conservation as a way to fix these problems; they present a strict protection approach opposed to an allegedly failing marginal agriculture; they legitimate the interventions by appealing to Western scientific knowledge; and lastly, they glorify past ecological riches that western Europe has lost, augmenting the urgency to act. Through a political ecology approach, this chapter discusses power, knowledge production, environmental justice and hegemonic conservation

narratives associated with the re-valuation of wild nature in eastern Europe with a focus on Romania.

This chapter does several things. First, it shows that wilderness protection is gaining momentum in eastern Europe and that this process enjoys the blessing of various governments. Second, it details this relation by scrutinising an ongoing establishment of a private wilderness reserve in the Southern Carpathians in Romania as well as the negotiation of a legal frame for the strict protection of 'virgin' forests by a technocratic government. Finally, it shows that wilderness conservation in Romania reinforces unjust dependencies and new forms of accumulation as wild nature becomes an environmental fix.

## Conservation Geopolitics

Emerging from civil society struggles or as private projects, wilderness-related enterprises have been championed by state and regional authorities throughout the entire eastern European region. As a new Common Agricultural Policy and a European Green New Deal are implemented, conservationists have suggested that a growing interest in conserving 'untouched' nature will mark a new era in intergovernmental cooperation and will conclude with the introduction of 'wilderness' values in sectors such as agriculture, energy and infrastructural developments (Wild Europe, 2019). Intensely lobbied for by a coalition of environmental NGOs, scientists and philanthropists, wilderness debuted on the EU political scene with the adoption of a resolution by the European Parliament on 3 February 2009 (European Parliament, 2009).

'Wilderness' as a concept of concern for environmental law and policy-making in the EU is very young (Egerer et al., 2016). The current wilderness momentum needs to be historicised and investigated against contemporary global conservation debates. I join others in reconsidering the regional specificities of wilderness preservation in the European context (Lupp et al., 2011; Lupp et al., 2012; Kupper, 2014; Kirchoff and Vicenzotti, 2014). I argue that the local historical and socio-political context makes eastern European wilderness protection significantly different to other, similar movements. Far from adopting a globalised, Yellowstone fortress-type of narrative, European actors propose many

interpretations of wilderness, each with profound political and social implications (Saarinen, 2015; Bastmeijer, 2016; Schumacher, 2018). While public attitudes to wilderness vary (Bauer et al., 2017), most of the recent legal developments champion a strict separation of wild nature from human history and use (Martin et al., 2008; Wild10, 2015; Egerer et al., 2016).

Read as part of a global attempt to strictly secure large areas of land for nature to develop according to its own rules, the European wilderness momentum appears as a process of re-territorialisation on the one hand (Adams et al., 2014) and as the creation of a new resource on the other. The new resource has become of utmost importance amongst EU strategies for green growth and climate change mitigation. The making and maintenance of these resources have involved the establishment of strict boundaries between domesticated nature and the areas in which (mostly white male) scientists and conservationists 'discovered' an autonomous nature that has evolved independently of any human influence. These boundary-drawing dynamics will be investigated through the Carpathia Project in the Southern Carpathian Mountains. The project under scrutiny changed not only local socio-environmental relations, but also the wider political economy of the area.

There is one particular process of capitalist transformation of nature into a commercial value that is more prevalent than others in the creation of the eastern European wilderness frontier. This is the 'cheapening of nature', a process of control and devaluation of nature as a source of essential inputs for the development of global capitalism (Moore, 2015; Moore and Patel, 2018). Adapted to local realities, the 'cheapening of wilderness' is a foundational moment for strict conservation initiatives in eastern Europe. This process is intimately imbricated within recent historical events such as land restitution and reform, the devaluation of the forest by illegal logging and deforestation, the top-down establishment of protected areas and a constant depreciation of traditional livelihoods.

