

*Research*

BORDERS AND BORDER ZONES: DIFFERENCES AND EQUALITIES

Veliko Tarnovo, 30 May – 1 June, 2014

## **CROSS-BORDER LANDSCAPE: CONSTRUCTION OF NATURAL HERITAGE AND LOCAL DEVELOPMENT AT BULGARIAN-SERBIAN BORDERLANDS**

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**Abstract.** Normally nature is examined as a phenomenon which is subject to natural laws; it belongs to the field of natural sciences. In constructivist perspective the environment is subsumed under the symbolism of humans' tradition and culture. From such point of view the very notion of nature is unthinkable without taking into account its existence and understanding in a specific social, economic and cultural context of definite time, space and society. In the proposed paper I proceed from this paradigm in examination of a definite natural landscape which, however, is divided by the political border. The research attention is focused on a region of Bulgarian-Serbian borderlands – the area where the Erma River flows. The river takes its sources in

Serbia and though it is not very long, it is notable for passing the Bulgarian-Serbian border twice, and for its two remarkable gorges – the Gorge of Tran in Bulgaria and the Gorge of Poganovo in Serbia. During the socialist period this border region was under strong military and police control. The crossing of the border was formally impossible; the borderlands remained peripheral industrially undeveloped areas and were putted under strong depopulation. However, the lands on either side of the border preserved its pristine nature. During the last two decades the preserved natural landscape and certain nature objects have been turned into more important landmarks and included in the value scale of local communities as symbols and heritage. In result, the above mentioned gorges have become more important part of strategic priorities in the local policies of revival of these economically undeveloped borderlands in the Western Bulgaria and Eastern Serbia. Nowadays the local efforts are uniting through different joint cross-border projects and activities in the sphere of nature preservation and eco-tourism.

*Keywords:* border, eco-tourism, nature preservation, local policies

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## **Theoretical frame and terminology**

### *Nature and social sciences*

Usually in its main meaning nature is conceived as a non-human and non-symbolic reality. According to Oxford English Dictionary<sup>1)</sup> nature is:

[t]he physical world, including plants, animals, the landscape, natural phenomena such as the weather, and all other things not made by people; the inborn qualities or characteristics of a person or thing; a kind, sort, or class: topics of religious nature.

In this respect nature is a subject of natural laws and belongs to the field of natural sciences. It contrasts to the social and symbolic human world requiring the use of specific social and cultural methods of examination which are representative of the so called human sciences (in terms of Wilhelm Dilthey<sup>2</sup>). Nevertheless the natural environment has always been important for ethnologists and anthropologists: in the materialist view nature is the main determinant of the social action; the cultural ecology sees the human habits and patterns, the social institutions, the specific cultural features as adaptation to the natural environment; the structuralists introduce the nature-culture opposition as a fundamental analytical tool in the examination and conceptualisation of the rituals, myths, systems of classification, food and body symbolism etc. (Descola & Pálsson, 1996). In spite of their different theoretical and methodological bases all three mentioned paradigms examine the nature and the culture from a common initial position, according to which the nature defines and shapes the human culture.

On the other side, Dilthey substantiates that the distinction between natural sciences and human sciences is determined by the difference of their methods, and it is not based on the distinction between two categories of objects. Natural sciences examine the physical facts, while human sciences are interested in the spiritual facts. According to Dilthey (1990b, pp. 248-255), however, both systems of knowledge can be presented simultaneously in the same object. The natural sciences *explain* a phenomenon in terms of cause and effect, while human sciences *understand* it in terms of the meaning and the relations of the part and the whole (Dilthey, 1990a, pp. 14-24). Thus once a natural object has been valued with cultural meaning it becomes an object of interest to the human sciences.

In this context a social constructivist perspective toward the dyad “nature-culture” can be grounded, according to which the natural environment is subsumed under the symbolism of humans’ traditions and culture (Descola &

Pálsson, 1996). The work of anthropologists, historians and philosophers over the past several decades show that nature is socially constructed (Cronon, 1996; Descola, 1996). As William Cronon (1996) writes:

[T]his is not to say that nonhuman world is somehow unreal or a mere figment of our imaginations – far from it. But the way we describe and understand that world is so entangled with our own values and assumption that the two can never be fully separated (p. 25).

