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GREEN ACTS: GLOBAL POLITICS VS LOCAL CRISES (A CASE STUDY IN TWO BULGARIAN VILLAGES)

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Abstract. As the EU implements measures to tackle the climate emergency on a continental scale, national governmental and economic actors haste to claim better positions in an eco-friendly low carbon market of goods and resources. With this gradual change, surprising factors hinder local community support for the decarbonized promised future. In order to understand what inspires rural communities to contest and negate green economic action, I investigate a case of local unrest against the erection of an RES plant on public non-arable agricultural land. Drawing upon in-depth interviews with local villagers, rebelling against the photovoltaic plant and municipal representatives, deciding the fate of the land, I outline three main axes of exclusion. These, I argue, fuel the opposition to the EU’s green acts: the symbolic exclusion of differing types of greenness (natural vs political); the geopolitical political exclusion of the local human for the benefit of the global one; the local exclusion, depriving some citizens of legitimate instruments for social claims-making.

Keywords: local contestation; social resilience; civic representation; multi-level exclusion; rural lifestyles

Introduction

As the climate crisis slowly but surely develops into a global climate emergency, governments and geopolitical actors across the world speed up to implement measures aimed at tackling the effect of human activity upon the planet’s ecosystems. The most notable example of such preventative (and declaratively restorative) measure is the European Green Deal. Defined by the European Council as “a package of policy initiatives, which aims to set the EU on the path to a green transition, with the ultimate goal of reaching climate neutrality by 2050” (Council of Europe 2024) the Green Deal’s most up-to-date package, known as the “Fit for 55” comprises 19 interlinked laws, aimed at a holistic approach to equip the EU member states’ policies in all relevant sectors to meet the carbon neutrality goal. Furthermore, the EU has been diligent in integrating its green agenda as a key pillar in all of its future grand acts (including most recently, but not limited to the

Recovery and Resilience Strategy). However, as all-encompassing as they may be, the EU's guidelines on member's commitment to carbon neutrality serve mostly the purpose of guiding governments (national and local) as to how they should go about reforming and transitioning to a cleaner greener state of existence. The execution of the efforts towards achieving this ideal are left upon lower executive levels – the lower the level, the more concrete (practical) the acts and the more challenging their coming to fruition. In this article, I examine a specific case which illuminates the everyday borne challenges to the EU's (and global) aspirations for big moves and economic (specifically energy) revolution with the aim of understanding why the idealized utopian green world appears more easily (even if not even declared as easy at all) achievable and more clear-cut and unquestionably desirable than its particular manifestations on a local level.

As with all big policy the global efforts to revolutionize the world (and all of its sectors) have been criticized for overlooking the needs and challenges faced by smaller communities. Research has demonstrated how indigenous communities are more severely influenced by climate change itself (Abate & Kronk 2013; Vinyeta et al. 2016) despite their contributing to pollution disproportionately less (ibid). Furthermore, the particular positionality of indigenous or local communities on climate change has been linked to their more grounded or “nature-based livelihoods” (Ambrosio-Albala & Delegado-Serrano 2018), which appear to also be more community-based. Traditionally, the research into the role of indigenous people has centered on the discovery of the unique ways, in which their practical knowledge and history of managing natural resources could provide example in the grounding of climate-management efforts (see Etchart 2017; Galappaththi et al. 2021). It has also explicated a key characteristic of local communities' livelihoods, which are so intricately linked to nature and so deeply intertwined with the world's potential to tackle climate change – their perception of their place in the world (their worldviews) and of the world's impact and relation on their lifestyles and lives. Research has not only demonstrated but sought ways to incorporate local people's “longstanding social or cultural issues” into climate change research (Cajete 2020). Local indigenous people's particular precarity could be both created or deepened by climate change and the measures set in place to address it, hastened by disparities in scale, knowledge and power (Brugnach et al. 2017; Rahman and Alam 2016). These research efforts have managed to unquestionably highlight an intuitive, yet often neglected conclusion – in order for climate change action to be either successful or at least in fact implemented at all, the active inclusion and support from local people must be sought. This requires an understanding of these people's relationships with nature (literally in terms of resource utilization and symbolically in terms of historical intertwinement of ideas and lifestyles), as this relationship could potentially flourish in a grounded approach to small-scale enforcement of global ideals. By employing the case study approach on one such instance of

