



Visiting the Margins.

INnovative **CUL**tural **ToU**ris**M** in European peripheries

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Pilot 8: Vjosa valley, the shared river

INNOVATION FACTSHEET

Version 2- 2024/05

CONTEXT

The pilot area of the **Upper Vjosa valley** is situated in the southeast of Albania, close to the border region with Greece. The Vjosa River, considered as one of the Europe's last living wild rivers, flows from the Pindos Mountain to the southeast and drains into Adriatic Sea in the northwest. Flanking the meandering route of the river extends a terrain of unspoiled beauty with river terraces, hill slopes rich in Mediterranean vegetation, and high mountain massifs of forests, waters and extensive prominent pastures. The flych-formed hill slopes along the river are home to a number of small traditional villages and one historical central place, the town of Përmet, which expands downwards into the lower river terraces.

The environs of the valley have historically sustained the development of arable and pastoral economies. However, over the recent years, tourism has emerged as a new and steadily expanding sector, significantly influencing the economy of the region.

The landscape characteristics of the pilot have appealed a nature-based tourism with outdoor activities, such as hiking, climbing, rafting, camping, horseback riding, and etc., becoming some of the most attractive tourist offerings.

Alongside with the natural ecosystem resources, the valley boasts an abundance of cultural heritage values integrated within the revered mountainous landscape. However, cultural heritage resources remains as yet the least explored tourist attractions in the Vjosa valley.

The focus of the pilot during the **INCULTUM** project is to present a concept of 'inclusive tourism' and 'cross-cultural tourism' where tourists are offered the option not only to enjoy the natural attractions, but also to experience the tangible and intangible cultural components of the area, involving active participation and interaction with local communities.

In this context, we have identified the cultural heritage of the Vlach minority as the main product of the **INCULTUM innovative actions**, aiming at **recording, revitalizing** and **promoting** the currently **endangered cultural heritage** values of the **Vlachs**.

The action includes a ground-up initiative that focuses on the following objectives:

- Rediscover and record the cultural heritage of the Vlach minority.
- Reactivate, promote and disseminate their tangible and intangible cultural values.
- Develop a collective self- awareness and self-understanding of the Vlach heritage.

REDISCOVER THE CULTURAL HERITAGE OF THE VLACH MINORITY.

Who are the Vlachs?

The Vlachs, which are known to themselves as Arāmān/Rāmān, are an ethnolinguistic group that have historically inhabited swathes of the Balkans territory. They are distinguished by their language, which is a dialect derived from Latin, and by their ways of living, based primarily on long-distance seasonal pastoral transhumance. The historical sources have recorded the presence of Vlach people in the Balkans as early as the 11th century. There is scant historical information that suggest for a systematic ethnic discrimination of Vlachs in the medieval times, which continued during the Ottoman Empire, triggered also by the nationalism and the formation of national states.

The Vlachs in Albania suffered more severely after the WWII, when the establishment of nationalist communist regime banned the transhumance movement and their culture was largely rejected.

The Upper Vjosa valley was one of the main routes used during Vlachs seasonal nomadic movements from winter pastures in the Ionian coast, towards the summer pastures in the mountain areas of south-east Albania. Very often, small groups of Vlach families built their seasonal summer encampment in the mountainous area of the Vjosa valley. During the Medieval era, Vlach families began to permanently settle in the mountain areas to the east of the Upper Vjosa valley, ultimately losing their nomadic aspect of life, but not the language. A larger Vlach settling in the valley occurred after the 50's of the last century, and several families were permanently set in villages of the valley.



Vlachs nomadic journey early 20th cent.



Vlach family in the early 20th cent.

Identify and record the potential of tourism attractiveness of Vlach culture.

The Vlachs have endured long-lasting historical discrimination and intimidation, which has consequently hindered the preservation and appreciation of the symbolic aspects of their culture. Although lately in Albania they are declared a national minority¹, various elements of their culture, such as past traditions, customs, rituals and material culture, remain largely unknown. Therefore, the initial action undertaken by CeRPHAAL during the INCULTUM project in the Vjosa valley was an ethnographic enquiry aimed at recording these lost symbolic aspects of Vlachs culture. This included several interviews conducted with elderly Vlachs of the valley, enabling the recording and mapping the historical nomadic itineraries, as well as the identification of the seasonal summer and winter settlements along the landscape of the south-east Albania.

Other important elements of future touristic interest were also recorded, including the housing and their everyday aspect of the nomadic life.

¹ Law number 96/2017, article 3, point 2, For the protection of national minorities in the Republic of Albania.

Additionally, several free-flowing encounters held with local tourism stakeholders and policymaking institutions, aimed at introducing the possible potentials of Vlach culture for generating new tourism products.