From such point of view, the very notion of nature is unthinkable without taking into account its existence and understanding in a specific social, economical and cultural context of definite time, space and community/society. It turns into a social and cultural reality, which humans co-construct by their experience and interpretations and which they endow with certain socio-cultural meanings.

The diachronic examination of dynamics of human-nature ratio is a serious scientific challenge which can be object of particular study and it is not the aim of this article. In the next several paragraphs just some aspects are briefly presented in order to explain the terms used in the article and to outline more clearly the approach of the study.

#### *Nature as heritage*

In pre-industrial societies humans and nature were inseverable; if the dichotomy existed it must have been very different from that typical for the modern epoch (Pálsson, 1996). As Gurevich (1972) argues in his study:

[T]he people's dependence on the nature was still so deep-seated that their world-view had many features clearly indicative of their inability to make any sharp distinction between themselves and their natural environment. ... Man's intimate contiguity with the world surrounding

him ruled out any possibility of an aesthetic relationship with nature, or 'disinterested' admiration of it. Being himself an organic part of the world subject to the rhythms of nature, man was hardly able to take a detached view of nature (p. 41;47).

The renaissance rationalism developed the idea of the difference between world created by humans and nature. Humans were not a part of nature; it was only a resource for human's existence and progress. Nature should be understood and controlled. The "otherness" of nature is what allowed it to be known (Bordo, 1987, p. 108). The tools for controlling it were the knowledge of natural laws (it was no accident that the bases of natural sciences were grounded then.)

Since the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the human rule over the nature has gradually lost its significance. As Bokova (2003) notes "today the idea of human progress raises disturbing questions connected to the lack of security and the hesitation of the idea of human progress" (p. 18). As a result the human-nature ratio has been changed. A new ecological attitude has emerged: nature should not be exploited – it must be preserved for future generations. This has added a new meaning of nature – that of heritage.

The perception of nature as heritage is important because it associates natural environment with the concept of cultural heritage defined as:

[...] the legacy of physical and mental artefacts and intangible attributes of a group or society that are inherited from past generations, maintained in the present and bestowed for the benefit of future generations (Czepczyński, 2008, p. 54).

From anthropological point of view, the heritage is not a fixed and unchanging entity but a culturally ascribed and socially constructed process

(Smith, 2006). The heritage is a way of thinking of the past and nowadays it is deeply bounded to the mode of the past's usage as a boundless resource, endlessly open to variety, elaboration, re-invention and social empowerment (Apadurai, 2001, p. 48). In addition, although not each heritage is uniformly desirable, it is widely viewed as an essential source of personal and collective identity and necessary for self-respect.

Referring to natural heritage it implies a sense of responsibility of the natural resources that has been received from the ancestors and which should be left to future generations (Howard & Papayannis, 2007). The process of heritagization indicates the establishment of some kind normative relationship with an element of nature. It is connected to another important process - the aestheticization of nature and its estimation as value. The aestheticization and heritagization are a result of the interaction between regional (or local), national and supra-national actors. They are developing and evolving processes over time (Bajuk Senčar, 2012).

#### *Nature and sustainable development*

Ecological voices turned the public attention to a new idea of sustainable development which takes into account the satisfaction of human needs in correlation with the preservation of nature. The notion of sustainable development was defined for the first time in 1987 in the report "Our Common Future" (also known as the "Brundtland Report", prepared by the United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED). The key element in the definition was the interconnection and interweaving of natural environment and human development (in economical and social sense):

[S]ustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (WCED, 1987).

Since then the term “sustainable development” has come into wide use, especially in policy discourse and in different spheres of economical and social development. One of them is touristic industry and particularly the eco-tourism which in the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century acquired a considerable popularity. The World Conservation Union (IUCN) defines eco-tourism as:

[E]nvironmentally responsible travel and visitation to natural areas, in order to enjoy and appreciate nature (and any accompanying cultural features, both past and present) that promote conservation, have a low visitor impact and provide for beneficially active socio-economic involvement of local peoples (Ceballos-Lascurain, 1993).