(an attempted) utilization of local natural resource in a small-scale economic energy-related act, I also demonstrate that key to local support is not only the community relationship with nature, but also its relationship with multiple levels of government and its attitude towards its place in a global world. In order to discover what could be the best conditions for the EU's green agenda to be implemented on a small local scale, I turn my gaze to a case where it has been strongly rejected by local villagers in Bulgaria. Understanding the causes for resistance allows me to pinpoint the complex forces behind local rejection of global policies and to diagnose the key factors shaping the relationship between EU policies and Bulgarian villagers.

The Case: An Attempt to build a RES plan in the lands of the villages of Knijovnik and Dolno Voyvodino

In July of 2020 an investment intent, made on behalf of Energy BG 1 enters the agenda of the municipal council of Haskovo. The company, established for the purposes of this particularly large project under the umbrella of the Austrian corporation *Energy*, seeks to secure the right to use 400 hectares of agricultural land situated between the two villages of Dolno Voyvodino and Knijovnik. The territory, which is public ownership under the jurisdiction of the municipality of Haskovo, comprises almost the entire free uncultivated land between the two villages. *Energy* intends to build a photovoltaic park upon the land – an endeavor, in which the investor has a long history of success in Bulgaria and elsewhere on the continent. The RES park, at the time when it was first proposed, would have been the largest on the Balkan peninsula and would promise to produce more than 560 000 000 kWh of clean energy annually (XNEWS, 2020). The investment is estimated to attract several million leva to the municipality – both in the form of bureaucratic taxes and fees for the administration of the land and the provision of the permission to use the land¹. Furthermore, some employment positions are to be open to the public during the building of the park and in security of the property afterwards. The predicted benefits to the municipality would be, according to the corporation's proposition in monetary, economic, and environmental form. As the municipal council voted to move the procedure forward, news of the intent reached local citizens. The local villagers reacted with contestation efforts, utilizing the available resources at their disposal – they organized a public meeting, gatherings and contacted local media outlets to make their claim against the project. Their arguments – the RES park would take up the land, which informally has been put to use by the population. Although very scarcely populated, both villages are home to a little under 900 people (588 in Knijovnik and 274 in Dolno Voyvodino, according to the 2021 CENSUS). Knijovnik's proximity to the municipal center – the town of Haskovo – has seen its emergence as a rural type of suburb where young families are drawn to the close-to-nature setting easily linked to the town via a renovated road. Thus, younger villagers are employed in the town and housed in the village.

Nevertheless, predominantly the population of both villages comprises pensioners. Economic or employment opportunities are barely existent.

The land in question has not been cultivated for decades. No economic activity takes place upon it. Instead, it serves as a landscape for locals, providing fresh air and an attractive natural setting. Several beekeepers from nearby villages utilize the naturally growing flora. A hunters' group with members from both villages, as well as from nearby towns, uses the land as hunting grounds and claims to have re-populated it with deer, pheasants and other small fauna. The land has also been used for recreational purposes. Locals have, with their own funds and efforts, built a chapel, a picnic area and a large metal cross – a monument claimed to symbolize religious belonging. Thus, the logics of contestation follow a more cultural and social route, rather than the rational economic, geo-politically sound reasoning in favor of the RES park. Within the next four years, a contestation battle ensued, where local government had the authority – privilege and obligation – to seep through both parties' claims and establish a priority use of the public land. Should it comply with the EU's green agenda and contribute to the efforts of de-carbonization and clean energy, or should it keep the green scenery untouched and designated to the utilization of local populations with their unique lifestyle. The opposition therefore would not be shaped as pro- or anti- RES, rather it was manifested as the battle of different interpretations of the green future of Bulgaria's available natural and public resources. In this article I examine how the two types of green acts are perceived and shaped by local actors and link these symbolic and cultural battles to underlying social forces which have more to do with the distribution of power in decision-making, rather than with environmental and/or industrial agendas.