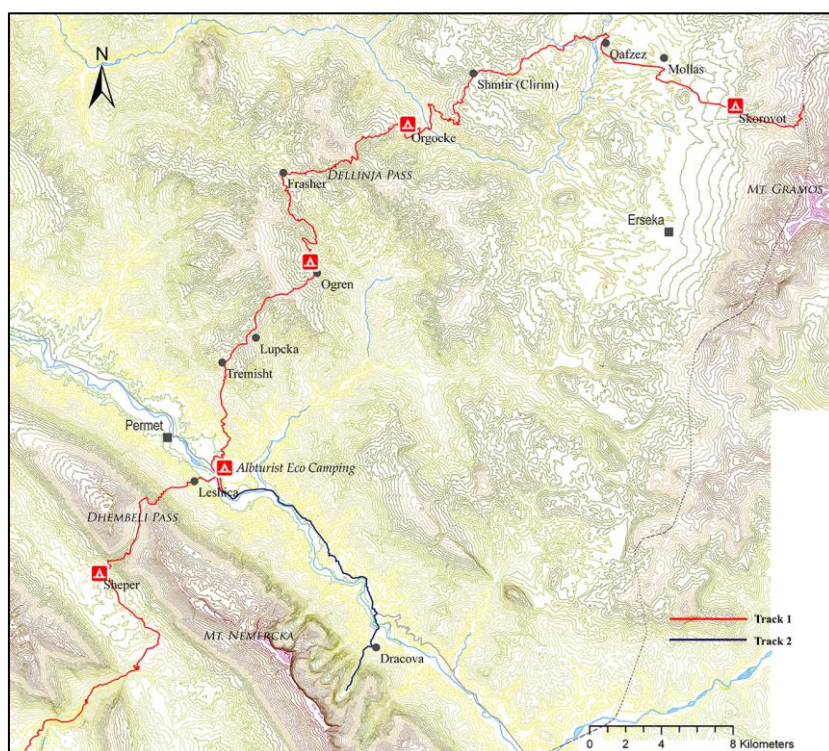
REACTIVATE, PROMOTE AND DISSEMINATE THE CULTURAL HERITAGE OF THE VLACHS.

The revival and presentation of a particular cultural heritage aspect of a region involves, among others, the creation of historic interpretation and storytelling, as a mode that connect people to the legacy of their past and provokes tourist curiosity for a particular region. In the case of the Vlachs, we developed past narratives that evolves around the historic transhumant routes and their way of life, including their authentic dwelling.

Cultural routes that follow the historical transhumance movement

The Upper Vjosa valley was an important route during the annual Vlach nomadic movements, often making the surrounding mountains territories home to their seasonal summer encampments.

Through frequent meetings and detailed interviews with the elderly Vlachs of the valley, we were able to create a dataset of the past nomadic itineraries. Based on these data a hiking trial that follows the historical route of transhumance was designed in the first year of the project. The hiking trail was evaluated and GPS recorded by team members along with local young volunteers in the spring of 2022. It begins to the west of the valley in the region of Zagoria and extends all the way to the Mountain Gramos on the Greek border.



Hiking trails along the Vlach transhumant route

This first itinerary spans approximately 90 km and can last up to 5 days. It goes along rural areas boasting unspoiled natural beauty and rich historical heritage, including villages of unique vernacular architecture, medieval monuments, archaeological sites, and more. These areas are often overlooked by traditional tourism, making this trail not only a means of preserving the surrounding cultural resources but also an opportunity for local communities to benefit economically.

The second hiking trail was designed in May 2023 as an alternative path diverging from the main historic route of the Vlach. It spans around 4 km and, unlike the first trail, offers a short daily walking alternative with numerous points of interest to explore along the way.

Both itineraries are presented as digital online maps on the *wikiloc* platform.² The online accessibility of the routes is a crucial tool for disseminating information to a wide audience and for providing constant monitoring of user behaviour.

Materializing Past Memories through the Reconstruction of a Vlach Dwelling Site – the *Kalive*

The difficult historical journey of the Vlachs has posed challenges for the survival and preservation of any standing physical object as representative of their past. To bring to life and materialize the surviving memory of the Vlachs in valley and simultaneously present and validate the physical aspects of their past, a traditional dwelling was reconstructed along the Vlachs' historical nomadic route. This dwelling site offers the public an opportunity to connect with the past and reveal a previously unknown narratives of the Vlach history. The dwelling site consists of an authentic Vlach nomadic dwelling type – the *kalive*, which is a simple circular structure built of wood and has a thatched roofing. It was reconstructed in July 2022, at a camping site that is located at the outskirts of the town of Përmet, and which at present is a popular destination for both foreigner and domestic tourists. This location holds significance as it aligns with one of the Vlachs temporary daily camps established during their seasonal transhumance movements between summer and winter pastures. The dwelling exemplifies the living history of the Vlachs, preserved through the detailed memory retained by those individuals who once lived in pastoral transhumant societies across the landscape of the Upper Vjosa valley. It was constructed using past traditional techniques and locally sourced materials.