Nowadays in different regions of the world the implementation of projects and other initiatives with eco-tourist purpose are seen by central and local authorities, conservation NGOs, local communities, tourist agents etc. as major way of achieving nature conservation goals, improving the well-being of people and generating new business activities (Drumm & Moore, 2002, p. 13). Thus eco-tourism integrates the ideas of nature as value and heritage which should be preserved, and nature as resource for socio-economic local development.

The definition of eco-tourism is also interesting because it turns our attention to the connection between nature and “any accompanying cultural features, both past and present” – an important aspect of perceptions about the

natural environment which is of specific interest in proposed research and which refers to another important term used in the article – landscape.

*Landscape: nature and human (tangible and intangible) influence*

As it was shown above the term “landscape” is a part of the dictionary’s definition of nature. However, the notion of landscape is very polysemantic. In its own narrow meaning the landscape comprises the visible features of an area of land, including the physical elements of landforms such as mountains, hills, water bodies – rivers, lakes, ponds and seas, living elements of land cover including indigenous vegetation etc. This concept of natural pristine landscape became increasingly questioned by the knowledge of human impact on the environment. In the beginning of the 20th century human geographers substantiated facts about the significant human impact on natural environment and introduced the term “cultural landscape” crossing the bridge between the objective and the subjective assessment of an area (Tuan, 1976).

[T]he cultural landscape is fashioned from a natural landscape by a cultural group. Culture is the agent, the natural area is the medium, the cultural landscape is the result (Sauer, 1925).

[A]ny landscape is composed not only of what lies before our eyes but what lies within our heads (Meinig, 1976).

[A] landscape is a cultural image, a pictorial way of representing, structuring or symbolising surroundings (Daniels & Cosgrove, 1988).

In the course of the years the term has become more popular and widespread not only in conservation circles, but also among politicians and policy-makers. During the last decades the term was adopted and used by the World Heritage Committee of UNESCO. The landscapes were included in the Com-

mittee's Operational Guidelines as an option for heritage listing properties that were neither purely natural, nor purely cultural in form (i.e. 'mixed' heritage) and became a part of policies for heritage's preservation and for sustainable development of the Earth (Fowler, 2003).

Distancing myself from its usage in aspect of different policies of conservation, I find the notion of landscape useful tool which encourage an anthropological approach and enables to contextualize the ratio between natural environment, on the one hand, and human tangible or intangible influence over it, on the other hand.

### *Nature and borders*

In this article the term “border” is used referring to the political (state) borders. In the past geographical features such as insuperable mountains, big rivers or seas and oceans were natural barriers separating the human groups. One of the historical methods of drawing borderlines was applying universal laws based namely on such natural geographical features (Pietroszek, 2009); even today in many cases borders coincide with rivers and sea coasts or pass on the mountain ridges. However, very often the political borders run through particular element of nature dividing it between the territories of different states. Such well-known examples in Europe for instance are Lake Geneva, divided between Switzerland and France or the Danube which flows through ten countries (Germany, Austria, Slovakia, Hungary, Croatia, Serbia, Bulgaria, Romania, Moldova, and Ukraine). In such cases the impact on nature and the construction of landscape depends on the respective policies, regulations and practices on either side of the border.

With regard to this, in the article borders are understood as products of the social and political negotiation of space; they frame social and political action and are constructed through institutional and discursive practices at different levels and by different actors (Scott, 2012). Moreover, the sense of a

border and the character of border control can change in the course of time depending on the political, economical and social circumstances. This dynamics of borders is “encircled by trends of looseness and strengthening, closing, opening, defining boundaries and reassessing them, integration and preservation”.<sup>3)</sup> Thus a particular border can be closed and function as a barrier to movement of people, goods, ideas and services between countries; then borderlands became peripheral zones not only in geographical sense, but also in economical and socio-cultural terms. If the institutional and discursive practices change the same border can be transformed into a symbol of cooperation and of common heritage (Laine & Demidov, 2011).