Methodology

In order to paint as complete a picture of the perceptions and experiences of the contestation between the local villagers and the investor, I conducted fieldwork, which took place in two main locations – the municipality of Haskovo and the village of Knijovnik. The data, analysed in this article, consist of fourteen interviews (in-depth, semi-structured and go-along (Bergeron et al. 2014) with a total of 17 respondents. In selecting the respondents, I relied on a mapping exercise which identified the key actors who had stakes or a role to play within the contestation (municipal representatives and local villagers, the investor²). As the fieldwork unfolded, other relevant actors emerged as they were identified as potential allies to one side or the other – environmental activists and smaller scale RES entrepreneurs. The data were gathered in two stages: December of 2022 and July of 2023. The respondent's accounts were analysed against archival data – public records of Municipal Council meetings, which addressed the investment intent and allowed insight into the decision-making process on a local political level. The data illuminated several key factors in the local people's perceptions of the problem in establishing the proper use of public land and

allowed me to conceptualize the important influences, shaping the villagers resistance to the proposed green actions. The crucial points of conflict, painted by the local villagers, brought to the forefront their desire to establish and defend their place in the civic sphere and in the processes of power distribution, setting boundaries of rightful access to the benefits of the land. These points of conflict, which I elaborate below, follow the logics of complex juxtapositions in 1) symbolic terms (what actions are greener – energy policies or everyday acts of interacting with nature as a landscape and rural lifestyle), 2) geopolitical terms (who should benefit from green acts – the local or the global humans), 3) national terms (who should benefit from the monetary gains, which the newfound worth of “free” land bring about) and 4) on civic terms (what tools and procedures allow influence and leverage in deciding the use of natural resources).

Shades of green – symbolic exclusion

The investment intent, set before the municipality of Haskovo, follows a clear-cut logic of economic gains and positive environmental impacts - increasing the share of renewable energy decreases the carbon footprints of the region, the country, and the EU. With the investor eager to support growth in the region (Municipal Council of Haskovo 2020) and to seek ways to reconcile the emergence of the photovoltaic plant with measures to preserve some native flora and fauna (mostly small livestock, bees and shrubs) (ibid.), there seems to be a possible compromise between the two aspects of greenness – producing green energy and protecting natural greenness. However, a focal point for the local villagers, especially in the early days of contestation (the contestation, which has to this day lasted for more than four years and witnessed a slight shift in the predominant narrative against the RES park) was the supposed hypocrisy of the EU’s interpretation of “green”.

While green energy in itself is not viewed with any sort of suspicion, i.e. there is no narrative of negation that green energy must be produced as a way to preserve the planet, what raises the locals’ concern is the particular execution of the green idea at the cost of free, (relatively) untouched natural land. This concern can best be represented by the question: *Why here?* uttered by one of the most prominent opposers to the park (XNEWS 2020). It is the locals’ view that the RES park would be the end of the greenness of the land, comprised of open fields, as well as some self-forested plains. Therefore, the EU’s green is narrated in contrast to the locals’ idea of green. This interpretation can be best summed by the following quote from an in-depth interview with a local citizen:

“In my opinion, and this is my personal opinion, the first thing that would die out would be vegetation. I have some experience in botanical matters and to me [the establishment of the photovoltaic park] would mean destroying the entire flora underneath it. And by destroying the flora, what do you achieve – the small animals begin to disappear” (Respondent 3, local villager)

Thus, the opposition stands as follows: the greenery of the clean energy vs the greenery of the open fields, bees, bushes and forests. A common theme among respondents' testimonies is the juxtaposition between grass, trees, open skies on the one hand, and metal, glass, armatures and set squares on the other. This point at first glance appears entirely linked to just two abstract ideas of "greenness", each of which could hold its weight and inspire subscribers and defenders. In fact, how could one measure and determine which is greener – a photovoltaic plant or a tree?

