

From the Editors

The cultural heritage of minorities in Central and South-Eastern Europe

In recent years, the category of heritage has become one of the most popular research topics. Gregory J. Ashworth proposed an inspiring theoretical approach in claiming that “heritage is everything that contemporary people choose from the past, which they themselves have created for the present or for the purpose of passing on to future generations” (Ashworth 2015: 94). Heritage is therefore not *everything* we receive from the past, but that which is considered valuable by a given group of people at a given moment. The heritage paradigm, as described by Ashworth, is about moving from the practice of preserving and securing something valuable, such as a building or a custom, to an activity that involves creating value for the present and shaping the future (Ashworth 2015: 23–34). It is therefore necessary to pay attention to the essential elements of the transmission process: i.e., who transmits what, for what reason (in other words, what value justifies the transmission of this particular good), and to whom. Defining and transmitting heritage can therefore be considered a special case within the social communication process which triggers various practices, or “range of activities that include *remembering, commemoration, communicating* and passing on knowledge and memories, asserting and expressing identity and social and cultural values and meanings.” (Smith 2006: 83).

In the case of minority heritage, it is worth considering the distinctive and identity-related dimension of this category. Who are the communicating parties that use positively valued resources from the past? It seems that in the case of a minority group – a notion variously defined, as we will see further on – the clarity of what is communicated, its emotional and symbolic value, are crucial for sustaining the group’s identity and cultivating memory. The group communicates within itself, and heritage becomes a sign of the group, its embodied avatar, seeming to say: “We are here, we come from the past, we have roots and a foundation for our existence!”

If we accept Yuri Lotman's view that culture is the non-hereditary memory of humanity, then we can consider the content of heritage to be transmitters of information or symbolic condensers through which culture is re-produced (Żyłko 2009: 101).

However, the subject matter in question concerns the culture of a specific group, a culture defined by adjectives, as Ulf Hannerz (Hannerz 2006) would say. Just as in the process of communication, where one needs to know the code to read the message, without knowledge of the cultural code the message will remain illegible. In the case of heritage, its symbolic value will be interpretable to those who know the code, the contexts and the semantic value of a given phenomenon. Heritage, therefore, as an important element in the process of social communication, plays a significant role in defining the cohesion of a community and determines the formal (if specified and pre-defined top-down) or informal (if it is created in grassroots everyday culture) scope of the community in question.

Our interest lies in examining the role which heritage plays in the case of specific respective communities, namely minority groups. In this setting, although heritage is an autonomous element of the cultural landscape, it does not function in isolation but in a network of dynamic relations with the majority culture – it becomes an area of negotiation and tension where various strategies are implemented within identity politics: from affirmation through essentializing or marginalization. An example of how heritage is politically instrumentalized is the myth of “colorful” Vojvodina used in socialist Yugoslavia to support the idea of brotherhood and unity. In the opening article, Patrycjusz Pająk analyses the documentary film *Zdravi ljudi za razonodu* (*Healthy People for Fun*), in which director Karpo Godina ironically deconstructs the idyllic image of a harmonious multi-ethnic community, while offering a unique kind of aesthetic experience that eludes unambiguous ideological subordination.

Any minority wishing to emphasize its status and assert its right to autonomy (be it identity-related, cultural, or, as is often the case, legal) must demonstrate their right to separateness. The strongest argument is usually cultural distinctiveness, related to symbols, customs and traditions, and language. Language and the symbolic sphere, encoded in various artifacts, are particularly important negotiation assets that testify to the special status and uniqueness of a given group within the broader social field. Elites

are therefore engaged in the production of identity narratives for the given minority, not unlike in majority groups, defining the content which can be passed on to future generations as a valuable part of the past that testifies to their unique identity. This trend can be seen in the efforts taken to codify the language of Croats from the Austrian province of Burgenland (Gradišćanski Hrvati), for whom the standardization of the language and its teaching in schools was intended to safeguard their distinctiveness and guarantee its transmission across generations, as described by Janusz Szablewski. The language in its specific form – different from the Croatian standard – became a key element of this group's heritage, one which marks a double minority: against the German-speaking majority and the Croatian language standard. Marzena Maciulewicz presents the folk oral tradition as the heritage of Balkan cultures and element of the self-identification processes among the Gorani – a minority group inhabiting the region divided by the borders of Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia. A comparative analysis of the Goran variant of the folk ballad with the wandering topos of the “walled-up woman” (*Zid zidale kula trojca braća*) and of the activity of local intellectual elites and folklore collectors, reveals the tensions between the complex identity of the inhabitants of Gora and the dominant cultures that incorporate the region's creativity into their own national traditions.