From such point of view bordering space (and nature) is not merely a point of traced and fixed line, it is a social process, contingent on continuous re-imagination and re-interpretation of borders through ideology, discourses, political institutions, attitudes and agency (Van Houtum, 2002; Scott, 2009).

### **Focus and aim of the study**

Deriving from these short terminological notes in the article I examine a definite landscape – the area where Erma River flows. In the course of geological times Erma shaped two big gorges, located only at few kilometres from each other. They are known as the Gorge of Tran and the Gorge of Pogonovo according to the names of nearby settlements. This landscape has evolved, developed and changed over the time. During the centuries long Ottoman government on the Balkans the area was not border in relation to some political entity. In the end of the 19<sup>th</sup>–the beginning of the 20th century this micro-natural region (in geographical terms) shared many common cultural, social and economical characteristics (in anthropological terms). After Russian-Ottoman war and Congress of Berlin in 1878 the area and both gorges were included into the border of the newly-established Bulgarian state. However, thirty years later, in 1919 with the Treaty of Neuilly, this landscape was

divided by the political border – the Gorge of Tran remained in Bulgaria and the Gorge of Poganovo – in Serbia.

During the socialist period the border was totally closed and the borderlands became a very rigorous guarded periphery with limited access. However, this border location of the both gorges was to some extent a cause for a preservation of ecological pure nature, although the human influence and meanings' ascription over the natural object have not interrupted, as I try to show in the article.

After the collapse of the socialist regimes in Eastern and South-eastern Europe and especially within the EU-integration processes, Bulgarian-Serbian border started changing – the border-keeping installations were demolished, the border control was softened. The closed until recently rigorous guarded border became rather a bridge for exchange.

Nowadays both gorges of Erma are located in the administrative frame of the Bulgarian Municipality of Tran and Serbian one – Dimitrovgrad. During the last two decades in the context of the efforts for local development and the policies for encouragement of cross-border co-operation and exchange different initiatives and even joined projects have been developed in both municipalities. Many of these activities are exactly in the sphere of conservation of the natural resources and development of ecological tourism. Despite being divided by the border in the past, today the both Erma's gorges are valued by local authorities and communities as a shared heritage which can foster sustainable development and overcome the insularity and peripheral position.

The main research aim of the article is to study the processes of aestheticization and heritagization of Erma's gorges taking into consideration their location in Bulgarian-Serbian borderlands and to examine the role of the natural heritage in the context of its usages as a significant resource for different local activities and cross-border projects in the sphere of conservation and

ecotourism which pursue sustainable local development on both side of the border.

### **Methodological notes**

The article is mainly based on content analysis of municipal strategies for development, various projects in the domain of conservation and ecotourism, touristic leaflets and booklets, book of local historians, etc. Besides, in the period of 2005-2007 I was a coordinator of the Tourist information centre in the town of Tran and I participated in some of these implemented projects. In result I was in position to have many direct observations and lots of informal conversations with local people, representatives of local administration, and experts of different local and national institutions, NGOs, touristic and conservation organizations on the both sides of the Bulgarian-Serbian border. In the period July 2012 – April 2013 I took an additional advantage to participate as an expert of cultural heritage in the project “Trans-Border Eco-trail”.<sup>4)</sup> I had made a preliminary conversation with representatives of municipal administration in Tran about my interest in research of various activities and practices in border regions, as well as of cross-border cooperation, and we reached an agreement on me using the made observations and gained experience in my ethnological work and studies.

### **The gorges of Erma: aestheticization and heritagization**

Gorges are a type of landform – deep, narrow passages with steep rocky sides formed by running water. They are natural formations given to our perceptions, but as Krastanova (2004, p. 69) points this is not enough in order to ascertain the presence of some remarkable scenery. A very indicative example proposed by her is an excerpt from the Hristo Vakarelski’s (1974) study on folk aesthetics:

[V]azov, for instance, notes the total aesthetic insensitivity of a peasant woman from Kostenets for who the beautiful Kostenets waterfall did not exist, and there was only "hot water", i.e. the bath near to the waterfall (Vakarelski, 1974, p. 625).