That seemingly abstract opposition is grounded in pragmatic terms, when we turn our gaze to the group of hunters – the most vocal and outspoken contestator of the RES park. They would have to pay a severe cost, should the park be built – most of their hunting ground would have to be foregone to the benefit of the plant. Hunting, unlike the RES park, cannot be linked to any economic activity, which could monetarily or politically benefit the region or its people. However, the group of hunters takes pride in a somewhat unusual but still socially and environmentally sound value of their work. The hunters have supported local environmentalists in the repopulation of a breed of deer – one that is native to the lands of Southern Bulgaria. For nearly a decade several deer have been re-populated on the lands, targeted by the investment intent, and the hunters' group has been instrumental to their survival:

“At the end of the day, a hunter's job is not only to slaughter and just provide for themselves. The idea is to restore some local population, which has over the years disappeared from our lands.” (Respondent 04, local villager hunters' group)

Re-population of deer in the area, although perhaps seen as a more grand of an accomplishment as an outsider might think, is an endeavor taken up with no formal or institutional support from any level. It has been solely to the devices and efforts of local hunters and ecologists. Thus, an undertone of civic service could be identified in the hunters' experience of the worth of their voluntary work. And this aspect of the “destruction” of their valued greenness adds a socially relevant aspect to their potential losses. Disregarding the worth of the greenness of the deer and trees is also public disregard of the laborious efforts to revive something of value to the people, the land, the country, and nature. Therefore, the deer is not just a deer. It is a symbol of unsupported, yet (perceived as) heroic civic duty, fulfilled by locals on their own accords.

This implicitly uncovered social aspect of the local greenness points to a more complex than the purely abstract and subjective battle between different forms of green acts. It illuminates the battle between different groups of people and institutions, associated with the opposing ideas of greenness. By replacing deer and forests with RES parks, local government undermines local acts of voluntary nature preservation, for the benefit of large scale, national and international economic acts of producing green energy. Therefore, by choosing a priority interpretation of

greenness, local governments are in fact establishing a more worthwhile group of green actors – corporations rather than citizens.

The global human vs the local human – geopolitical exclusion

After establishing the perspective, that (in the eyes of locals) the choice between different types of greenness actually represent a choice between different types of actors, I turn my gaze to the personification of the more worthwhile actors, as present in the locals' narratives. Interestingly, even the most outspoken of opposers to the RES park, held no particular grudges or dislike against the concrete corporation, which seeks to use their land. Furthermore, as the investor had sent representatives, who sought common ground and a compromise with locals, the investors themselves were perceived as merely rational economic actors, seeking to realize their interest, as might be expected of them³. Instead, grievances were aimed against geopolitical actors on a higher level of decision-making and power. Bulgaria, painted by respondents as a poor country within the EU, is experienced by the local villagers as a country, tricked (or bought) into paying the price of Western prosperity and the comforts of Western citizens. The following quote from a local villager, who had spent years living abroad, sums up this particular grievance:

“But what do Italians, Germans and other European countries do? They export their waste here, so that our facilities would burn it. And this is supported by Green Directives! [...] Germans, Italians, you know the inner-continental states, they are doing just fine! Us, who were the Eastern Block and Africa – we suffer the most, we pay the highest price.” (Respondent 05, local villager).