The Romanian forests of the Făgăraș Mountains are heavily impacted by extractivist processes and are considered to be of particular ecological value by non-state conservation programs. The Carpathia Project is legitimised by its promoters as undoing some of the environmental harm done by recent ruthless timber exploitation. While stopping commercial

logging and hunting, the Foundation Conservation Carpathia aims and succeeds to buy as much land as there is available, claiming that exclusive (private) ownership is the safest strategy for strict protection in perpetuity.

This case study is informed by interviews with people working for the implementing organisation, direct observation, field visits and the study of legal documents, grey literature, technical reports, wildlife documentaries and several other media productions. As the project is situated within a highly political field of negotiating new values attached to nature, I follow the Foundation Conservation Carpathia (FCC) as an actor involved in building the first eastern European private wilderness reserve.

## Eastern Europe as a Wilderness Frontier

Over the last ten years, the protection of 'wild nature' has gained increasing momentum in Europe. From the extensive mapping of remaining wilderness to progress with EU legislation, proposals for the strict protection of nature have set the ground for many continent-wide alliances and permeated national and institutional boundaries. Although merely a decade old, such conservation approaches have triggered important changes in socio-environmental relations. I argue that these wilderness protection projects have predominantly targeted the outer regions of the EU, creating an imagined green periphery. As I am focusing on such processes developing in eastern Europe, I propose to call this green internal periphery 'The New Wild East'.

The New Wild East represents a politico-environmental frontier whose importance goes beyond nature protection and is underlined by spiritual values, productive aesthetics and a lot of experimentation. As it is read from the 'West', this wilderness frontier was revealed and subsequently discovered after the fall of the iron curtain. The official storyline goes like this:

> the fall of the iron curtain, [...] revealed large, intact areas in central and Eastern Europe, primarily along the east-west border, and created significant opportunities for government-protected areas (Martin, 2008: 34)

Since the wild nature of eastern Europe and the wilderness in the periphery have been 'discovered', threatening degradation narratives have proliferated. Overgrazing, intensive use, deforestation, overhunting, highway and infrastructure development, are all elements of a sudden attack on Europe's last wild areas. For example, damming in the Balkans is destroying Europe's "blue heart" (EuroNatur, 2016), illegal logging is a threat to the last "remaining wilderness" of Poland (Gross, 2016). On the other hand, these threats are rapidly turned into opportunities for conservation:

> Conservation organisations today have the unique opportunity to acquire large areas of land to secure in perpetuity. Ecological and evolutionary processes can be allowed to convert landscapes that still possess wilderness qualities and ecological richness back into true wilderness for the benefit of biodiversity and the people alike. (Promberger, 2015: 242)

If we aim to interpret this eastern European wilderness momentum as a creation of a green internal periphery, it is essential to ask ourselves whose periphery would the New Wild East be relative to? Who are the human and the more-than-human winners and losers of this process? And what can political ecology say about it?

Land abandonment is an opportunity to move towards a new wilderness. In this narrative, the processes underlying land abandonment are unquestioned and rewilding comes as a restorative process "in which formerly cultivated landscapes develop without human control" (Hochtl et al., 2005: 86). Within this new conservation ethic, land abandonment is productive (Jørgensen, 2015: 484), but the underlying causes are always left unaddressed (Tănăsescu, 2017). In eastern European countries land abandonment is often a result of rural under-development, a lack of infrastructure, healthcare, education opportunities and jobs, huge rural-urban investment and livelihood divides and a steady devaluing of agricultural work combined with a lack of outlets for selling the fruits of this work (Fox, 2011).

Closely connected to land abandonment is the issue of rural depopulation. Many wilderness protection projects celebrate so-called wildlife returns across the continent. Leaving aside the fact that only 'charismatic' species seem to return (brown bears, wolves, lynxes), such processes happen predominantly in areas affected by out-migration, ageing populations and other negative demographic trends. From the

Fig. 1. Abandoned land in the Southern Carpathian Mountains. Photograph by George Iordăchescu (2019).