This example clearly shows that the waterfall of Kostenets, as well as the gorges of Erma itself are not natural monuments and sights. Such perception is connected to the process of giving a cultural meaning of natural environment, its aestheticization and insertion in the symbolic system of a community or society.

In this context, the earliest description of the Erma's gorge as valuable and remarkable natural sight was made by the famous Bulgarian writer and initiator of Bulgarian touristic movement Aleko Konstantinov. In 1895 he wrote "What? Switzerland?" – short travel notes about his travel to the surroundings of Poganovo. Konstantinov was amazed by the nearby gorge and the beautiful nature which he compared to the nature of Switzerland (Konstantinov, 1963). At that time the Gorge of Poganovo lied within the Bulgarian borders. Approximately at the same time Bulgarian poet and novelist often referred to as "the Patriarch of Bulgarian literature" Ivan Vazov also described in a very poetic way the same gorge:

[O]h, this magic Erma! It is winding between high hills, murmuring and singing; on the right the hill is impaled with gray rocks, torn, ugly, and magnificent. Its peak is lit up by the sun, which from here you do not see. Climb these rocks - gray and chaotically heaped. Go up to the top of the rocks, the crown of the hill. You are sitting on one of them next to grown in the cracks young trees swayed by wind, and you are looking at the charming view at sunset. And you are look-

ing and dreaming, because here only this can be done (Vazov, 1970, p. 249).

As it was noted above, in 1919 the new Bulgarian-Serbian border was established and the Gorge of Poganovo remained in Serbia. Later on, however, the certain fragments of the texts written by Aleko Konstantinov and Ivan Vazov were inputted into the Gorge of Tran and throughout the years were attaining a big significance for local people in the town of Tran. Until recently an inscription “What? Switzerland?” was the first thing the visitors saw arriving to the located near to the Gorge of Tran motel “Zhdreloto” (The Gorge).<sup>5)</sup> The fragments have been cited in all touristic prospects, promotional movies, web-pages etc. about the region, aiming to strengthen the big value and uniqueness of this natural site. Today for the most local people it is beyond any doubt that these fragments were namely written about the Gorge of Tran and they always cite them to tourists and other visitors.

Namely these early literary descriptions, moreover made by the most acknowledged Bulgarian national writers, had a very important meaning and shaped in practise later aesthetic perceptions of this rock formation. In addition photographers started documenting it and the pictures started circulating as postcards in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In result, the Tran’s gorge of Erma gained value of national importance.

The official proclamation of the Gorge of Tran as a natural monument of Bulgaria in 1961 was the next important factor of its valorisation. The notion of natural monument is legally defined as one of the levels of natural conservation. This brings up to the fore something else: a natural monument must be protected and preserved for the upcoming generations, acquiring a meaning of heritage.

The Gorge of Tran became namely such a monument and value for local community. During the socialist period the Gorge became even a main

character of different local stories and legends, popular articles in the local newspapers etc.:

[T]he rocks have taken strange positions with plucked from winds foreheads. The both rocks are gray, they have strips of moisture on their faces, and their pupils are faded from the sun [...] If the sun warms them, the rocks laugh with a broad smile, and if the sun hides, covered by clouds, the stone is angry, pucker theirs eyebrows (Momchilov, 1973, p. 23).

At that time different “legends” arose – invented by local historians they quickly became a part of the local narratives. Nowadays one of them is related by the guide<sup>6)</sup> to the visitors, as well as in different variants can be read in newspapers, booklets, internet forums, etc. The legend associates the formation of the Gorge with the faith of two lovers – Ratza, who descended from a rich family and Rangel, who was a poor orphan. The girl's mother did not approve of the boy and was trying to separate them. The couple decided to keep their love by fleeing to the mountains. When the girl's mother found out about their run away, she laid them under curses. At that moment Ratza and Rangel were overtaken by the awful mater's damnation. Suddenly a great storm arose, accompanied by thunders. The mountain split and the coming torrent of water dragged the lovers' bodies and threw them on two separate banks. Rangel long shouted the name of his beloved without any answer. After the water flowed away the gorge appeared and left Rangel and Ratza divided on the two rocks, between which nowadays the river (mother's tears) flows. Every night when the moon goes down a slim girl's shadow appears on the rock and the rumble of the water in the gorge repeats Rangel's calls.