During the reconstruction of the kalive



The final view of the dwelling site

The construction process engaged elderly Vlach builders, researchers, young specialists, and local volunteers, facilitating the transfer of past knowledge to the new generation. It employed a multidisciplinary approach combining cultural memory, experimental reconstruction, and tourism.

Further activities were undertaken during the spring of 2023 with the aim of arranging the interiors of the dwelling as a museum. This involved displaying domestic old furniture and tools that were used by the Vlachs in the past.

Additionally, an interpretation panel was designed and displayed at the dwelling site, featuring a brief narrative of the Vlachs history along with a map highlighting their main

² <https://www.wikiloc.com/hiking-trails/vlachs-transhumance-route-108659966>;
<https://www.wikiloc.com/hiking-trails/walking-with-the-vlachs-hiking-trail-from-the-village-of-dracova-up-to-the-mount-nemercka-135792697>

transhumance route. The use of dynamic QR code generators highlighted in the touristic panel provides quick access to the online platform on Wikiloc allowing visitors to navigate and download the trail.

Developing promotional and dissemination resources

The concept of Vlach minority heritage and the related products developed during the INCULTUM project in the Vjosa valley represent a novel innovative addition to the tourism industry. Therefore, the project team paid particular attention to developing tools that would facilitate the promotion of this innovation product as integral part of the diverse cultural heritage resources embodied in the mountainous landscape of the region.



In alignment with this goal, the brochure *‘Walking with the Vlach: Hikes in the mountains of the Vjosa valley’* was designed with the intention of introducing the reader to the history of the Vlach and their historical significance in the territory of the Vjosa valley.

This brochure also serves as a guide to the newly designed nomadic routes, while highlighting other cultural landmarks found along these historical pathways. A second brochure *‘Përmet: A guide to the city and its surroundings’* was dedicated to introducing, for the first time to the public, some of the area’s overlooked and neglected heritage points of interest, such as the endangered military heritage from the Second World War and the Communist Period. These materials are accompanied by easy-to-read maps, brief explanatory texts, images, and QR codes that provide links to online digital sources.

Particular attention was also given to presenting and introducing these promotional materials to heritage specialists, local tour guides and other tourism stakeholders in the pilot area, by organizing workshops and in-person meeting.

DEVELOP A COLLECTIVE SELF- AWARENESS AND SELF-UNDERSTANDING OF THE VLACH HERITAGE

The Vlachs, as a historically marginalized and stigmatized community, have remained largely unnoticed and unrecognized both locally and nationally in terms of their cultural heritage.

Therefore, through a foreground initiative, attempts have been made towards the institutionalization of Vlach heritage. This effort includes a series of local encounters aiming at establishing familiarization to this devalued culture and creating social cohesion and a sense of solidarity in the community.

These engagements brought together the Vlachs, other members of community, researcher, and local stakeholder, stimulating constructive dialogues about the future of Vlachs culture. Such gatherings provided a familiar environment that resulted to be a mutual learning process. While, on the one hand, they provided the participants with historical narratives and novel insights into Vlach cultural heritage, the involvement of researches, on the other hand, provided the Vlach community with the opportunity to rediscover a new historical narrative of their past that ultimately stimulated awareness and self-appreciation for their history.

As of July 2022, CeRPHAAL project team, in collaboration with the Municipality of Përmet, began organizing a festival of events, called ‘the Vlachs Open Days’ aimed at bringing together a wider community of local people, researcher, and stakeholder, and offering the opportunity to present, discuss and disseminate aspects of Vlach culture.



During the ‘Vlach Open Days’ in summer 2023

This event was repeated in the summer of 2023, expanded in time and with a wider participation. During these days, a number of dynamic cross-cultural activities took place, showcasing aspects of Vlach past life, such as the traditional wool processing and weaving demonstrated by Vlach women at the *kalive* dwelling site. Additionally, a digital photo documentary, resulting from extensive archival work, was presented under the title ‘*The Vlachs: a short history as seen through the lens of photography*’. This was complemented by a film documentary featuring key moments in the history of the Vlachs in Albania prior to the 1970s. The success of this initiative led to its potential recognition as an annual festival to be organized by the Municipality of Përmet and supported by CeRPHAAL during its initial years. Such agreement is an important achievement for the pilot in Albania as it may lead towards the future institutionalization of a Vlach heritage in the Vjosa valley.