Alpine communities to the Spanish comunales, depopulation seems a critical process negatively affecting environmental stewardship. In eastern Europe, one of the first rewilding projects in the early 1990s was the reintroduction of Konik horses in the Pape region of Latvia, an area marked by massive outmigration, an ageing population and a total absence of markets for local products (Schwartz, 2006). Previous Soviet rule had transformed both the rural economy and the cultural landscape around Runcava village. While pre-Soviet fishing practices were abandoned as the area became militarised, families moved to the bigger cities, leaving the land almost deserted. When a rewilding project started to be considered as feasible, locals still present were (re-)trained to see the land in terms of sustainability, biodiversity and restoration. However, donors chose Pape not only for its ecological riches and sparse population, but also for its low wages and prices. At the same time, the region was close enough to countries like Sweden and Germany, from where potential tourists could come once the new wilderness was established (Schwartz, 2006: 159).

It is important to note that, except for Finland, no EU member country has so far adopted explicit legislation for wilderness protection (Bastmeijer, 2016). Moreover, local grassroots support for wilderness protection in eastern Europe has been weak so far, even if the concept is widely popular in the West (Urban, 2016). Nevertheless, the eastern part of the continent occupies the centre stage for some of the most notable and well-funded strict protection projects, financed by private actors or through public-private partnerships. A quick overview of the European Rewilding Network, a pan-European movement connecting all rewilding initiatives since 2013, shows that twenty-three out of around sixty rewilding initiatives are located in former post-socialist countries (Rewilding Europe, 2020). Moreover, Rewilding Europe, the agenda-setting actor in this field on the continent, has so far established five of their seven rewilding areas in eastern Europe.

Another example is the Endangered Landscape Programme, a recently launched program aimed at supporting remarkable environmental restoration projects for an extended period to secure their success. Financed by the Arcadia Foundation and managed by the Cambridge Conservation Initiative, the programme announced its first round of projects from March 2019. Five out of a total of eight projects receiving support are located in eastern Europe or its immediate vicinity, and their central long-term goal is "to give space back to nature" (Endangered Landscapes Programme, 2017).

EuroNatur, Germany's oldest and most important foundation advocating for wild nature protection, is involved in nineteen projects across the continent, of which thirteen are located in eastern Europe. One of its most ambitious initiatives is the European Green Belt, an initiative aiming to protect and promote the strip of land formerly known as the iron curtain. Stretching over more than 12,000 km, the former demarcation line between east and west is allegedly Europe's "precious natural pearl necklace" consisting of "pristine forests and swamps, wild mountain ranges and river landscapes that cannot be found anywhere else in Europe" (European Green Belt, 2018). In Romania, EuroNatur is one of the leaders and a generous supporter of an environmental campaign for the protection of 'virgin' forests.

These projects attempt to define wilderness uniformly to build scientific coherence and homogenise tools and indicators by assembling

pan-European standards, reference indicators and a uniform set of criteria. The strict separation of the newly discovered wild nature from managed landscapes and socio-historical natures is another facet of the same process. This strict separation is necessary and directly impacts on local strategies for rural development, frames imaginations for the future of humans' relations with the environment, and often contradicts locals' aspirations and perspectives (Schwartz, 2006; Petrova, 2013).

This review has tried to demonstrate the apparent abundance of wilderness to be saved in eastern Europe. Since Romania is widely regarded as containing the highest percentage of 'virgin' forests (UNESCO, 2017), charismatic wildlife (Schlingemann et al., 2017; European Parliament, 2018) and 'intact' landscapes, it makes for a good example to study the European shift towards wilderness protection.

## State-Conservation Entanglements in Romania

Over the last couple of years, the Romanian government, environmental NGOs, and other actors involved in conservation have actively promoted the country as a biodiversity hotspot and an untouched nature destination. In terms of legislative developments, these efforts have been mirrored by proportional developments that reached a peak while a technocratic government was in office between 2015 and 2016. For almost a decade the country's touristic brand played on narratives of wild nature and adventurous discovery (Iordachescu, 2014), and the government used various diplomatic occasions to portray Romania as the "green heart of Europe" (Romanian Presidency of the EU Council, 2018).