Nevertheless, until 1989 the Gorge of Tran was situated in a strictly guarded border zone where one could go only with a special safe-conduct.

The region remained industrially undeveloped periphery and many of local population migrated towards nearby bigger industrial town of Pernik and the capital Sofia. Therefore the area was not seen a very appropriate tourist destination.

On the other side of the border the Gorge of Poganovo in Serbia in actual fact was impassable till the 1930 when for the needs of coal mine “Rakita” a narrow-gauge railway track was drilled. The current asphalt road was made during the second half of 1970, when the mine was closed. This area was also peripheral borderlands putted under strong border control and affected by a deep demographic crisis.

### **From natural heritage towards resources of cross-border cooperation and development**

Although after 1989 the border restrictions and control softened, the economical and demographical problems on both sides of the border increased during 1990s. However, in the context of the eco-awareness of the contemporary globalizing world, the local administration and people became aware of the true value of the surrounding preserved nature, which to a certain extent were a result namely of the border location, peripheral position and economic underdevelopment.

In this period the Gorge of Tran became symbol of the town and the municipality, so as a mark of local identity and community’s self-confidence. Its stylized image was included in the municipal emblem. The local people also realized its significance as a potential resource for local development:

[W]hat about Bansko? Here we also can attract tourists. We have what to show them. We have the Gorge. Everybody knows it, who hasn’t heard of it. It is not in Bansko, there is nowhere such site, only here!<sup>7)</sup>

During the last two decades ecotourism and other alternative forms of tourism became increasingly popular in Bulgaria and Serbia. In municipality of Tran the Gorge is the main corner stone of the efforts for development of tourism – this is the economical branch on which the local administration sets its hopes to create means of livelihood for the locals and to bring back some of the departed people. The development of ecological tourism with accent on the “protection of natural monuments and pure natural environment” is the focus of the first Strategy of sustainable development of the Tran’s municipality.<sup>8)</sup> The accomplishment of this strategy “will foster the creation of new work places and will make better the well-being of the local population”.<sup>9)</sup> This quotation in broad outlines reproduces the mentioned above definition of ecotourism.

The local authorities of Tran associate the establishment of integral tourist product namely with the Gorge as a main touristic attraction. It is a base of several municipal projects about development of ecotourism and sustainable local development. In 2002 the Tran eco-trail was constructed.<sup>10)</sup> The Erma’s gorge and another smaller gorge made by the river of Yablanitza (it runs into Erma just on the Bulgarian-Serbian border, close to the divided by the border village of Petachintzi) are the main sites along which the trail passes. According to project’s booklet:

[T]he route of the Tran eco-trail has several options, the longest being 13, 2 km. Its equipment includes six wooden bridges, twelve staircases with hundreds of steps. The route is composed to illustrate both – the landscape and biodiversity in the 600-1000 m attitude zone – low mountain landscape [...] Big variety of trees, bushes and grass species are concentrated in small spaces. The herb diversity is exclusive.<sup>11)</sup>

Simultaneously, the guide narrates to tourist groups various legends (as the mentioned above) or makes notes about curious, but “proven historical facts” – for instance that Celtic artefacts have been discovered around the Erma’s gorge or that the high rocks in antiquity were part of important fortifications.

The construction of the eco-trail was the base for implementation of the project “Tourist-information centre Eco-trail the Gorge of Erma River” (2004-2005).<sup>12)</sup> The tourist-information centre was created with the aim “to unite the interests of local community and the inceptive touristic business and to become the main driving force of sustainable development of tourism and ecotourism in particular”<sup>13)</sup> The longer-term aim is to be created a natural park “Tran Karst” which would include the Gorge and other nearby rock formations.

