

The End of the Landscape

The summer of 2026 passed as yet another one of the hottest on record. Extreme heat, droughts, low river levels, wildfires—all of this is now behind us, and it seems as though we have all breathed a sigh of relief and can return to our lives, to our homes, our jobs, schools, and hopes. But can we? We would rather believe that these were merely natural disasters that happened to us by chance, shook us up, and will not happen again. It is difficult for us to take responsibility and accept that these events are not mere accidents, but may be manifestations of the consequences of our actions and behaviour over the past two centuries. Eleven years ago, the whole world sat down at one Paris table and agreed that a radical transformation of the global economy and society was urgently needed if planet Earth was to survive the twenty-first century. From the Paris Agreement on climate change (2015)¹, the European Green Deal (2019)², the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans and the Guidelines for its Implementation adopted through the Sofia Declaration (2020)³, the Action Plan for the Implementation of the Green Agenda 2021–2030 (2021), followed by the adoption of Integrated National Energy and Climate Plans by the signatories of the Sofia Declaration (2021–2024), all the way to the Revised Action Plan for the Implementation of the Sofia Declaration on the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans 2025–2030⁴, it seems that the green transition in the Balkans, and the idea of saving the planet, have barely moved from where they started. We agreed, signed, promised, shook hands—and then what?

The European Green Deal has changed the position of coal-fired power plants in the Western Balkans from “sources of energy sovereignty” into an environmental and economic burden. What once represented a promise of collective prosperity has today become an environmental threat. In a world where progress is measured exclusively through the accumulation of profit, the crisis is deepened by

¹ Paris Agreement on climate change was adopted on 12 December 2015 at the 21st UN Climate Change Conference (COP21) in Paris and officially entered into force on 4 November 2016. Almost all countries in the world are parties to the agreement, committing themselves to limiting the increase in the global average temperature to well below 2°C above pre-industrial levels, while pursuing efforts to limit the increase to 1.5°C, as well as to reducing greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions as soon as possible and achieving carbon neutrality in the second half of the century.

² The European Green Deal was presented by the European Commission on 11 December 2019. Its main objectives include climate neutrality by 2050; making Europe the first climate-neutral continent; reducing emissions by at least 55% by 2030 compared with 1990 levels; and achieving economic growth without exhausting resources through the transition to a circular economy, the modernisation of industry and the protection of biodiversity, while creating new green jobs.

³ The Green Agenda for the Western Balkans is a regional strategy adopted in 2020 in Sofia, through which the countries of the region committed themselves to achieving climate neutrality by 2050. It emerged from the European Green Deal in order to align the region’s economies with European Union rules, standards, and the *acquis*. The Sofia Declaration was signed by the six Western Balkan economies: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia. North Macedonia and Albania were among the first to adopt their Integrated National Energy and Climate Plans (2021), followed by Serbia in 2024 and Montenegro in 2025. These plans were revised following strong criticism and demands that they contain precise and accurate measures rather than merely lists of aspirations and copied targets from the Green Agenda. Bosnia and Herzegovina remains a special case, as it still does not have an adopted Integrated National Energy and Climate Plan.

⁴ The Revised Action Plan for the Implementation of the Sofia Declaration on the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans 2025–2030 was adopted in mid-October 2025 at the Ministerial Meeting in Dubrovnik. With this framework, the European Union introduced a powerful new mechanism to ensure that Western Balkan countries fulfil their environmental commitments. Crucially, the Revised Action Plan was structurally linked to the Growth Plan for the Western Balkans, tying reform progress to a €6 billion financial instrument designed to support the implementation of the Sofia Declaration. After a decade during which regional authorities failed to adequately address an unfolding environmental catastrophe, the European Union ultimately opted for strict financial conditionality.

the fact that electricity generated from coal no longer has an export future, while the survival of large energy systems depends on the construction of alternative generation capacity based on wind and solar power. The climate and ecological crisis expose the limits of the modernist concept of linear progress.