This new valuation of wild nature comes after two decades during which a Carpathian timber frontier has gone from boom to bust (Vasile, 2020), leaving behind an inability to halt illegal logging and deforestation (Iordachescu, 2020). An immediate effect of post-socialist land reforms related to forest privatisation was an increase in timber exploitation. Dorondel describes how both legal and illegal forest exploitation mushroomed within patronage networks (2009), resulting in what he calls "disrupted landscapes" (2016). According to Vasile and others, this post-socialist timber frontier was marked by extensive corruption and violence (Lawrence and Szabo, 2005; Vasile, 2009; Vasile, 2019).

These transformations impacted the region not only from an ecological point of view but also visually. Many forest plots were clear-cut as soon as they were returned to owners. As the timber frontier was coming to an end, wilderness protection became the new hegemonic narrative.

The current grim prospects for nature conservation in Romania were preceded by a series of positive developments under the technocratic government in office between November 2015 and January 2017. That period was marked by signs of progress in laying down the legal framework for identifying and protecting the old-growth forests (referred to as 'virgin forests'), curbing the extent of illegal logging and unwavering support for the creation of wilderness reserves in the Southern Carpathians.

The protection of virgin forests in Romania is a perfect case for understanding regional and even international attempts to conserve wild nature under strict protection regimes. As has been explored above, the abstraction of wilderness is a political project that continually changes the geographies of conservation, where virgin forests represent a proxy of this transformation (Iordachescu, 2021).

Beyond constituting a hot public debate for several years, 'virgin forests' have been the object of detailed political discussions ranging from national security to the development of big infrastructural projects (Wild Europe, 2018). It is important to contextualise this process within a broader eastern European interest for the protection of old-growth forests as part of a sustained international effort to identify and find ways of conserving wild nature under strict protection mechanisms. The Romanian legal framework for protecting virgin forests started to be developed only after the party states of the Carpathian Convention signed the Protocol on Sustainable Forest Management in May 2011. The Forest Protocol follows up on Article 7 (paragraph 5) of the Convention and refers to the designation of virgin forests and the need to protect them strictly. During the technocratic rule, ministerial ordinances set the criteria and detailed the instruments suitable for the strict protection of these iconic wild values (Ministry of Environment, 2017).

Along with strong governmental support for the definition, mapping and strict protection of old-growth forests as ecosystems "developing without any direct or indirect human influences" (Ministry of Environment, 2012), the technocratic period was marked by an

explicit endorsement of a private initiative aiming to turn large areas of the Southern Carpathians into a wilderness reserve. Popularised in the media and political discourse as the 'European Yellowstone', this initiative is emblematic for the current transformations of nature protection in eastern Europe. Enclosing nature for the protection of biodiversity, whether by public or private actors, has international ramifications and is considered by many to be a global phenomenon (Peluso and Lund, 2011; White et al., 2012; Corson and MacDonald, 2012). The phenomenon is considered a sort of green grabbing, and it supposedly takes nature out of an extractivist logic and reserves it for ecotourism and the development of green businesses that are purported to be friendlier to the environment (Fairhead et al., 2012; Ojeda, 2012).