Nowadays there is not cultural event or project which is not connected somehow to the Gorge of Tran and the pure nature of the region. The annual alpine climbing meet called “Cup of the Tran’s gorge”, has been held there for several years; every year a motorcyclists’ fair is organized on the meadow in front of the Gorge. Near to the Gorge is situated the small Demonstration garden for cultivated herbs “Erma”. In the Museum of Bulgarian Yogurt located 10 km away from the Gorge in the village of Studen izvor one can see an information board devoted to the Gorge of Tran and the features of the natural environment in Tran region where the discoverer of *Lactobacillus Bulgaricus* (which causes the milk fermentation) dr. Stamen Grigorov was born and lived in the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century. In 2012 started the project “Adventure centre of the Gorge of Erma River”<sup>14)</sup> in accordance to which a mountain bike’s track would be set up around the Gorge and some other attractions would be created and managed by a new tourist centre,<sup>15)</sup> built close to the Gorge.

The Gorge of Poganovo in its turn is a main natural site in the recently proclaimed a Special Natural Reserve “Jerma”.<sup>16)</sup> According to a publication of the Institute for Nature Conservation of Serbia:

[T]he reserve is a unique complex of valleys and limestone gorges with impressive cliffs, which are characterized by exceptional floristic and phytocenological diversity and the presence of a large number of endemic, rare and endangered plant and animal species. An outstanding landscape diversity and beauty is expressed by distinguished geomorphological forms, numerous speleological sites and interesting and important hydrographic phenomena and processes [...] The area is rich in extraordinary natural phenomena, but also in many cultural and historical monuments.<sup>17)</sup>

In fact, the medieval Monastery of Poganovo is located nearby the Gorge. An international art pleinair is held every year in August on the mouth of the Gorge and very close to the monastery. A few kilometres away Zvoznačka banja is situated – a village famous for its thermal springs which has been known since Roman times, as well as “Asenovo kale” – a medieval fortress built on the rocks. Along with them there is a big cave called Vetrena dupka, more than 4 km long with numerous galleries, where, according to an interesting popular legend in the 19<sup>th</sup> century the robbed Ottoman treasury was hidden by the band of pop Martin. The robbery took place on the Tzarigradski drum (the road to Istanbul), remains of which can be seen 10 km away from the Gorge.

It is clear that during the last two decades the both gorges have become more important part of the strategic policies’ priorities orientated to conservation of nature and development of the both border municipalities. The new moment is the integration and unification of the particular local efforts by

working out and implementing joined cross-border projects and combined activities in the sphere of nature's protection and development of ecotourism. In these projects both gorges of Erma river have a key role. In this respect, during the 2012-2013 the Tran's municipality, the Dimitrovgrad's municipality and the Institute for Nature Conservation of Serbia realized the project "Cross-border eco-trail". Its main objectives<sup>18)</sup> were: (1) to contribute to the economic development of the cross-border region through development of tourism and tourist attractions; (2) to improve both municipalities capacity to jointly make the preparation and implementation of projects.

In the frame of the project the mentioned Tran eco-trail was reconstructed and a recreation park was built at the Gorge of Tran. The research of natural and cultural values was carried out in the Special Nature Reserve "Jerma", where other new eco-trail with length of 32 km was constructed. For the needs of tourist-information centre an old house was reconstructed in the village of Poganovo. Among the others results the project notes: "increased attractiveness of the region based on preservation of natural resources; improved environment for development of relationships across the border; Number of new partnerships created; increased public awareness regarding sustainable use of regional resources (160 trained residents in both municipalities)."<sup>18)</sup>

All this gives stronger reasons to the local authorities and inhabitants of the borderlands to insist on their decade old idea for establishment of a cross border checkpoint in the divided by the border village of Petachintzi, where the Erma River leaves Bulgaria and enters in Serbia. Thus the both eco-trails would be tied in a real cross-border trail and in opinion of locals this would increase the number of tourists, create new work places and improve the economical and demographical situation in the border region.

## Concluding remarks

The aim of this article was to analyze the natural environment in the context of the dynamics of socio-cultural meanings that people ascribe to it in the present day. The particular case is even more interesting because the natural site and its boundaries do not coincide with the political boundaries, which divide it in two states.

Because of its border position the Erma's gorges remained peripheral regions of Bulgaria and Serbia during socialist times. Under the influence of supra-local and even supranational political, economical, social and cultural processes nowadays the both Gorges of Erma, just because of their border location, acquire a new significance as ecologically preserved natural environment, becoming a valuable natural heritage, which can and should be protected by joint cross-border efforts.