Heritage, as posited by Ashworth, is oriented towards the present and the future. However, it is the research filter and description that identifies the specific mechanisms of cultural practices as heritage. It is therefore necessary to prove that these practices help form the group in question so as to stand out from others and function as a specific communicative/cultural community within a certain whole, to consider it in terms of conscious shaping of heritage based on a historical and ethnographic description. Very often only contemporary efforts to revive dying practices and present them as local traditions that fall within the trend of protecting heritage which serves as basis to distinguish the minority group, a local culture distinct from the all-national culture. A result of long-term grassroots communication practices, shaped in the multi-layered borderland space, are local variants of speech in Podlachia (Podlasie) today. Gabriela Augustyniak-Żmuda addresses the issue of ethnolinguistic vitality in this region, recognizing in it a space for identity negotiation; here, speaking “in

one's own way" functions not only as a means of everyday communication in the private sphere, but also as a medium for articulating the experience of the local community, a tool of resistance to the standards imposed by global media or the education system, and carrier of intergenerational memory.

Language as an important example of intangible heritage and a repository of cultural values in the context of bilingual emigration is also highlighted by Yordanka Ilieva–Cygan who reconstructs the situation of the Bulgarian language inherited in Poland and discusses strategies for transmitting the mother tongue as a second language. In this case, Polish is the dominant language, while Bulgarian, as a heritage language, is transmitted across generations via immediate family (mainly by parents). The issue of linguistic heritage is also addressed by Sara Mićkec in an analysis of bilingualism in the Catholic Upper Lusatian community in Saxony, which sheds light on the phenomenon of transferring the responsibility for transmitting the Upper Lusatian language, onto the family. In a German-speaking majority environment, the Church proves to be a notable institution that supports mechanisms for maintaining linguistic traditions. Both authors of texts on bilingualism emphasize the importance of language as a vehicle for identity and local solidarity, the role of programmatic solutions and language policies, as well as the need to raise awareness on the transmission of linguistic heritage in the context of globalization and growing pressure from dominant languages.

It is interesting to note that in most articles gathered herein, the issue of language plays a prominent role. It is language that gains significance as an element of heritage in itself, as a sign of distinctiveness of a given minority community, and as a tool for maintaining the community and the boundaries of its separateness. In the case of Podlachia, Upper Lusatia, and the Croats of Burgenland, language becomes the subject of protective measures, gaining a special status as a common good, and not just a quasi-transparent tool of communication. For a significant proportion of Bulgarian families in Poland, the inherited language takes on special significance as a marker not only of individual distinction, but above all as a sign of belonging. In this case, too, it is (or should be) subject to special measures aimed at strengthening its knowledge and use. Minority heritage therefore requires special care and attention so as to ensure that it is

preserved and can be passed on. Marzena Maciulewicz highlights an interesting phenomenon: disputes over the attribution of a fixed name to the language spoken by the Gorani people illustrate the difficulty of placing their traditions on the map of majority identities; an analysis of songs in their cultural contexts reinforces the argument for Gorani distinctiveness.

As exemplified by the handful of case studies included in this issue, minorities are constantly striving towards developing mechanisms of cohesion, and defining heritage is an important strategy in the process of group-building. However, it is always a matter of choice and effort undertaken by local activists or professionals. Minority heritage requires attention from group members: the necessity of continuous work in preserving and promoting distinct practices is particularly laid evident in the texts authored by Ilieva–Cygan and Mičkec. In Pająk's article, on the other hand, the very idea of categorization of culture is clearly questioned; posing the question of the right level at which to set our observational and definitional apparatus – where to look for minorities. It may seem that the present collection confirms the structural, voluntary dimension of *heritage* as a category, as well as its process-based nature related to practice and action.

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