The Carpathia Project is a representative example for understanding how wild nature emerges within the region as a cheap resource. In the aftermath of the Romanian forest restitution, the proponents of the country's most iconic wilderness conservation project wrote to an international audience that

> Private owners want to sell, and what happens after a sales contract is rather irrelevant to these new owners. What if conservation organisations step dynamically into the picture? (Promberger and Promberger, 2015: 245)

Similarly, proponents of rewilding approaches advocate explicitly for the artificial cheapening of land to promote conservation initiatives:

> We propose to disconnect subsidies for marginal land from farming activities. Doing so will make farming less economical to owners of marginal land, which will reduce land prices, and hence reduce competition for land with other societal players, bringing opportunities for ecosystem restoration (Merckx and Perreira, 2015: 99)

## A World-Class Wilderness Reserve

The Romanian case shows that after the cheapening of nature and its subsequent securitisation, ecotourism is frequently advanced as the silver bullet for many types of problems, from habitat degradation to land abandonment and rural poverty. So far, ecotourism has been presented to the general public as the only development alternative possible, as it is a fair economic model not only for nature but also for locals. In

the Făgăraș Mountains, part of the Southern Carpathians, ecotourism initiatives have been sustained by a logic of securitisation. This captures the processes of capital accumulation as they are bound to a vast array of resource enclosures and dispossessions (Kelly and Ybarra, 2016; Masse, 2016; Masse and Lundstrum, 2016; Huff and Brock, 2017). The Carpathia Project is a good illustration of various processes at play in the creation of the eastern European wilderness frontier: the project is proposed by a conservation foundation that secures an entire territory for future accumulation by concomitantly taking over the roles of exclusive owner, custodian of Natura 2000 sites, administrator of hunting grounds, and as a member of historical forest commons. The project aims to be an example and blueprint for future initiatives in the region (Promberger, 2019). This case is relevant not only for its pioneering vision, but also for its ambition to become a model for other initiatives on the continent. FCC's founders are the leaders of the wilderness movement in Europe. Some of them pursue their rewilding projects; others put great efforts into lobbying for wilderness at the EU institutional level.

In this light, the wilderness conservation project acts as a veritable new frontier of land control. While enclosures have a long history in Europe and elsewhere, this specific enterprise stands out through its mechanisms. Peluso and Lund (2011) appreciate that what is different in the contemporary wave of enclosures are the alliances backing the project, as well as its general economic rationale. The FCC's conservancy allegedly takes nature out of an extractivist commercial logic and includes it in a non-extractive circuit (for ecotourism or contemplation). In other words, the Carpathia Project is justified as an attempt to repair the harm done by humans (i.e. former owners) by giving the land back to nature (i.e. wilderness). This new way of drawing boundaries between the human and the wild is seen here as a 'territorialisation' process (Peluso and Lund, 2011: 668). As this process includes dispossession, rights transfer and securitisation of resources, its losers end up being pushed towards a 'systemic edge', where expulsion from the economic, social and natural landscape is so advanced that it becomes hardly visible (Sassen, 2015).

Foundation Conservation Carpathia (FCC) is the most important private conservation actor in Romania and aims to be a leading example at the European level. Over the last ten years, the FCC has sought

to protect and restore large forested areas in the eastern part of the Southern Carpathian Mountains. Their approach has centred on using private and public money to buy as much land as possible and ensure its full protection. Leasing hunting rights, acquiring custody of Natura 2000 protected areas and cataloguing virgin forests complemented their approach towards the strict protection of an allegedly untouched nature. By the end of 2019 the foundation and its commercial companies owned and administered over 22,000 hectares of forests and alpine pastures, and are considered one of the biggest private forest owners in the country. Besides buying land for strict protection, the foundation has acquired the custody of two Natura 2000 protected areas, a further almost 15,000 ha. Another strategy to ensure strict protection of wildlife within the project area was to bid for and acquire exclusive hunting rights. Buying land, being a custodian of protected areas and managing the hunting grounds are the strategies through which the FCC builds the future 'European Yellowstone'. If Africa has Serengeti and Kruger, and North America has Yellowstone, the time has come for Europeans to have their own, emblematic Yellowstone. This comparison is not fortuitous, however 'the European Yellowstone' has become common parlance among conservationists and nature lovers alike, frequently being adopted by policy-makers (Ziare.com, 2016; Rear, 2018).