This narrative, sprinkled with vocabulary typically found in conspiracy theories and filled with a sense of injustice, introduces another key disposition, affecting the potentials of local people to even recognize the EU's green aims before beginning to support their implementation. This would be the distinction between the global human, who will benefit from the clean air provided by renewable energy sources and reduced pollution, against the local human who will have to suffer the polluted landscape and air. A juxtaposition revealing a new aspect of spatial projection (Ditchev 2007) – not only does the “envied other” (ibid.) have it better, but it is with the cost of “the victimised us” having it even worse. This juxtaposition plays with the idea of righteous gains and losses – those, who have had the least monetary benefit from the economic industrial growth will have to now give up the small joys which they have left – the clean air, nature and free spacious land. Therefore, the ideal of global de-carbonisation, of a globally clean planet, cannot be recognized by people, whose locality would have to transform (in a non-desired manner). The global greenness is in this case perceived as conditioned on the eradication of local greenness and therefore the local human's losses experienced to the benefit of the global human. But the local and global could not be experienced as one, as the losses and costs are much more tangible than the promise of a distant abstract

gain. The opposition between the global and the local human is a rather narratively derived and constructed juxtaposition, which illuminates yet another, seemingly unrelated but in actuality crucial hidden force, which drives citizens to oppose the EU's green acts – the subjective experience of geopolitical exclusion of Bulgarians. This exclusion intersects with another, more case-related exclusion, grounded in the potential distribution of the potential monetary gains that are to be derived for the region, should the investment come into fruition.

On gains and losses – local forms of exclusion

The potential gains which the investment could bring to the region have been the main focus of the discussion in the Municipal council, since the investment intent was first introduced. The promise of employment for locals was debunked very early on in the discussions, which the investor had with both the municipality, and the local people. While some construction-related jobs could in fact be offered to locals, after the building of the RES is completed, only few security guards would remain on their positions. Expert positions for engineers and managers could not possibly be filled by locals, who lack the credentials. Therefore, as early as within the first year of contention, the discussion on gains shifted towards the funds, which the municipality would receive in the administration of the right to use. These were originally estimated to account to 4 – 5 million leva, however in time, as the desired land was reduced by ask of the investor, after the final completion of the administrative process, the profit ended up amounting to 2 – 3 million leva. However, this money would enter the municipal budget and it would be the Municipal Council's sole prerogative to operate with it as it sees fit. This development was anticipated very early on by both villagers and Municipal Council representatives:

“The income, that will enter the budget, by no mean comes with an obligation that could force the mayor to spend that money in the villages.” (Respondent 11, Municipal Council representative).

This hard truth seems to be interpreted by the locals as a definitive decision that no money should come to the villages and their inhabitants. In fact, while the mayor of Knjovnik concentrated her efforts on securing some written form of obligation to spend money for the benefit of the villages, most locals saw themselves as voiceless victims, who will not only lose their land, but also see no budgetary delegations. This seemingly inevitable double loss is also experienced as deprivation of civic functions and of a community voice. As the investment intent entered the agenda of the Municipal Council, no representation from the local villagers was sought before local government moved forward with the project. This exclusion from the entire conversation pointed toward exclusion from the decision-making process, as well as from the civic sphere as whole:

“In this whole mess, nobody actually thought of even asking us our opinion. Us, the simple villagers.” (Respondent 04, local villager)

In fact, as local villagers organized their public display of negation, they sought alternative routes to utilize civic instruments that would empower them to insert their voice into the decision-making process. One such attempt was the organization of a formal petition, signed by some 500 locals, voicing their stance against the construction of the park. This very formal institutional instrument however seems to have held no weight, as there is no official record of the petition ever being presented to the Municipal Council. Another strategic step, which the locals (represented mostly by the hunters' group) sought to employ, was that of civil networks and alliances. More particularly, as they planned their claim, they sought to align with environmentalists. This attempt required the framing of the land as environmentally valuable, despite it not being part of any protected areas. Locals investigated local flora and fauna, however none turned out to be as pivotal, as expected: *"We called upon the lady [from an environmental activist group] to look at these old trees we had. But she said they weren't special, so that failed."* (Respondent 08, beekeeper).