It is at this point, at the beginning of the green transition, that Matteo Trevisan begins his journey across the Western Balkans, visiting mines, coal power plants, towns and settlements that have grown around them, as well as the homes of people whose lives are inextricably linked to industrial facilities that simultaneously provide their livelihoods and threaten their existence. Between 2022 and 2025, he visited and photographed some of the largest industrial polluters in the region and in Europe, as well as some of the most environmentally vulnerable settlements directly affected by the consequences of mining and industrial production in coal power plants and factories. His series *More Necessary than the Sun* records landscapes that once represented the promise of industrial progress and now bear witness to its consequences. Through his photographs, miners, workers, and residents of the settlements surrounding industrial sites are revealed as key witnesses to a broader ecological, social, and health crisis."

The series depicts the areas surrounding Tuzla, Zenica, Lazarevac, Obrenovac, Smederevo, Bor, Kostolac, Majdanpek and Požarevac. Although geographically distant, these landscapes resemble one another; each small story fits into a wider network that outlines a geography of devastation and sorrow. Outdated industrial facilities, coal power plants whose time has run out but which continue to pollute, open-pit mines devouring the land and settlements, people risking their lives in order to remain alive. Different places, the same landscape of consequences.

Industrial modernism was founded on faith in progress, science and technological development, but also on the assumption that nature represented an almost unlimited resource that could be rationally controlled and placed at the service of human advancement. The image of great chimneys billowing thick clouds of smoke was perceived as a romantic symbol of progress and power, rather than as pollution and a threat. Modern industrial society built its system on the imperative of constant economic growth, in the name of progress and a better future for all.

In socialist Yugoslavia, electrification and the construction of hydroelectric and coal-fired power plants were among the main drivers of social transformation, but also a promise of prosperity and a better future. The electricity produced and the factories built were part of a collective project of modernisation and emancipation, an infrastructure intended to uplift society as a whole. Industrial facilities became symbols of the strength of a country that was rising from the ashes of war to become a modern industrial power.

With the dissolution of Yugoslavia, the Western Balkans entered a different phase of modernisation. Energy was no longer part of a broader project of social transformation, but increasingly became a commodity traded on the global market and an instrument of economic and political power. Industrial giants built during the socialist period became state-owned enterprises exposed to privatisation, restructuring and political control. At the same time, the weakened economies of the newly formed states increasingly struggled to finance large infrastructure projects independently and became ever more dependent on foreign capital and loans. The question of energy therefore came to concern not only the production and consumption of electricity, but also the relationship between the state, the market, capital and political power. In this context, the existing energy system has proved remarkably

resilient. Coal power plants, mines and entire cities that have depended on them for decades are not simply infrastructure that can easily be replaced with something new. They have become part of economic interests, political structures, local communities and everyday life. For this reason, decarbonisation in the Western Balkans is not taking place merely as a technical transition from one energy source to another, but as a conflict between different interests and visions of the future.

Within this series, *No Past to Return* stands out. The work was created in the mining area around Bor, one of the region's most important centres of copper extraction, managed by a Chinese company. In Bor and the surrounding villages, Trevisan records the consequences of the intensive expansion of the mining industry on the landscape, the environment, as well as the lives of people who have lived in this area for generations. Under the pressure of capital and the logic of extraction, residents are confronted with the disappearance of their land, homes, and sites of family memory. The expansion of the mine by the Chinese corporation Zijin is thus changing not only the physical appearance of the landscape, but also disrupting the continuity of life within communities deeply rooted in this place. Forced or inevitable displacement entails leaving homes behind, but also losing places where traces of family history and memory have been preserved.

The black-and-white photographs of abandoned houses, captured at night with a flash, further intensify the sense of unease and estrangement. Deprived of their inhabitants, these houses appear almost like sets after some invisible event—spaces that still preserve traces of life, but can no longer restore it. In this sense, *No Past to Return* is not only a record of a devastated landscape, but also of a rupture in continuity: of a space in which the past is no longer a place to which one can return.