Carpathia is a concrete example of how and where internationally discussed ideas about the strict protection of wild nature, understood as separated from human use, are put into practice. To achieve conservation objectives, the FCC proposed and followed two strategies. First, it worked to restore forest and aquatic ecosystems by reforesting barren slopes, covering old eroded forestry roads and reconstructing riparian alder habitats (*Alnus incana*). A generous LIFE+ grant and several other projects contributed to the successful implementation of this approach, resulting in more than 1.8 million trees being planted. Second, the foundation aims to reintroduce two missing species, considered of great value for an area aspiring to be a 'world-class reserve'. The beaver (*Castor fiber*) and the European bison (*Bison bonasus*) are the usual suspects in many rewilding projects on the continent, and scientists have devoted particular attention to the practicalities of these projects (Tănăsescu, 2017; Tănăsescu, 2019; Vasile, 2018b). Here they are expected to recreate mosaic landscapes and restore the natural ecosystems as they

are abandoned or are not adequately managed. A grant of 5 million USD, awarded to the FCC by the Cambridge Conservation Initiative in early March 2019, is currently dedicated to this process (Endangered Landscapes Programme, 2018).

If in the early years Carpathia was merely a project aimed at stopping illegal logging around Piatra Craiului Massif, it has evolved over the years, at times with the state's help, into an enterprise for creating an iconic national park around the Făgăraș Mountains, considered the last unfragmented mountain range in Europe. The areas that the foundation currently controls are expected to constitute the strictly protected core of the future national park. At the peak of its governmental support the park was expected to be operational by the end of 2020.

Such a daring project would not be possible without direct governmental endorsement manifested in moral and legal support (Iordachescu, 2018). Over the last decade, important political figures from various parties have shown their appreciation for the wilderness reserve. This peaked in 2016 when Romania was ruled for about one year by a cabinet of technocrats led by the former EU Commissioner for Agriculture and Rural Development, Dacian Cioloș. Previously, in February 2014, the FCC received for the first time confirmation that the central authorities backed their project. The liberal Lucia Varga, holding office at the Ministry of Environment and Climate Change, signed a collaboration protocol with the foundation offering them full technical support for stopping the illegal logging and developing the conservation initiative in Făgăraș.

Towards the end of 2015, an unpredictable change of executive power took place in the country. The social democrats, led by Victor Ponta, resigned in the middle of a massive corruption scandal that triggered large public demonstrations. President Klaus Iohannis invited the non-affiliated Dacian Cioloș to form a government until the next parliamentary elections. Two FCC board members were appointed as state secretaries in the Ministry of Environment. Upon taking office, both of them announced an interruption of their roles in the FCC for the period of their appointment.

Two months after her appointment, the Minister of Waters and Forests went on an official visit over Făgăraș accompanied by the FCC's directors. The trip, financed by the FCC, also included the BBC's *Wild*

*Carpathia* documentary presenter Charles Ottley, and involved several other national celebrities in ongoing environmental campaigns. Both the minister and the FCC posted social media pictures of deforested mountain slopes in the middle of endless virgin forests. They reminded their followers about the urgency to save these wonders by supporting the creation of the 'European Yellowstone'.

Later that year, in September 2016, the government announced publicly that a new memorandum for establishing the Făgăraș Mountains National Park had been proposed for public consultation. The very first page of this official document advertised the proposed park as Europe's own Yellowstone: "Thus, Făgăraș Mountains National Park could become the most important national park of Europe regarding its rich biodiversity and extended area, a veritable 'European Yellowstone'" (Guvernul României, 2016: 1). The public consultation, on the other hand, did not go as expected, so for the time being the 2020 target for the park being operational remains a missed target.

According to the document, the proposed development vision for the area revolves around green businesses and ecotourism enterprises such as low impact visitations, wildlife watching facilities and animal tracking tours catering to an affluent Western audience. The locals are expected to propose business plans and develop their initiatives under the direction of the FCC and its partners, Conservation Capital, Romanian Association for Ecotourism, and others (Iordachescu and Vasile, 2016). Extractive processes such as commercial logging, domestic grazing, foraging and other traditional land uses are mainly excluded from this vision.