This strategy was unsuccessful, despite the local hunters' conviction that the environmental activists, engaged in deer repopulation would back their claim for natural value of the land. In an interview, which I conducted within the first stage of my research, an environmentalist seemed eager to distance himself from this dispute, as this land was not included in NATURA 2000 and was therefore no subject to his particular efforts. All of the abovementioned developments shape the locals' precarious position – one in which they see themselves as intersectionally excluded from processes, which they hold more dearly than the EU's de-carbonisation efforts. On the one hand, the symbolic exclusion of their view of greenness diminishes their cultural worth, which they have ascribed and protected as foundational to their identity and lifestyle. On the other hand, the larger structures of power exclude them from the decision-making process in regards to natural goods, which they have maintained and protected for years. And this exclusion follows a very steep road of (perceived) exclusion on global and national levels. As the civic tools for inclusion, which are at their disposal, have been exhausted, it would appear that their claim to the land, built upon cultural and symbolic arguments had given way to the pragmatic and politically and economically sound claim of the investors.

However, by late 2024 the RES park project has come to a hold. The reason – gridlock in the Municipal Council, who has decided to stall the administration of the (technically already formally provided) right to use the land for the benefit of the investor. As several political crises on the local level unfolded, a strong minority of municipal council representatives has been able to hinder the project, under the predicament of community unrest. The case remains still open and it is to be expected that the outcome might hint toward an interesting development. The complex forces, shaping local people's exclusion from social and political processes are also the same forces, which give them authority in times of political stagnation – the strong cultural

and symbolic sentiments, which form them as a community, which dictate and are dictated by their lifestyle and feeling of belonging to nature, rather than to geopolitical alliances and national institutions. The popularity and success of policies appear to depend of the winds of social sentiments in times of turbulence.

Conclusions

In seeking to understand the complex forces which shape and (almost) demand local resistance to the implementation of global policies, researchers would benefit in doing what policy-makers often neglect – seek the perspective of local indigenous and/or systemically excluded groups. When they counter green initiatives, it is not necessarily the “green” or the “initiative” that they rebel against. It is the representations, symbols and perceived power structures that permeate green actions and inspire the cultivation and/or energizing of distinctions and juxtapositions. In the case of the local resistance to the emergence of a photovoltaic plant in the villages of Knijovnik and Dolno Voyvodino the entanglement of symbolic, geopolitical and national power dynamics inspires local unrest and negation of the EU’s idea of green. Finally, it does appear as if social custodianship of the land (i.e. the privileged interpretation as to what the priority use of public land should be and whose interests and purposes it should satisfy) could itself become a valuable civic resource. One that is used to make social claims and gain power in the process of distribution of goods both natural and civic. The power to have authority over the use of land becomes a worthwhile resource in a context where land is newly valuable. While in Bulgaria agricultural land had been neglected for decades in the country’s post-Socialist period, it currently provides opportunities for large-scale infrastructural projects in settings, which would be unimaginable elsewhere in Europe. The “abandoned” land, which has for so long only served the created or imagined needs of local communities, extricated from urban and economic development, is currently of great monetary value. Its new use now seemingly threatens to leave smaller communities out of their lifestyles, should they use the authority of deciding its everyday use. On the other hand, in times of political unrest, authority over the decisions of land use could be a pathway for locals to seek potent political representation if it is linked to the symbols of the prevalent social sentiment. In this case, establishing a dominant interpretation of how land can be green (to serve as place for RES) or greener (to serve as nature and environment) is a process entangled with the powers that (are to) be and determines which politics are popular and fruitful.

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NOTES

1. A process, which required tens of procedures to repurpose the land, which formally comprised over 30 separate land properties, all owned by the municipality, and was formally finalized by the end of 2023.
2. A representative of the investor is only non-formally included in the research through several short conversations over telephone.
3. Some locals referred to the investors by name, while others used (non-ironically) terms of almost endearment: “these pleasant boys, who came over” (Respondent 04).

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