Trevisan's work can also be considered within the tradition of the photographic essay—a mode of storytelling and thinking constructed through sequences, scenes and relationships between images. As Allan Sekula observes, photographs are in themselves “fragmentary and incomplete utterances”⁵; their meaning emerges through the juxtaposition of images, text, archival material, documents, and modes of presentation.

Trevisan's photographic essay emerges at a moment when coal landscapes cease to be merely industrial infrastructure and become sites where climate policies, energy security, geopolitical interests and the everyday lives of local communities intersect. This is precisely why a single photograph is insufficient; only a sequence of interconnected images, archival materials, and human stories allows us to grasp what Fredric Jameson calls “cognitive mapping.” Trevisan's photographs do not attempt to explain extractivism through a single representative image. On the contrary, they operate on the premise that contemporary energy and economic processes cannot be understood from a single perspective. Through landscapes, portraits, medical images, and family archives, his photographic essay becomes a map of extractivism in the Balkans. He reconstructs the larger story from below—from a series of local experiences—and thus makes visible the structures that produce those stories. Together, these sequences, carrying small narratives and human stories, begin to speak of energy, capital, colonial relations, ecology, labour, and geopolitics.

⁵ Allan Sekula, *Photography Between Labour and Capital*, in *Mining Photographs and Other Pictures 1948–1968*, The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada, 1983.

Matteo constructs a larger story about labour, capital and the transformation of the landscape—about a system that grounds its development on the exploitation of natural and human resources, and then confronts the catastrophic consequences of that process. In Trevisan's work, this principle allows photographs from Kostolac, Bor, Tuzla, Kolubara, Zenica, Obilić, Smederevo, and Majdanpek to become more than separate local stories; they become parts of a broader network. These photographs function as nodes connecting energy, extraction, mining, ecology, politics and history, creating a wider map of life. In this sense, they do not illustrate global capitalism, but attempt to make it imaginable through concrete places and lives.

And although his photographs may seem to depict how life persists within a devastated landscape, behind the photographs lies a much more important question: What does life mean after irreversible change? These landscapes have been irreversibly transformed, just as the lives of the communities that once lived in them cannot be restored to what they once were. In Matteo's photographs, the landscape becomes an archive: it preserves visible traces of the economy, politics, labour, extraction, and the lives of the communities built around these systems.

Industrialisation and electrification did not merely change the modes of production; they reconfigured how society organised time, space, and everyday life. The factory, mass production, standardisation, and access to electricity became the material infrastructure of modernity and industrial capitalism. Trevisan photographs the landscapes of this very system, but from the perspective of its consequences—the end of the landscape of progress.

The paradox of his work becomes particularly visible at the moment of the green transition. From a critical perspective, the green transition can also be understood as a new promise that economic growth can continue while simultaneously reducing pressure on nature. The shift from oil and coal to solar, hydropower, wind, and the inevitable lithium is presented as a new path towards the preservation of life, even though it is clear that the green transition itself depends on the exploitation of new raw materials and new territories.

At the same time, the countries of the Western Balkans are expected to abandon a development model based on fossil fuels while remaining part of a global economic system based on growth, competitiveness, and energy consumption. The source of energy is changing, but not necessarily the logic that determines how much energy we produce, for whom, and for what purpose. In the places Trevisan photographs, therefore, what is being negotiated is not only the future of energy, but also the future of entire communities that are entering the green transition carrying the burden of the previous development model. His essay, ultimately raises the question of what kind of future we want to produce and, perhaps more importantly, who pays the price of the transition towards a cleaner Europe?

Mines, coal power plants, and industrial cities are not merely remnants of an outdated system; they are spaces in which the past, the present and the promised future intersect. Perhaps this is why the green transition does not mark the end of the story of modernism, but rather the beginning of a new phase—one in which the limits of nature are acknowledged in principle, yet the system seeks to overcome them through new technologies, markets, and raw materials.

Senka Ristivojević