Securing and controlling access to local resources, enclosing the commons and commodifying charismatic wildlife are facets of this attempt that draw strict boundaries between 'wild' and 'domesticated' nature around the Făgăraș Mountains. Not everyone has experienced the same impact on their livelihoods by the strict conservation regime. Most of the villagers who privately own pastures and forests felt the arrival of the FCC to a lesser extent. At the same time, Roma communities, who possess no land, have no stable jobs, and live in precarious settlements, felt the impact the most. Between these two polarised categories are the shepherds, farmers, foresters, guesthouse owners, hunters, and many others who either had asked for their interests to be represented by the local authorities or opposed the foundation directly themselves.

## Dispossession and Exclusion in the 'European Yellowstone'

Yellowstone is an important brand within the global conservation movement: while the park played an essential role in framing the spectacle of wildlife as part of a standardised, commodified experience (Rutherford, 2011), its foundation was marked by brutal dispossessions and genocide (Cronon, 1996).

The most decisive impact of the Carpathia Project, the 'European Yellowstone', has been felt in the historical region of Muscel, situated on the southern side of the Făgăraș Mountains. Most of the municipalities here are composed of several villages whose agricultural lands and forests extend from the hills to the alpine pastures. Historically, the area was relatively well off, situated between the first two capitals of the medieval Principality of Wallachia. Animal husbandry, forest exploitation, and commerce across the mountains between Transylvania and Wallachia have been the basis of this region's economic development. As almost all villages retained their privileges from medieval to modern times, the landscape and most natural resources have been governed by commons and customary rule until the land was nationalised from 1948 onwards (Vasile, 2018a). From 2000, a new restitution law allowed former historical owners to take back their lands, so the common ownership of forests became a source of pride and collective action throughout the region (Vasile, 2009). Thus, locals' strong opposition towards the wilderness conservation project did not come as a surprise for anyone, and the first years of the project were marked by rumours and suspicion rather than by open consultations and dialogue.

Aside from various forms of everyday resistance that never morphed into organised violent revolt, there have been different types of mobilisation by local authorities concerning rumours about declaring Făgăraș Mountains a national park. Although the state government's memorandum mentioned that the population around the Făgăraș Mountains was 73,000 inhabitants, it did not organise any consultation meeting before or after the memorandum was made public. The document's preamble read:

> The national park could attract over 500 million potential visitors from Europe. […] through the establishment of Făgăraș Mountains National

Park, the local communities surrounding the mountains have the unique opportunity of making it to the international map of tourism (Guvernul României, 2016, translation my own)

Rather than flattering local authorities, these words infuriated them. In November 2016 a big meeting was organised in Șercăița, a village on the northern side of Făgăraș. Representatives of thirty-three commons were joined by twelve mayors who discussed the memorandum and reaffirmed their opposition to the FCC's plans to build a 'world-class wilderness reserve'. Together they signed the Resolution of Șercăița, an official document that was submitted to the technocratic government. In four points, they asked the government to stop the establishment of the national park and to respect their property rights as granted by the Romanian constitution. They also filed a complaint to the National Anti-Corruption Office in which they accused the government of adopting a private conservation project as a state project of public interest.



Fig. 2.  Rudari permanent settlement. Photograph by George Iordăchescu (2018).

Another important group that has never been at the negotiation table despite being directly impacted by the development of the wilderness reserve is that of local Roma communities. In many hilly or mountainous regions of Romania, different groups of Roma (calling themselves *Rudari*) were engaged in patron-client relations around forest exploitation, precarious agricultural work, scrap iron collection and other types of informal livelihoods that proliferated during the post-socialist period

(Dorondel, 2009; Dorondel, 2016). Around the Făgăraș Mountains, these realities were not different. All seven Rudari communities that I visited were economically deprived compared to nearby villages, in terms of infrastructure and public amenities. An unclear land tenure situation has been doubled here by precarious living conditions sometimes involving a lack of safe drinking water, or a heightened probability of flooding with the advent of severe rains.