At the same time beside its cultural value as heritage the both gorges begin to gain a significant economical importance – they become a resource by which a cross-border tourist product could be developed. For local administration and people this is an important way to provide sustainable local (and regional) development regardless of and even due to the border existence. Of course, there are numerous instances of conflicting policies at various levels - local, national, Euro-regional, as well as many conflicts of interest among different driving actors (individuals, NGOs, policy- and project-makers). This makes the topic interesting research challenge and opens the way for future studies.

## NOTES

1. <http://www.oed.com/>
2. The German term “Geisteswissenschaften” used by Dilthey encompasses both the humanities and the social sciences, *cf.* Dilthey, 1990a.
3. [http://www.eastbordnet.org/working\\_papers/open/documents/Topaloglou\\_The\\_role\\_and\\_nature\\_of\\_borders\\_090414.pdf](http://www.eastbordnet.org/working_papers/open/documents/Topaloglou_The_role_and_nature_of_borders_090414.pdf)

4. The project (Contract № RD-02-29-244/02.08.2011) was co-funded by EU through the Bulgaria – Serbia IPA Cross-Border Programme.

5. In the beginning of 1990s the motel was privatized. The reconstruction started, but it was not completed and the motel did not work for long.

6. E.C., woman, born in 1989.

7. D.D., male, born in 1964, teacher.

8. The strategy was prepared in the frame of the Project "Sustainable Development of Rural Areas" (2003-2007), funded by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the Bulgarian Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry. Within the project included 11 Bulgarian municipalities. The Municipality of Tran was one of them. The project aimed testing approaches and implementation schemes for participatory rural development in Bulgaria and to accumulate some practical experience necessary for the future implementation of the EU LEADER + Initiative.

9. *Strategy for sustainable development of the municipality of Tran in the sectors of tourism, agriculture and forestry*. Tran, 2003.

10. The eco-trail was built by Bulgarian Association for Rural and Ecological Tourism (BARET) at two stages. The first stage around the Gorge of Erma was financed by the SunShine Tours in 1996. The second part of eco-trail was constructed in the frame of Project № BG 9915-01: "Creating a Regional Tourist Product – Steps Towards the Revival and Sustainable Development of the Tran District", the PHARE Steel and Mining Areas Employment Project (SMAEP).

11. *Tran Eco-trail: touristic booklet*. Bulgarian Association for Rural and Ecological Tourism, 2002.

12. The construction of the Tourist-information centre was the pilot project proposed by the Local Leader Group-Tran and realized in the frame of the Project "Sustainable Development of Rural Areas" (2003-2007), funded by the United Nations Development Programme and the Bulgarian Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry.

13. <http://tranholiday.hit.bg/TIC-Tran.htm>

14. The project (Contract № № 14/313/00055/06. 07. 2012 was funded by the Rural Development Programme 2007-2013, measure 313 “Encouragement of Tourism Activities”, Bulgarian Ministry of Agriculture and Food.

15. The mentioned above tourist centre was built in the central part of Tran. It was closed in the beginning of 2008 – a year after the Project "Sustainable Development of Rural Areas" had finished. The reasons were financial and personnel; the political change in municipality's administration after the local elections in the end of October 2007 also had its influence. The new tourist centre is already situated on the meadow in front of the Gorge. It is a new wooden building constructed in alpine style (!) – the point of local authorities for this architectural decision was to be synchronized with the “mountain landscape”.

16. The name of river in Bulgaria is “Erma”, but in Serbia it is officially called “Jerma”.

17. [http://www.zzps.rs/novo/kontent/stranicy/odnosi\\_s\\_javnoscu\\_dokumenti\\_zavoda/Izvestaj%20o%20radu%20za%202013%20godinu.pdf](http://www.zzps.rs/novo/kontent/stranicy/odnosi_s_javnoscu_dokumenti_zavoda/Izvestaj%20o%20radu%20za%202013%20godinu.pdf)

18. <http://www.ipacbc-bgrs.eu/upload/docs/2013-10/107.pdf>

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