For many of the interviewed families, their livelihoods were seriously affected after their access to areas rich in mushrooms or to nearby forests was halted. Until recently, they enjoyed customary access to these resources. It is here where everyday forms of resistance were most frequently performed: Rudari's weapons of the weak involved an entire set of actions, from petty firewood stealing to regularly breaking the barriers and fences installed by the FCC. They have often been fined, their carts, horses and chainsaws seized, and they were sometimes beaten, or even imprisoned, by gendarmes. Most of the clashes were with the rangers employed by the foundation to patrol the valleys alone or accompanied by gendarmes. These clashes happened inside and outside the protected forests.

During the last two years, the FCC has radically changed their public relation strategy towards greater openness and inclusivity. They have been very active in promoting their plans at local folklore festivals and even organised a Forest Carnival for 300 guests in Rucăr in 2018. Regardless of these attempts, locals' mobilisation against the project has remained strong. As the FCC started a set of consultative meetings in April and May 2019, people gathered in significant numbers in Râmnicu Vâlcea, Sibiu and Brașov to express their concerns. Farmers and the presidents of commons particularly voiced profound disagreement with FCC plans. On the western side of the Făgăraș Mountains, as well as on the eastern side, people have a recent history of conflicts with the administrations of Cozia and Piatra Craiului National Parks, both established in the mid-2000s without adequate public consultation. The discussions during the meetings convened by the foundation in May 2019 revolved more around the fears about future restrictions than around issues related to the value of wildlife and the ecosystem services offered by the future national park. As they have been reported by the local media, none of the meetings ended in a constructive way (Nostra

Silva, 2019a; Nostra Silva, 2019b). As the summer started, Barbara Promberger, executive director of the FCC, was invited to the National Geographic Explorers Festival in Washington. Here she spoke about how the foundation puts great effort into improving local communities' economic situation but finds nothing but suspicion and distrust.

Being the ones to bear the costs of wilderness preservation, locals fear that timber will be scarcer, grazing areas less bountiful and that conflicts with wild animals will increase. As they are offered promises of significant gains from the development of ecotourism, they also have their own ideas and concepts about how tourism should be developed in the area. Many locals, both persons with decision-making power as well as guesthouse owners and small farmers, believe that mass tourism and resorts with winter sports facilities would be more beneficial for the economies of their villages.

All of these forms of contention should not be seen as a rejection of nature protection or as a disinterest or aversion to environmental issues. People in the area feel a deep attachment to their mountains. Through the historical institutions of commons, natural resources have been used and managed in a sustainable way for centuries. These concerns should be interpreted as a disapproval of a top-down, strict conservation approach that attempts to 'save' a nature that is unknown and unrecognisable to those who live there—the wilderness and its narratives are totally separate from traditional use and local history.

## Conclusion

As intact landscapes, old-growth forests and strictly protected wildlands are considered an essential element in recent EU climate mitigation and biodiversity strategies (such as the New Green Deal), I see the development of wilderness protection in the region as a process of unequal ecological exchange between a wealthier, Western core and a periphery, where the decision-making processes, hegemonic conservation knowledge and financial mechanisms of the former are concentrated and deployed to fix, restore, reconstruct and sustainably use the 'nature' discovered in the latter, which is characterised by backwardness, subsistence, land abandonment and depopulation. This process unfolds as the creation of a green internal periphery, mainly

to achieve EU and member states' ambitions to sustain green economic growth and lead the global fight against climate change.

These various wilderness conservation projects are bound together not only by strong political and ideological support, but also by the similar socio-economic local contexts that enable them. Local conditions such as declining rural population, actual or relative land abandonment, the demise of traditional land-use practices and 'cheap' nature, are all features of this new green internal periphery represented by the eastern European wilderness frontier.

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